

Commentary

# Botanic Garden Tourism, Social Value, Health, and Well-Being

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**Abstract:** Many botanic gardens are flourishing, and many others can learn from those leading the way; at the same time, all can form new allegiances informed by service research. We developed this paper to plant seeds for different stakeholders interested in putting a spotlight on botanic garden tourism opportunities. It is in response to a call to action by many stakeholders across the botanic garden sector for greater public engagement, to challenge plant awareness disparity, and to ensure the vitality and viability of the sector. Our commentary considers positive, transformative service making, marketing, management, and development. We recommend holistic, integrated services via ecosystemic thinking and collaborative partnerships across the sector and with non-traditional partnerships in the design of sustainable service ecosystems. It is envisaged that service research will spur on a more responsible, ethical, moral enterprise and sustainable botanic garden tourism with opportunities to drive positive, transformative change in meeting sustainable development goals for the good of plants, people, and planet.

**Keywords:** transformative service research (TSR); sustainable development goals (SDGs); plant awareness disparity (PAD); social value; health and well-being; botanic garden tourism



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## 1. Introduction

Transformative Service Research (TSR) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) A call to action from botanic garden stakeholders highlights the need for innovation regarding the challenge for greater reach and engagement, which is “vital for [botanic garden] institutional success” [1]. Gardens are deemed the most popular tourism option, with boundless opportunities to innovate in garden tourism with new directions to ensure the vitality and viability of the botanic garden sector and the great works it achieves and have achieved since times past [2]. The Garden Tourism Alliance [3] highlights “that visiting gardens and heritage sites reign supreme as one of the most popular outdoor pastimes on the planet”. They go on to state the following:

“Surprisingly, more individuals flock to gardens in the US than the combined attendance of Disneyland and Disneyworld. In fact, a staggering 130 million people actively seek out gardens to immerse themselves in, surpassing destinations like Las Vegas or Orlando. Remarkably, in the UK, 33% of international tourists expressed their desire to visit gardens during their vacation, outshining the desire and intent to visit castles, museums, and historic landmarks”.

Despite such facts and figures, research on garden tourism is limited [2,4–11], let alone that related to “botanic” garden tourism; therefore, more is needed to understand and innovate with impact in mind on behalf of the sector. Conserving a botanic garden’s cultural and natural heritage and satisfying visitor economies requires interdisciplinary knowledge, talent, and skills, especially due to the challenges of sometimes contrasting and in some cases traditionally conflicting objectives [12,13].

First, it is important to realize the heritage and more so the definition of these unique places. Botanic Gardens Conservation International, the membership organisation representing botanic gardens in more than 100 countries around the world [14], clearly defines botanic gardens as:

“Institutions holding documented collections of living plants for the purpose of scientific research, conservation, display, and education, with emphasis on conserving rare and threatened plants, compliance with international policies, and sustainability and ethical initiatives”.

Botanic gardens also play a vital role in leisure, tourism, and recreation; however, it is key that these places innovate to ensure a range of outcomes and impacts that match their strategic vision, mission, aims, and objectives [15–21]. We believe that service research and, in particular, for the purpose of this commentary, TSR, is one approach to developing the effectiveness of services in the context of individual and societal health and well-being. We promote ecosystemic thinking and service-dominant logic [22], considering service as value co-creation processes at work among and between various actors and agencies, creating an exchange of existing and new resources and therefore innovating service reciprocity and the integration of resources to provide additional insights and resources for botanic gardens in promoting responsible, sustainable botanic garden tourism developments.

In consideration of the calls for action, gaps in research and the extant literature, and vision of the botanic garden sector, we believe that TSR represents an opportunity. As an emerging interdisciplinary approach and perspective rooted in the disciplines of marketing, service-dominant logic, services marketing, consumer research, service research, and service science, TSR integrates theories and tools from various disciplines to assess and catalyze service innovations that improve quality of life and contribute to individual and societal health and well-being [23–28]. TSR emphasizes the co-creation of value and social innovations through active collaboration between academics, industry practitioners, government agencies, and community members [29]. As such, TSR aligns closely with the principles and objectives of the 17 United Nations’ SDGs [30–34], which aim to stimulate cross-sectoral, collaborative partnerships in tackling complex global challenges related to poverty, inequality, climate change, and environmental degradation [35]. This commentary paper considers the application of TSR approaches within the context of botanic garden tourism development to promote the SDG for good health and well-being while considering opportunities surrounding plant awareness disparity (PAD) [36] and the alignment of a variety of SDGs [21,34,37–40].

