

## **CAUTHE CONFERENCE 2021: WORKING PAPER 09 Feb 2021**

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### **CHALLENGES ASSOCIATED WITH INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL BUBBLES/CORRIDORS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC CRISIS OF 2020.**

**Track: Destination Management Development and Policy**

#### **ABSTRACT**

The 2020 outbreak of the COVID-19 has imposed the greatest challenge to the viability of the global travel industry in living memory. Unlike previous pandemics, COVID-19 has affected all sectors of the tourism and hospitality industry globally, integrating a downturn in travel to and from all countries. During previous pandemics, tourism recovery was largely market and perception driven. By contrast, the recovery of tourism during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, is predominantly determined by government policy, with emphasis on opening or closure of borders, quarantine procedures for arriving and returning travellers and social distancing regimes.

This paper examines the role of international travel bubbles/corridors as a key stage towards the resumption of international travel between participating destinations. It also discusses how COVID-19 has altered core paradigms of tourism, which have dominated tourism operations and thinking since the advent of mass international tourism since 1970.

**Keywords: travel bubbles, destination recovery, risk, pandemic response, travel advisories, quarantine.**

## INTRODUCTION

Pandemics have disrupted travel and tourism for hundreds of years.(Henderson 2007) During 2020, the global economy and especially the tourism industry, experienced unprecedented disruption due to the outbreak of COVID-19. Although COVID-19 is neither the most toxic or widespread pandemic in history, it brings with it a potent mixture of a moderately high mortality rate (2.7%) and a wide range of medical unknowns. (WHO 2020) The COVID-19 virus has proven to be highly infectious. Within the space of three months from November 2019, it spread from the first recorded cases in China, to infect populations in almost every country on earth.

At the time of writing (October 2020) COVID 19 has infected over 43 million people and it has killed over 1.16 million people (Worldmeters 2020). In the absence of a reliable and proven vaccine, infections increase globally by a rate of over 200,000 cases per day. Yet COVID-19 has proven less virulent than the Spanish Flu outbreak of 1918-1921 which killed over 50 million people out of 500 million cases (10% mortality rate) and less pervasive than H1N1, (swine flu) which infected 1.4 billion people in 2009-10. Swine Flu's disruption of global tourism, was moderated due to a low mortality rate 0.03% and a vaccine that was an effective cure for 60% of patients. (WHO 2010)

The scale of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on international tourism has been vast. International aviation Since March 2020 is down over 90% compared to the same period in 2019 (IATA 2020). Of the 350 million jobs attributed to tourism by the World Travel and Tourism Council in 2019 over 220 million jobs have been lost during 2020. (WTTC 2020) Cruise ships (with a few exceptions) have largely suspended operations from March 2020 until the end of 2020. Thousands of social, business and sporting events worldwide, were either curtailed, cancelled or postponed during much of 2020. (CLIA 2020) Most prominent among them the 2020 Tokyo summer Olympic Games, which Japan plans to host in July 2021.

A major distinguishing factor between COVID-19 and all previous pandemics over the past century has been the dominance of government policy in establishing restrictions on both international and intra-national tourism activity. These restrictions include (Beirman 2020)

1. Entry of tourists across borders and medically based conditions applying to entry. Some countries, notably Australia, New Zealand, Israel and Samoa have (with a few exceptions), banned inbound international tourists. Many more countries have banned tourism from selected countries deemed as high risk. Some countries including China and Australia imposed bans on outbound tourism.
2. Many national and state/provincial/prefectural jurisdictions have required external tourists to undergo a quarantine regime prior to official permission to enter.
3. Social distancing regulations within jurisdictions limit activity and capacity in commercial accommodation enterprises, restaurants, pubs, retail establishments, places of entertainment and dining, sporting, social and business events, conferences, public transport, tour parties, cruises, attractions and educational institutions.

All the above have served individually and in combination to restrict tourism activities in a wide range of countries during the pandemic. Consequently, subject to the severity and spread of the COVID-19 outbreaks, many countries have imposed severe restrictions on tourism entry and activity.

