

Eco-Tourism As a Tool for Ensuring Sustainable Tourism Goals

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Summary:

The present article deals with the problems of ensuring the sustainable tourism development which can be achieved by the alternative forms of tourism such as the eco-tourism. It aims to represent the significance of the sustainable tourism and its principles which are integrated into the development of the eco-tourism. Consecutively there are analysed the different definitions of it, its role and main advantages. Futhermore in the article other forms of tourism are presented which contribute to the sustainable tourism development goals with their specific characteristics and opportunities which they offer for both destinations development and visitors experience. Recommendations are formulated for the creation of different tour packages accorging to the forms of tourism which contribute to the sustainable tourism development goals so that higher possitive impacts could be genetated for the destinations in order to minimize the negative effects of tourism.

Key words: sustainable tourism development, eco-tourism, environmental protection, consumer demand

JEL Classification: M2, O1, L1

1. Introduction:

The tourism industry is among the largest and fastest growing economic sectors and is often described as the „industry of the future“. In the recent past, tourism was seen as a „white industry“, harmless to the environment in which it develops. However, practice shows that the sector has a huge potential to destroy the environment and their own capital. In recent years, the increased attention appears to improve the environmental performance of tourism. The main reason to mitigate the negative impact of tourism on the environment results from the inseparable relationship that exists between tourism product and nature. Supporters of the idea believe that environmental protection is in the interest of the tourism industry, as it has the advantage that with proper planning and management, tourism development has a minimal impact on the environment, while it can be a catalyst for conservation.

As Toncheva (2014, p. 251) maintains tourism is a big industry and in some countries it could be a considerable source of employment and income. It may not dominate the national or regional economy but in almost every country or

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province there is some site that attracts visitors who provide money income and need for seasonal or year-round employment.

The road from the idea of environmental sustainability to responsible action requires a fundamental change in the industry as a whole, in cooperation with government authorities, local communities, international development agencies, NGOs and international tourism organizations. This idea aims to review the environmental sustainability of tourism, considering the approaches and methods to reduce the impact on the environment, suitable for both private and public sector, responsible for creating and implementing adequate and effective tourism policy. In order to avoid the negative impacts of tourism on the environment, it has evolved, which is to say that green or sustainable tourism have emerged. In other words, an environment-friendly sustainable tourism aims to ensure minimizing the phase of stagnation to continuously strengthen regeneration. This feature applies mostly to ecotourism.

2. Nature and occurrence of sustainable tourism

Sustainable tourism aims not only to influence tourists during their trip, but to form a culture of conservation in the more tourist-valued issuing centers. This evolution in tourism integrates the interests of visitors (tourists) to those of the representatives of the host community.

Sustainable tourism implies all activities in the area and mean to comply with the marginal capacity of natural resources, ie to respect the principle

of optimal and economical usage of resources.

To create a more complete picture of the evolution of the theoretical essence of sustainable tourism, as well as guidelines for its development, definitions adopted by major organizations whose activities are directly or indirectly relevant contribute. These definitions describe sustainable tourism as it should be, and in most cases rarely is consistency achieved between results and goals, as it does not create the necessary conditions and prerequisites to follow up applications and the optimal model of behavior of participants in ecotourism.

One of the first ecotourism organizations in the world is the International Ecotourism Society, founded in 1990. Functioning as a non-profit organization, it focuses its efforts on defining guidelines and standards, training, evaluation of projects, studies and publications to promote the development of ecotourism. In 1991 the company provided the following definition of ecotourism: „Ecotourism is a responsible travel to natural areas to protect the environment and to contribute to the wellbeing of local residents." In this organization the main characteristics of this type of tourism are:

1. Minimizing the negative impacts on nature and culture, which may cause damage to a destination;
2. Informing the traveler about the need to preserve the environment; Stressing the importance of responsible business that must take place in cooperation between local authorities and people to meet local needs and maximize the benefit to the conservation of the environment;

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3. Directing the proceeds to conservation and management of the nature and protection which contributes directly to the biodiversity;
4. Highlighting the need for regional tourism zoning and management planning visits to the region as well as natural areas which are to be included in the list of eco destinations;
5. Performing basic research in the field of the environment and society, as well as developing long-term monitoring programs to assess and minimize adverse impacts;
6. Maximizing the economic benefits to the host country, local businesses and people, especially for people living near or in a natural and protected areas;
7. Economic support for communities through training and employment of local people, buying goods from local manufacture and promotion of the initiative to acquire property by locals or participation in joint ventures with external business partners and NGOs;
8. Ensuring that tourism development does not exceed the limits of possible social changes set by research in cooperation with the local population;
9. Using infrastructure created in harmony with the environment: reducing the use of harmful fuels, conservation of local flora and fauna and merging with the natural and cultural environment.