Botanic gardens offer unique contexts for transformative service innovations given their longstanding heritage and multifunctional nature as, first and foremost, research institutions, biodiversity conservation sites, places and spaces for education, and displays of special botanical collections. They also provide leisure, tourism, recreation, healthcare, and other spaces: a diverse cultural ecosystem of services [2,37,41–44]. However, realizing the full transformative potential of botanic garden tourism requires overcoming persistent challenges related to access and inclusion, knowledge sharing, capacity, environmental sustainability and stewardship, impact assessment, and service-related opportunities in the areas and regions surrounding and connected to botanic gardens [12,13,45–47].

The present commentary concludes with suggested research priority areas where TSR approaches could catalyze service innovations that leverage botanic garden tourism. It is intended that such considerations and proaction improve accessibility, mindfulness, visitor behavior and epistemological change in botanic garden guests and partnerships, visitor economy, visitor experience, social value, and community health outcomes as well as ultimately contribute to meeting SDGs and the sector’s strategic vision, mission, aims, and objectives [4,6,8–10,21,34,39,40,43,44,47–65].

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, provides a shared global framework for coordinated efforts to improve the lives of people everywhere while protecting the health of the planet [34,66]. This agenda is operationalized through 17 SDGs and associated targets that address interconnected eco-

conomic, social, and environmental challenges. Progress towards the SDGs requires unprecedented levels of cross-sectoral collaboration, ecosystemic thinking, and transdisciplinary innovation [22,31,32,67,68].

Within this context, TSR has emerged as an integrative, solutions-oriented field focused on catalyzing changes that contribute to well-being, social justice, and ecological integrity [23,28]. TSR approaches emphasize co-creation, capacity building, and impact assessment, aligning strongly with the aspirations of SDGs [26]. For example, Anderson and Ostrom [25] proposed TSR as a conduit for realizing transformative social change, such as those envisioned across the 17 SDGs, which promotes cross-sector partnerships in support of the broader sustainable development agenda, ultimately considering Russell-Bennett et al.'s [31] call for action for service researchers and communities to come together to pursue collaborative research that reduces suffering, improves well-being, and enables well-becoming for the sustainability and prosperity of planet Earth.

To date, TSR initiatives have facilitated transformative service innovations in diverse contexts from energy systems and finance to healthcare and vulnerable communities, to name a few [28,69–72]. However, additional research is needed to explore the application of TSR tools and strategies across different institutional environments and geographical settings [73–75]. Examining the intersection of TSR and botanic garden tourism provides one such opportunity to consider how transformative service innovations can advance progress on the SDGs, particularly SDG 3: “Good Health and Wellbeing” [34].

The transformative potential of botanic garden tourism for meeting SDGs is an opportunity that many gardens have realized and capitalize on [38], and this is certainly captured across citizen participation, offline and online presence, and the cornucopia of digital integrated marketing communications and related novel innovations that can be generalized across other institutions [19,37,76–78]. There are over 3000 botanic gardens worldwide that collectively engage with several hundred million visitors annually [79]. This positions botanic garden tourism as a potentially high-impact context for catalyzing transformative service innovations aligned with the SDGs [2,3,37].

Botanic gardens provide an optimal environment for transformative experiences given their rich sensory dimensions, interactions with living collections, and integration of cultural and natural heritage. Botanic garden experiences have been linked to cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and behavioral transformations related to environmental attitudes, knowledge, and experiences [40]. In particular, social interactions during botanic garden visits help reinforce shared values and norms around sustainability [80,81].

From a health perspective, botanic gardens provide opportunities for stress reduction, increased physical activity, reduced mental fatigue, and enhanced mood [82,83]. Exposure to botanical biodiversity also stimulates interest in learning about plants, gardening, and medicine, while engagement and exercise in such greenspace offers both preventative and therapeutic health benefits [84–87]. Botanic gardens are thus also well positioned to utilize their living collections, programming, and partnerships to catalyze service innovations that contribute to good health and well-being across communities, regions, nations, and for visitors and guests the world over.

