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Host Perceptions of Rural Tour Marketing to Sustainable Tourism in Central Eastern Europe. The Case Study of Istria, Croatia

Evgenia Bitsani^a, Androniki Kavoura^{b*}

^aDepartment of Health and Welfare Unit Administration, Technological Educational Institute of Kalamata, Antikalamos, Greece

^bDepartment of Marketing, Technological Educational Institute of Athens, Aigaleo, 12210, Greece

Abstract

The aim of the paper is the examination of the attitudes of the community, which incorporates the entrepreneurs of Istria, Croatia towards the promotion of rural and cultural tourism of the area and the examination of the factors, which formulate their attitudes. An isolated area as is Istria, would be expected that would be willing to open up itself to the world, to compete for tourism inflows and develop in a sustainable way since the region combines both cultural and natural elements as distinct characteristics. This research is part of a wider project called Rural Tour Marketing, which has the intention of promoting a model for the development of rural tourism, in sustainable and innovative ways and is applied in Central Eastern Europe to examine the host community's interest. Limited research has taken place in regard to the residents' attitudes on the promotion of tourism for this area. Residents filled in 350 questionnaires. It was found that residents who are also businessmen in the area are afraid that local culture is in danger to be distorted or destroyed due to tourism increase. It is suggested that partnerships and networks is a prerequisite for the acceptance of the sustainable tourist development of a community. The residents as part of the economic activity of the place need to be incorporated in the process of managing, communicating and advertising the region, realizing the benefits that may exist from such a process. By creating networks among the interested parties involved, the personal but also the common interest will be safeguarded and all activities will be more organized and coordinated.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the 2nd International Conference on Strategic Innovative Marketing.

Keywords: rural-cultural tourism, Istria-Croatia, Rural Tour methodology, tourism and entrepreneurship, sustainable tourism, networks, host community

1. Introduction

The study of a community's attitudes towards tourism greatly contributes to maximize the positive impacts of tourism and minimize its negative impacts (Williams & Lawson, 2001). Host community's attitudes towards tourism change over different tourism development stages. Changes in character of interaction between locals and tourist depend on the numbers of latter; when tourism activities led to high volume mass tourism, impacts

might eventually reach a level that would annoy local community residents (Doxey, 1976). Greiner (2010) argues that while economic benefits, including increased business activity and employment, arise from the development of tourism in remote areas (see for example, mountainous areas as is Nafpaktia, Greece - (Bitsani, Kavoura & Kalomenidis, 2010) or remote ones-as is central west Queensland, Australia (Greiner, 2010: 2198) -, there can be social and environmental costs.

It is thus significant to appeal to these people in order to make them participants in all the phases of the tourism development of the region. When residents trust and are committed to a place, they may form such strong connections with it that it becomes reflective of their self-concept (Kemp, Childers & Williams, 2012). Limited research on the significant role of the communication with stakeholders in the planning process but also in the implementation stage though exists although collaboration and cooperation among stakeholders in order to bring about common good for the community and enhance their own interests, is an issue that should be sought (Karvelyte & Chiu, 2011; Ooi & Pedersen, 2010; Northover, 2010).

Residents need to find attractive the place they live, whether this is a city, a town or a neighborhood. Residents are an important target group, they are the 'insiders' to whom the place aims to promote its attractive and distinct elements that unite and bring them together; thus, policy makers in charge of regional tourism development and marketers who initiate communication and advertising strategies need to take into consideration that the inhabitants of a region are a significant target market that they need to approach and attract (Cassel, 2008). This then, can be a developmental tool, especially in peripheral and economically vulnerable regions across Europe where residents may realize the significance of cultural economic approaches to development (Cassel, 2008; Kemp, Childers & Williams, 2012). The paper aims to examine the residents' attitudes towards marketing Istria, Croatia for tourism purposes by promoting its cultural and natural distinct elements with the creation of networks.

2. The role of networks for sustainable tourism development of a region for the promotion of its distinct characteristics

Butler's Tourism Destination Lifecycle Model suggested that the impacts of tourism on the host community are different over different stages of tourism development (Butler in Zhang, 2008: 18). In addition, economic contribution from tourism has been treated as an important benefit of the industry offering another way to the residents to positively react to the development of the tourism industry since there is stimulation of tourism infrastructure, there is stimulation of tourism supply industries, there is job creation and business opportunities (Zhang, 2008: 21; Bitsani, Kavoura and Kalomenidis, 2010; Katsoni, 2011). Furthermore, Haralambopoulos and Pizam (1996) reported that among the factors influencing the positive attitude of the community towards tourism is education, -well educated people in the context of a Greek island, Samos, for example, were more correlated with positive tourism attitudes-. When tourism develops, the accessibility of an area is improved and development projects are encouraged which benefit the local community (Bitsani and Panagou, 2003; Cano and Mysyk, 2004; Smith, 2004). One can realize this long-term financial sustainability if, subsequent to an initial investment, the tourist initiatives are capable of generating a positive flow of funds to ensure an enduring success of the initiative itself. Alternatively, environmental sustainability is connected with the capability of increasing the economic value of the natural and cultural patrimony by adopting a tourism proposal that does not damage this same patrimony. We can have high revenues both by directing a greater number of tourists to the interested regions and by protracting their presence in the low season. Length of residence was another variable that has been examined in the literature related to residential status; studies reported that those residents who lived more years in the area were more negative toward tourism in relation to residents who live in the region fewer years (Williams and Lawson, 2001) although a study of ten rural towns in Colorado by Allen et al. (cited in Zhang, 2008: 26) indicated that length of residence had no significant effect on resident attitudes toward tourism.

Thus, the effort needs to be made towards the promotion of the region not only to outsiders such as tourists, but rather to residents themselves, the inhabitants of the place, who need to see the attractiveness of the region;

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