Research Paper

An importance–performance analysis of sustainable tourism: A comparison between international and national tourists

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable tourism—with its focus on the economic, social, and environmental impact of tourism—has been an issue since the publication of the Brundtland Commission Report in 1987. The objective of this research paper is to use importance–performance analysis (IPA) to examine the performance of one particular tourist destination with regard to social and environmental sustainability, and to establish whether international tourists and national tourists differ in the sustainability factors they consider important. A quantitative questionnaire was handed out to national and international tourists at tourist offices in Bologna, Italy. The questionnaire contained scales to measure the tourists' satisfaction with the destination and their hotels from a sustainability point of view, and their views on the importance of such factors. The conclusion is that their opinions vary considerably: for example national tourists rank the environmental sustainability of their holiday destination more highly than do international tourists. The results of the study can be used by destination managers in Bologna and elsewhere to improve the sustainability factors that tourists think are most important, while other tourist destinations could also conduct similar studies to examine their sustainability performance.

1. Introduction

According to the World Tourism Barometer (UNWTO, 2012), international tourist arrivals grew by over 4% in 2011 to 980 million, and are expected to reach one billion during 2012. Representing over 60% of the world's tourism, the tourism sector is Europe's largest industry, and is expected to grow even further (UNWTO, 2012). Tourism resources are limited by natural, economic, social, and cultural circumstances and will not survive continued growth (Tao and Wall, 2009); nevertheless, it is often seen as the great hope for economic development in regions and communities, especially in developing countries or in economies suffering from negative growth because of ongoing structural changes in society. The expansion of the tourism industry encourages stakeholders to invest in the sector without always considering the possible side-effects of such investments on the environment and on social development. As a result, there have been calls for the European Union (EU) to take the necessary steps to achieve successful sustainable tourism. As things stand, the goal in Europe is to guarantee economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable tourism (European Commission, 2003), and there is also a consensus within the EU that tourism

development should be made sustainable (Bramwell and Lane, 1993; Gössling et al., 2005). The question is, how?

The standard notion of sustainable tourism had its starting-point in the Brundtland Commission Report (1987), which defined sustainable development as the balance between economic, social, and environmental issues. The tourism industry itself recognizes the same sustainability issues, but sees them mainly from the perspective of producers and providers. In recent years, politicians, tourism producers, and researchers have agreed that the tourism industry must become sustainable to survive. If all stakeholders in the tourism sector shared the same understanding of what it takes to achieve sustainability, then it would be relatively easy; however, where stakeholders disagree about where the responsibility lies or where the 'sacrifices' have to be made, a lasting agreement on sustainable tourism is unlikely and any consensus would be hard to maintain and such problems arise when the priorities of sustainability collide with stakeholders' particular interests. Even where stakeholders from the private and public business sectors are able to reach an agreement on sustainability, can we expect tourists to take any responsibility in the matter, and if so, are there any differences between categories of tourist as to their perceptions of sustainable tourism? And how does tourism consumption contribute to environmental, social, and economic sustainability at the destination level? Existing research on sustainable tourism is insufficient given the increasing importance of tourism as the engine of regional and local development. Previous studies have overlooked

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one or both of the two sustainability perspectives presented in this research paper: a tourism destination's sustainability performance, and the sustainability factors that tourists consider most important in a tourism destination. To understand better the extent to which tourism providers meet tourists' needs, importance–performance analysis (IPA) is here applied in a study of a mass tourism destination in Italy.

The objectives of the study are twofold: to examine the social and environmental sustainability performance of a mass tourism destination in Italy; and to identify the sustainability factors that are considered important by international tourists, as opposed to national tourists, at the same destination. To identify possible strengths and weaknesses in the destination's performance, the study uses an importance–performance analysis (IPA), a technique used to understand tourists' level of satisfaction with regard to their expectations of standards of service (Tosun et al., 2007). The results of the present study can be used by destination management to improve their performance in the areas of sustainability that tourists think are most significant. At the same time, it can help tourist management to work more efficiently with sustainable tourism development at the destination level.