Realizing the potential of botanic garden tourism to advance SDG 3, however, requires addressing persistent challenges related to inclusion, knowledge exchange, environmental sustainability, stewardship, capacity, and impact assessment, among others. We herein cover a range of considerations that begin to touch upon these as discussion points for stakeholders, first mentioning social value and the nexus between botanic garden tourism and health and well-being.

## 2. Social Value

Recognized as a multidisciplinary concept, “social value” enables the achievement of SDGs and demonstrates an organization’s value beyond the accounting statements of purposeful profit by demonstrating how it generates a true positive impact on society [12,13,19,37,88,89]. Tourism organizations have recognized incorporating social value

as part of their ethos [66] as well as the increasing prevalence of the importance of social value in their strategies. This trend has grown exponentially across the U.K. after the introduction of the 2012 Social Value Act [90]. Yet, social value is not wholly a new concept, with Haulot [91] laying the initial foundations for tourism's social value in his work on social tourism. However, social value's roots are grounded in a synthesis of ideas on corporate social responsibility (CSR) [92], theory on stakeholder analyses [93], and emergent models based around social value, such as Fodranová et al.'s [94] Tourism Societal Value Model, which developed the concept further. However, Sorakunnas [95] highlighted limitations in the model, as tourism's social value is not simply value created for the comfort of residents, but it is intrinsic and extrinsic as well as other-oriented and self-oriented for residents, recreational users, tourists, and visitors. Raiden and King [96] argued that social value is a medium in which SDGs can be achieved by aligning different stakeholder energies into diverse strategies. Regarding botanic garden tourism, the key here is the target and project of change, considering botanic garden-related value, propositions, and perceptions, as well as more mindfulness of botanic garden research, education, conservation, displays of special botanical related collections, and integrated marketing communications of all these and more [37].

Social value is often used interchangeably with societal value, social impacts, and social capital [94]. The U.K.'s 2012 Public Services (Social Value) Act defines social value as the additional benefits organizations generate for the community above the purchasing of services and goods [90]. However, we realize the diversity of botanic gardens offers consumerism in both monetary and non-monetary terms, and either way, there are clearly exchanges and reciprocity of social value and benefits, as referenced earlier.

Fodranová et al.'s [94] work, which continues to be applied in tourism research today, argued societal value is deemed by quantitative metrics that measure economic value, whereas social value is the way in which tourism creates qualitative, non-economic benefits. Similarly, Annamalah et al. [97] highlighted social value which aligns with key quantitative economic factors of social capital, but non-economic factors all too often fall second to profit-related numbers. Arguably, Fodranová et al.'s [94] approach has been successful in contributing to social value research; nevertheless, an important point to make is a heavy weighting, yet again, towards the economic indicators of societal value, notably seen by twenty-four economic indicators in comparison to only four social value indicators, which are specifically focused on residents, and just six environmental value indicators focused on the preservation, conservation, and protection of the environment. As well as the aforementioned economic indicators, the environmental indicators specifically consider the distribution of financial resources, investments, and the volume of environmental economic value. They fail to consider the broader social value aspects such as the value of sites as places of education and social justice, the impact of the general public's behaviors, research, and climate change and in particular do not consider garden tourism simply for recreation of non-residents [2]. Furthermore, it is important to note that Fodranová et al.'s [94] work heavily relies on Elkington's triple bottom line (TBL) theory, and the TBL term, Elkington [98] has since recalled, is no longer fit for purpose in contemporary organizations. He argued that the term in contemporary system change "has failed to bury the single bottom line paradigm" and queried sustainability models considering pace, scale, and the "necessary radical intent needed to stop us all overshooting our planetary boundaries", going on to state that we need to start "working toward a triple helix for value creation, a genetic code for tomorrow's capitalism, spurring the regeneration of our economies, societies, and biosphere". Hence, our commentary on transformative service and sustainability is in this vein. More research is needed, and one key challenge we present here out of numerous opportunities is for the sector to innovate on ecosystemic thinking [22], service ecosystems [32,99], transformative service [26], and sustainability in terms of social value and good health and well-being in all its wondrous forms as a starting point for creative, interested individuals and collectives [29,56,75,84–87,100,101].

