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**FROM MASS TOURISM TO ECOTOURISM:
THE CASE OF THE BALEARIC ISLANDS, THE MALTESE ISLANDS AND THE
REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS**

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FROM MASS TOURISM TO ECOTOURISM: THE CASE OF THE BALEARIC ISLANDS, THE MALTESE ISLANDS AND THE REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS

Noemi Said

1. INTRODUCTION

Many islands located in the Mediterranean Sea are major tourist destinations, particularly during the peak months of summer. Unfortunately, their tourism success often leads them to exceed their carrying capacity during peak tourist months resulting in an increase in environmental degradation and negative social impacts, which ultimately also affect the residents' quality of life. Furthermore, the high pressure on the natural environment and the natural resources eventually result in the deterioration and loss of appeal of the same destinations.

Ecotourism could be an option to reduce the negative environmental and social impacts of tourism. Currently ecotourism ventures in Mediterranean islands are still far behind compared to investment in mainstream tourism. This could be so mainly because investment in mainstream tourism ventures is likely to yield higher profit.

The main objective of this paper is to assess whether ecotourism could be a suitable alternative to mainstream tourism whilst taking into account its economic contribution, its impact on the environment and the social relations. The study, focussing on the Balearic Islands, the Maltese Islands and the Republic of Cyprus, attempts to discuss what constitutes "ecotourism", why ecotourism should be given more importance in plans and strategies of the islands under study and what constraints and limitations are associated with investing in ecotourism projects. In order to achieve the said aims a survey was conducted by the present author with the respondents being four categories of "experts" namely government officials in the tourism industry, scholars who have studied or written about tourism, representatives of environmental organisations and business operators in ecotourism ventures.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mass tourism and its economic importance and negative consequences

Mass tourism, sometimes also referred to as mainstream tourism, is a term associated with leisure tourism, often linked with "sea, sun and sand". The economic importance of mass tourism in all areas under study remains evident. In the case of Cyprus, Sharpley (2004: 321) states that tourism has proven to be the right tool to deliver development and claims that since the mid-1970s mass tourism in Cyprus was essential for its socio-economic growth. Ioannides (2001: 115) describes the Republic of Cyprus as "one of the most affluent societies in the Mediterranean rim", triggered by a very successful tourism sector.

In the case of the Balearic Islands, Garín Muñoz and Montero-Martin (2006: 1224) describe tourism as a sector which dominates the economic activity of the archipelagos. Tourism

transformed the Balearic from a rural area into a very rich region and contributes a lot to the local Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Garín Muñoz and Montero-Martin, 2006).

In the case of Malta, Cordina (2014: 11) describes the tourism industry as a “crucial driving force of the national economy making essential contribution towards economic growth”.

While the economic benefits of mass tourism are undeniable, as it generates considerable income and employment, there are costs which are not generally factored in when assessing the contribution of tourism to the economy, and such costs are likely to be high in small islands, where population density tends to be high and where the ecosystem tends to be fragile. The negative environmental and social impacts of tourism are highlighted in Briguglio and Briguglio (2002) and include waste generation, traffic congestion, intrusion of construction into sensitive environmental assets, and discomfort to the local residents when tourist densities are very high. There are also negative economic effects of mass tourism associated with employment seasonality, loss of work time due to traffic congestion and pressure on resources in peak season, and infrastructural costs (Ioannides, Apostolopoulos, & Sonmez, Searching for Sustainable Tourism Development in the Insular Mediterranean, 2001; Urry, 1990). Another economic disadvantage is what Selwyn (2001: 24) refers to as Balearization referring to the situation when islands are subjected simultaneously to under development of its interiors and economic development of its coastal areas characterised by rapid and unplanned building. As a result of the negative consequences associated with mass tourism, alternative forms of tourism are researched and sought. Ecotourism is one such possible alternative.

Definition of ecotourism

A commonly cited definition of ecotourism is that provided by the International Ecotourism Society in 2015; “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people and involves interpretation and education”. This would seem to encapsulate the most common aspects which feature in all ecotourism definitions.