2. Sustainable tourist destinations

2.1. Mass tourism destinations

As an industry, tourism differs from ordinary industries in three ways: customers (for which read tourists) must be imported to the production site (the destination); tourists are co-producers, and thus play an active part in production, delivery, and consumption; and any destination involves many co-operative, collective bodies, but there is still individual business competition (von Friedrichs Grängsjö and Gummesson, 2006). A destination can be a country, region, city, or village to which tourists travel. It is the 'geographical room' that offers tourists the complete 'tourist product'. Elbe (2003) argues that what is on offer at a destination is divided into attractions and facilities. The attractions provide the motive for the trip, whereas the facilities make it possible, and it is the combination of the two that creates the complete tourist experience (von Friedrichs Grängsjö, 2003). With such prerequisites, it can be a challenge to maintain sustainability in environmental and social values at a mass tourism destination, where a large number of national and/or international tourists pass through during the season (or seasons). Different tourists have different reasons for visiting, just as the different stakeholders and tourism producers, both public and private, have different reasons for their investment in the tourist destination. The optimal situation for keeping a mass tourism destination attractive and sustainable would be if the tourists' perceptions of both the destination and sustainability were compatible with the performance of the stakeholders at the tourist destination.

Mass tourism tends to attract tourists who are looking for sun, sea, and sand, and such destinations often undergo rapid expansion as tourism producers try to maximize their profits, with the result that they normally take a short-term approach to sustainable destination development, in which development is uncontrolled, with new buildings that ignore social and environmental considerations. At such destinations, tourist groups are frequently large and follow fixed programmes (for example, organized mass tourism) (Butler, 1990; Sharpley and Telfer, 2002). According to Wahab and Pigram (1997), the tourist map of tomorrow will be different from today's—but the difficulty lies in predicting where tourists will want to go in future. Consequently, destinations need to find tools that will enable them to create a form of tourism that is more sustainable in numerous respects.

For many mass tourism destinations, tourism is an essential part of the area's growth, as is the case in the Greek islands or Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the Emirates (Sharpley and Telfer, 2002). Archer (1996) argues that many countries are heavily dependent on tourism to maintain and increase their levels of income and employment. In the wake of ongoing and rapid global structural changes, tourism is considered the salvation of countries' and regions' economies, to the point of becoming a 'base industry' in some countries (see, for example, Visita, 2012). There is also the issue of the seasonality of demand, as many places are tourist destinations for only a few months each year, which makes it difficult to achieve economic, social, or environmental sustainability (Edwards and Priestley, 1996) on a yearly basis. Given the environmental impacts of tourism, this kind of seasonal variation represents a challenge to destination stakeholders in their efforts to meet tourists' needs. As tourists are consumers of the destination's environment on a short-term basis, keeping the environment attractive at the moment of interaction is of great importance. Yet, since the development of many mass tourism destinations is often both rapid and unplanned—because tourism is seen as the salvation of regional and community development—this uncontrolled growth leaves regions and communities at risk of becoming over-exploited, and, in the long run, less attractive to tourists. Consequently, destination stakeholders must find strategies to keep their destinations attractive for tourists as well as for investors. In other words, they need to find paths to achieve sustainable economic, environmental, and social development, and, especially at mass tourism destinations, to satisfy customers' needs (Buhalis and Fletcher, 1995; Weaver, 2012).

2.2. Sustainable tourism as concept

Sustainability as a concept can be applied to all types of tourism and environment (Clarke, 1997; Saarinen, 2006); the challenge is to use it in a practical and useful way (Hunter, 1995; Liu, 2003; Saarinen, 2006; Sharpley, 2000). Researchers such as Butler (1998), Peeters (2012), and Weaver (2012) argue that sustainable development is now a well-established term, but that its implementation has not been particularly successful. This can be explained by the uncertainties that remain about the meaning of the concept. The Brundtland Commission Report (WCED, 1987) stated that 'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. Ever since, sustainable development has been discussed with a focus on three areas: economic, social, and environmental sustainability. Sharpley (2000) argues that the concept of sustainable development is very unclear, as it has over 70 different definitions and people use it in widely different contexts. It is unlikely that there will ever be only one interpretation of sustainable development in the future, since even the term itself comprises two contradictory parts: while the first part speaks of conservation, the latter speaks of growth. Today, sustainable development is to some extent applied to tourism, but many still think of sustainable tourism as an ideology. Saarinen (2006) discusses three traditions draw on different ideas of sustainability. The resource-based tradition focuses on the need to protect nature (environmental approach); the activity-based tradition looks to the resource needs of the industry (economic approach); and the community-based tradition hinges on the empowerment of those the destination (social approach). They all have both advantages and disadvantages in the process of sustainable tourism.

Clarke (1997) maintains that the concept of sustainable tourism has been subject to three paradigm shifts. The first paradigm saw mass tourism and sustainable tourism as polar opposites, the former being bad while the latter is good. The second saw