3. Subset of sustainable tourism

Tadarakov (2008, p. 44) emphasis that eco-tourism aims mostly to reduce the negative environmental impacts and to ensure the socio-economic development

and employment for the host community. So it can be used as a form of tourism which contributes to the sustainability of the industry. When these aspects of the eco-tourism are taken into account in the business activities, this is called the "triple bottom line" approach.

Sometimes it is referred to as "doing well by doing good." It means creating tour packages in such a way that it does not destroy the resources – natural, cultural, or economic – on which the business depends. In fact, a business that is run in this way can enhance all three aspects and continue to operate profitably, while benefiting its surrounding natural areas and communities.

Ecotourism is one kind of sustainable tourism, based on nature, and usually following a distinct set of principles and good practices. A major problem for true ecotourism businesses is a practice called greenwashing. This term refers to a business that presents itself as 'sustainable', 'ecological', 'green', 'responsible', 'ecotourist', etc., when it fails to comply with generally accepted standards, or worse, it runs counter to them. For those who are really trying to do their best to comply with all ecotourism standards, the businesses that falsely use the term 'ecotourism' compete unfairly and damage the credibility of the whole industry. One way of determining which businesses are truly practicing ecotourism (or sustainable tourism in other market segments) is certification.

Certification is a way of ensuring that an activity or a product meets certain standards. Within the tourist industry, different organizations have developed certification programs measuring

different aspects of tourism such as quality, for the entire tourist industry, sustainability, also for all sectors, and ecotourism, for sustainable tourism that takes place in natural, protected, or fragile ecosystems, that may include indigenous communities, and that conforms to the definition above.

4. Different types of eco-tourism tours

As a part of the eco-tourism ethnographic tourism is becoming more popular in recent times. At the heart of this area stands the desire of people (tourists) to learn about the customs and traditions of the local population, which for thousands of years lived in perfect harmony with the surrounding nature. Its driving force is the genetic memory of mankind and the realization of the fact that the ethnic diversity of the planet decreases at a rate comparable to the rate of loss of biodiversity.

A part of the eco-tourism is the volunteer tourism as well. According to Toncheva (2014) it is one of the new forms of tourism. It is a form of the eco-tourism in which people are going to the working holiday, giving voluntary labor for worthy causes.

Some specific activities of eco-tourism should be mentioned. They can be applied into the Bulgarian tourism industry to develop eco-tourism products.

4.1 Travels with naturalists

During these trips a wide variety of eco-routes is offered, in which scientists-naturalists participate. Botanical tours provide introduction to the flora of the

tropics, forests, steppes, tundra. There are also special excursions to explore certain plant species endemic to a particular region. As the Bulgarian nature is characterised with its biodiversity those forms can be used to enhance the travel experience and increase the demand for eco-tourism products. The interest of practicing the hobby of bird watching is growing constantly, underlying the ornithological tours, and specialized clubs in ornithology. That kind of tours are offered in Bulgaria as well. The most famous regions for birdwatching actively visited by tourists are:

- The rainforests of Costa Rica;
- One of the islands of the Western Archipelago – Estonia
- Mediterranean forests in the province of Extremadura - Spain;

4.2 Travelling with bicycles

Interest in cycling is explained by ecology as a mean of transport and the need of idle urban dweller from the daily physical training. Usually cycling journeys are long and filled with risk through cross-country, they themselves tourists luggage and equipment. But the demand of that form of the eco-tourism can be increased in the domestic tourism market in order to ensure the sustainability of tourism development in Bulgaria.

4.3 Travel on horseback

Saddle and pack animals are widely used in tourism movement of tourists and freight. Equestrian tourism is one of the most common types of tourism. Its popularity is increasing worldwide - campsites were built to serve riders and

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their horses, develop new horse routes. The variety of these routes is huge.