Page and Dowling (2002: 52) refer to ecotourism as “one of the least clearly defined areas of study”. They point out that definitions on what it constitutes and how it should be defined, differ without any common agreement. However common elements in the definitions of ecotourism include the benefits to the natural environment, the respect of the local culture, the educational effect and the appreciation of sustainability.

The term “ecoturismo” is mostly attributed to Hector Cebellos-Lascurain by various sources in literature (Weaver, 2001; Page & Dowling, 2002; Higham & Lück, 2001). According to Weaver (2001: 3) Cebellos-Lascurain defined ecotourism as: “...tourism that consists in travelling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas”.

Cater and Lowman (1994: 5) asserted that the most important element in ecotourism is the ecological aspect and that any form of tourism has to be carried out in an environmentally sustainable manner. According to Weaver (2001: 9) the prefix “eco” in the term refers to the

ecology or ecosystem of the destination and that therefore the attractions are based primarily on the natural environment or some element of it. Laarman and Durst (1987) as cited in Fennell (1999: 34), defined ecotourism as a form of nature tourism. However they later realised that ecotourism and nature tourism can never be synonyms since as Fennell argued, both hunting and birdwatching are activities in which the traveller is drawn to the destination because of its nature but the two activities cannot be classified as ecotouristic.

According to Weaver (2001: 85) most of the ecotourism case studies in literature focus on undisturbed environments, however he argues that ecotourism can also be experienced in modified spaces that “provide habitats for specific kinds of adaptable flora and fauna”. This is particularly important in the three case studies being discussed in this study since all three areas occupy a very large portion of land which has been significantly altered from their natural state by human activities. Weaver (2001: 86) argues how modified areas have the potential to divert pressure away from vulnerable natural environments. Modified sites include agricultural land and rehabilitated abandoned areas, such as quarries which have the potential as “restoration ecotourism” (Weaver, 2001: 90).

With regards to the cultural aspect of the definition, it is virtually impossible to find destinations without any human intervention and it is therefore more realistic to include it in the definition (Weaver, 2001). On the other hand Fennell (1999: 44) argues that culture is part of any type of tourism and considers it as secondary motivation to the overall experience.

Another element in most of the definitions of ecotourism is education. According to Weaver (2001: 11) on one hand an ecotourist may be travelling as part of his formal education and may be engaging in a fieldwork, whereas on the other informal end the ecotourist may be simply observing and “absorbing the natural environment”. Therefore the idea of learning is blurred between education and simple appreciation.

Cater (1994: 3) includes the element of sustainability when he discusses whether ecotourism is a product or a principle and concludes that it is a “variant of alternative tourism with the attributes of ecological and socio-cultural integrity, responsibility and sustainability. Wood (2002: 9) describes ecotourism as a sustainable tool and a sub-component of sustainable tourism. Weaver (2001: 12) affirms that the element of sustainability, in most definitions of ecotourism, is injected by the desire to find an alternative form of tourism which avoids the negative impacts that “unavoidably” result from mass tourism.

Forms of ecotourism

Mallia (2013: 89) mentions several ecotourism niche markets which could attract investment in the Maltese Islands. These include; diving, avitourism, social tourism, photography tourism, artistic tourism, agritourism, architecture tourism and volunteer tourism.

Bird watching also presents economic opportunities and is a potential ecotourism niche market (UNEP, 2012). Son, Dung and Van (2011: 89) describe bird watching ecotourism as highly-

responsible, educative and which aids in the conservation of the environment and the local culture.

Scuba diving is described as an economically important industry and a high-yield type of tourism by Musa and Dimmock (2015: 52). Di Nora et al. (2007: 665) and Lucrezi et al. (2017: 385) indicate scuba diving as a useful activity which helps financially support and conserve Marine Protected Areas (MPA).

Agritourism is often associated with ecotourism. In fact Ioannides and Holcomb (2001: 251) single out agritourism as the main form of ecotourism initiative in Cyprus. However they argue that the economic benefits of such ventures are “relatively small and highly localised”. According to the Ministry of Labour, Commerce and Industry of the Balearic government (2014: 66), the Balearic Islands have a number of agritourism establishments which are mostly home based with a limited number of beds, located in a rural area and are an agricultural farm. Barbieri and Mschenga (2008: 168) consider agritourism as an activity or practise or service in a farm which is developed for the purpose of attracting visitors.

