FRAMEWORK FOR THE COMPARATIVE EVALUATION OF TOURIST PRODUCTS: THE CASE OF BIRD-WATCHING AND MASS TOURISM IN LESVOS ISLAND - GREECE

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ABSTRACT

The evaluation of tourist products in the context of sustainable tourism is essential in order to plan for the regional development. Special forms of tourism are considered as the solution to the problems of mass tourism, even if their socio-economic and environmental impacts are unidentified. In this paper we try to set a methodological framework for the evaluation of different tourist products, according to the principles of sustainable tourism.

Two different tourist products are compared: mass tourism and bird-watching in the area of Kalloni Gulf in the Greek island of Lesvos, using questionnaires to the tourists and hotel owners. The analysis focuses on the tourists’ profile and the tourism contribution to the island’s sustainable development. The results show significant differentiation of special interest tourism and mass tourism in the performances of all sectors (economic, social and environmental).

KEY WORDS: sustainable tourism, evaluation, framework, bird-watching, Lesvos, Greece
INTRODUCTION

The issue of sustainable development preoccupies scientists, planners, and politicians all over the world in all economic sectors. In this concept, the argument about sustainable tourism is a constant topic (Swarbrooke 1999, Wall 1997, Hunter 1997). The sustainability of the tourism activity needs to be examined and measured, especially nowadays that a new tourism pattern (alternative forms) is emerging (Smith & Eadington 1996). A very important question is whether the alternative forms of tourism are more sustainable than the conventional tourism, as far as their environmental, social and economic performance are concerned (Butler 1996, Spilanis, Vayanni 2004a, b).

A critical issue on the concept of sustainable tourism, as on sustainable development in general, is to make its definition operational, so that to be able to measure the state of the tourism activity, its performance and consequences to the economy, the society and the environment of a region (Swarbrooke 1999). This is a very challenging question for every researcher, since all attempts until today are incomplete. While sustainable development is understood as ‘development that lasts’ and everyone agrees on its basic principles, the details of how to achieve exactly what and in how -and still remaining on a sustainable path- are not fixed yet; the perceptions and the necessary actions for achieving sustainable development differ between socio-cultural and political contexts and change over time (Briassoulis 2001). Yet there are different levels of sustainability, and the sustainable development spectrum varies from the very weak to the very strong sustainability (Turner et al. 1994).

In the international literature, many ways are proposed to solve the problems of mass tourism, such as the creation of new products in order to attract tourists who are presumed to have high expenditure per capita, the change of the tourist model, with the emergence of “special” forms of tourism and the improvement of the environmental performances of the existing tourist products and destinations (Bramwell 2004). Special interest forms of tourism are practiced by tourists who do not want just to rest under the sun and by the sea during their vacations, but to gain “unique” experiences and enrich their knowledge. They participate actively in activities that are relative to their main interest of traveling. Various studies mention that these forms concern rather prosperous, high-educated tourists, which also justifies their interest for learning (Bramwell 2004).

In these forms of tourism more activities are included apart from the basics; transportation, accommodation, food and entertainment. This means that these forms generate more complex products for the satisfaction of special interests of the consumers (tourists). These products apart from the fact that they contain many activities, they also incorporate bigger business involvement, capital, know-how and demand high educated, skillful employees. This is why their added value is higher compared to conventional forms of tourism and consequently the profits for the host communities are also bigger.

Furthermore, special interest forms of tourism differ from the conventional tourism also in the way of organization. Special interest tourists are more aware of what to expect from the destination, so it is difficult a unified product (tourist package) to fulfill all different expectations. They need to be more independent. At the same time, they also afford to travel by themselves and their families or in small groups, which could cost them more money.
This is why the measurement of the sustainability of conventional and new forms of tourism is necessary, through the comparison of the products that are offered in different destinations, based on specific criteria and methodology. The purpose of this paper is to set a framework for the evaluation of the tourism forms, according to the principles of sustainable tourism (Tourism Concern, WWF 1992).

In the first part, we refer to the concept used and to the proposed tool by presenting the analysis of the factors that affect tourism performance; these factors are proposed in order to measure and evaluate the performance of various products. In the second part we analyze results of the implementation of this framework for two different tourist products; bird-watching and mass tourism in the area of Kalloni Gulf in Lesvos Island. Concluding, we suggest improvements of the tool, according to the problems that we faced during the research and we also give more possibilities of the evaluation tool.

