



Paths to success: Benchmarking cross-country sustainable tourism[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Given the complexity of the issues surrounding the concept of sustainable tourism, the current paper tries to provide a unified methodology to assess tourism sustainability, based on a number of quantitative indicators. The proposed methodological framework (Sustainable Tourism Benchmarking Tool – STBT) will provide a number of benchmarks against which the sustainability of tourism activities in various countries can be assessed. A model development procedure is proposed: identification of the dimensions (economic, socio-ecologic, infrastructure) and indicators, method of scaling, chart representation and evaluation on three Asian countries. This application to three countries shows us that a similar level of tourism activity might bring on different sorts of improvements to implement in the tourism activity and might have different consequences for the socio-ecological environment. The heterogeneity of developing countries exposed in the STBT is useful to detect the main problem that each country faces in their tourism sector.

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1. Sustainable tourism – the need for a comprehensive methodological framework

In recent years the list of international organizations, NGOs and academics tackling the concept of sustainable development has increased dramatically. Such efforts range from grand theories focused on producing a generally accepted, “one-size-fits-all” conceptual framework for sustainable development to more modest attempts concentrated on specific issues or sectors. One of the specific areas of research concentrates on the concept of sustainable tourism. Sustainable development was defined as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. Both an equity dimension (intra-generational and inter-generational) and a social/psychological dimension are clearly outlined by this definition. As with other subfields of the sustainable development literature, sustainable tourism is an area where the list of existing analyses is long and impressive. In its 1998 annotated bibliography, the World Tourism Organization (WTO-OMT) reviewed about 100 books and more than 250 articles on sustainable tourism. Yet, despite these

sustained research efforts, and irrespective of the approach adopted, the merits and usefulness of such analyses are not yet fully clear and their findings remain under-utilized. This is, in part, because the concept itself is far from being consistently used. The WTO-OMT defines sustainable tourism as follows:

“Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and esthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems.”

However, the definition is sufficiently flexible to allow a variety of approaches and interpretations of the concept. For instance, in the WTO-OMT annotated bibliography, within the “sustainable tourism” catchphrase are included issues connected to rural development, ecotourism, environmental impact, cultural and natural heritages, urban development, alternative tourism, indigenous people, wildlife, natural parks, etc. This diversity of views on the subject and the complexity of the concept have led some tourism academics and practitioners to even question its utility (e.g. Middleton & Hawkins, 1998). As Fernandez and Rivero (2009) pointed out in their recent article, there is still no agreement on a universal list of indicators enabling the comparison of sustainability levels in different tourism destinations because of the

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multivariate character of sustainability, together with the difficulty in aggregating the considerable amounts of information required.

Given the complexity of the issues surrounding the concept of sustainable tourism, this paper will provide a unified methodology to assess tourism sustainability, based on a number of quantitative indicators. Its aim is to resolve the lack of aggregate information on tourism sustainability and to be of aid in evaluating management at tourism destinations and comparing the sustainability measures taken by those destinations. The proposed methodological framework will provide a number of benchmarks against which the sustainability of tourism activities in various countries can be assessed. The STBT methodology developed in this paper relies on quantitative indicators that are policy-relevant and, as such, it is hoped that it will become a useful tool for decision-makers, researchers and businesses involved in tourism activities in developing countries.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: section two briefly reviews some of the literature on indicators for sustainable tourism. The third section makes a succinct case for a sustainable tourism benchmarking tool, while the fourth section describes the methodology used to construct the STBT. The fifth section exemplifies its usefulness using three case studies. The concluding section summarizes the main findings obtained based on the use of STBT and provides some policy recommendations.

2. Sustainable tourism indicators

2.1. *What do we have so far?*

Most studies assessing tourism activities often deal with one aspect of tourism. For instance, the economic impact of tourism activities is usually estimated on the basis of data on number of arrivals, receipt per tourist, average length of stay and other economic indicators. In order to correctly estimate tourism activity and the impact of tourism on national economies, some studies have developed tourism account methodologies (e.g. Frechtling, 1999; Frechtling & Horvath, 1999). Other studies have focused on the use of tourism resources (natural, cultural, etc.). However, a growing literature deals with the sustainability assessment, trying to develop indicators and provide methodologies for sustainable tourism, such as Miller (2001). Unlike many studies that cover only the physical and human environment, Miller (2001) presents several indicators covering all aspects of sustainability: environmental issues (physical and human), employment, financial leakages and aspects pertaining to the customer (satisfaction levels, etc.). In recent years there has indeed been significant progress in the definition of indicators for the sustainable management of firms and tourism destinations (Dwyer, Forsyth, & Rao, 2000; Dwyer, Forsyth, & Spurr, 2004; or Liu, 2003). However the application to real cases is only partial, being and restricted to specific cases.

