
Sustainable tourism development: environmental education as a tool to fill the gap between theory and practice

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Abstract: Sustainability is introduced as the key to address contradictions between tourism policy development on one hand and environmental protection on the other. However, in the literature exists confusion on what sustainable tourism is all about, sustainable tourism policy has relatively little influence on the broad tourism market operation and research shows that tourism stakeholders have a confused understanding of the sustainable tourism concept. Furthermore, although tourism policy planning has followed a significant turn to participatory approaches towards the development of sustainable tourism, literature neglects a range of educational methods and strategies that already exist which could support effective education responses in order that tourism stakeholders can make informed environmental decisions about sustainable tourism development. This paper suggests that environmental education is the path in order that tourism stakeholders and local community obtain a stronger understanding of the complex issue of sustainable tourism and are empowered to engage in effective ecological action.

Keywords: sustainable development; sustainable tourism; environmental education.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Sakellari, M. and Skanavis, C. (2013) 'Sustainable tourism development: environmental education as a tool to fill the gap between theory and practice', *Int. J. Environment and Sustainable Development*, Vol. 12, No. 4, pp.313–323.

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1 Introduction

Although sustainable development constitute an important factor for sound tourism development, sustainable tourism policy has relatively little influence on the broad tourism market operation (Holden, 2009) revealing a gap between sustainable tourism theory and practice. Furthermore, although the importance of tourism stakeholders participation in decision making process towards tourism development has already been recognised, literature hasn't address the methods and strategies need to be developed in order that tourism stakeholders can make informed decisions about tourism development (Byrd et al., 2009). Therefore, if tourism policy planners wish to make a significant contribution to these challenges, a new area of concern needs addressing.

The paper discusses the need for environmental education (EE) in order to promote tourism stakeholders participation in decision making process towards sustainable tourism. In this framework, the paper provides a literature review on the theory and practice of sustainable tourism and examines the overlapping fields of EE and education for sustainable development (ESD).

2 Sustainable tourism: a gap between theory and practice

Greek film gained international attention with *Stella* (1955), directed by Michael Cacoyannis, *Never on Sunday* (1960), directed by Jules Dassin, and *Zorba the Greek* (1964), directed by Michael Cacoyannis. As a result the international image of Greece as a fun-loving tourist resort and escapist paradise emerged, coincided with an unprecedented growth of the tourist industry in the 1960s. Also, Greek films musicals, such as *Some Like it Cold* (1963), *Girls for Kisses* (1965) and *Mermaids and Lads* (1969), promoted domestic tourism because they treated their viewers as virtual tourists offering them a two-hour wishful fulfilment without any costly physical displacement (Papadimitriou, 2000). Greece accepted crowds of tourists and as it is located in the centre of the Mediterranean, the country was transformed to one of the main tourist destinations worldwide. This peaceful 'invasion' of other cultures in Greece affected every aspect of Greek life, from bank accounts and self-awareness to appearance and language (Constantinidis, 2000) and altered the natural environment. Commercialisation of human relations with tourists (Buhalis, 2001), rich folk traditions that are limited to the 'syrtaki' and choreographed 'folk' performances (Kouri, 2012), 'demonstration effect' and 'xenomania' (Papadopoulos, 1988; Wickens, 1994), change in labour force values with young people who abandon other productive, year-round occupations and work only

during the tourist season (Briassoulis, 1993), are some of the threats to the socio-cultural interests of Greece's population that can be attributed to mass tourism development. Furthermore, the main driving force behind coastal environmental degradation in Greece is extensive tourism-driven urbanisation. Sprawl of often illegal summerhouses and rooms-to-let, attraction of a range of diverse economic activities and the high density of roads and other transport infrastructure exert a considerable pressure on the coastal environment. Tourism, also, exerts serious pressures on Greek islands with small catchments and low rainfall. Salination of groundwater is a frequent consequence of overexploitation of the aquifers to meet the increased water demand in the dry summer months.

