

Tourism in the polycrisis: a Horizon 2050 paper

Stefan Gössling and Daniel Scott

Abstract

Purpose – *Tourism faces a range of interconnected and potentially transformative global risks—collectively considered an evolving polycrisis—that have not been adequately defined and understood. As a result, the industry struggles to proactively anticipate and mitigate potential future challenges, while governments lack insight for strategic longer-term decision-making on tourism development. The purpose of this paper is to advance tourism sector consideration of global change threats and their complex interactions and more effectively incorporate these risks into tourism futures planning.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This conceptual gap is addressed through a discussion of the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Reports, and their definition of environmental, economic, geopolitical, societal and technological risk categories. In applying results to tourism, a preliminary expert assessment of global risks serves as a foundational framework to incorporate potential global change threats more effectively into tourism futures planning and decision-making.*

Findings – *Additional research should be prioritized to examine global risks most influential of tourism, how and where they may interact, how to convert risk categories into measurable indicators and to evaluate whether risk assessments can contribute to mitigating the evolving polycrisis.*

Originality/value – *This paper discusses the systematic and strategic engagement with global risks for tourism, critically reviews the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Reports from tourism perspective, presents key risk dimensions driving future tourism development, provides a foundational framework to further assess global risk for tourism and compels tourism academy to prioritize global change research agenda.*

Keywords *Global risks, Planning, Polycrisis, Resilience, Strategy, Tourism futures, Transformative change*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

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多重危机中的旅游业：2050年展望视角

摘要

目的：旅游业面临一系列相互关联并且具有潜在变革性的全球风险——这些风险被统称为不断演变的多重危机——尚未得到充分定义和理解。因此，行业难以主动积极预测和应对未来的挑战，而政府在旅游发展中的长期战略决策上也缺乏洞见。

设计/方法论/途径：本文通过讨论世界经济论坛的《全球风险报告》及其对环境、经济、地缘政治、社会和技术风险类别的定义，弥补了这一概念上的空白。在将这些结果应用于旅游业时，初步的专家评估为更有效地将潜在的全球变化威胁纳入旅游业未来规划和决策提供了基础框架。

研究结果：应优先开展进一步研究，以探讨对旅游业影响最大的全球风险、这些风险可能如何以及在何处相互作用、如何将风险类别转化为可衡量的指标，以及风险评估是否有助于缓解不断演变的多重危机。

原创性/价值：讨论了旅游业与全球风险的系统性和战略性应对；从旅游业的角度批判性地审视了世界经济论坛的《全球风险报告》；·提出了驱动未来旅游业发展的关键风险维度；·提供了进一步评估旅游业全球风险的基础框架；·呼吁旅游学界优先关注全球变化研究议程。

关键词 全球风险、规划、多重危机、韧性、战略、可持续旅游

文章类型 观点文章

El turismo en la policrisis: Un documento horizonte 2050

Resumen

Objetivo: *El turismo se enfrenta a una serie de riesgos mundiales interconectados y potencialmente transformadores-considerados globalmente como policrisis en evolución-que no se han definido ni*

Received 24 June 2024
Revised 25 July 2024
29 July 2024
Accepted 29 July 2024

comprendido adecuadamente. En consecuencia, el sector se esfuerza por anticipar y mitigar de forma proactiva los posibles retos futuros, mientras que los gobiernos carecen de información para tomar decisiones estratégicas a largo plazo sobre el desarrollo del turismo.

Diseño/metodología/enfoque: Esta laguna conceptual se aborda mediante un análisis de los Informes sobre Riesgos Globales del Foro Económico Mundial y su definición de las categorías de riesgo medioambiental, económico, geopolítico, social y tecnológico. Al aplicar los resultados al turismo, una evaluación preliminar de los riesgos mundiales realizada por expertos proporciona un marco fundacional para incorporar más eficazmente las posibles amenazas del cambio global a la planificación y toma de decisiones sobre el futuro del turismo.

Conclusiones: Debe darse prioridad a la investigación adicional para examinar los riesgos globales que más influyen en el turismo, cómo y dónde pueden interactuar, cómo convertir las categorías de riesgo en indicadores medibles y evaluar si las evaluaciones de riesgo pueden contribuir a mitigar la polícrisis en evolución.

Originalidad/valor: Analiza el compromiso sistemático y estratégico con los riesgos globales para el turismo; Revisa críticamente los Informes sobre Riesgos Globales del Foro Económico Mundial desde la perspectiva del turismo; Presenta las principales dimensiones del riesgo que impulsan el futuro desarrollo del turismo; Proporciona un marco básico para evaluar el riesgo mundial para el turismo; Precisa a la academia del turismo a priorizar la agenda de investigación sobre el cambio global.

