

THE IMAGE OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM PRODUCTS AMONG ROMANIAN CONSUMERS

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Abstract:

Sustainable tourism is a priority at international level resulted from the desire of tourists to purchase quality products, to use touristic services with a lower impact on the environment or to be close to nature. The interest of consumers for sustainable tourism products is reflected in the increasingly varied offer of major tour operators, in how hoteliers choose to adopt environmentally friendly solutions (like water saving, energy efficiency, waste management etc.). Those who offer sustainable tourism products are in permanent contact with their customers and this enables them to be informed about the impact of their visit and to help protect the environment of the destinations visited. Food and culture can be another type of sustainable product with a big impact on tourism in a destination and it is important to promote the purchase of local products found extensively in the region of destination. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the demand for sustainable tourism products among Romanian consumers, who are the consumers of such products and how they see the development of sustainable tourism product in Romania.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, market, tourism products, sustainable products

1. Introduction

It is well known that the environment is an important resource for the tourism industry. With increasing urbanization, tourist destinations become more popular among tourists, both in the developed and the developing countries. In these circumstances, preserving and protecting the natural environment should be a priority for governments. In Agenda 21, six types of "fragile ecosystems" have been identified; five of which required specific actions in order to be protected (small islands, coastal, humid regions, the mountainous region and the desert). Their biophysical characteristics are extremely vulnerable to tourism activities, especially for mass tourism. In these circumstances, tourism has direct implications for sustainable development, thus being increasingly treated more independently. Meanwhile, the occurrence of extreme natural phenomena contributes to the deterioration of the environment in certain destinations, with repercussions in the short or even long term.

2. Tourism, Sustainability and Sustainable Tourism Products

Tourism is one of the largest contributions to achieving sustainable development, primarily due to the dynamism and growth of the sector with direct implications on economic growth in regions and tourist destinations, and secondly because tourism is based on a direct link between consumers (tourists), the industry, environment and local

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communities. This direct relationship between tourism and sustainable development is based, unlike other industries, on the fact that the consumer (tourist) moves to the producer and to the product. When tourism services are planned and managed properly, they can be a means of maintenance for rural and urban communities (Patrichi, 2012).

In terms of this relationship, tourism can have a positive impact on the local sustainable development, however it can produce degradation of the environment.

The positive impact can result from:

- Creating sustainable tourism products;
- Creating opportunities for local economic development and jobs growth;
- Stimulating investments;
- Creation and development of local infrastructure;
- The establishment of inter-cultural relations;
- Generating revenues from the exploitation of natural resources and cultural activities which can be used for conservation and environmental protection.

The negative impact may result in:

- A direct pressure on fragile ecosystems;
- A considerable pressure on host communities, which can lead to loss of authenticity.

What is a sustainable tourism product?

In accordance with the definition of sustainable tourism given by World Tourism Organization, a sustainable tourism product uses resources in an environmentally responsible, socially fair and economically viable way, so that users of the product can meet their current needs without preventing future generations from being able to use the same resources.

In recent years, public awareness on issues affecting the environment and the consequences of excessive natural resources exploitation has been increasingly stronger, leading ultimately to a change in the general attitude towards the environment and increased demand for holidays - experiences in nature. Many tourists now expect the tour operators to introduce and consider creating sustainable travel packages. There are a number of ways to measure the level of consumer demand for sustainable products and to describe how this demand is reflected in the choice they make.

Studies suggest that tourists are increasingly more interested in leisure time closer to nature and to establish an interaction with local communities (knowledge and understanding of local culture and traditions). While such a market trend leads to the development of small operators who sell packages of eco-tourism, major tour operators are beginning to understand that consumer satisfaction can be increased by introducing original elements closer to nature.

Through tour packages design and a wider range of services tour operators can have a significant impact on the sustainability of tourist destinations. Developing sustainable products and their management involves a greater level of attention paid to the choice of tourist destination, giving priority to those where there are environmental strategies, sustainable infrastructure and policies.

Creating sustainable package holidays in such destinations involves finding the best solutions to ensure that these holidays generate maximum benefits (economic, environmental and social) for that purpose.