### 3. Challenges for Advancing Good Health and Well-Being through Botanic Garden Tourism

#### 3.1. Increasing Access and Inclusion

Botanic garden tourism research and insights underline issues of diversity in some respect for some places that highlight certain types of visitor economy and perception [6,9,11,37]. Various studies have shown that historically, this has benefited relatively affluent, able-bodied, and well-educated visitors, contributing to exclusion of potential minority, disabled, and economically disadvantaged groups, which may not necessarily represent intentional exclusion in this day and age but rather just a need to innovate on reach, engagement, facilities, and services for the wider community and, in many cases, forgotten others [6–11,102–106]. Measures and efforts to broaden access and inclusion are apparent when reviewing the sector's offerings; however, further innovation is needed to ensure botanic garden tourism promotes diversity and equity along dimensions of ethnicity, gender, age, income, and ability, but this list is not exhaustive. It is clear that there are leading exemplars of such wonderful public engagement and innovation on efforts, such as: the Eden Project, Heligan, Kew, Ness, Bridgewater, and Westonbirt (England, UK), Carmarthenshire and Treborth (Cymru/Wales), Edinburgh and St. Andrew's (Alba/Scotland), as well as Glasnevin (Éire/Ireland), Seethawaka (Sri Lanka), Araribá (Brazil), Jawaharlal Nehru (India), Stellenbosch (Africa), Warsaw (Poland), Neuchâtel (Switzerland), Bogotá (Columbia), Andromeda (Barbados), Shanghai Chenshan (China), and Bernheim, Bloedel Reserve, Brooklyn, Cape Fear, Chicago, Denver, Fairchild, and Morton (USA) [2,60,107–116]. We feel an opportunity to further innovate on such good practice is rooted in service ecosystemic thinking and service research to build on meeting a range of SDGs and ensure sustainable service ecosystems for a thriving, impactful botanic garden sector.

Specific co-creative strategies could include offering a democratization of botanic garden tourism opportunity, tiered admission fee structures and pricing strategy, multi-lingual interpretive services, accessibility in all its forms, access in terms of mobility and socio-cultural factors, meeting specific learning differences and difficulties, and equity, diversity, inclusion, partnerships with health and social care service organizations, as well as other collaborative partnership innovations [117–122]; although as mentioned, many are already engaging in these good practices. Botanic gardens can continue to expand community outreach and programming tailored to diverse cultural perspectives on human-nature relationships [84]. Adopting co-creative design principles facilitates engagement across all visitor segments, i.e., human and non-human (i.e., flora and fauna) and even post-human considerations (i.e., machine learning, A.I., virtual and augmented reality), by integrating reciprocity, flexibility, simplicity, and intuitive wayfinding into built and natural infrastructure and utilizing an engaged scholarship, effectual entrepreneurship, and designs on sustainable service ecosystems [62,106,123–127].

Ultimately, increasing knowledge and understanding of the diversity and opportunity of tourism and of access and inclusion requires a culture of continual learning and co-creation with communities, which is certainly alive across our botanic gardens at differing levels. From a TSR perspective, improving health equity through botanic garden tourism depends on creativity, capacity, and collaborative partnerships across service ecosystems. Opportunities await to build on the great work of the sector, with individuals and groups to take active roles in co-designing relevant services and experiences witnessed across other service settings for sustainable development, meeting the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations [25,26,28,30,31,34,66].

#### 3.2. Enhancing Knowledge Exchange

While botanic gardens curate extensive information about plant science, this knowledge is not always effectively transmitted to maximize epistemological change and public health benefits. Challenges include translating scientific concepts and practice for broader audiences, overcoming PAD, and sparking interest in the useful applications of botanical diversity [36,40,128,129]. There are, however, some wonderfully engaging developments,

gamification, virtual reality, augmented reality, online digital, social media, and influencer interactions highlighting such innovative efforts, which we promote and support across those creative stakeholders and service ecosystems [37,130–132].