Benefits of ecotourism

Throughout literature ecotourism is described as having many benefits which include the generation of income for the local economy, the protection and the conservation of the natural environment in the locality being visited, all combined with the provision to travellers with an educational experience and the generation of money to fund conservation research (Brightsmith et al., 2008; Self et al., 2010).

Weaver (2001: 99) makes a distinction between direct benefits of ecotourism and the indirect ones. The direct benefits include; the protection of the natural environment, the incentive to rehabilitate and modify environments, the provision of funds for management and expansion of protected areas, the assistance by the ecotourist in the habitat maintenance and enhancement and the intervention of ecotourists when the environment is being threatened. The indirect benefits include; the fostering of environmentalism and the provision of environmental benefits to the protected area.

Potential ecotourism sites in the Mediterranean islands

Islands have the potential to offer a number of ecotourism attractions which include unique ecosystems with endemic species, unique cultures and a varied coastal and marine environment. In the Mediterranean islands under study, areas that have highly attractive natural features are often protected areas. In fact Weaver (2001: 67) describes as how in literature public protected areas are portrayed as the dominant setting for ecotourism around the world. He argues that protected areas are ideal ecotourism sites since they are oriented in protecting relatively undisturbed natural environments and the living organisms which live in them and therefore provide the nature based environment needed for ecotourism.

Furthermore, protected areas include recreational activities where people can learn and be educated. Fennell (1999: 89) also describes parks and protected areas as lands that “have a

certain mystique to travellers” and which have the dual purpose of protecting the area and fostering appreciation and understanding. Kafyri, Hovardas and Poirazidis (2012: 64) point to tourism as a tool for local development in protected areas which can also be used as a medium of education for the visitors.

Constraints and limitations of ecotourism

A number of authors (e.g. (Cater & Lowman, 1994; Page & Dowling, 2002)) suggest that alternatives to mass tourism might not be genuinely sustainable. As Wall (1997: 483) argues “even in its purest form, ecotourism is likely to present substantial challenges to the destination area”.

Islands are well-known for their endemic biodiversity, however this also means that there is always a danger that tourism of any form leads to environmental degradation. Drumm and Moore (2002: 35) suggest that environmental degradation in ecotourism can happen in many ways and may result in the visitors destroying the very resource that they visit. Weaver (2001: 107) affirms that even when all measures are taken to avoid negative environmental and socio-cultural impacts, such negative effects may still occur and that is why careful planning and management is needed especially since most ecotourism practices happen in protected areas.

Self et al. (2010: 116) point out that ecotourism may cause adverse impact on the animals and their habitat. In fact Wall (1997: 483) points out that ecotourism and sustainable tourism are not synonyms and for ecotourism to be economically viable “careful planning and management is required”. Briguglio and Briguglio (2002: 1) affirm that the result of substituting mass tourism with more “environmentally-friendly activities” would result in economic loss in small islands. In the case of Cyprus, Sharpley (2004: 321) argues that promoting alternative forms of tourism is “not only inappropriate but may actually hinder further development” of the island.

Two other constraints of investing in ecotourism are the high rate of failure amongst small private operators and the lack of interest from tourism planners. Weaver (2001: 134-135) attributes this failure amongst small private operators to the possibility that often tourism ventures are run by operators with narrow, specialised skills and little or no prior knowledge on how to run a business. Weaver (2001: 144) affirms that the lack of interest from tourism planners is due to the fact that travel agents have little incentive to work with small operators with low intake of clients and which are not integrated into the travel distribution systems.

Khan (1997: 988) argues that a major constraint in phasing out mass tourism is that it involves many stakeholders. She points out that while ecotourism is very popular, not all tourists seek eco-experiences and since there will always be a high demand for mass tourism the benefits of mass tourism outweigh its negative impacts. Khan concludes that while ecotourism can remedy some of the problems caused by mass tourism, it can never replace it.