Another notable attempt to create a comprehensive methodology to assess sustainable tourism is found in Ko (2005). After a review of the existing literature, he argues that “methods of systemic sustainability assessment are not currently used in tourism” (Ko, 2005). He finds that most studies on sustainable tourism development are descriptive, based on qualitative data and subjective in their conclusions, thus lacking a rigorous methodology to assess these issues. After identifying this gap in the literature, he develops a conceptual framework for tourism sustainability assessment based on eight dimensions: political, economic, socio-cultural, production-related aspects, environmental impact, ecosystem quality, biodiversity and environmental policies. Each dimension is assessed on the basis of several quantitative and qualitative indicators which are scaled and clustered to assess the sustainability of a tourist destination.

The current analysis follows the same objective as Fernandez and Rivero (2009) and Ko (2005), notably to develop a methodology to assess tourism sustainability with quantitative indicators. However, the current paper departs in a number of respects from the methodology outlined in Ko (2005). Firstly, Ko (2005) argues that the issues and concerns related to sustainable tourism vary from one tourism destination to another. Hence, he suggests that dimensions, indicators and data gathering methods could also thus vary, in order to adapt the methodology to the specific conditions of each tourist destination. While this methodology has its merits, it limits the ability to compare results across tourist destinations. To address this gap, our methodology is intended to create sustainable tourism benchmarks based on a generally applicable and consistent methodology that allows comparability of results across tourist destinations. Secondly, Ko (2005) works with hypothetical data to give an illustration of his methodology. Recently Fernandez and Rivero (2009) have conducted a similar exercise but using real data for several indicators on tourism sustainability in Spain. We agree with their assessment and we use similar methodologies (i.e. factor analysis) to assign weights. The authors emphasize the use of this approach and test it with data from Spanish regions. We trust them and take comfort they did it. Our value added is that we do this approach on a wide range of countries and a much broader set of indicators (they only have 14). In the current paper, the STBT is tested using real data for 75 countries and we also conduct a more detailed analysis for three case studies. This allows us to show the usefulness of such an approach in identifying policy-relevant indicators and making policy recommendations to increase the sustainability of the tourism sector in developing countries. Thirdly, unlike previous studies, our methodology covers a wide range of tourism-related dimensions: economic sustainability (tourism assets, tourism activity, linkages and leakage effects), the role of overall infrastructure and environmental and social sustainability.

Our methodology also has several limitations. The STBT does not account for quality considerations, nor does it at this stage include any qualitative data (perception surveys, questionnaires, etc.). Also, another specificity of our approach is that economic sustainability is broken down into several dimensions whereas the environmental and social aspects are bundled together in socio-ecological sustainability. However, the fact that each detailed indicator has its own score allows the STBT users to combine or separate the various sustainability dimensions in different ways.

2.2. *Why do we need a methodology?*

The main reason for a comprehensive methodology aimed at improving the prospects for sustainable tourism in developing countries stems from the growing importance of tourism activity in developing countries. Tourism has already emerged as one of the world's most important socio-economic sectors, and has been steadily expanding at an average rate of about 4–5 per cent annually during the latter half of the 20th century. In spite of occasional shocks, international tourist arrivals have shown virtually uninterrupted growth: from 25 million in 1950, to 277 million in 1980, to 435 million in 1990, to 675 million in 2000, and to 940 million in 2010 (WTO, 2011). The combination of domestic and international tourism is now acknowledged as comprising the world's “largest industry”. In 2010, tourism globally generated an estimated US\$3.4 trillion in gross output, contributing 5 per cent of the world's gross domestic product (GDP). For advanced, diversified economies, the contribution of tourism to GDP ranges from approximately 2% for countries where tourism is a comparatively small sector, to over 10% for countries where tourism is an important pillar of the economy. The contribution that tourism makes to employment tends to be

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