Botanic gardens can enhance knowledge exchange on the linkages between plants, ecosystems, and human well-being by providing multisensory learning experiences tailored to different learning styles and needs [133]. Offering cooking workshops and food tastings, for instance, introduces visitors to the culinary and nutritional uses of botanical diversity [134]. Collaborating with health practitioners also helps communicate potential therapeutic benefits of specific plants and green space exposure [135,136]. An assets-based approach engages vulnerable communities in sharing tangible and intangible, traditional ethnobotanical knowledge and identifying priorities for programming on medicinal plants or sustainable food systems [49,137]. Co-created educational initiatives ensure enriching and impactful knowledge exchange, which is relevant, inclusive, accessible, and actionable in promoting community health, botanical, and environmental stewardship and citizen participation.

### 3.3. *Advancing Environmental Sustainability and Stewardship*

Given botanic gardens' living collections, these all-important research institutes and education and conservation powerhouses (or rather powergardens) bear significant ecological footprints related to energy, water, waste, and procurement. Adopting environmentally sustainable operations is an ethical imperative central to their mission. Indeed, the internationalization of botanic gardens prioritizes modeling sustainability in all aspects of their institutional management [14].

Specific strategies focus on sharing knowledge and resources and addressing global challenges and considerations such as facilitating and implementing energy and water conservation, switching to renewable energy, recycling organic waste on-site, procuring eco-certified materials, and reducing chemical inputs [138,139]. Botanic gardens also pilot test applications of plant biodiversity for bioremediation, bioenergy, and sustainable product development [21,35,38]. Demonstrating holistic sustainability helps botanic gardens in showcasing linkages between human health, environmental quality, and responsible resource use [114]. Botanic gardens engage local partners and visitors in co-developing innovative solutions that minimize ecological footprints while preserving living collections [40].

Fostering green infrastructure that restores ecosystem functions also benefits community health through improved land, air, and water quality. These awe-inspiring efforts can be innovated on for tourism developments to get creative with nurturing environmental stewardship. More to the point, we need to collectively bring good practice across the diversity of our botanic garden heritage worldwide together. We hope our commentary offers some additional impetus to support stakeholders and drive what the leaders of the sector are working toward: making transformative change at many far-reaching levels. Let us embed this into the variety of policies, practices, and legal frameworks that can dovetail into botanic garden tourism and sectoral efforts going forward.

### 3.4. *Assessing and Communicating Impacts*

While botanic gardens recognize the need to document their contributions to recreation, education, conservation, and well-being, impact assessment remains a persistent challenge [66]. Key issues include identifying meaningful indicators, collecting rigorous evidence, conveying value to stakeholders, and considering SDGs and environmental, socio-cultural, and economic impacts [47].

Botanic gardens can continue to improve assessment by utilizing mixed methods encompassing interviews, surveys, observational studies, experimental research, ecosystem service valuations, big data analyses using computer-aided qualitative and quantitative data analytical software tools, and all manner of service research opportunities such as TSR [37,40]. Measuring changes in knowledge, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors provides strong evidence of impact rather than purely descriptive visitor numbers [140].

Integrating engaged scholarship and related partnerships helps implement robust protocols while advancing theoretical and practical understanding of human–nature interactions [37].

From a TSR perspective, participatory monitoring and evaluation enables stakeholders to collaboratively define success indicators, gather data, interpret findings, and determine implications for knowledge exchange and impact. Environmental stewardship is certainly a challenge, as changing the mindset and behavior of everyday people will need careful consideration, and we hope service research and botanic garden tourism developments can shed light on opportunities to innovate [107–109,116,138–140].

#### **4. Opportunities for Advancing TSR and SDG 3 through Botanic Garden Tourism**

There are many priority areas, and these will differ from one botanic garden and service ecosystem to the next. Application of TSR approaches could help botanic gardens overcome persistent challenges and realize their potential to improve community health outcomes and offer some leads into aspects of social value attainment [141]. Suggested strategies emphasize the principles of co-creation, inclusion, and integrated assessment that are central to TSR. Specific opportunities to leverage botanic garden tourism for advancing SDG 3 include building partnerships with health agencies, insurers, social service providers, and statutory bodies to develop nature-based health interventions, green social prescribing, and inclusive programs tailored to vulnerable populations. We have observed ideas and good practice from many botanic gardens to explore further, such as working with ethnobotanists, traditional healers, therapeutic gardeners, chefs, and community members to co-create culturally diverse events, exhibits, and programming that celebrates connections between plants, food, medicine, and well-being; engaging old and young citizens in participatory biomonitoring of environmental health and their own health indicators, contributing data to local ecosystem and health and well-being assessments in all manner of creative ways; and collaborating with parks, trails, and planning departments and domestic garden schemes and stakeholders to establish botanical greenway corridors that link gardens with other greenspaces to promote active living, bringing the botanic garden and biodiversity into the everyday worlds of everyday people and non-traditional places and spaces.

