
Tourism and Environment – Towards a European Tourism Policy

Author: Carmen Valentina RADULESCU, Faculty of Agro-Food and Environmental Economics, Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania, cv_radulescu@yahoo.com

Environment and tourism interact in very close terms, the relation being strong and in many cases straightforward. The synergic interaction came into reality in several forms of alternative tourism with a very dynamic evolution in the last decades. Ecotourism, as the outmost of environment friendly tourism, attracts more and more consumers and determines communities or entrepreneurs to create a prolific economic framework. The paper explores at what extent EU policies are prepared to harness the benefits of this interaction. It resulted that tourism-environment combination is not only a sector policy target, but also an important development levy for rural areas and an effective protection means for nature conservation.

Keywords: EU, tourism policy, sustainable development, ecotourism, EDEN

Introduction

The last two decades revealed the importance of environmental protection and that its accomplishment necessitates major changes in all sectors of economic activity. In case of tourism, the environmental concern induced changes on both sides: service consumers and service providers. Eventually, it resulted in the emergence of new tourism forms, on the one hand, and new approaches in the organization of tourism activities, on the other.

Tourism is amongst the most dynamic economic sectors and is credited with a high potential for the start-up and sustainable development at local level. Therefore, the question of how environmental objectives could be integrated in tourism planning and organization becomes of great interest for research. Indeed, the topic was widely approached in the literature in a variety of settings, special focus being granted for market segmentation, the ecological impact of visitors on wildlife, and community based ecotourism [1].

The European Union's leadership in terms of environmental protection is well documented and widely recognized in the global policy action. Meanwhile, Europe is the largest market for alternative tourism, 71% of the eco-tourists originating in this area [2], [3]. It is easy to recognize an overlapping that promises a synergic interaction. At what extent this relation is acknowledged and transformed in specific policy measures in the EU is the main question to be addressed by our paper. The first step is a brief review of environment-tourism interaction in conceptual terms, followed by an analysis of the European policy framework, focusing on sector specific approaches, but also on the impact of other sector policies.

Environment-tourism interaction

Economy as a whole relies on nature and it could be expected that internal feedbacks are sensitive enough to regulate the level of resource uptake in accordance with the laws that rule the processes of their formation. In reality, this is not happening because the economic system is at certain extent "blind" to the changes occurring in the natural environment [4]. This is the basic cause of what we call today environmental degradation. If the economic system is broken down to its components, it could be noticed that the degree of "blindness" varies from one subsystem to another. The pattern of this variation is given usually by the strength of the linkages between the main driver of the economy – profit – and the state of the natural system. Based on this logic, tourism is a good candidate for an environmental supporter economic sector. Nonetheless, conventional tourism, also known as mass tourism, found itself undermined by the same drivers that allowed its spectacular development – natural resources.

The recognition of this self-destructive pattern came some decades ago and induced a number of changes in tourists' preferences on the one hand and in organization of tourism on the other hand. The environmental upheaval played an important role by influencing potential tourists to consider more and more seriously the criteria applied in their destination selection. Keeping path with the general trend, in tourism was readily adopted the concept of sustainability. Compared to other sectors, the assimilation was easier because win-win situations were identified in many areas (Fig.1).

