

**Tourism, ageing and the demographic timebomb - The implications of dementia for the visitor economy: A perspective paper**

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## Introduction

Tourism as an academic subject is primarily concerned with people and their temporary mobility from their home area to a destination, including travel in the destination and a return trip back to the origin area. Yet, while tourism concerns the study of people and their temporary migratory habits for pleasure and business, there has been little explicit linking of tourism with demography (i.e. the analysis of the dynamics of the population, including births, deaths, migration and ageing). Some cognate areas such as population geography have developed specialised areas of investigation around demography but it is not adequately integrated into tourism research. This paper argues the analysis of the tourism-demography nexus allows us to understand one of the grand societal challenges facing many countries that will impact the visitor economy – ageing. The ageing population has created a demographic time-bomb with a population structure that is more skewed towards a growing proportion of older people. When this is combined with the impact of one major health condition – dementia and the visitor economy, the future shape of visitor demand likely to change, albeit at different rates in time and space. Not only will an ageing population structure reduce the numbers of economically active people able to fund taxes and the services they require, but longer life expectancy and a rise in complex health conditions, such as dementia. These health conditions will add a degree of complexity to service provision for ageing visitor market. For this reason, attention now focuses on ageing and tourism to conceptualise and understand the tourism-demography-ageing nexus prior to examining the issues associated with dementia and the visitor economy.

## Past perspectives on ageing and tourism: 1945-2020

The study of ageing within social science can be dated to Quetelet's (1836) *Sur l'Homme et le Développement de Ses Facultés Ou Essai de Physique Sociale* and the rise of gerontology, a term first used in 1903, that led to the study of old age and ageing. As gerontology emerged as a subject area in the 1950s, that formalised the study of older age in social science and medicine, the challenge of caring for and meeting the needs of an ageing population attracted attention. Yet it was principally in the 1970s that many western countries began to understand the impact of people living longer and a declining birth rate and its impact on the long-term population structure of countries. Evidence of the scale of ageing is stark for many nations as the UN data for 2016 indicates, notably Japan with the highest proportion of the population over 65 years of age at 26.3%, followed by 22.4% in Italy, 22% in Portugal, 21.4% in Greece and 21.2% in Germany. Whilst the specific proportions of ageing population will vary through time and space, these statistics provide an indication of the proportions of the population now deemed to be ageing. However, there is a great degree of variation in definitions of ageing as some gerontologists adopt the over 55 years of age criteria whereas other researchers and organisations use different measures such as over 65 years of age. Different terms have been developed to describe the concept of ageing (see Laslett 1989) such as the *Third Age* as an era of personal achievement and fulfilment in later

life. In contrast, the *Fourth Age* was described as one of growing dependence leading to death. This approach to ageing adopted a focus on the functional attributes of individuals as opposed to demographic definitions based on age to determine a person's position in the cycle of ageing. Other more generic terms such as the silver group or seniors have also been used in tourism research on ageing (Ross 2005; Nielsen 2014). The UN has forecast the rise in the world's population over 60 from 500 million in 1990 to 3.2 billion by 2100 (Figure 1) which indicates the long-term projections for a more ageing population structure globally that will create a wide range of societal challenges. It will also require society to adapt to a greater proportion of people with different accessibility and consumer needs. These are already the focus of the growing number of studies of ageing, accessibility and tourism inclusion. Such studies seek to achieve fairer and civil society objectives by enabling individuals to participate by accommodating their specific characteristics that may inhibit their inclusion (e.g. audible, visual, mobility and cognitive barriers) (e.g. see Lehto et al 2018). Other recent studies (e.g. Gillovic et al 2018) raise pertinent issues related to dementia given the debates about health issues as disabling conditions for tourism participation and the development of accessible tourism market segments, with shared narratives around inclusion and caring common to much of the experiences of accessible tourism.

*Figure 1 here*

While the clearest challenges relate to funding of medical and social care, the ageing population also has implications for business sectors such as tourism. The post-1945 boom in travel created new generations of tourists for whom holidays have become a normal part of life, thus an increasingly ageing population constitutes a major source of tourism demand. The consequences for tourism are that the profile of travellers is significantly ageing and a growing number of studies within tourism (e.g. Sedgely et al 2011) have begun to assess the issues around the tourism-ageing nexus. While the value of the senior market is recognised, the forecast growth in world tourism to 1.8 billion arrivals by 2030 indicate that ageing will impact both established tourism regions and emerging economies. As life expectancy increases, the growing scale of ageing tourism markets pose new opportunities, threats and challenges for the global tourism sector – not least in relation to dementia.

### **Tourism, the visitor economy and the dementia time-bomb: Challenges for tourism to 2100**

Dementia has emerged as a global health condition with estimates that around 46.8 million people worldwide are living with dementia. In parallel with the global forecasts of the ageing population (Figure 1), the number of cases of people with dementia are expected to double every 20 years: by 2030 there will be around 74 million cases globally rising to 131.5 million by 2050 and over 500 million by 2100. Connell et al (2017: 111) indicate that 'under the auspices of the term 'dementia' are in the region of 160 conditions, the best known of

which is Alzheimer's disease, and typified by a progressive cognitive degeneration based on three broad stages: early, mid and late stage along a time continuum of mild to severe symptoms'. The challenge for the tourism sector is that well-established tourism behaviours of the ageing population must be met when people with the early stages of dementia and their carers seek to live well for as long as possible, including going on holiday and day trips (Page et al 2015; Innes et al 2016). This poses significant opportunities and challenges for the wider visitor economy (Connell et al 2017, 2018; Connell and Page 2019a, b). Accommodating a growing volume of people with dementia (PWD) and their carers into the tourism system will require a greater awareness of the condition. It will also require simple innovations, some of which are inexpensive (e.g. training via short "Dementia Friends" courses to raise awareness and to share knowledge) as well as infrastructure developments (Chryssikou et al 2018). It also requires a greater focus on customer care as some sectors have identified (e.g. the heritage sector – see Klug et al 2017) and leadership from champions within the visitor economy to share best practice to enhance provision. The focus on human resource training and the future development needs for PWD and their carers will be a key issue going forward as advice and guidance for the visitor economy gathers momentum. With so many tourism businesses comprising small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs), often with limited resources and time to commit to major infrastructure investment (Connell and Page 2019b), simple advice and awareness raising is the first step towards establishing a more dementia-friendly visitor economy. From such a 'call to action', greater investment in customer service will add value and wider consumer benefit for all visitors in the local visitor economy since many initial steps required to become a more dementia-friendly business are rooted in enhanced customer service provision in interactions with PWD and their carers.

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