It should be noted that holidays and accommodation must be provided with food and water for both riders and horses, but also to ensure the duty shift of the participants in the route. In equestrian travel applies hippotherapy - treating diseases by horse riding (such as autism and cerebral injuries among children respond very positively after a period horse riding under the care of specialized therapists). So the target segments of that form of eco-tourism are plenty and Bulgarian nature has the resource to offer it. So that it can significantly contribute to the sustainable tourism goals. Among equestrian trails, enjoying worldwide fame should be noted:

- Russia has excellent prospects for the development of equestrian tourism - nowadays recover routes, created in the 1970s in Upper Altai, Bashkortostan, Chuvashia, Kamerovska District, Krasnoyarsk region, Southern Urals, the Caucasus, Crimea, and other regions.
- You can enjoy eco-routes not only horses but also with other animals. The Chitwan National Park in Nepal offers a journey with an elephant.

5. Consumer demand for eco-tourism products

When discussing the opportunities that eco-tourism opens up, the sustainable development of the demand for such products and the importance of the certification should be taken into account. Consumers continue to view safety, cost, weather, accessibility, and quality of facilities as paramount

when planning vacations. However, their demand for ethical products, social investment, and eco-labels is growing. On the other hand tour operators are increasingly aware of the demand for socially and environmentally responsible tourism, and are exploring certification programs as a way to market their ecotourism products. To create a current snapshot of the trends that are shaping the eco-tourism demand I analyzed a range of recent studies made in the United States, Europe, Costa Rica, and Australia. The following introduction summarizes my findings:

- According to Travel Industry Association of America (TIA) and National Geographic Traveler (NGT) survey (2002) more than half (53%) of the tourists surveyed agree that they have a better travel experience when they learn as much as possible about their destination's "customs, geography, and culture."
- Goodwin (2001) pointed that more than three in four (78%) package vacation travelers reported that the inclusion of social and environmental information in tour operators' brochures is important to them. Over half (52%) of respondents indicated that they were interested in finding out more about local social and environmental issues before booking a trip.
- The opportunity to "learn about the environment" was the motivation most frequently cited by those choosing to patronize ecotourism operations according to IHEI (2002).
- More than two-thirds of travelers consider the active protection of the

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environment, including support of local communities, to be part of a hotel's responsibility. According to a 2002 survey, these travelers are more likely to patronize hotels with a "responsible environmental attitude", according to TIA and NGT (2003).

- More than three-quarters of travelers "feel it is important that their visits do not damage the environment," according to a 2003 survey conducted by Tearfund.
- Tourtellot (2002) states that most of the travelers said that they had placed importance on the fact that their last trip "had been specifically designed to cause as little damage as possible to the environment."
- Hildebrand (2002) emphasizes that an overwhelming majority of domestic tourists, (71.1%) and more than half of the foreign tourists (59.5%) agree that an environmental label for tourism is useful.
- About half of all tourists (52.8%) would use an eco-label, if available, in the choice of a vacation according to Ecotrans.
- In a 2002 travel survey of nearly 8,000 Germans, 14.2% (8.5 million) said that "easy access to information on all tourism products in Europe with certified environmental quality (Ecolabels)" was "of peculiar importance" to them. Most of the travelers reported they would pay at least 5% more to use certified businesses.

The analysis of the data shows the increasing demand for eco-tourism products. The certification programs offer

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practical tools for achieving sustainable tourism goals and are important for the consumer when they take a decision for choosing a holiday. So the Bulgarian tourism enterprises can use them to increase the demand for eco-tourism products. Furthermore by offering eco-tourism products they can get higher rates of profits.

By intergrating the consumer research data with the different forms of eco-tourism products the goals of sustainable tourism can be achieved by ensuring social and economic benefits with regard to the host community and environmental protection. As our country has a huge potential to develop eco-tourism as well as the potential to ensure its sustainable development.

Conclusion

If in the long run conditions are not created for the protection of the environment, then sooner or later a tourist destination will gradually lose its attractiveness, and will accordingly suffer from a loss of visitors for tourism purposes. Not only those involved in the supply of the tourist product market are actors on the issue of environment protection. Tourists should take care of anthropogenic and natural resources. This is due to the promotion and education of tourists by the local population for a particular destination.

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