

Science for Environment Policy

Sustainability drivers identified for smaller businesses in European protected areas

Tourism businesses operating in protected conservation areas in Europe engage in a high number of sustainable practices, a recent survey of over 900 small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs) reveals. Reasons for their sustainable behaviour include cutting costs, improving company image and lifestyle choices.

As part of the EU funded STEPPA¹ project, the researchers sent a questionnaire to small and medium-sized tourism businesses operating in European protected areas in 2011. These included guesthouses, campsites, restaurants and activity organisers. They asked the owners or managers about themselves, their business characteristics, which social, economic and environmental measures they practise and the reasons they choose to act sustainably. A total of 910 SMEs in 57 protected areas belonging to the EUROPARC network² responded to the survey.

The **businesses** reported that they engaged in many sustainable actions. Approximately 75%, for example, said they use environmentally-friendly products and 68% said they encourage their customers to be environmentally-friendly on their property. Other environmental actions included reducing energy and water use, recycling waste, encouraging customers to adopt environmentally-friendly behaviour in life more generally, using renewable energy sources and choosing green suppliers.

The SMEs also acted to support social goals. Supporting local community conservation was the most common social activity undertaken, followed by promoting gender equality and encouraging respect for local culture and language. The most common sustainable economic action reported was encouraging customers to consume local products, followed by employing local staff where possible.

A significant majority of the respondents (87%) said protection of the environment was their top reason for acting sustainably. Almost half said their sustainability decisions were lifestyle choices. Lifestyle choices were based on factors including personal ethics and quality of life for their family and community. A further reason was to improve society. Cost savings were only given as a reason for sustainable behaviour by around 30% of the businesses.

When asked about barriers to acting sustainably, the most common reason, given by 70% of respondents, was lack of money. Not enough time, knowledge, customer pressure or motivation were also identified as barriers, as well as the perception that nobody valued their efforts.

The researchers divided the businesses into three groups based on their motives to engage in sustainable behaviour. The first, or 'lifestyle', group (302 enterprises) was driven by the owner or manager's personal beliefs and lifestyle choices, i.e. that environmental protection and improving society are more important than cost-saving measures. Lifestyle enterprises carried out more sustainable actions than the other two groups.

The second 'business' group (321 enterprises), represented the more conventional view of businesses, which focuses on reducing costs to be competitive. These businesses choose sustainability measures that will lower costs, such as using renewable energy sources, but were less interested in measures to improve society or actions solely designed to improve their image. The third 'legitimation' group (232 enterprises) was driven to act sustainably if it improved their public image, but was less focused on costs and lifestyle actions.

Importantly, the researchers also found that enterprises implementing more sustainability measures reported that this had benefitted their businesses and that they felt that their financial performance had improved during the past two years.

These results suggest that policy measures to encourage greater sustainability in SMEs should focus not only on cost reductions, but should be broadened to include other motivations that drive sustainability-related decisions.



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1. Sustainable Tourism Enterprises in Parks and Protected Areas (STEPPA) project funded through the European Commission's DG Enterprise. See: www.european-charter.org/charter-projects/steppa-sustainable-tourism

2. www.europarc.org