Generally, cases where tourist destinations have lost their flow of visitors due to environmental problems are not rare, such as reduction of tourists in the City of Mexico because of the air pollution (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996), in the coast of Brittany due to oil spills (Bonnieux and Rainelli, 2003) and in Brunei Darussalam due haze-related air pollution originated from forest fires (Anaman and Looi, 2000). Although, tourism is almost always dependent on the quality of the environment, the continuing and rapid expansion of the global tourism market during the last decades generated the huge phenomenon of 'mass tourism' with various consequences, one of which is the suffocating pressure to the natural environment (Williams and Shaw, 1998; Holden, 2009; Skanavis and Sakellari, 2011) and in turn environmental degradation due to tourism activities impacts on the quality of tourism.

The concept of ecotourism, the responsible tourism in natural areas able to facilitate conservation objectives (Tisdell and Wilson, 2005; Blangy and Wood, 1993; Yu et al., 1997; Maharana et al., 2000), is experiencing fast growth, but is not the answer to addressing the environmental problems facing the tourism industry (Mastny, 2001). Contradictions between tourism policy development on one hand and environmental protection on the other are addressed through sustainable development (Skanavis and Sakellari, 2011). The basic principle of this concept is that of intergenerational equity, which says that our development is sustainable only to the extent that we can meet our needs today without prejudice to those of the future generations (Mbaiwa, 2003). This means that if tourism is to contribute to sustainable development, then it must be economically viable, ecologically sensitive and culturally appropriate (Wall, 1997). Beyond this general argument, in the literature exist a confusion on what sustainable tourism is all about (Swarbrooke, 1999; Butler, 1999; Clarke, 1997; Coccossis, 1996; Fyall and Garrod, 1997; Ioannides, 2001; Sharpley, 2002; Farsari et al., 2007; McCool et al., 2001; Miller, 2001; Holden, 2009; Soteriou and Coccossis, 2010) and many researchers require further research to turn sustainable tourism into a more operational concept (Hassan, 2000; Miller, 2001; McCool et al., 2001; Soteriou and Coccossis, 2010). However, no one disagrees that sustainable tourism development appears as the avenue to ameliorating the worst impacts on natural environment (Kousis, 2000) and in this framework, there is a need to look beyond tourism and consider the people and environment in a holistic way, which integrates tourism into a wider context (Dodds, 2010).

By the early '90s, tourism entrepreneurs have undertaken different voluntary initiatives to show their commitment to sustainable tourism. Internationally, the most common voluntary tools applied by the tourism industry are codes of conduct, best environmental practices, eco-labels, environmental management systems, environmental performance indicators and corporate social responsibility (Font, 2002; Ayuso, 2006;

Holden, 2009). The motivation for such policy represent a combination of legislation, environmental values, a need for market competitiveness and a medium to long term business strategy (Knowles et al., 1999; Ayuso, 2006; Holden, 2009). Despite those initiatives, the environmental and sustainable tourism policy has had relatively little influence on the broad tourism market operation (Knowles et al., 1999; Holden, 2009), with the rest of the tourism industry keeping its priorities clearly on profit rather than sustainability (Younis, 2003) revealing a gap between theory and practice of sustainable tourism development.

Many researchers address how tourism stakeholders, that is tourists, residents, entrepreneurs, and local governmental officials (Goeldner and Ritchie, 2003), view the environmental impacts of their activities (Kavallinis and Pizam, 1994; Kirk, 1998; Bramwell and Alletorp, 2001; Forsyth, 1995; Stabler and Goodall, 1997; Vernon et al., 2003; Ayuso, 2006; Knowles et al., 1999; Dodds, 2010). Residents, tourism entrepreneurs, and local governmental officials seem to play a key role in leading the necessary organisational change towards the environmental sustainability (Ayuso, 2006; Byrd et al., 2009; Dodds, 2010). The behaviour of tourists at a local level is also influential in initiating sustainable tourism, as the impacts of tourism are typically associated with the cumulative effects of visitation (Holden, 2009). However, evidence suggests that although tourism stakeholders recognise the need to protect the environment, they have a confused understanding of the sustainable tourism concept (Kousis, 2000; Knowles et al., 1999; Cottrell et al., 2004; Holden, 2009) and tourism entrepreneurs take environmental friendly actions that are most likely to advance only the company's objectives (Knowles et al., 1999; Holden, 2009; Dodds, 2010). On the other hand, despite the fact that research is limited when focusing into the perceptions of tourists about sustainability, new evidence shows that in the long-term tourist awareness of sustainability issues might lead to changes in tourist destinations choices (Kaae, 2001; Cottrell et al., 2004; Deng, 2007).

