Developing sustainable tourism in a changing environment: issues for the tourism enterprises (travel agencies and hospitality enterprises)

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Abstract

The awareness of the problem of mass tourism led researchers on tourism and the environment to attack past methods and policies of tourism development and to recommend their replacement with alternative forms of tourism. Due to conflicts between mass tourism and the environment, managers researchers, academicians, planners, tour operators and international bodies, such as the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organization (WTO), are all working towards the development of new forms of tourism that will diminish impacts on the environment as well as maintain the national and local benefits of the tourism. The problem is that some favor small scale approaches and others see that there is no solution due to inherent problems of pollution related enterprises. This paper presents how sustainable tourism theory can be 'operationalized' putting on the tourism firm especially the micro tourism enterprises (travel agents and tour operators, hotels and other hospitality establishments etc) certain issues regarding opportunities and treats with this form of tourism.

Key words: sustainable tourism development, mass and alternative tourism, tourism stakeholders

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Introduction

Alternative types of tourism, environmentally friendly, that integrate environmental protection and development policies can be introduced at local and regional level by supporting environmentally friendly traditional activities.

The development of leisure and recreation activities should be based on the capacity of local and regional resources to sustain such activities. An identification of local environmental assets must take place in order to be preserved and protected.

Local administrative structures must be trained and educated to monitor environmental resources as well as to improve skills and knowledge of environmental issues.

1. Mass versus alternative tourism

It is evident that not only has tourism grown rapidly worldwide, but that many of those concerned about its negative impacts at the destination assume that mass forms of tourism are largely responsible for these problems (Cooper and Ozdil,1992) [1]. Although the notion that mass tourism is 'a bad thing' is perhaps rather simplistic (Cooper and Ozdil,1992) [1] it has been suggested that controlling the volume of tourism might control the situation (Wheeler,1992) [2]. Especially since tourism is typically found in locations with fragile environments, such as mountains and coasts, many of which are peripheral to the world economy. Increased interest in alternative forms of tourism is perceived as a response to the emphasis placed on exploitation associated with mass tourism, especially in developing countries. The search for a different holiday experience is not a new phenomenon. It has been codified by writers such as Cohen (1972) [3] and Plog (1972) [4]. But there has been a renewed concern with environmental ethics, which has focused on the negative effects of mass tourism on important and fragile natural environments.

This led to the emergence of a more sensitive form of tourism, in which the aim is to minimize the environmental (and also the social, cultural and economic) costs and maximize the benefits. It has been given a number of different labels - appropriate, responsible, soft, green - but perhaps the most useful is 'alternative' tourism, since it is pursued as an alternative to mass tourism and its associated negative impacts. Small numbers of individual travelers are preferred to big numbers of tourists, who are often in groups. Locally provided accommodation and decision making encourage slow, controlled growth that lies well within the capacity of the host area to absorb, without damage to its culture or the natural environment. These factors contrast with the rapid pace of the large-scale development often favored by multinational companies, which dominate on any destination and frequently leads to soaring costs. Inevitably this polarization masks a continuum in reality, along which a range of variants and sub-types can be identified. The nomenclature is confusing and clear definitions can be difficult to find. In addition there is overlap among the categories.

This is compounded by an assumption sometimes made that sustainable tourism is simply another type of tourism, synonymous with alternative and the antithesis of mass tourism. Ecotourism, in some cases appears as a variant of adventure tourism Cater (1987) [5] rather than as a sub-type of equal status. Has attracted so much attention in the literature and in the popular press that deserve separate consideration. The complexities of definition are compounded by perception on the part of the consumer, and by temporal changes that can result in the movement of a host area within the boundaries of a category or from one type or sub-type of tourism, to another, often with quick rapidity.

Table 1. Variants of Alternative Tourism and their Characteristics

	Characteristics
Adventure tourism	Attracts mainly allocentric and mid-centric tourists. Usually resource-based. Involves physical challenge, education and contact with nature. Can be small-scale with many ecotourism characteristics, e.g. bird-watching or scuba-diving. Medium-scale and sports oriented, e.g. canoeing and rafting along Colorado River; or large-scale and an aspect of mass tourism, e.g. safaris in East Africa.
Nature tourism	An aspect of adventure tourism where the focus is upon the study and/or observation of flora, fauna and/or landscape. It tends towards the small-scale, but it can become mass or mass tourism in many national parks, e.g. Yosemite. It is sometimes perceived as synonymous with ecotourism since one of its aims is to protect natural areas.
Community tourism	A type of tourism run by and for the local community. It may be alternative in character or may be in larger numbers and have more in common with aspects of mass tourism as in some heritage or traditional settlements. Can be associated with organized packages and even coach travel.

2. Typologies of sustainable forms of tourism

There is a number of diverse terms reflecting sometimes an often simplistic approach to tourism with positive benefits. A brief discussion of three main typologies is presented below although there is a considerable overlap and confusion between the terms.