3. METHOD

This study was based on purposive sampling technique in which respondents were deliberately chosen on the basis of the author’s judgement in deeming them as the experts needed to answer

the research questions. The persons singled out covered four categories of experts, namely; government officials in the tourism industry, scholars who have studied or written about tourism, representatives of environmental organisations and business operators in ecotourism ventures residing in the three areas under study; The Balearic Islands, The Maltese Islands and the Republic of Cyprus.

An e-mail message was sent out to each respondent with a covering letter explaining the purpose of the research and indicating the link where the survey questions could be accessed and answered. Out of 120 prospective respondents, 52 answered the questionnaire; 22 of which from the Maltese Islands, 16 from Cyprus and 14 from the Balearic Islands.

The questionnaire was organised in the following manner. Questions 1 to 4 were aimed at obtaining information about the respondent including the gender, age, education level and place of residence. Question 5 focused on the respondents' opinion as to the importance of tourism in their island of residence. Questions 6 and 7 elicited information from the respondents as to whether tourism was putting pressure on the natural environment and the social fabric of the island. The remaining questions focused on ecotourism. Question 8 attempted to shed light on the meaning of "ecotourism". Question 9 then referred to the need for ecotourism and why it should be given more importance in the plans and strategies of these islands. The tenth question sought information as to whether the respondents thought that ecotourism might have negative effects on the natural environment, whereas question 11 focused on the economy and whether ecotourism could generate as much revenue as mainstream tourism at the island level and the local level. Question 12 enquired about the extent to which the local community could benefit from ecotourism. The thirteenth question related to major constraints which are encountered in ecotourism projects. The fourteenth question provided the respondents with the option to add further comments. The last question, which was optional, asked respondents to write down their name.

The responses then were processed using the SPSS software package.

4. SURVEY RESULTS

Definition

In response to the question about the meaning of the word "ecotourism" the majority of respondents 73.1%, agreed that ecotourism is "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education". This was one of the three possible definitions provided, with the other definitions focussing only on the environment and the other on social aspects. Some respondents chose to elaborate more on its meaning and contributed additional remarks on what "ecotourism" constitutes. A suggestion was that ecotourism should not refer only to natural areas, but also to man-made places such as old cities, where the focus would be on the local culture and traditions, rather than the natural environment.

Economic impact

The large majority of respondents (87.5%) believed that ecotourism could generate significant economic benefits. This response could be attributed to the fact that ecotourism would be significantly important for inland areas, away from the coast since it would create jobs in these non sea-and-sand locations.

Ecotourism could also be used to mitigate the effects of “Balearization” in which a migratory shift occurs from the inland parts of the islands to the coastal regions, mainly as many people shift jobs to the tourism sector.

Environmental and social impacts

According to most respondents 58.8%, the main reason why ecotourism should be given more importance than it is actually being given in plans and strategies is that “it fosters appreciation of environmental assets”. This percentage was highest among government officials. Most respondents were of the view that ecotourism could generate appreciation of environmental assets and could also promote conservation. However, about half of the respondents 55.8%, believed that ecotourism could still have “slight” negative effects on the environment.

When respondents were asked if tourism also negatively affects the social fabric of the island or islands, the response was less clear when compared to the impact on the environment, although respondents from the Republic of Cyprus assigned importance to the negative social impacts of ecotourism, in that it intrudes on an erstwhile undisturbed social milieu.

Constraints

The two major constraints relating to investment in ecotourism which were identified by the survey respondents were “limitations in profit possibilities for private operators” and the “lack of interest by tourism planners”. Interestingly the majority of respondents from the Balearic Islands (64.3%) chose the “limitations in profit possibilities for private operators” whereas the majority of respondents from the other two localities (42.9% from the Maltese Islands and 40.0% from the Republic of Cyprus) chose the “lack of interest by tourism planners”.

When asked to elaborate further on their responses, additional constraints were mentioned including the lack of co-ordination between various stakeholders, the lack of proper planning, lack of promotion from government entities and the lack of understanding of how ecotourism could be made profitable.

5. ANALYSIS

The responses to the survey yielded considerable information regarding ecotourism and the different views held by the four categories of expert respondents. In this section we highlight some interesting results.

