

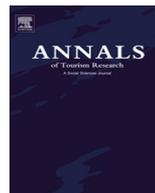


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Unobserved tourism



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ABSTRACT

Having more reliable statistics is essential for policy-makers to be able to make effective decisions. Nevertheless, measuring the number of tourists in a given destination is not an easy task. After reviewing the main problems affecting official statistics on tourism, this paper proposes a general framework by formalizing a theoretical model in which tourism nights and trips in a given destination are broken down into observed and unobserved components, according to the European system of tourism statistics. The main approaches related to the measurement of unobserved tourism are discussed, and some empirical findings in Sicily (Italy) are presented in order to highlight the actual magnitude of unobserved tourism.

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Introduction

The importance of having reliable information about the actual magnitude of tourism in a given destination is related to the planning of transportation and other services, to the need to monitor and quantify the economic, socio-cultural and environmental impact of tourism, and to marketing purposes. Indeed, any phenomenon that is not measured and reported does not exist politically (Eagles, 2007, p. 6). For the last two decades, considerable debate has arisen about the importance of data collection in tourism. Since the WTTC in 1992 (WTTC, 1992), national and international institutions have made great efforts to collect tourism data and to agree on definitions and methodologies

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(Council of the European Union, 1995; European Parliament, 2011; OECD, 1996; UNWTO, 2010; WTO, 1994).

More recently, an important step toward the design of future guidelines in the measurement and analysis of tourism, is represented by the collaboration between the International Network on Regional Economics, Mobility and Tourism (INRouTe) and UNWTO, which aims at developing a set of guidelines for the design of a Regional Tourism Information System (INRouTe/UNWTO, 2012). In their recent paper, Lam and McKercher (2013) present the results of a broad-based analysis of the type, quality and coverage of data provided by more than 110 National Tourism Organizations worldwide, and reveal a gap of information between the publicly-available market data provided by the public sector in tourism and the needs of the tourism industry. Moreover, several researchers have found that some approaches used to measure tourist flows are of questionable validity and reliability (Smale, 2011, p.473). In short, the primary aim of tourism statistics to accurately quantify tourism flows has been only partially achieved; indeed, on a lower territorial scale (sub-regional and local level), tourism statistics appear less precise and accurate.

Despite its strategic importance, accurately measuring visitor attendance has been a challenging and problematic exercise for tourism managers for decades (Kelly, Williams, Schieven, & Dunn, 2006, p. 449; Smale, 2011). This is due to the very special nature of the population of interest, since tourists, by definition, are mobile groups of individuals and a complete list of the population units is often unavailable. These characteristics create difficulties, which do not necessarily arise in other behavioral and economic research (Ritchie, 1975, p. 5). On the other hand, a supply-side perspective (Smith, 1988) poses other challenges, which still need to be adequately addressed.

In this context, this paper aims to introduce the concept of unobserved tourism by highlighting the main limits of official statistical systems (with a special focus on the European statistical system on tourism statistics), and by formalizing a theoretical model in which tourism nights and trips in a given destination are broken down into observed and unobserved components, according to the current systems of tourism statistics. Some potential approaches for dealing with the problem of unobserved tourism are proposed and described. Finally, empirical evidence from past research in the context of Sicily (Italy), aimed at quantifying the magnitude of unobserved tourism, is presented.

Tourism statistics and unobserved tourism

Given the above-mentioned problems, we propose a definition of unobserved tourism, which can be used as a starting point to cope with the problem of estimating the actual magnitude of tourism in a destination. Let us consider a specific sub-regional administrative unit and a time interval greater than one day. We will define unobserved tourism, in terms of overnight stays, as the sum of two components: the set of all the nights spent by tourists in unofficial establishments (unmeasured tourism), and the set of nights spent by tourists in official establishments, but deliberately concealed from public authorities, mainly for fiscal reasons (underground tourism). In order to better understand the potential sources of bias affecting tourism flow measurement, a deeper analysis of the main features of official tourism statistics is required.

The actual limits of tourism statistics in Europe

According to Regulation 692/2011 (European Parliament, 2011) concerning European statistics on tourism, member countries should provide data on: a) the capacity and occupancy of tourist accommodation establishments; b) tourism nights spent in non-rented accommodation; c) tourism demand (domestic and outbound tourism); d) characteristics of same-day visits. Nevertheless, despite this apparently uniform framework, some differences in methodology and other features emerge if we compare various countries' surveys (e.g., census versus sample surveys; systems of classification used; typology of collective establishments included in the survey). Consequently, the statistical information produced by each member country is only partially homogeneous and comparable. Moreover, the actual system of tourism statistics still seems to be inadequate for tourism destination planning for the following reasons. Generally, the more direct information concerning tourists' motivations

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