Palabras clave Riesgos globales, Planificación, Polícrisis, Resiliencia, Estrategia, Turismo sostenible

Tipo de papel Punto de vista

An introduction to global risks

From climate change to COVID-19, from new wars to the AI revolution, it is evident that the number and potential disruptiveness of global risks has increased. This perspective article seeks to provide an overview to the diverse global risk dimensions and their interrelationships that have relevance for tourism. In conceptualizing these large-scale strategic risks, it serves the purpose of alerting the tourism research community to the compound dangers of the polycrisis.

There is a growing dialogue on risks related to natural hazards, health, society and technology that extends across academic disciplines and often involves varying definitions and understandings of the concept ([Battistelli and Galantino, 2019](#)). As argued by [Williams and Baláž \(2015\)](#), tourism “risks” remain inadequately understood and lacking conceptualization. A review of the recent literature suggests that risks are often discussed in the context of crises and disaster events, though without clear distinction of the terms. For example, in their review of the literature on tourism risk, crisis and disaster management, [Ritchie and Jiang \(2019\)](#) describe “risk” as an “uncertainty” that can have negative outcomes and refer to “large-scale risks, namely crises and disasters” that include “political instability, economic conditions, the environment and weather.”

Yet, a risk is not analogous to a crisis or a disaster. [Merriam-Webster \(2024; no page\)](#) defines “risk” as a “possibility of loss or injury” as well as “something that creates or suggests a hazard.” A crisis, in comparison, is “a situation that has reached a critical phase,” while a disaster is “a sudden calamitous event bringing great damage, loss, or destruction.” The terminology of tourism risk, crisis and disaster should consequently distinguish risk as something that can be anticipated, assessed and potentially avoided or mitigated. In comparison, a crisis is an acute negative situation requiring immediating attention and action, while a disaster may be understood as damage done.

A recent tourism crisis management literature review of the period 1985–2020 ([Wut et al., 2021](#)), distinguished papers concerned with *crisis* (impacts, recovery, resilience, communication, response, preparedness, prevention); *risk* (management, perceptions, assessment, communication); and *disaster* (recovery). Other tourism crisis management reviews have suggested a subdivision of preparedness and planning; response and recovery; resolution and reflection ([Ritchie and Jiang, 2019](#)). The tourism crisis management literature consequently contains a risk perspective that has been theoretically framed ([Williams and Baláž, 2015](#)) but remains inadequately advanced in practical terms.

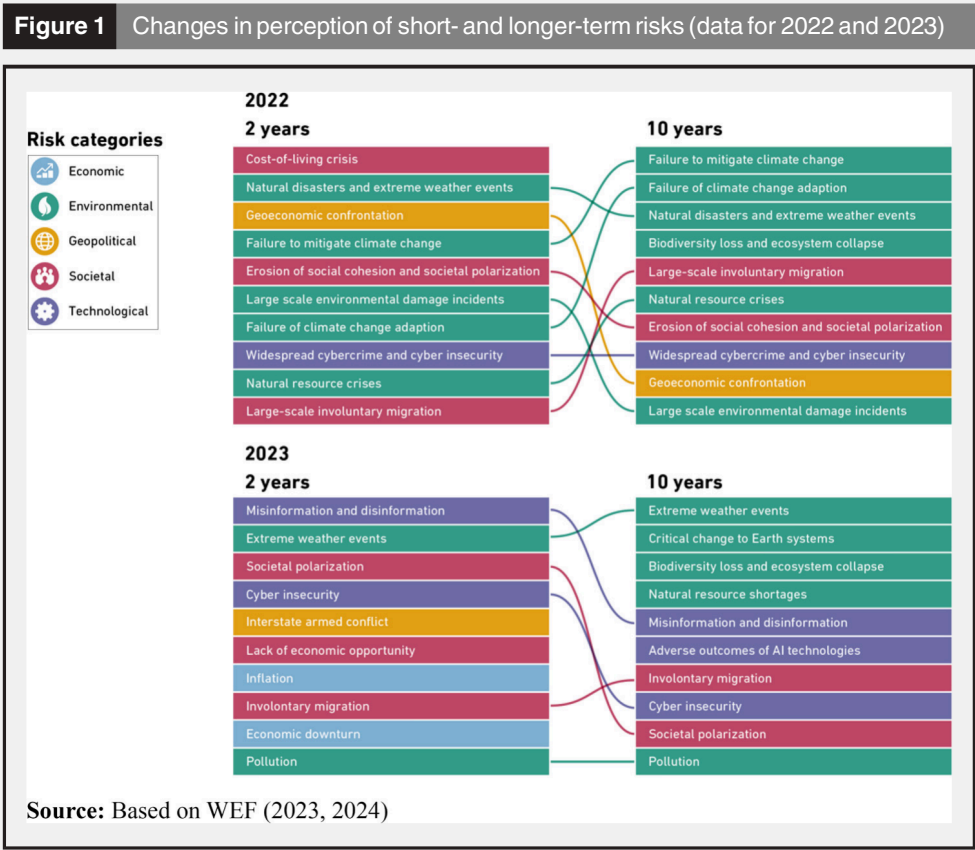
This is particularly relevant for global-scale risks, where insight is needed on which risks tourism predominantly faces, how they interact and how they manifest geographically and temporally.

