

# REACHING OUT TO OCCUPATIONAL THERAPISTS

Accessible tourism is a growing area of tourism research. The belief that all tourism facilities, products, and services should be accessible to those with disabilities drives research in tourism ethics and sustainability. However, a key voice is being ignored. Occupational therapists play a critical role in enabling people with disabilities to participate in the activities of daily life, including leisure. Dr. Alan Fyall believes it is time for interdisciplinary research with occupational therapists to properly understand accessible tourism.

**S**hould people with disabilities go on holiday? That's a rhetorical question, and quite ridiculous. So, let's rephrase it: how easy is it for people with disabilities to go on holiday? It's still rhetorical, but this time should prompt some urgent reflection, with the uneasy knowledge that much still needs to be done to extend all the benefits of tourism to persons with disabilities. The term 'accessible tourism' has become an area of increased focus among tourism scholars. Their research is helping to underpin the regulatory, structural, infrastructural, and societal changes that are helping the sector transform to become more inclusive and accessible. However, that transformation is proving glacial. Dr. Alan Fyall, UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management's Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and Chair of Tourism Marketing, is a member of an interdisciplinary team of researchers who are calling for more interdisciplinary research on the topic to provide the energy and impact that accessible tourism needs, with the team reaching out to researchers in a

discipline with shared values and specialised insight: occupational therapy.

Interdisciplinary research has benefits when addressing multifaceted, complex societal issues because it encourages diversity of opinion and expertise, and promotes innovation and creative thinking. Therefore, interdisciplinary research is ideally suited for grappling with the complexities of accessible tourism. It's facile to believe tourism will become more accessible through simply tweaking current tourism models. It requires a

**'ENABLING' PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES INVOLVES MORE THAN BUILDING WHEELCHAIR RAMPS AT ENTRANCES TO HOTELS AND TOURISM SITES.**



Occupational therapists work to improve participation in all aspects of life.

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thorough understanding of what people with disabilities experience; as such, it makes little sense that occupational therapy has been largely denied a voice in tourism research.

Occupational therapists play a critical role in enabling people with disabilities to participate in the activities of daily life. As such, they embrace the social model of disability whereby it is the environment that is considered disabling, instead of it being the 'fault' of the individual in not being able to interact with an inaccessible, and occasionally alienating, environment. Occupational therapists work to improve motivation and participation in activities of daily living. But 'daily living' does not mean the purely operational 'day-to-day' negotiation of the physical world. It includes embracing all aspects of life, including the enjoyments offered by time away with friends

and family. And that's where the tourism sector must play its part.

## AN ERRONEOUS VIEW OF DISABILITY

According to the research team, failure by tourism stakeholders to provide accessible services to people with disabilities is usually not by intent but through an apparent lack of education and awareness. Such failures are not limited to tourism. Indeed, just among those sectors concerned with the physical space people must negotiate—architects, designers, and planners—there is a tendency to reduce disability to medical and stereotypical notions. 'Solutions', therefore, emerge framed by an incomplete or erroneous view of 'disability', and disregard its diversity and complexity.

'Enabling' people with disabilities involves more than building wheelchair ramps at entrances to hotels and tourism sites because



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Navigating physical spaces is an issue that needs to accommodate the full range of disabilities, not just stereotypical notions.

## WHERE WOULD TOURISM BE WITHOUT TOURISTS' WILLINGNESS TO PARTICIPATE?

'disabilities' aren't boxes to be ticked. 'Disability' is a broad spectrum and extends beyond the purely physical. It includes those with mobility, hearing, sight, cognitive, or intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, older persons, and those with temporary disabilities. Furthermore, the effects of those disabilities are complex. Occupational therapists understand this, which is why their approach to therapy is holistic—it addresses all the needs of people with disabilities, including physical, psychological, social, and environmental. These are issues tourism researchers and stakeholders need to consider before espousing any claims of accessibility.

### REASSESSING ACCESSIBLE TOURISM

For Fyall and his collaborators, the value of including occupational therapists in interdisciplinary research into accessible tourism extends beyond their expertise. They see tourism and occupational therapy as kindred disciplines. The team further points out that 'daily living' for occupational therapists includes leisure activities, and that occupational therapy and tourism research both recognise that barriers to participation also lead to a decreased motivation to participate. And where would tourism be without tourists' willingness to participate? Furthermore, occupational justice—a cornerstone of occupational therapy research—is a derivative of social justice and therefore has an inclusive agenda, which sits at the very heart of accessible tourism research. The researchers go further, pointing out that both research areas engage with deprivation, social exclusion and how to increase the quality of life through leisure activities. If this is the case, then where is the voice of occupational therapy in accessible tourism research?