METHODOLOGY

Theoretical approach

The problem of definitions occupies many scientists that deal with the issue of sustainable tourism development. Before we analyse our own view, we will quote and argue some of the most used and reliable definitions. The World Tourism Organisation (WTO) defines **sustainable tourism development** as: "Development that 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 aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems" (WTO internet site, 2001). This suggests that sustainable tourism is a state of the tourist activity, although this definition needs more explanation and precision in order to be operational.

According to Swarbrooke (1999), sustainable tourism differs in meaning from other terms such as responsible tourism, alternative tourism, ecotourism, environmentally friendly tourism, minimum impact tourism, soft tourism and green tourism, even though it is related to them. While the majority of these terms are taken to imply tourism that is friendly to the environment, fewer are considered also to refer to tourism's economic and social impacts on host communities.

The inclusion of the term **ecotourism** in the above list is likely to cause most confusion since it is defined as "environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impacts, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations" (as suggested by Boo, 1990: xiv, and also accepted by Ceballos-Lascurain, 1993; Fennell, 1999; Yunis, 2001). However, this definition implies that we should classify ecotourism as a new form of tourism, together with agrotourism, cultural tourism, conference tourism, and not as a state of the tourism activity. The confusion is due to ecotourism having been considered to be friendly to the environment and to host communities, and consequently it has been identified with sustainable tourism. While this can be true, it only applies if the activity is also economically and socially viable in a specific region.
From this perspective, tourism activity can be divided into two major categories: conventional tourism and new forms of tourism. The term 'conventional tourism' is used in a similar way to that of 'conventional economics' (Turner et al., 1994) in order to highlight the importance of the market, the way of pricing of resources used as inputs, and the negligence of the environment and of various externalities. It is also preferred from the term 'mass tourism', as the latter indicates the way in which the activity is organised (mass, standardized, low cost, and controlled by tour operators) and not a form of tourism or a conceptual approach. New forms of tourism are divided into alternative forms and special interest forms (Varvaressos, 1998). Special forms of tourism are defined by the special motives that induce travel, while alternative forms of tourism are related to the way the travel is organised (relative autonomy) and to the tourists' willingness to take care of the host area and to consume environmentally friendly products; they are alternative to the conventional model.

New forms of tourism may be either economically viable or environmentally friendly or both. All new forms of tourism do not have the same environmental impacts, even though they are considered to be more sustainable than conventional tourism. For instance, conference and sport tourism are characterised by the creation of high added value but also by high consumption of resources (available land, water and energy) and by the need for huge installations (big conference centres, hotel resorts, sports fields, swimming pools, marinas etc), that have irreversible impacts on the environment. Moreover, the profits for the local population are not certain, as the economic leakages can be very high.

Conventional tourism is not considered to be sustainable, since many problems have been identified in its application up to this time (Butler, 1991; Mathieson & Wall, 1982; Swarbrooke, 1999). Scientists, politicians, planners, the media and the public generate more confusion due to their different uses of the terms 'sustainable development' and 'sustainable tourism'. Both terms may be regarded as a process for the improvement of the economic, social and environmental performance from a given state (different for each area), and not as a well pre-defined situation (the same for all areas). Every attempt, which contributes to the reduction of environmental pressures and the maintenance of environmental balance, in combination with the improvement of economic and social conditions in the host area, can be characterised with different sustainability levels (Swarbrooke, 1999). The sustainability spectrum varies (Hunter, 1997; Turner et al., 1994) from very weak sustainability (greening - efforts to reduce resource consumption and the production of wastes), to very strong sustainability (change in the model of development and in social behaviour) (Loinger, 1995).

According to Inskeep (1991: 166), all types of tourism can be sustainable, under some conditions, such as that they respect the local society and environment of the area in which they are found. This is especially the case for the alternative forms of tourism, which are developed in ecological sensitive areas and in areas with important cultural monuments that should be preserved and protected.