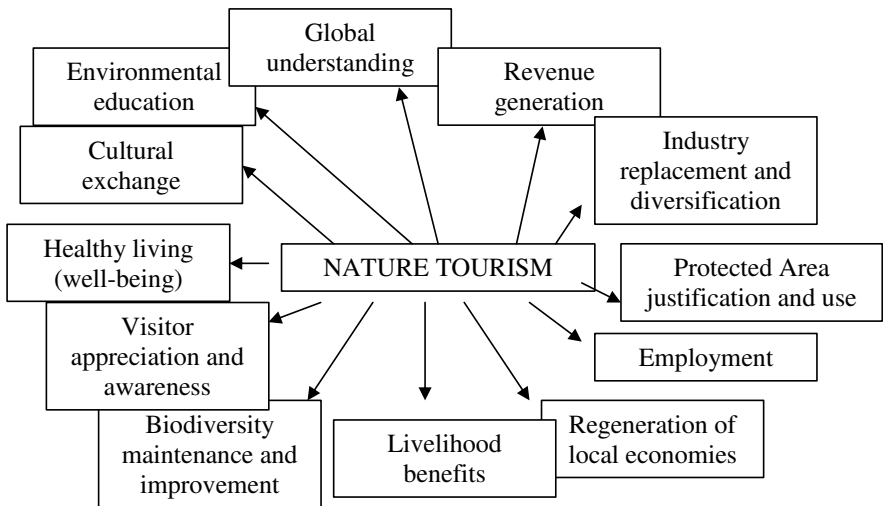


Figure 1: Potential benefits resulting from nature tourism [4]

Sustainable tourism is defined by the World Tourism Organization (WTO) as tourism that satisfies the needs of present tourists and host regions, meanwhile protecting and enhancing the chances and opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as a management approach that pursues the total satisfaction of economic, social, esthetical needs, while cultural integrity, essential ecological dimensions, biological diversity, and life support systems are maintained. Sustainable tourism will focus on three areas:

- quality – valuable experience for visitors and increased life quality for host communities through cultural identity, poverty reduction and environmental quality;
- continuity – exploitation is made at the optimum level that allows the preservation and regeneration of the natural resources;
- balance between the needs of tourism industry, environmental protection, and local communities by an equitable distribution of benefits among stakeholders.

Besides the changes in terms of management of tourism, sustainability brought also some structural transformations. The most prominent one is the emergence and rapid development of the some alternative forms of tourism. These forms are all forms of tourism that could be not comprised within the conceptual scope of conventional tourism. Although not all of them respect the tenets of sustainability (off-road trails for instance) many rely on the close and intense experience in nature.

The highest degree of sustainability is in case of ecotourism, which is just about to exceed the threshold of market niche and to be transformed in a market segment that will soon account for a quarter of tourism market. Although there are many definitions, three convergence areas could be identified:

- attractions are based predominantly on nature;
- visitors interaction with attractions focus on learning and education;
- experience and products management should follow the principles and practices of ecological, social, and economic sustainability.

Most of the venues are in protected areas, but private land is increasing in importance. The industry is dominated by small businesses, which are quite volatile [5], especially then the partnership with the local community is not well-managed [6]. Another challenging issue is quality control and certification, since green washing is quite a widespread practice. Other forms of alternative tourism that respect sustainability criteria are agro-tourism and rural tourism, nature based tourism, camping. Rural tourism is in fact the European translation of ecotourism, since in this area nature is highly transformed giving little opportunity to experience genuine wilderness. Instead, it is rich in cultural heritage with spectacular and well-preserved traditions [2].

Emergence of the European tourism policy

Tourism patterns as economic activity hindered its approach as a public policy issue in general. Tourism products are much diversified and highly fragmented. The type of tourism product is determined by the combination of local tourism resources and local tourism services. Thus, areas with similar natural or cultural resources could be providers of different tourism product types and vice-versa. The tourism product is made up by a number of components (travel agencies, tour operators, carriers, hotels, restaurants etc.) and is consumed mainly at the site of tourism destination. Thus, public policy approaches are less developed compared with the social and economic importance of tourism [7].

This applies for the European approach too, where only in the last decade there were undertaken steps towards a specific policy framework. Since in this timeframe the environmental concern is widely recognized, tourism policy approaches are developed by acknowledging sustainability. Thus, the last three communications of the European Commission ([7], [8], [9]) stress both the social and environmental implications of tourism development and the potential of their streamlining towards sustainability.