In no way do the researchers place the blame at the door of occupational therapy research. Instead, they search inwards and see interdisciplinary research between the two

Simply tweaking current tourism models will not bring about true accessibility.



fields as logical and overdue. In a way, they are extending an invitation to occupational therapists. Fyall and his team say that a starting point to address how knowledge from occupational therapy could inform accessible tourism and accessible tourism research would be a systematic review of the two areas of study to set a research agenda for the domain. They also suggest, somewhat provocatively, that perhaps we should reassess what constitutes 'accessible tourism'.

#### ACCESSIBILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

The issue of accessible tourism extends beyond just the tourism sector. In fact, within the United Nations is a specialised agency—the United Nations World Tourism Organization—that is entrusted with promoting responsible, sustainable, and universally accessible tourism. The UNWTO is quite clear on the ethical framework for its mandate: 'Accessibility for all to tourism facilities, products, and services

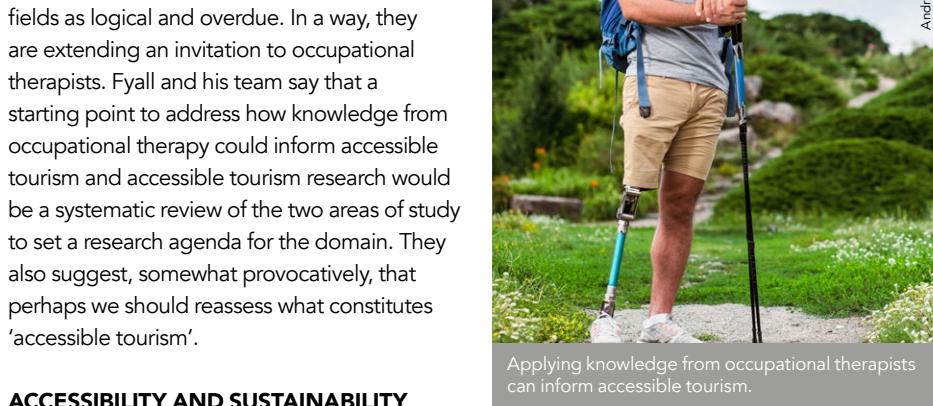
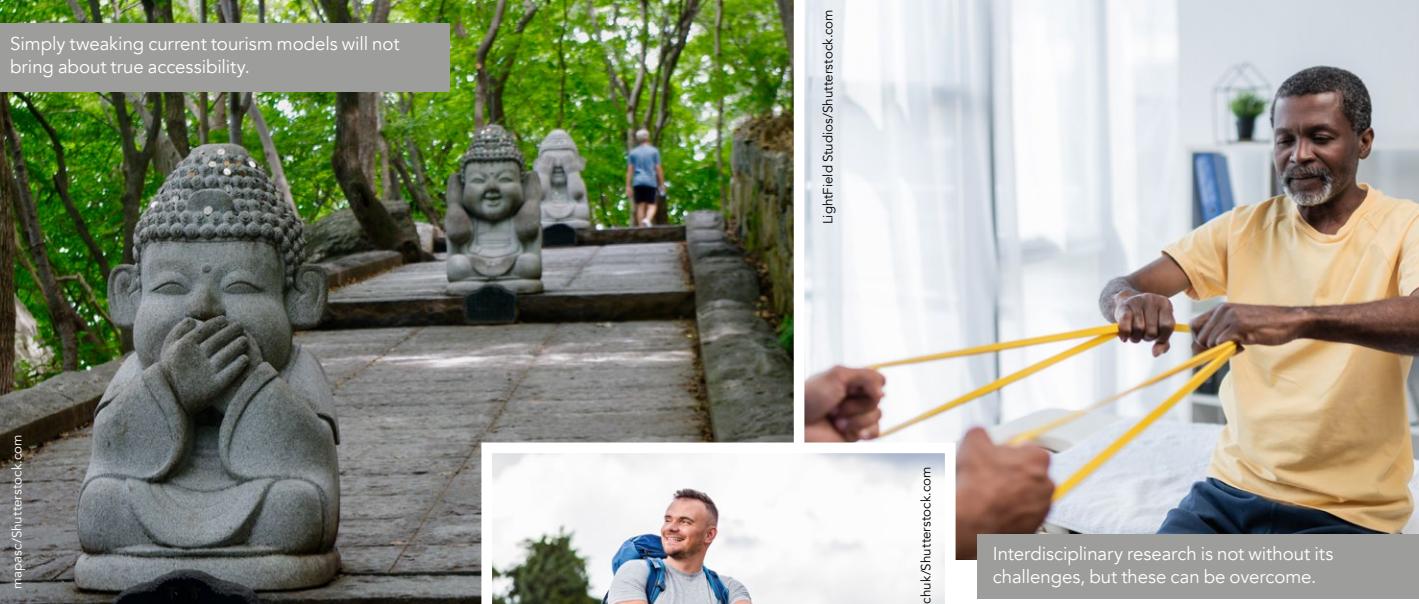
sector the right thing to do, but it is also the smart thing to do.

