Considering Service Animals in Tourism

Accessible tourism is a rapidly growing sector of the tourism industry and increasingly recognized as essential to supporting mobility and leisure as human rights (Buhalis & Darcy, 2001; Buhalis, Darcy, & Ambrose, 2012; McCabe & Diekmann, 2015). This has contributed to active research regarding disabilities and mobilities needs in tourism (see Darcy & Dickenson, 2009; Small & Darcy, 2010), as well as the embodied experience of traveling with disabilities (see Small, Darcy, & Packer, 2012). Yet, the ways in which transportation services, accommodations, and tour operators provide for the needs of service animals remains underdeveloped (Pond, 1995; Bourland, 2009; European Commission, 2015) and, indeed, underexamined (see Small, Darcy, & Packer, 2012). Service animals are increasingly utilized to mitigate mobility challenges, particularly for those who live with visual impairment, physical disabilities, disorder response, or require emotional and psychological support. Nevertheless, we lack an understanding of the role of service animals in tourism mobilities and touristic experience (see also Small, Darcy, & Packer, 2012).

While guide dogs have long been utilized in the service of the visually impaired, their ability, along with other animals, in assisting with multiple types of disabilities and impairments is increasingly recognized (Sachs-Ericsson, Hansen, & Fitzgerald, 2002; Small, Darcy, & Packer, 2012; Berry, Borgi, Francia, Alleva, & Cirulli, 2013.). Service animals, which can often include dogs but also pigs, turkeys, tortoises, and many others, are being employed to help mitigate a host of mobility challenges (see for example, Semmel, 2002). The trainability of these animals, along with their sociability and willingness to work for their handlers, has facilitated greater accessibility for individuals within their home communities. The very fact that such animals are doing their jobs by allowing those with varying mobility challenges to lead more mobile lives means they will also venture further into the tourism sector, increasing the demand for animal-focused services. Unfortunately, these services are lacking in a number of ways (Pond, 1995; Bourland, 2009; Small, Darcy, & Packer, 2012; European Commission, 2015).

Disability legislation is an on-going process of working to meet the mobility needs of a diverse populace (Miller & Kirk, 2002; Goodall, Pottinger Dixon, & Russell, 2004). Yet, the success of service animals in assisting with mobility challenges raises concerns about the extent to which current legislation accounts not only for the needs of humans with disabilities but also considers the needs of their service animals (see Pond, 1995; Bourland, 2009). While there is legislation in many countries that permits service animals access to the same facilities as their handlers, or more specifically, prohibits businesses from denying services to an individual with a service animal, enforcement is not consistent (Harpur, 2010; Small, Darcy, & Packer, 2012). What's more, such inclusive legislation is not ubiquitous across all countries and providing animal-specific services remains largely voluntary. For example, many airports now provide animal relief areas; yet, often these are outside of security barriers and therefore can be problematic when a service animal needs access to a relief area while their handler is also attempting to change gates to board a connecting flight.

A recent European Commission (2015) study estimates that the accessible tourism market across Europe is comprised of potentially 138 million people. While only half of these are regular travellers, they contribute an estimated €150billion in revenue annually. More importantly, however, this same study suggests that the lag in growth of the supply of accessible tourism services will result in a serious shortfall by 2020, as currently over 3 million tourism businesses do not adequately cater to the accessibility market. Examining 79 accessibility information schemes across all EU member states for a wide variety of accessibility needs, including visual and hearing impairments, learning difficulties, mobility challenges, and physical and health considerations, the study found that information for people accompanied by a service animal appeared in only 28 schemes placing this travel segment amongst the least catered for across Europe. Identifying, implementing, and communicating service animal amenities are crucial to meeting the current and future needs of people with disabilities in the tourism sector.

Relatedly, Carr (2016) identifies a dearth of research on pet participation in holiday travel and pet appropriate services in the tourism industry, despite growing trends to include the family pet on vacations (Carr & Cohen, 2009; Dotson, Hyatt, & Clark, 2011; Hung, Chen, & Peng, 2013). It could be argued that in regards to service animals, more specifically, we are also lacking an understanding of how animals contribute to tourism mobilities and the ways human-animal relations contribute to tourism motivations and experiences (see also Fennell, 2011).

Considering the role of service animals in tourism has implications for a number of areas of tourism research. Broadly, there is a need for better understanding and communication of the ways transportation services, accommodations, and tour operators provide for the needs of service animal. As tourism studies is becoming further aligned with mobilities studies, scholars are asking questions of the factors that facilitate and/or hinder movement at all scales (Hannam, 2009; Rickly, Hannam, & Mostafanezhad, 2016). Turning our attention to accessible tourism and the role of service animals, specifically, opens up opportunities for understanding the mobility challenges for which service animals are employed, the ways these animals might facilitate tourism mobilities, and how their needs and the availability of (or lack thereof) these services affects travel behavior by the same people who require a service animal.

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