3. Green tourism

The form is often been used as a basis for creating a balanced approach to planning. Bramwell (1990)[6] defines green tourism as tourism which enhances the distinctive character of local cultures works through host community control, provides quality employment for local people and keeps economic benefits within local economy. Green tourism is used as antidote to mass tourism although it is often argued that to accomplish this must follow a step by step approach. Slow development is recommended in order to make it easier for the destination to absorb changes.

In real practice, green tourism is used sometimes by the tourism industry as a label, providing information to the tourist such as how to conserve energy, avoid littering in the beach etc, and not actually touching the major impacts of tourism. While strong competition exists between tourist enterprises it seem logical their unwillingness to implement green strategies. There are for instance cases where the economic benefits of tourism very little remain locally and are repatriated to foreign countries.

Tourism industry sometimes is condemned of using the label "green" just as a marketing ploy. Although there is a response of the industry to changing consumer values towards greenness Wheller

(1992) [2],and Long (1991) [7] ,have accused marketing people of promoting tourist destinations without considering implications to the environment.

Regarding consumers the English Tourist Board has devised a four category profile for them related to "green" attitudes:

- The inactive, who have no real interest in the environment.
- The mainstreams who make some green purchase.
- The second wave, new green consumers who adopt green consumption
- The leading edge, "dark greens" with full knowledge of green initiatives.

4. Alternative tourism

Alternative tourism is another synonym for green tourism. is defined as small scale tourism developed by local people and based upon concern for the local environment and carrying capacity. Tourism of this type require responsibility from both tourists and tourism developers (T.O., travel agents) in terms that tourism activity avoid damaging physical and social environment. Alternative tourism has developed as a reaction to mass consumerism in the modern industrial world. This type of tourism calls for forms of tourism that are consistent with natural, social, and community values which allows both hosts and guests to enjoy positive and worthwhile interaction and shared experience. Arguments exist about the application of alternative tourism to tourist destinations. Others treat alternative tourism as an elitist activity for wealthy and highly educated groups and as a form of tourism which only spreads problems to unspoiled areas.

5. Responsible tourism

Gilbert et al (1994)[8] says that responsible tourism does not argue for small scale development or unnecessary protection, but for modes of individual action which recognize the need to feel and be responsible for the development and activity of a touristic area such that appropriate values are held by all those involved.

The idea of responsible tourism comparing to that of green or alternative is not the overthrow of existing forms of tourism but the reform and modification of current tourism industry practices so as to eliminate negative impacts. Responsible tourism requires the evolution of a set of values that will lead to an improvement in the way tourism is conducted today. That means more awareness of the problem of tourism, more careful development, more concern for the host community and environment, and a more enlighten approach by the tourist Gilbert et al (1994) [8].

Responsible Tourism (and responsibility) seem to be not another form of tourism rather than a set of "responsible principles" that any form of tourism, including that of alternative, should be based on.

Another characteristic is that responsible tourism feed back in welfare to the community. Planning at the local community level will be led by a culture which requires the cooperation of all stakeholders involved in the tourism decision making process.

Local government officials, cooperate with local citizens professional and business people, so that all can participate in decision - making that will benefit the welfare of the environment and community. Also the specific principles of responsible tourism are directed towards the visitors so that they are educated to be aware of the fragile environment.

Table 2 shows the interrelationship between tourism stakeholders within the definition of responsible tourism.

Table 2. Interrelationship between tourism stakeholders within the concept of responsible tourism.

Stakeholder	Expected behavior
Tourists	• aware of fragile environments and impact of their actions • responsive to needs of local people
Tourism businesses (hotels, travel agencies tour operators)	• Density of tourism, balanced with environmental capacities • Minimum import of goods and services into the tourism area
Local people	• Participation in decision making • Responsible attitude over protection of the resource base • Local ownership • Economic benefits stays locally
Government	• Incorporate "responsible tourism" into tourism policy, and planning

In any case the appropriate form of development for an area must follow the cost – benefit approach. The social cost – benefit approach to analyze the economic impacts of tourism development in the area, can be useful in planning and provide a framework for development. It is possible, for instance, to have a balanced development between low and high impact recreational activities that favor maximization in welfare for the host community, environmental protection and visitor satisfaction. It is our decision to consider that the so called "low impacts groups" seeks natural activities while the "high impact group" require leisure and social activities that are more harmful to ecosystem.

6. Issues for the tourism firms (travel agencies, hotels, etc.)

Certain issues for the tourism enterprise especially for the small one (travel agencies, hotel and other hospitality establishments etc) are raised regarding changes in the behavior of the tourist that needs to be taken into consideration as well as issues regarding training of the staff.

Mass tourism was the dominant form of tourism in the 1970s and early 1980s for most of the countries. It developed by taking advantage of the paid holiday time, and an adequate disposable income. Also the relatively cheap travel and accommodation was made available by technological advances

(internet) and the economies of scale Poon (1993) [9].

"New Tourism" is a phenomenon of large-scale packaging of non-standardized leisure services at competitive prices to suit the demands of tourists as well as the economic and socio-environmental needs of destinations (Poon 1997) [10]. New tourism refers to key emerging characteristics of the tourism industry. Table 3 shows the conditions hold for new tourism.