Implementing mixed-method TSR assessments of botanic gardens, contributions could be applied to health promotion, preventative care, chronic disease management, social cohesion, ecological integrity, and ecosystem service provisioning. TSR could be pivotal in co-designing real-time community health and well-being dashboards displaying botanic garden impacts to inspire collective action. Hosting community dialogues, citizen juries, and participatory scenario visioning to determine desired pathways for evolving botanic gardens as multifunctional organizations, fostering social learning and diffusion of successful health and sustainability innovations across the global botanic garden network, are noble works already achieved by many a botanic garden service ecosystem, and we need to understand and learn more about these instances.

Innovating on TSR, service research, and service marketing, management, and development provides another useful opportunity, framework, and toolkit to guide botanic gardens and partners in co-creating and assessing their botanic garden tourism offerings and service ecosystem for alignment with such activities. Service innovations that leverage diversity, programming, and infrastructure to improve individual and societal health and well-being while restoring ecosystems is certainly a way to go. Realizing such potential requires building multi-level, multi-sectoral networks, and continuously engaging marginalized voices, embracing holistic sustainability, and fostering social value and learning with sometimes forgotten others are ways forward. While challenges exist, botanical gardens represent promising contexts for exploring and piloting transformative service innovations that instigate and help measure social value, and promote, facilitate, help nurture, monitor, and measure good health and well-being within, across, and in between diverse human and non-human communities.

## 5. Conclusions

Considering this rather exploratory commentary based on the authors' interests and research agendas, the botanic garden sector can enhance, reach, engage, and grow mindful visitor economies and change-making experiences, promoting transformative service and sustainability via TSR and other mosaics of service-related research. As a result of such engaged scholarship, research agendas, and embryonic, exploratory comments of challenges, opportunities, priorities, and impacts, we intend to spur on more commentary, discussion, and proaction for redefined and reimagined botanic garden tourism with social value, health, and well-being, ultimately meeting broader SDGs as ongoing priorities. As noted, there is a dearth of research on botanic garden tourism and its current issues and opportunities. TSR and related service research agendas are still to be realized by the botanic garden tourism sector. There are many references to good practice and exemplars across the sector, albeit disjointed in some respects and in need of bringing together, joining their forces and resources, hence our novel commentary and call to action. There are many multi-disciplinary and practitioner opportunities for the sector to enhance service design, sustainable service ecosystems, efficacy, and drive innovation, such as in our call regarding TSR and service research. However, beyond the limitations of this service-focused commentary, engaged scholarship, effectual entrepreneurship, service and place making, marketing, management, and related ecosystemic thinking as well as good practice and development efforts, among others, are also avenues to explore together. Future research directions and practical applications, for the purpose of our commentary, it is hoped that botanic garden tourism will be a research priority for likeminded academics, practitioners, and stakeholders, considering the topic from coordinated, multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral aspects, resources, and experiences. We also hope that botanic garden service ecosystems will be further researched and realized that integrate TSR in innovative ways, transforming service making, marketing, management, and development and supporting the botanic garden tourism sector in general. We hope to facilitate service research, discussion, and proaction on envisioning specific, strategic botanic garden tourism planning, policy formulation, and developments to innovate on scientific research, conservation, display, and education with greater innovation on public engagement to instill social value, nurture health and well-being, challenge PAD, and to ensure the vitality and viability of the botanic garden sector. Service research, especially TSR, can offer support to the botanic garden sector to innovate on a range of responsible, ethical, and creative botanic garden tourism initiatives, which can be further curated and developed for even more impactful, positive, and transformative service and sustainability.

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