Every action plan that seeks to move away from conventional tourism and to apply new forms of tourism is preferable, since it is contributing to the area's sustainability. On the other hand, it is considered as too utopian to believe that the development of economically sustainable tourism activities will have absolutely no environmental impact. Figure 1 shows that this change in the pattern of tourism development has at least three dimensions:
• Improvement in the environmental performance of enterprises in the tourism industry (green tourism) in combination with the change of tourists’ behaviour, and the imposition of limits to tourism growth.

• The development of special interest forms of tourism through exploitation of the natural and cultural characteristics of the area, which means that the increase in added value per capita that is created remains within the host area (special interest tourism).

• The development of forms of tourism that have a low environmental impact and at the same time contribute to the preservation and exploitation of cultural heritage and the maintenance of population and economic activities in remote areas (alternative tourism).

Thus, with the use of this figure someone can classify the various tourist products according to their socioeconomic and environmental performance. Similar figures (The Barometer of Sustainability) had been used by international institutes and other scientists (IISD 1997, Sebastian & McArthur 1998, Pinter et al. 2000). Sustainable development is a continuous procedure to the improvement of social, economic and environmental conditions.

Figure 1: Sustainability levels of various tourist forms

Sustainable development can be presented as a graphic of the curve \( f(x) = 1/x \), where the environmental condition is a result of the economic intense. When the economic
development grows up, the environmental condition decreases. This is similar to the utility curves that are used in the economic theory. Every point of a specific curve has the same level of welfare (or sustainability).

Points 1 and 2 on the curve $S_n$ have the same level of welfare. Point 1 compared to point 2 is in a better socioeconomic, but in a worse environmental condition. So if we are on the point 1 and we want to move to the point 2 without loosing our welfare, we have to sacrifice a great part of our socioeconomic condition in order to gain even a small amount of a better environmental condition. On the contrary, if we are on the point 2 and we have to move to the point 1, the amount of socioeconomic development that we will get should be so big, that we will be willing to loose a small amount of environmental condition. In order to move to a better level of welfare (or sustainability) we have to move to a higher curve, e.g. from $S_n$ to $S_{n+1}$.

The horizontal lines set the boundaries to the sustainability spectrum, which depends on the percentage of the contribution of the environment to the economic development. On the top level there is the very strong sustainability (high environmental protection/conservation), whereas on the lowest level there is the very weak sustainability level (low environmental protection).

In this paper, we consider as sustainable any form of tourism that, in a given area, alters the conventional tourist product to a more “sustainable” one, so that it is a more socio-economically “profitable” (advantageous) and/or a more environmentally friendly product. The evaluation of tourism activity can be based on two criteria: first, the tourist expenses per capita (economic), which relates to the added value and the employment created per tourist (social), as well as the consumption of water and energy, and the production of wastes per capita (environment); and, secondly, the scale of the activity compared to the carrying capacity of the host area. Even if the performance per capita is improved, every area has its own environmental, social and economic limits that cannot be surpassed.

The tool

In order to evaluate the various tourist products\(^1\) of a destination, someone has to consider various characteristics that involve the product’s demand, supply and type of organization and distribution. The demand concerns the tourists that visit an area, the supply concerns the characteristics of the destination, its infrastructure, installations and accommodation and finally the organization concerns the way that the product is managed and distributed in the market. These are the most important parameters that have to be considered. Each of these parameters involves a number of factors and can be measured by many indices (Table 1).

The tourist demand refers to the behavior of consumers-tourists who “choose” a form of tourism that fits best to their needs and tastes. It is connected to the motive of the travel (relax, entertainment, “revitalization”, education etc), which influence the choice of the destination, and also to the experiences that the tourists expect to gain, by participating or not to activities, such as training, sports, professional improvement, meeting new places, cultures and environments. The variety in the demand reflects in

\(^1\) The term tourist product refers to the activities that are offered to the customers during their vacations in a destination area. This differs from the tourist package, which refers to the services, which the tourist buys from the origin country, before his/her travel to the destination.
the various forms and products that are developed in order to satisfy the tourists’ wills. Of course, the demand and the products are transformed in time as shows the brief history of the tourism (Boyer 2001).