The survey results, based on the responses of experts in the field, would seem to suggest that there is a general agreement that ecotourism has its advantages, mostly because it is associated with less environmental and social downsides when compared to mass tourism, but at the same time it is not as economically attractive as mass tourism. Interestingly, the role of the government and of tourism planners was assigned major importance by the respondents in fostering an interest and attracting investment in ecotourism. It emerged very clearly from the survey that the success of ecotourism ventures depend highly on the backing of the government and its tourism planners.

There were some response differences between the types of respondents. The responses by most government officials unlike those of the others categories of respondents showed a belief that tourism does not negatively affect the social fabric of the island. Furthermore only 7.1% of the government officials felt that tourism puts “extreme” pressure on the environment. Both these two responses could indicate that the government representatives tend to downplay the negative effects of mainstream tourism. The economic benefits of mainstream tourism is often given priority on the protection of the environment because there is the belief that the more economically viable, the better it is for the well-being of the people. Unfortunately, this also points to the tendency of disassociating the natural environment from the well-being of people.

It was the business operators and the representatives of environmental organisations who in the additional remarks criticized the government the most. In fact out of all the business operators 50.0% chose to add additional remarks and mentioned the need for a change and government intervention to improve the current tourism situation in these Mediterranean islands. 36.4% of the representatives of environmental organisations also made similar comments.

Another point emphasized by the business operators was that they deem tourism as an “extremely” important component of the economy. Not surprisingly only 16.7% of business operators responded that mainstream tourism puts only “slight” pressure on the environment.

It was also no surprise that 71.4% of respondents from representatives of environmental organisations felt that mainstream tourism puts “extreme” pressure on the environment. However, when asked why ecotourism should be given importance 23.1% of this category felt that it was because “it involves the participation of the local community” rather than because “it fosters appreciation of the local environment”. One reason for this could be that some representatives of environmental organisations also represent the civil society.

Most of the comments in favour of ecotourism came from representatives of environmental organisations. These also voiced their concern about the pressure on the environment exerted by mainstream tourism. 42.6% from this category replied that some areas could “definitely” be setup for ecotourism purposes.

While it was initially assumed that responses from scholars would be similar to those made by representatives of environmental organisations, this pattern, did not emerge. To be noted was the fact that about 25% of the scholars believed that ecotourism could have a highly negative effect on the environment. This could have been triggered by past failures of ecotourism in the surveyed islands. Furthermore, about a fourth of the scholars believed that ecotourism would not

benefit the local community. Additionally, the majority of the scholars, 66.7% pointed out to the “limitations in profit possibilities for private operators” as the most major constraint of ecotourism and therefore the lack of economic benefits.

6. CONCLUSION

The results of the survey indicated that different types of experts tend to have different views regarding ecotourism. For environmentalists, it is generally imperative that the carrying capacity of the surveyed islands be taken more seriously and that less concentration patterns of visitation in both spatial and temporal terms should be encouraged. A tourism strategy aimed at reducing the downsides of tourism needs to be formulated based on some estimates of the carrying capacity of these islands with the aim of rendering tourism less polluting and socially and culturally appropriate. To the business community, as expected, the profit motive is generally the major incentive for investment, and mainstream tourism is generally more attractive than ecotourism in this regard. In the case of governments, lip-services is often paid to controlling the environmental damage and social discomfort associated with mainstream tourism in tourism plans and strategies but in practice what seems to matter most to governments propagandists are the number of incoming tourists, with environmental and social concerns placed on the back burner.

Ecotourism also has its disadvantages notably that it can be less money-making than mainstream tourism, but it is likely to be less damaging than mainstream tourism. As in many things in life, some sort of balance will need to be sought.

Although a number of interesting findings emerged from this study it has some limitations. First and foremost because of the time limit, this research was only conducted on three island groups in the Mediterranean out of the many islands which are distributed in the area. Had there been more time, the comparison could have been done amongst more islands, including Sardinia, Corsica, Crete and Hvar.

More experts in the field would have been contacted too so as to increase the number of respondents thereby possibly improving the survey’s reliability. The study would have benefitted if an estimate of what proportion of tourist actually visit the islands for ecotourism purposes and what could be the potential demand, assuming that ecotourism facilities exist. This is not an easy exercise to carry out, however this could be an area for further research.

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