Environmental and tourism planning is often a contested political activity involving multiple, interdependent stakeholders with diverse and possibly divergent interests and values with respect to the natural environment, therefore public and private involvement in tourism and environmental decision making facilitates implementation of sustainability (Jamal et al., 2002). Literature on tourism policy planning has followed a significant turn to participatory approaches towards the development of sustainable tourism (Bramwell and Sharman, 1999; Joppe, 1996; Miller, 2001; Inskeep, 1994; Murphy, 1985; Simmons, 1994; Tosun and Jenkins, 1998; Tosun, 2006; Byrd, 2007; Byrd et al., 2009; Castellani and Sala, 2010; Keske and Smutko, 2010), in order to improve the professional basis of tourism development planning (Pearce et al., 1996), to reflect and satisfy needs of local people in a better way (Tosun, 1998, 2006) to secure conservation of local resources (Inskeep, 1994) as well as developing a more democratic local community (Simmons, 1994; Syme et al., 1991). But, research on participation on sustainable tourism development hasn't address the methods and strategies need to be developed in order that tourism stakeholders and local communities can make informed decisions about the development that takes place in their area (Byrd, 2007).

Based on the idea of sustainability, education is prerequisite in order that tourism stakeholders and local community obtain a stronger understanding of the tourism actual environmental impacts, understand that that their participation in the environmental decision making process has the potential to influence the decision and finally, are empowered to make decisions throughout the process (Byrd, 2007; Byrd et al., 2009).

EE is a process aimed at developing environmentally responsible citizens, by fostering clear awareness of and concern about economic, social, political, and ecological interdependence, by providing every person with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment, and participatory skills in the decision making process, needed to protect and improve the environment and by creating new patterns of behaviour of individuals, groups, and society as a whole toward the environment. EE is an integral part of tourism at heritage sites, ecological sites and in ecotourism (Gough and Scott, 1999; Newsome et al., 2002; Uzzell and Ballantyne, 1998; Fennell, 1999; Gilbert, 1997; Hall and McArthur, 1996; Ham, 1992; Luck, 2003; Skanavis et al., 2004; Tisdell and Wilson, 2005; Ballantyne & Parker, 2005, 2009; Falk, 2009), but mainly as tool of managing the interaction of tourists with the natural environment and as a process remains absent from the tourism policy planning integration with sustainability.

3 EE and ESD

Emphasis on citizenship, problem solving, and issues identification have been demonstrated as the main EE objectives, at the declaration of the UNESCO-UNEP Belgrade workshop and in 1977, at the Tbilisi Declaration (Skanavis et al., 2005), at the UNESCO-UNEP Tbilisi + 10 international congress in Moscow, in 1987 (UNESCO-UNEP, 1988), in 1992, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (UNCED, 1992) and at the United Nations World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg in 2002 (United Nations, 2002). EE has mainly been established in the formal education; however, its importance has been recognised in the forms of non-formal and informal education.

Since the early 90's, in effort to respond to the recommendations contained in Chapter 36 of Agenda 21, following the Earth Summit in 1992, the concept of ESD emerged. ESD is multidisciplinary, lifelong, embraces a wide range of participatory learning experiences and programmes in both formal and non-formal settings and aims to ensure that anyone can benefit from quality education, and that the principles, values, and actions necessary for promoting sustainable development are incorporated in all forms of education for positive societal transformation (UNESCO, 2005).