On the one hand, there is the recreational tourism, where tourists are basically interested in relaxing, resting and having fun, without doing any special activity, and on the other hand, there are the special interest forms, where tourists’ activities have to do with a specific motive that is fulfilled by being involved in activities. For example, bird-watchers organize their daily program based on their interest of watching rare birds. However, they may visit museums, bars, beaches, that are considered to be places for conventional tourists. The same thing happens with the conference participants, the bicyclists, the sailors, the walkers, the students etc, as long as all other activities happen after the fulfillment of their basic motive. At the same time, recreational tourists that visit a cultural monument are not considered to be cultural tourists; they just enrich their entertainment with cultural activities. The same thing happens with someone who buys a diving package and chooses his/her destination (e.g. the Red Sea) by this criterion in comparison with someone who travels in a coastal area where there is a diving center and buys a daily diving activity incidentally.

The evolution in demand is the turn from mass consumption to specialized, flexible, quality products and from simple recreation, to special interest tourism. This demand varies from the enrichment of the vacation program with specific activities (e.g. visit to the thermal springs in Lesvos) to the choice of the destination based exclusively on specific activities (e.g. choice of the destination Ikaria for example for health tourism).

Of course, the effort to classify the tourists in big categories according to their motives is widely subjective, since practically there are so many motives as the number of tourists. Therefore, we could figure that with a vector where on the one side there is the “pure” recreational tourism and on the other the special interest forms of tourism and in the middle there are all the other mixed cases (Figure 2).

Considering all of the above, we conclude that a critical point concerning tourism performance is the reason that the tourists choose the destination or the product: the choice is either based on the satisfaction of his/her motive, or on the relation between quality and price, or even only by the low prices. Therefore, the combination of the special interests with the destinations or products that offer something unique seems ideal, since tourists are willing to pay more in order to satisfy their interest. On the other hand, 3S tourists can choose among many destinations (closely substitute products) all over the world, within the whole year. In this case, the price plays the determinant role in the final choice. The factors of the tourist demand that influences the tourism impact to the destination appear in the Table 1.

The tourist supply refers to the main services and products that each destination offers to the consumers. Their type and content depends on the local resources, the degree and way of their exploitation, the infrastructures, the services and the other activities that have been developed. All of the above, conclude to different but substitute products for the same form of tourism in different destinations as the conference tourism: for example it is urban in Paris, Rome or Prague, cosmopolitan in Nice and Rhodes, exotic in Bahamas and Canary islands, small scale with traditional elements in Lesvos etc.

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2 This trend is based on the post fordism systems that do not use economies of scale and homogeneous types of production (Bramwell 2004).
Assuming the fact that a tourist product is a complex one without specific borders (as all other products), as it is composed of a number of services and activities offered from different enterprises in a certain place, we could presume that every destination may offer from a rather simple to a very complex product³.

The variety and the complexity of the supplied product is another determinative factor for the socio-economic and environmental performances of a destination. For example, the fact that the supplied product of bird-watching in Lesvos is a simple one with no organized infrastructure in the place (e.g. towers, binoculars to rent, eco-museum, trails) or activities (e.g. organized visits companied by eco-guides, out-door activities) cannot provoke the tourists to spend more and/or stay more days, so that the total expenditures will rise.

The size of the enterprises in a region is another factor that affects the performances of the product. Big scale enterprises, that employ trained staff and use modern methods of organization and promotion of their services (industrial tourism), affect the destination in a different way as small family owned units (artisanship tourism) that can not easily follow the development and adjust to the rapid progress.

The presence of small-family businesses, which offer qualitative products and have local character, does not always mean a worse situation: big scale business often depend greatly on tour-operators, do not diversify their products from those of other businesses’ in other destinations, they use imported trained personnel and standardized products (high leakages) and consume more water and energy, which generates less economic benefits locally (more leakages due to higher propensity of imports for goods and services) and moreover creates more environmental pressure.

Finally, the degree of cooperation between the public and the private sector in the destination affects the form, the variety and the quality of the supplied products, whereas it facilitates the confrontation of the problems and the transformation of the supplied products for the satisfaction of the tourists’ wills.

Critical parameters for the tourist product efficiency and the economic effectiveness of the tourism in a specific destination still remain:

- the tourism expenditure per capita and the percentage of the use of local products and services (income leakage – low multiplier),

- the added value per unit of product: this depends on high prices compared to competitive activities and also on the better exploitation of local resources, by incorporate capital and specialized labour.