The business case for improving accessibility in tourism is not lost on certain authorities. The European Union sees it as key to boosting the competitiveness of tourism in Europe and is embarking on a spirited push to clarify

## NOT ONLY IS ENSURING ACCESSIBILITY WITHIN THE TOURISM SECTOR THE RIGHT THING TO DO, BUT IT IS ALSO THE SMART THING TO DO.

should be a central part of any responsible and sustainable tourism policy.' The term 'sustainable' is essential. According to the UNWTO, accessibility is not only about human rights; it is a business opportunity for destinations and companies to embrace all visitors and enhance their revenues. So, not only is ensuring accessibility within the tourism

regulations around accessible tourism in its member states. Furthermore, it co-funds projects related to the design, implementation, and marketing of accessible tourism itineraries, from the web design of tourism authorities and operators to facilities and activities, customer support, and feedback. In a way, accessible tourism simply extends the scope



Applying knowledge from occupational therapists can inform accessible tourism.

of 'daily living' for people with disabilities. This underlines the importance of the input into the necessary research of those whose passion, focus and insight are directed towards empowering those with disabilities to live daily living to the fullest.

#### UNLOCKING THE WORLD

Fyall and his collaborators are firm in their view on the benefits of interdisciplinary research into accessible tourism. The team says, 'the role of occupational therapy in the successful delivery of accessible tourism experiences clearly warrants further investigation, with occupational therapists bringing a novel skillset and expertise currently missing.' However, they are aware that although tourism and occupational therapy may share a kindred spirit and a joint interest in the welfare of those with disabilities, interdisciplinary research is not without its challenges. The team points to the academic technicalities of overcoming attachment to primary discipline, a possible unfamiliarity with methodologies, and a lack of shared vocabulary, which could lead to miscommunication.

However, such challenges fade into insignificance when considering those which people with disabilities must deal with in their daily living. Researchers can overcome any interdisciplinary hurdles through commitment and a common purpose. The world is an exciting and wondrous place, and the tourism sector, in many ways, holds the keys to unlocking it. With the insight and experience of occupational therapists, tourism can make it all more accessible.

## RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Dr. Alan Fyall, along with a team of researchers, highlights the need for interdisciplinary research in the field of accessible tourism, drawing upon the expertise of occupational therapists.

### REFERENCES

Hanson, M., Fyall, A., et al (2021) The role of occupational therapy in accessible tourism, *Annals of Tourism Research*, Volume 90, doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2021.103145.

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### PERSONAL RESPONSE

#### Where do you think occupational therapists have the most critical insights into understanding accessible tourism?

Occupational therapists have a professional mindset focused on enabling individuals to lead a full and active life irrespective of their disability. They understand the broad spectrum of disabilities that exist and the challenges that people with disabilities face. This is especially valuable to those managing tourism and the visitor economy as there is a tendency to focus on purely physical disabilities and policy and infrastructural solutions, rather than the more inclusive agenda of designing tourist experiences that also take into account psychosocial, social and environmental disabilities. Occupational therapists bring a more holistic dimension to the design and delivery of tourist experiences which destinations are well advised to address in the future.

## Dr. Alan Fyall

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