The need for ESD was reaffirmed at the World Summit on Sustainable Development at Johannesburg in 2002 and throughout this period, with the assistance of numerous additional conferences, efforts have been made to transform EE into ESD, while EE community hasn't reach to an agreement if ESD is beyond or about EE. According to the supporters of ESD, ESD is a different field than EE, because sustainable development literacy, although it derives from environmental and ecological literacies, gives an emphasis on the interrelationship between human and natural systems (Gough, 2002; Scott and Gough, 2004; Dale and Newman, 2005). Contrarily to these arguments, for many EE theorists and practitioners the importance of EE can not be questioned (Knapp, 1998; Sauve, 1999; Meira Cartea, 2005; Russell et al., 2000) and ESD is treated only as a trend in the pedagogical landscape of EE. In this framework, Sauve (2005) identifies sustainable development as among the currents that recently emerged in the field of EE research, while others view as problematic the emergence of ESD in educational policies (Jickling and Wals, 2008).

Despite the confusion that exists in EE field about the relationship between EE and ESD, both share certain similarities. The goals of EE educators are similar to those

involved in ESD, both EE and ESD envision a society in which citizens actively participate in decision-making processes and environmental protection, society, and economy are balanced in the pursuit of development and quality of life for all members of society (McKeown and Hopkins, 2005). Whether we choose to refer to EE or to ESD, both can play a central role to the needs of a sustainable society, by enacting a problem-solving mode of inquiry that, ultimately, would increase the quality of enlightened decision-making, so that tourism policy decision makers, local communities, businesses, educators, tourists and local citizen groups can be more fully functional in their identification, assessment, and management of sustainable tourism.

An appropriate model for establishing a training programme for involving tourism stakeholders in sustainable tourism management is an urgent issue that must be addressed. The field of EE provides a valuable educational framework, with sound pedagogical approaches, curricula and assessment strategies both in formal and informal educational settings, that empowers people of all ages to actively participate in the environmental decision making process. In this regard, Monroe (2011) sets four guidelines for education that engages adults in environmental issues that do not yet have accepted solutions, where citizens livelihoods are not threatened, and where it is not possible to attract stakeholders to spend years working toward an agreement:

- 1 engage citizens and experts
- 2 establish a neutral atmosphere
- 3 allow for the transformation of the issue
- 4 enable participants to share their concerns and feelings with decision makers.

There are many venues to accomplish these criteria, such as community meetings or internet (Monroe, 2011), however such a model must balance the requirements of both tourism stakeholders and the fulfilment of the sustainability values. For this purpose, citizens must gain information as without education people will be contributing only impressions and biased opinions, experts must not attempt to persuade and convince the audience that there is only one way to look at the issue and along with community leaders should accept the possibility that their perception of the issue could change through interaction with the citizens and ensure that the public's informed opinions and ideas will be shared with the decision makers (Monroe, 2011).

Another challenge for sustainable tourism policy practitioners is the ability to inspire people from different race and class backgrounds to engage in effective ecological and political action. The key to accomplish such a goal, is that EE programmes should be designed with non-traditional audiences in mind, not only aware of differences in motivation, attitudes and behaviours, but also actively seeking effective ways to address them (Skanavis and Sakellari, 2012).

4 Conclusions

In order to bridge the gap between sustainable tourism theory and practice, tourism policy planners must focus much of their educational efforts on adults, following strategies that engage tourism stakeholders in creating solutions to environmental challenges.

The paper suggests that the field of EE is a prerequisite in tourism policy planning in order that tourists, residents, entrepreneurs, and local governmental officials obtain a stronger understanding of the tourism actual environmental impacts, the concept of sustainability, understand that their participation in the environmental decision making process has the potential to influence the decision and finally, are empowered to make decisions throughout the process. Therefore, the field of EE must not be treated only as a tool of managing the interaction of tourists with the natural environment, but a process that will enable tourism policy planners to raise environmental awareness of tourism stakeholders, empower partnerships among them and alter their behaviours towards sustainable tourism development.

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