Studies to assess global tourism risks are currently mostly limited to the environmental domain (e.g. climate change, [Scott et al., 2019](#)). Advancing a global change agenda in tourism needs to also include economic, geopolitical, societal and technological risk dimensions. These are the strategic risks that will determine the future of the tourism sector, not only the prospects of tourism at the local/destination scale. The World Economic Forum's Global Risk Reports [[World Economic Forum \(WEF\), 2023, 2024](#)] can serve as a starting point for the definition, conceptualization and evaluation of global risks that can guide future work on tourism development, transformation and resilience.

The WEF global risk reports

An assessment and ranking of critical global risks have been undertaken by the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Reports since 2006. The 2024 report [[World Economic Forum \(WEF\), 2024](#)] details six environmental, nine economic, five geopolitical, eight societal and six technological risks, identified by 1,490 experts across academia, business, government, the international community and civil society. The drivers of risks are not explicitly examined by the WEF. As an example, population growth is a driver of many risks, such as pressures on natural resources, climate change or involuntary migration.

The Global Risks Reports rank risks over a 2- and a 10-year period. [Figure 1](#) provides a comparison of 2023 with 2024 reports and reveals considerable shifts in rankings within just one year. Changes are apparent in the number of risks (revised upwards from 32 to 34),



their importance (“risk influence”) and their relevance in the 2- and 10-year comparison. One very notable change is that in 2023, the *future* (10-year outlook) was expected to be less volatile than the *present* by one fifth of the participating experts. In the 2024 report, only one percent of experts asserted a “negligible risk of global catastrophes” for the coming 10 years. This confirms that risk perceptions constantly evolve and change, with evidence of “Grey Rhinos” – threats with high probability and impact that remain ignored or downplayed (e.g. climate change) and “Black Swans” – events that are unforeseen, usually with extreme consequences (e.g. artificial intelligence), suddenly emerging as the highest ranked risk and driver of misinformation and disinformation. As illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, such blind spots can have highly disruptive tourism outcomes.

Short-term concerns tend to dominate risk rankings and the source of ranking changes year over year. In the 2022 ranking, the cost-of-living crisis was ranked first in the two-year perspective; but in the following year it had disappeared out of the top ten (Figure 1). Risks are considerably more stable in the 10-year perspective and deserve greater prioritization by tourism scholars. A review of WEF reports suggests that there is consistency in high environmental risk rankings (10-year perspective) since 2011 and a greater emphasis on economic risks before that (2006–2010). These findings can be used to prioritize research into global risks most influential for tourism and insight for minimizing long-term development risks for tourism.

Tourism in the polycrisis

Global tourism risk assessments should consider risk types, the role and responsibilities of different stakeholders, scales, time frames, impact magnitude, occurrence probabilities and interactions (Table 1). There are risks that are identifiable and predictable, alongside risks which occurrence or impact cannot be ascertained, as well as those that are rare and unforeseeable. Future research could prioritize the former (e.g. unavoidable sea level rise will transform coastal tourism in most regions of the world in the decades ahead).