However, the tour operators aren't the only ones offering sustainable tourism products. The owners of different type of tourism business such as accommodation, food and beverage, local manufacturer of traditional products (artisans) and others may sell such sustainable products.

Thus, there are examples of sustainable tourism products that are not viable because the supplier has failed to understand market needs, often through a failure to engage the industry in product development. This is often the result of agencies working with host destinations that have suffered the negative impacts of unsustainable development, and then fail to involve operators, on whom marketing success often ultimately depends (UNEP, 2005).

Taking in to account all the above, the main goal of this study was to analyze the perception of the sustainable tourism products among Romanian consumers and how the consumers are interested in the consumption of such products.

3. About the Research Study

The method used in this paper was the quantitative data collection utilizing some of the qualitative methods (open questions) in order to get more detailed information on certain topics, hence more comprehensive experience from tourists. It was important to get a large number of answers in a short period of time and be able to easily analyze this amount of information.

The web-based questionnaire (iSondaje.ro) was used, allowing the author to gather needed amount of answers in a short time.

There were a total of 17 questions in the questionnaire.

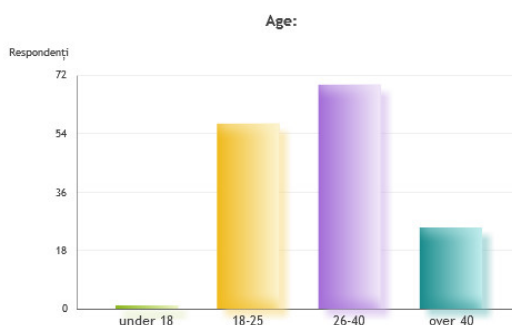
Firstly, 14 questions were asked in order to gather more detailed information about the respondents' attitude towards sustainable tourism and sustainable tourism products and the last three were identification questions.

Most of them were single choice questions with just two open questions.

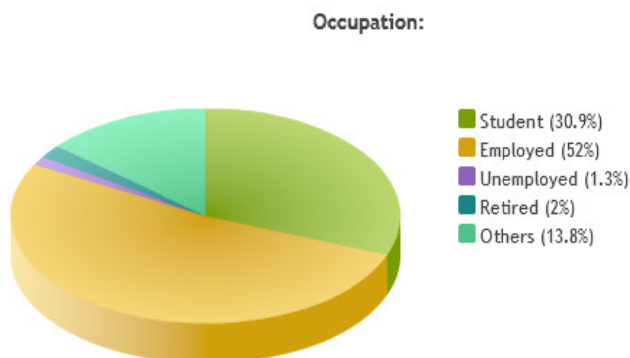
The data was gathered in sept. 2016.

The core goal of the research was to get at least 150 answers, but the final amount that I received was 152. Of 152 respondents 137 (90,1%) were female and only 15 (9,9%)—male.

Talking about the age of the respondents—there was also a huge gap between various options: 1 person under 18 yrs (0,7%), 57 of the people got into the category 18-25 years old (37,5%), 69 were 26-40 years old (45,4%), 25 persons over 40 years old (16,4%).



As for the occupation of the respondents the majority (52%) were employees, 30,9% were students, 2 % retired people, 1,3% unemployed and 13,8% other categories.



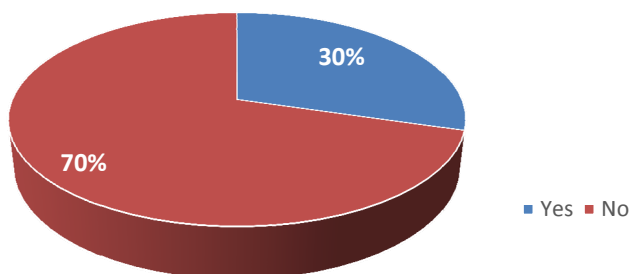
4. Study Results

The results of the questionnaire can be divided into 2 parts: first regarding the concept of sustainable tourism and the impact of tourism activities in the destinations and the second part regarding the sustainable tourism products and the use of it. These lead to the main question of the questionnaire, one that actually makes the object of today's paper.

We will analyze in the following the most representative questions from the study.

Most of the respondents doesn't know what sustainable tourism means and what involves. They can make a connection between the practice of tourism and environmental protection, but are not entirely sure about the actions involved by sustainable tourism.