Tourism has a special relation with sustainable development because of the size of the sector, the straightforward relation with social and natural environment, and its potential to become a tool for economic regeneration and development. The size of this economic sector is outlined by the indicators presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Size of tourism sector in EU (Source: [8], [9])

Indicator	2005		2008	
	Direct	Indirect	Direct	Indirect
Number of businesses (millions)	2.0	-	1.8	-
Employment (% of total)	4.0	12.0	5.2	12.0
Employment (millions of jobs)	8.0	24.0	9.7	27.7
Contribution to GDP (%)	4.0	11.0	5.0	10.0

Some of the trends recorded are also supportive. Thus, the sector's growth rate is beyond the average rate in terms of employment opportunities. In addition, European tourism is prominent at global level, being the number 1 tourism destination, but also the largest tourism market. In 2008, there were recorded 370 million arrivals, representing 40% of the world arrivals. This generated 266 million euro incomes, out of which 75 million were from outside EU. The demand for European destination is increasing fast in developing countries with high economic growth rates. Thus, the arrivals from BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) increased from 4.2 million in 2004 to 7.6 million in 2008. What is relevant for alternative tourism is the fact that the most significant growth is recorded for health tourism and for natural and cultural heritage valuing tourism.

The main challenges for European tourism are the economic crisis, international competition, demographic trends, and environmental issues (climate change, water scarcity, biodiversity loss), and the integration of information and communication technologies (ITC).

The European tourism policy will build on the action areas outlined in the Europe 2020 strategy. The ones that are relevant for tourism are: An industrial policy for the globalization era, Innovation Union, A digital agenda for Europe, and An agenda for new skills and jobs. In 2010, April 14th was held the Madrid Summit on tourism. The declaration adopted at this occasion groups action in four areas:

- stimulating competitiveness in European tourism;
- promoting the development of sustainable, responsible and high quality tourism;
- strengthening Europe's image and profile as a collection of sustainable and quality destinations;
- maximizing financial policies' potential and the role of financial instruments in tourism development.

Enhanced competitiveness of European tourism will be achieved by the diversification of tourism services, innovation through the use of ITC, improved professional skills, expansion of tourism season, and consolidation of socio-economic knowledge base. The quality of tourism destinations is strongly dependent on the state of natural and cultural heritage, while sustainability will be pursued by considering environmental impact, use of

clean energy, protection of natural and cultural heritage, and quality of jobs. In this respect, there are already in action some initiatives such as:

- Network of European Regions for a sustainable and competitive European Tourism (NECSTour);
- European Destinations for Excellence (EDEN) – sustainable development of tourism destinations.

Despite the strong commitment for the outlining and enforcement of the European tourism policy its role remains complementary to local and regional stakeholders who should take the lead in terms of action and policy initiatives, since bottom-up approaches are the most appropriate for the development of economic activities that are so strongly linked to local specificities as tourism. This will be more prominent for the alternative tourism activities, since the experience of authenticity necessitates local approaches in accordance with the specificity of natural and cultural heritage.

Sustainable destination as mechanism for sustainable tourism development

The challenges to be addressed by sustainable tourism development are numerous and divers. At European level, these include, but are not limited to [10]:

- Seasonality of tourism demand;
- Tourism transportation environmental impact;
- Improved quality of tourism jobs;
- Maintaining and improving community wellbeing;
- Minimize resource use and waste generation;
- Preservation and valuation of natural and cultural capital;
- Increasing the accessibility of holidays;
- Using tourism as a tool for sustainable development.

Tourism destination is the main place where tourism products are consumed. That means an opportunity for various tourism stakeholders to meet physically, but also in terms of interest. Therefore, improving sustainability will rely, amongst others, on how the interplays are managed at this level. In order to develop a coherent policy it is necessary to undergo the following steps:

- develop a policy mandate;
- situation analysis including resources assessment, tourism business survey, visitors survey etc.;
- developing of strategic choices;
- establishing an action plan; and
- monitoring and review.