The lack of consumption opportunities and of exploitation of local products and resources (which differentiates the product from other similar products of other destinations), has as a result the decrease in the economic benefit for the host region. In many cases, the tourist product includes the free use of resources (e.g. beaches, scenery, sights, folklore, museums), and thus the added value that is created locally is limited.

We could figure that with a vector where on the one side there is the simple product with limited use of local resources (capital and labor included) and on the other the

³ A simple product is the one that covers only the basic needs of the tourist (food, sleep, recreation), whereas the complex product is the one that also covers the tourist’s supplementary and special interests.
complex product that exploits environmental and cultural resources, capital and trained staff (Figure 2). The factors that play an important role to the tourist supply appear in the table 1.

The organisation of a market is needed in all industries so as to bring together the producers and the buyers. This organisation usually is made by the intermediaries whose role is to transfer the products and services from one form that the consumers do not like to a form that they are willing to buy and to the form that fits better to their needs (Cooper et al., 1993). The type of organization refers to the degree of involvement of institutionalized partners in the promotion, the organization and the distribution of a tourist product. The greater this degree of involvement of big and foreigner tour-operators is, the greater the dependence and the “mass production” of the products is (it becomes standardized, simpler and cheaper); consequently the added value that remains locally decreases, whereas the concentration in the time and space increases.

Today, small and medium size enterprises are taking up a central place in the tourist market. They do not occupy though proper educated personnel and they do not have strategic plans. This has an effect to the effective promotion and to the quality of their products. This is why small enterprises usually trust big tour operators for the promotion of their products, which places them to a position that they depend greatly on others (Bastakis et al., 2004). The greater the level of involvement of tour-operators to the destination is, the greater the mass production of homogeneous products is as well as the dependence on them in order to dispose of the local production. This reduces the added value that remains locally and also intensifies the concentration to the specific place and time, which has more environmental impacts.

The involvement of tour-operators to the market favors the consumers, because the prices are reduced and the quality of the supplied product secured, since their agent is present at the destination they visit. However, there are also benefits for the destination and the local business. Tour-operators contribute to the improvement of access to the area, by the charter flights. Furthermore, in some cases, they can contribute to the prolongation of the tourist season (Bastakis et al., 2004).

On the other hand, the per capita benefits are more significant when the tourists are informed either by themselves or by the local agents personally (e.g. by internet, brochures) and they organize their own trip, as they want. However, as the producers are insecure about the distribution of their products, if they promote them by themselves, they “prefer” to trust big tour-operators for the successful promotion of their products; even though they gain less, they also take less business risk.

Therefore, we could figure that with a vector where on the one side there is the full control by tour-operators and on the other the situation where no external actors are involved in the distribution chain (Figure 2). If we summarize all of the above, we take the following figure: at the edges we have the extreme situations, whereas in the middle of the vectors there are all other cases and combinations. The factors that play an important role to the tourist supply appear in the table 1.

All of the above demand, supply and organization characteristics of the tourist products can be grouped and summarized to the following figure. At the edges of the dipoles (two way vectors) the lower and higher values are placed and between them we can classify all other cases.
Figure 2: Categorization of tourism forms

**Demand:** Recreation

**Supply:** Simple product

**Organization:** Institutionalized

Special interest forms

Complex product

Non institutionalized

Source: Spilanis, Vayanni 2004a.

Based on the above analysis, we assume that when the tourism activity in a destination is based on passive tourists that travel for recreational reasons, consume simple products and unexploited local resources, with the intervention of tour-operators (conventional, mass tourism), it is unsustainable, since from the economic, social and environmental aspect, it has per tourist low economic and social performance and high environmental degradation⁴. On the contrary, when a destination is based on the special interest tourism, offers complex tourist products, which is based on exploited local resources, it is organized and distributed by local agents and has per tourist more “sustainable” results.

In the following table the more significant parameters of demand, supply and way of organization of a tourist product are presented, which affect directly the economy, the society and the environment of the host region.

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⁴ The “social effectiveness” of mass tourism is considered low, because it involves temporary and seasonal, untrained employment, where on the contrary special interest forms need high educational skills that incorporate in all other activities. As far as the “environmental effectiveness” is concerned, the great concentration of people in a specific place and time (mass tourism) creates usually bigger pressures from small scale tourism that has better distribution, and the behavior of the tourists which is often more responsible in the second case.