



Sustainable tourism: new methods to aid planning

Methods for assessing the sustainability of tourist destinations have been developed. In a new Spanish study, researchers describe a framework for analysing sustainability that is designed for policymakers and tourism managers, and, as a case study, apply it to the region of Andalusia.

There were 476 million international tourist arrivals in the Europe in 2010, with France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Turkey and the UK among the top ten tourist destinations in the world¹. Tourism has environmental, social and cultural impacts, and 'sustainable tourism' has developed as a term associated with efforts to address these impacts. While there is some debate about what exactly constitutes a sustainable tourism industry, efforts to improve its sustainability are considered more important than producing a strict definition.

Sustainability indicators can be used by researchers, destination managers and tourism managers, as well as planners, to measure the sustainability of a destination. Sustainability indicators are an active area of research, and this study helps integrate them into tourism policymaking through a new framework that the researchers claim is directly relevant to tourism planning and destination management. They split sustainable tourism issues into three areas: social, economic and environmental, with key issues in each defined by the World Tourism Organization guidebook. Within each area, sustainability issues were selected that could be usefully linked to tourism planning. The result is a list of 85 indicators covering a wide range issues. For example, under the environmental aspect, the researchers included 'protection of natural ecosystems' as a key sustainability issue; the three sustainability indicators associated with this are 'percentage of the destination considered a natural protected area', 'percentage of the protected natural area designated for visitor use' and '(approximate) number of species that exist at the destination'.

Also within the environmental aspect is a section for 'use intensity', which includes measures, such as 'total tourists per unit area'. Other environmental issues considered include energy, water and waste management. Each indicator is provided with practical guidance explaining why it is important and how to apply it. Data from the indicators are combined to produce Sustainability Indices, which give an overall impression of the sustainability of the tourism industry for a specific destination. The finer details of the analysis can also be used to identify weak areas that tourism managers and policymakers can work to improve, for example, the system may pick up on poor protection of natural ecosystems through the relevant indicators. Tourism plans at regional levels tend to range from around 3 to 4 year periods, so the researchers say there is adequate time for data to be updated and used to evaluate and redefine a sustainability strategy during each cycle.

They went on to validate their methods through a case study focusing on 270 rural destinations in Andalusia in Southern Spain, a popular tourist region with a varied landscape including beaches, plains, olive and cork woods, mountainous regions and wetlands. They used the best performing destinations to provide benchmarks and identify issues needing policy action at other destinations. The researchers say this type of information can help tourism managers develop new policies that improve the sustainability performance of their destinations.

Additional information:

The European Commission has developed a number of important instruments that can aid strategic planning of sustainable tourism, including the legally binding - [Natura 2000](#) network and [Bathing Water Directive](#). Voluntary instruments, such as [EMAS](#) and the EU [Ecolabel](#), also have a role to play in destination management, as a component under the sustainable tourism management practices of tourism enterprises. The European Commission is currently working on the development of a European System of Indicators in order to monitor the three aspects of sustainability (economic, environmental, and social) at destination level. The system is based on a core set of indicators defined by the Commission's Tourism Sustainability Group (TSG) and is being revised and tested with the help of an external contractor. The European System of Sustainability Indicators is planned to be put in place in early 2013.

1. European Travel Commission. (2011): www.etc-corporate.org/resources/uploads/20111013_ETC_Factsheet.pdf

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