Based on this it was developed the EDEN project. It is based on national competitions that take place every year and result in the selection of a tourist “destination of excellence” for each participating country. Through the selection of destinations, EDEN effectively achieves the objective of drawing attention to the values, diversity and common features of European tourist destinations. It enhances the visibility of emerging European destinations, creates a platform for sharing good practices across Europe and promotes networking between awarded destinations. The key feature of the selected destinations is their commitment to social, cultural and environmental sustainability. The recipients of the award are emerging; little known European destinations located in the 27 Member States and candidate countries.

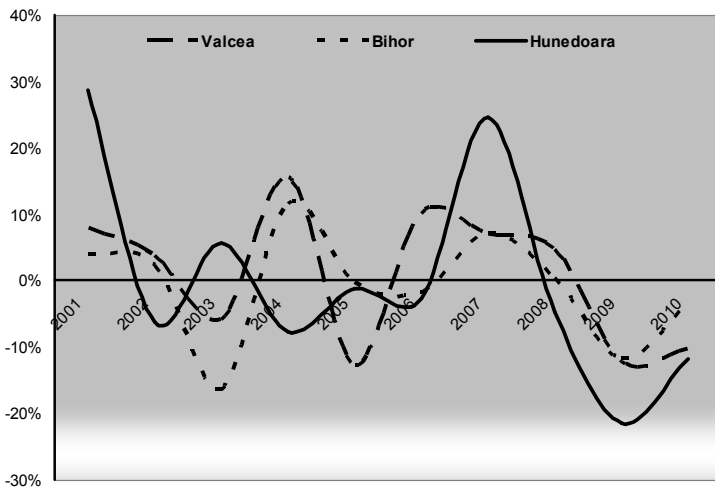


Figure 2: Annual index of tourism arrivals for EDEN destination counties in Romania

In each year, the competition is performed under a thematic approach. The EC establishes in collaboration with national representatives a specific theme for competition and each participating country designate an area that is considered the most representative one. Since 2008, Romania participated in this competition and obtained the EDEN designation for the following areas:

- 2008: Horezu Depression for Tourism and local intangible heritage;
- 2009: Apuseni Natural Park for Tourism and protected areas; and
- 2010: Geoagiu Bai for Aquatic tourism.

The destinations are located in three different counties. The tourism arrivals in these counties record high volatility, annual indexes ranging between -21% and 29%. Although the impact of economic crisis could be easily recognized, after 2009 each of these counties records a mild improvement (fig.2). The interpretation of these patterns is biased by the facts that other factors such as the economic and financial crisis impacted in the same period and that the time frame from the designation moment is very short. Therefore the patterns of this evolution could hardly be interpreted as an effect of the EDEN destination yet. Nevertheless, this neither means that the designation had no effect for the local tourism. More in depth research, based on surveys could improve the knowledge on the impact of the EDEN project in Romania.

Conclusions

Tourism is an economic sector in which the relation with environment is manifested with enhanced intensity, strong enough to permit the development of interdependencies between environmental quality and the organization of economic activity. This special relation is amplified by the recognition of the importance of environmental quality for human wellbeing. Thus tourism is regarded more and more as a tool of sustainable development. Meanwhile, a number of changes occurred, the most prominent being the emergence of new tourism forms that strongly depend on nature and cultural capital: ecotourism, agro-tourism, nature tourism, camping etc.

The synergic potential of tourism-environment interaction is recognized in the process of European tourism policy formulation.

Nevertheless, the main argument for approaching tourism as field of public policy at European level is the economic one, based on the one hand on the size of the sector, and on the other hand, on its dynamic pattern expressed by the growth rates that are beyond average.

European tourism policy goals are circumscribed to a basic request – increasing competitiveness. Fulfilling this request means preserving natural and cultural diversity, respectively promoting tourism forms that permit the valuation of these resources in within the sustainability framework. Since quality tourism is another distinctive note pursued to be secured for the European tourism, it is important to develop the knowledge base regarding this subject, especially considering the fact quality certification in ecotourism is an area featured by paucity in contemporary research.

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