Sustainable tourism in Spanish coastal resorts

The Spanish coast is a popular destination for tourists. A recent study has assessed the sustainability of tourism in these areas and the results can be used to guide future planning decisions.

Sustainable tourism, as defined by the World Tourism Organisation¹, has the aim of protecting natural, social and cultural resources to ensure these resources can meet the needs of current and future residents and tourists.

This study focused on developing sustainability indicators for established coastal destinations in Spain, using a method which could be applied to resorts in other countries. Sustainability indicators can be used to track changes by selecting key measures that summarise the state of the environment. These indicators are useful to evaluate tourist destinations and to help planners design suitable policies based on diversity, quality and sustainability. They allow comparisons of complex issues and can identify emerging environmental trends.

In 2008, there were almost 270 million overnight stays in Spanish hotels, making Spain Europe’s top tourist destination. Beach resorts are especially popular, and managing coastal areas sustainably is particularly challenging. Overexploited destinations can become ‘saturated’ by tourists and need guidance for long-term planning.

The system of indicators developed by the researchers shows the links between tourism and the impacts of this industry on social and natural environments. In addition, the indicators can rank destinations in terms of sustainability and relevant stakeholders can use changes in rankings to inform sustainability planning.

Key indicators supply basic information, such as tourism intensity, effects of tourism on the local community and management of waste. There are also indicators specific to each coastal and beach destination. In all, 32 indicators integrated the social, economic and environmental aspects of sustainable tourism, including how tourist activities affect the total provision of services, the economic benefits from tourist activities, and the intensity of beach use, management of water resources and the degree of protection for natural resources.

In addition, a composite indicator was calculated for each destination for three broad dimensions of sustainability: social, economic and environmental. Higher positive values for indicators suggest improvements and greater negative values suggest the sustainability of these dimensions has deteriorated, making it easier to compare different destinations. These indicators suggest, for example, that the best destinations:

• have a higher quality of employment
• have safer beaches
• have higher occupancy rates throughout the year
• implement efficient waste management (recycling 1,343,587.4 kg of glass on average)
• reduce energy consumption by 9-12 per cent on average as a result of tourism

The researchers calculated an overall global indicator for each destination, composed of the social, economic and environmental indicators. These global indicators suggest that the best destinations combine high sustainability conditions in waste and water management, safe beaches and lower ratios of peak season tourists to local residents because the tourist season is spread throughout the year.

1. See: www.world-tourism.org/frameset/frame_sustainable.html


Contact: fjblaper@upo.es

Theme(s): Sustainable consumption and production, Sustainable development and policy analysis