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged many core paradigms which have dominated tourism growth, business management, government policy and operations since 1970. Global mass tourism has been a high growth phenomenon since the introduction of wide body international jets in 1970. (Weaver and Lawton 2014, Cooper 2016)

These key paradigms include:

1. The democratisation of tourism is founded on sustained growth in global tourism numbers, which in turn makes tourism increasingly affordable to a greater portion of the world's population.
2. Tourism is a positive and resilient force for the global economy committed to the free movement of people and peaceful cultural exchange. If managed sustainably tourism can potentially address many of the world's environmental, social and political problems.
3. Tourism and hospitality enterprises could successfully operate as high volume and low yield enterprises. Apart from a few business collapses tourism businesses would remain viable on the proviso that they generated sufficient volume and turnover.
4. Governments consider tourism to be a desirable industry sector which advances national economies, infrastructure and regional development and create employment and positively showcase destination attractions (Beirman 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated deep and prolonged slump in global tourism has undermined the validity of these and many other core paradigms shared to varying degrees by tourism industry associations and many tourism scholars over the past 50 years.

The research conducted by the author focusses on the staged restoration of tourism between countries. The lack of a global strategy for tourism destination recovery is largely due to the variable impact of COVID-19 on countries. The favoured recovery option to resume international tourism has been via travel bubbles/corridors/ corona-corridors which enable a pair or a group of countries to agree to conditional travel between them. This research will examine how these bubbles/corridors work with a focus on mutuality and the operational and policy challenges encountered by participating countries.

## **Methods**

The research undertakes a content analysis of the status on declared travel bubbles and corridors between participating countries and regions. The research focus on ten different international travel bubbles/corridors to assess a number of key factors (see appendix).

1. The extent of mutuality or reciprocity between the participant countries in relation to border opening and closing.
2. Mutuality or differentiation in relation to either quarantine free access or the application of quarantine restrictions.
3. Mutuality or differentiation in relation to social distancing requirements.
4. Mutuality or differentiation in health and testing restrictions that apply to approved travel rights for travellers between participating countries.

The model for responses is as follows. An example in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Australia-New Zealand Travel Bubble from October 2020

<b>Countries Participating</b>	<b>Mutuality of Entry</b>	<b>Mutuality of Quarantine</b>	<b>Mutuality of Social Distancing</b>	<b>Mutuality of Health Testing Prior to Arrival</b>
Australia/ New Zealand	New Zealanders can enter Australia Except QLD, WA, VIC	New Zealanders Quarantine Free In NSW, ACT. SA, NT, TAS Not valid for VIC, WA, QLD	Social Distancing rules vary between Australian states	Required evidence of COVID-19 testing prior to arrival
	Australian banned from New Zealand	New Zealanders Subject to self - funded quarantine on return to NZ Australians banned from New Zealand	N.A. Australians banned from NZ	N.A Australians banned from NZ
Mutuality Score 1-5	2.5	2	2	2.5
<b>Total Mutuality 9/20</b>				

Travel bubbles are a dynamic concept and are subject to changes based on policy shifts, the status and severity of the pandemic in participating countries.

### Discussion

Although travel bubbles/corridors are an important first step in the resumption of international travel during and post COVID-19 they can only be regarded as effective if they have a high level of mutuality especially in relation to open borders and the absence of compulsory quarantine requirements. The Australia-New Zealand travel bubble shown in this paper is clearly not mutually beneficial. Many travel bubbles in Europe have achieved high levels of mutuality, although the evidence shows that consequent spikes in COVID-19 cases have led to policy changes compromising their mutuality. Travel bubbles generate business in most sectors of tourism, especially international transport, accommodation, attractions and subject to social distancing events and hospitality services.

### Conclusions and Implications

Barring the introduction of a globally effective and reliable vaccine, COVID-19 is likely to suppress global tourism recovery until well into 2021 and possibly beyond. Government policy is the key determinant of the re-opening of tourism.

Travel bubbles/corridors are a useful strategy in a staged recovery for tourism between participating destinations but will only succeed if there is a high level of mutuality which facilitates relatively free flow of tourism between participating countries. This working paper is the beginning of a more detailed and broader research program to track the effectiveness of travel bubbles as a viable strategy to restore tourism during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Appendix

Travel Bubbles to be assessed in follow-up research:

Australia-New Zealand, Maldives-China, Thailand-China, UK-Greece, Germany-Austria, UK-Spain, Singapore-Japan, Caribbean Bubble, Baltic Bubble (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia), EU Bubble.

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