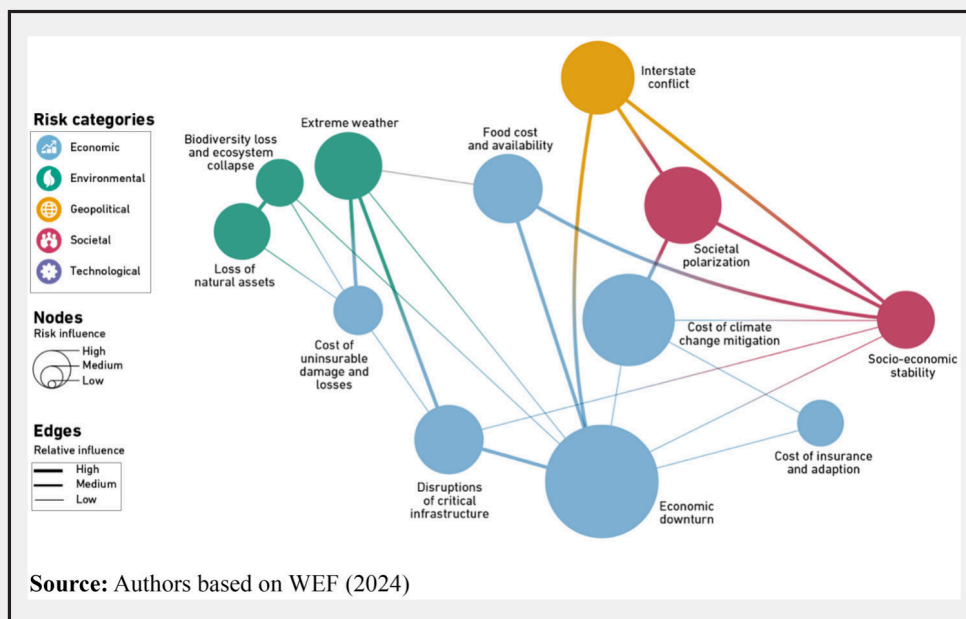
In comparison to global risks, tourism risks can be narrowed to those with strategic importance for the sector, here based on the expertise of the authors who have worked on related topics since the mid-1990s (we acknowledge that other priorities may be selected, and that the framework is preliminary). Figure 2 thus presents an initial prioritization of major tourism risks based on the literature, for a time frame of 10 years.

Environmentally, this includes the loss of natural assets (snow, beaches, biodiversity, water supply), or extreme weather events including heat waves, droughts, or wildfires, and the challenges associated with low carbon transition (Scott and Gössling, 2022).

Table 1 Tourism risk dimensions

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Risk type	May refer to risk categories (economic, environmental, geopolitical, societal, technological) or specific risks within these categories (e.g. extreme weather events, social unrest)
Scale	Local–regional–national
Stakeholders	May affect tourists, businesses, destinations or have relevance for government
Time frames	May become relevant in the short-, medium- or long-term future; last for hours, days, months, years, or be permanent
Severity	May be small or large
Likelihood	May occur with low or high probability
Source: Authors' own work	

Figure 2 Global risks for tourism



Geopolitical risks are incurred in interstate conflict or tensions that cause border closures. Current examples include the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Gaza conflicts and the impacts on safety perceptions of tourism in Egypt or restricted destinations available to Russian outbound tourism (Papagianni *et al.*, 2023).

Societal aspects of relevance for tourism include polarization, that can undermine efforts to mitigate climate change (exacerbating environmental risks), as well as growing socioeconomic instability that make some tourism markets and destinations vulnerable (Amin, 2020).

Economically, any economic downturn and changes in the pricing of tourism have great relevance for demand. Where real income declines, also because of inflation, this will affect destination choices and spending. Other cost changes may become relevant, including uninsurable damage and losses (World Bank, 2020), new or increased carbon prices (Gössling *et al.*, 2023), as well as food price volatility (Gomez-Zavaglia *et al.*, 2020).

This conceptualization also offers a basis for assessments at the national or subnational scale (e.g. see Bianchi and Milano, 2024 in Spain), as tourism stakeholders are increasingly concerned with growing uncertainty. Definitions of *polycrisis* vary but, as outlined by Lawrence *et al.* (2022, p. 2), highlight the self-reinforcing character of interrelated crises:

A polycrisis occurs when crises in multiple global systems become causally entangled in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects. These interacting crises produce harms greater than the sum of those the crises would produce in isolation [. . .].

To address this challenge, tourism stakeholders need to more strategically and systematically explore global risks, which are much more consequential to the future of tourism than local to regional disasters that have largely dominated the literature. For example, the AI revolution and climate change and associated low carbon transition will transform the tourism sector over time. There is no five-year recovery as there has been from even the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Tourism will forever be

different because of these global risks, posing distinctive challenges to market segments and destinations.

A global change polycrisis research agenda should prioritize examination of risks most influential and probable (in some cases unavoidable) for tourism, how and where they may interact and are disproportionately concentrated, how to convert risk categories into measurable indicators, differential capacities to respond and how risk assessments can contribute to mitigating the evolving polycrisis. This proactive foundational work can serve as a starting point for the engagement of tourism stakeholders with the polycrisis and its complex influence on macroscale investment and tourism prospects in the decade(s) ahead. This should be a research priority for the tourism academy, as global risks will be the main drivers of tourism development through 2050 and beyond.

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Further reading

Hospitalitynet (2022), "Hotels and the perfect storm: dealing with the global polycrisis", available at: www.hospitalitynet.org/viewpoint/125000176.html

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