Are you familiar with the concept of sustainable tourism?



The next question it was connected with the previous one and it showed that 36 % of the questioned people are not aware of the impact of their tourist activities on the environment. 49 % of the respondents believe that their actions as tourists can affect the environment, while 15 % said they were not thought about this.

Do you know that your actions as tourists can affect the environment?	# of answers	%
a. Yes	79	49
b. No	57	36
c. I don't know	24	15

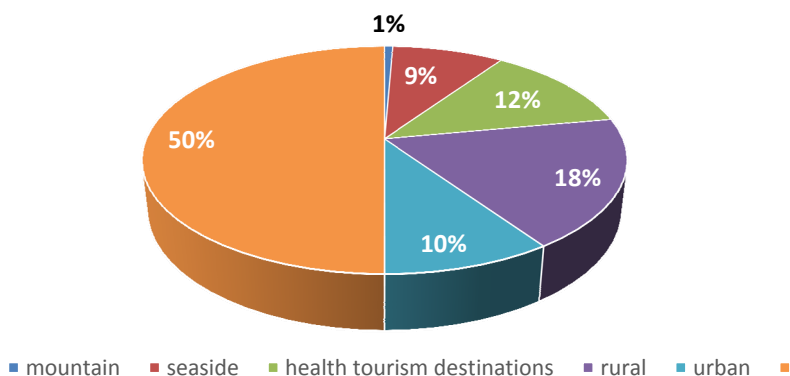
Another question was “What do you think are the most important environmental problems?” and the responses were:

different types of pollution (air, water, wastes, phonic etc.)	36	23.7%
exceeding the carrying capacity	28	18.4%
uncontrolled construction of tourist structures	38	25%
deforestation in order to build tourism infrastructure	32	21.1%
other (please specify)	18	11.8%
	152	100%

Most of the respondents considered that pollution and uncontrolled construction of tourism structures are the most important environmental problems in a tourism destination, but since the percentages were so close it seems like the people are aware of the real problems regarding the environment.

“Which are the favorite tourist destinations in our country?” was the next question from the questionnaire. Over 70 % of the preferences are connected with the environment and its tourism potential.

Favourite types of tourism destinations



Mountain and seaside destinations were the first two choices, with 34 % and 28 % of the responses. Only 4% of the respondents are preferring the health tourism destinations, while 14 % are visiting rural destinations.

72% of respondents organize their vacation on their own and are not familiar with the sustainable tourism products offerings of travel agencies.

Another important question was “How important is for you to consume sustainable tourism products?” and here are the answers:

very important	2	1%
important	27	18%
less important	38	25%
don't care	56	37%
don't know	29	19%
	152	100%

Unfortunately, a third of those who responded said they do not care about the consumption of sustainable tourism products and a quarter said that it is less important. Only for 2 respondents the sustainable tourism products are very important. This shows that our country's population still does not put great value on the consumption of quality products, on products that respect the environment.

It seems, according to another question that only a third of those polled consumed in various circumstances such products, while most unintentionally.

When asked “What kind of sustainable tourism products do you want to find in the Romanian tourism destinations?” two-thirds of those who responded consider culture, traditions and Romanian specific food as the most important sustainable tourism products that our country can offer.

At the last question 68% of those polled consider it important to promote sustainable tourism products among both Romanians and foreigners.

5. Conclusion and Proposals

Unfortunately, those who responded to the survey are not familiar with the concept of sustainable tourism nor with the concept of sustainable tourism products. This fact shows that interest in environmental issues and over the impact of tourism activities on the environment is quite low. It takes a more active involvement of the decision makers in familiarizing potential tourists with these concepts, as well as a minimum educational background.

Creating sustainable tourism products and promoting them among tourists is highly important at this time for the Romanian tourism.

The vast tourism potential that our country has can be better highlighted by such products and attracting foreign tourists who appreciate such products can be a springboard for tourism in our country. We can start with valuing local culture and the local traditions which can be easily transformed into sustainable tourism products. We must not forget that a high consumption of such products will attract the development of more sustainable products and including them into the international tourism offers would mean an advantage for suppliers.

References:

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