Table 3. The new tourism

(Source: Poon 1997)

THE NEW TOURISM
Condition 1. Flexible holiday that can be purchased at competitive with mass-produced holidays prices.
Condition 2. Production of tailor made services while taking advantages of scale economies where they apply.
Condition 3. No mass marketing. Holiday marketed to individuals with different needs, incomes, time constraints and travel interests.
Condition 4. Travelers profile: more experienced, educated destination – oriented, independent, flexible, "green".
Condition 5. Destination environment and culture key-part of travelers holiday experience.

New consumers are fundamental different from the old. "New tourists" whose search is for novel experiences and are more independent and interested for new experiences comparing to the "old tourist", with main desire to escape from work and home.

The new tourist is the one that seek an alternative (to mass tourism) form of tourism which provides greater opportunities for sustainable development. Shaw and Williams (1994) [11] Comparing to that, traditional forms of mass tourism that are inherently unsustainable.

7. Types of tourists

The various types of tourists influence the nature of the holiday experience they demand. Classifications devised by Plog (1972) [3] and Cohen (1972) [4] are determined by the attitude of individuals towards their trip, their expectations and the role of such an experience within their lives. Table 4 below shows the two different types of tourists and the spectrum of their characteristics.

At one extreme, is the small number of allocentrics or drifters and explorers, who are prepared to try new, exotic and challenging situations in which there is a degree of risk in order to obtain a novel and more authentic travel experience. Such people are absorbed into different cultures with minimum impact. Egocentrics or psychocentrics are organized mass tourist who prefer the security or familiarity of the environment.

Table 4. Types of tourists

(Source: Plog 1972, Cohen 1972)

Plog (1972)	Cohen (1972)	Characteristics
Allocentric	Drifter Explorer	Adventurer in search of new travel experiences.
Midcentric	Individual mass tourist	Individual travel arrangements made to well known destinations.
Psychocentric / Egocentric	Organised mass tourist	Package holiday-makers. Search for familiarity at their destination.

The holiday industry creates the experience for them and the perceived reality of their destination is rarely a true reflection of local life. Contact with the indigenous population is reduced to a minimum. Between these two extremes there is a range of tourist types that varies according to a preference for novelty and risk than security and familiarity, and for organized travel in contrast to independent journeying.

An important issue remains why allocentric tourists remain relatively low comparing to those of mass tourism. It is important to search if this implies an inability to achieve sustainability in tourism.

There is a shift from the tourists demand to more energetic selective environmentally and culturally oriented forms of tourisms (alternatively tourism – eco – green – agro tourism). All these forms have in common an interest for the protection of the natural and build cultural environment, and quality than quantity of services. Of course, we should not overestimate the importance of these forms of tourism from the economic point of view, since, although the market share is expected to grow, will continue to constitute small tourism sectors.

8. Training

Incorporating environmental awareness and management into training in the tourism industry would be a step towards ensuring the implementation of environmental policies and legislation in tourism enterprises.

Although tourism is the world's largest industry, jobs in the industry generally have a low status. Proper training and increased staff awareness of the importance and complexity of tourism within a broad social, economic and environmental context, would help foster pride in the job and destination and in turn improve the tourism product for consumers, hosts and the industry.

Staff such as front-office personnel in hotel and travel agencies, tour leaders and guides, who are on the front line of tourism, must be retrained for these new forms (sustainable) of tourism. Their opinions and experience, particularly if they are properly trained, can provide a valuable service to the industry, host communities as well as tourists.

Properly trained staff can encourage a sense of responsibility and environmental awareness in tourists which, in turn, will lead to a longer-term and more sustainable industry.

Training should include multi-cultural education that aims to foster an understanding and appreciation of cultural differences and to make tourism staff aware of the needs and expectations of both 'guests' and 'hosts'. A relevant issue on sustainability has to do with the local workforce that may be untrained that will lead in the short-term to import trained staff. However, longer term advantages for all will come if training and employing staff from the local community. This applies training in the entire spectrum of positions in the travel and hospitality industry (front office and back office personnel, food and beverage managers and personnel, tour guides etc). It is important to take into consideration that training of local personnel must not be restricted to low paid and low status jobs.

Training can be at home or abroad, ranging from in-house short courses to longer university-based programmes, according to requirements. Local training may prove more cost-effective for both the tourism industry and the national or local authorities, as well as promoting and making better use of local skills, handicrafts and produce.

Conclusions

Summarizing, the tourism industry should take advantage by the new forms of tourism by:

- Incorporating all the new trends in the tourism industry bringing relevant new products to the tourism market.
- Tour operators, travel agents, hoteliers etc can use the issue for sustainable development as an opportunity to improve their competitive advantage in the market.
- Integrate environmental, social and cultural issues into training programs.
- Enhance the status of local staff at all levels as an essential part of the industry.
- Foster a sense of pride in the job and care for the destination and its people.
- Train staff in understanding the complex nature of modern tourism.
- Explore the positive and negative impacts of tourism on host communities, during training.
- Train staff to foster tourist responsibility towards the destination country.
- Encourage multi-cultural education and interchange programs.
- Train local staff for managerial and leadership positions.

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