New Insights into how to achieve Sustainable Holiday Travel

A recent study identifies long-haul travellers as responsible for more than 80% of the greenhouse gas emissions associated with holiday travel, even though they represent the smallest travel group. This is due to the fact that those who travel to more distant destinations also appear to travel more often and use air travel for more than 60% of their trips. Long-haul travellers are therefore the group with the greatest potential for reducing the environmental impact of holiday travel.

Travelling to holiday destinations, including short breaks, has become increasingly relevant and an important part of modern society. It has been predicted that by 2020 there will be 1600 million tourists worldwide. Holiday travel is still dominated by car travel, but there has been a significant growth of holiday air travel. Indeed, in Europe, 80% of air travel relates to tourism. Most studies examining the environmental impact of tourism have considered the effects at the holiday destination, and often the effects of travelling to these places are neglected. Nevertheless, most greenhouse gases are emitted during the journey to and from the holiday destination.

A German study has analysed current holiday mobility patterns and the environmental impacts of the greenhouse gas emissions resulting from holiday mobility behaviour, taking into account socio-economic characteristics, values and attitudes. The authors used information collected from a survey of 1991 people and 84 in-depth-interviews with selected participants that was conducted in Germany in 2003.

The results suggest that the persons who travel to more distant destinations also travel more often and use air travel for more that 60% of their holiday trips. Consequently, it is the long-haul traveller group that emits most greenhouse gases. Indeed, although they represent the smallest group of travellers, they are responsible for more than 80% of the total emissions resulting from the holiday trips of all the travel groups considered. Most of their emissions result from travelling by plane. Because of the distances covered by plane trips, the relatively small number of trips using this means of transport causes a disproportionately large share of greenhouse gas emissions. For other groups, car travel is more important. The local traveller group emits the least amount of greenhouse gas.

Therefore, the long-haul traveller group has the greatest potential for reducing the environmental impact of holiday travel. According to the authors, reducing the number of flights even slightly would contribute to a decrease in greenhouse gas emissions. Because of the high share of car travel, there is also a potential for reduction within all respective travel groups, but especially in the long-haul and mid-distance traveller groups.

The authors highlight that environmental values do not influence travel behaviour. This could be due to a lack of information as well as the non-consideration of alternative options due to the high importance individuals attribute to their holidays.

The potential for reducing greenhouse gas emissions caused by long-haul travellers seems to be limited. For example, obstacles to shifting from air travel to more friendly modes of transportation such as the train are usually time, money and anticipated complications. Although the reduction potential is lower, local travellers are the most appropriate target group for the promotion of travelling by train or coach. This is because their holiday distances are shorter and they use car travel for 80% of their trips. They also have a relatively positive attitude to public transport.

The results of this study may help to assess the applicability of different strategies by taking diverse individual living conditions into account.


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