

## EVOLUTION OF TOURISM DEMAND AND DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM: WHAT IMPACT ON TOURIST DESTINATIONS?

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**Abstract.** *In recent years, the international tourism market highlights the growth of a substantial segment of demand more aware and attentive to the responsible and sustainable dimension of the holiday. The growth of the cultural level of tourists, the increasing awareness of environmental issues, the respect and desire to learn about the traditions of local cultures are increasingly becoming key criteria in the choice of tourist destinations. The set of changes affecting the world of tourism, both as regard the demand and supply sides, is accompanied by increasing attention and sensitivity to sustainability understood in its social, environmental and economic dimension. These trends have led to the emergence of a new type of tourist, who aims to live a territory and to interact with the local community, in a relationship of mutual exchange, which translate into a new experience for tourists. In this perspective, starting from the review of the scarce literature on the subject and by the definitions of sustainable tourism offered by different international institutions official documents, the paper aims to deepen both characteristics and evolutionary trends of sustainable tourism, with the aim of capturing the impact this type of tourism could have on tourist destinations.*

**Keywords:** *responsible tourism; sustainable development; tourism demand; competitive strategies; territorial marketing.*

### **Introduction: the evolution of tourism demand and the importance of the experiential dimension**

In present days, the tourism sector is located in the middle of important changes from both demand and supply sides, changes that put in the spotlight the binomial territory-tourism as a driving force for development and competitiveness of the tourism offer.

Several studies highlight the important changes in the consumption patterns (Andereck, 2009; Bramwell, Henry, Jackson, Prat, Richards & van der Straaten, 1996; Caruana, Glozer, Crane, & McCabe 2014; Chafe, 2005; Weaver & Lawton 2007). If until the 1970s, the tourist was mostly similar to a mass consumer, with the consequent

social and environmental consequences that this entails, in recent decades has emerged a growing demand for experiential and emotional content, with unique characters and far from standardized holiday (Donohoe & Needham, 2006). Increasingly, the tourist is configured as a traveler who seeks experiences in the direction of the so-called "three Ls": leisure, landscape and learning (Plog, 1974).

In this context, the tourist shows a marked sensitivity to the experiential aspects of leisure time, focusing on both the discovery of the intrinsic characteristics of an area, together with the development of a set of relations with the indigenous reality. Tourists seeking not a tourist experience of the generic type, but more complex and profound experiences, enabling them to appreciate both the elements of the identity and the specificities of a territory (Chafe, 2005; Franch, Sambri, Martini, Pegan & Rizzi, 2008).

Several factors explain the changes in tourism demand. First, psychological and emotional aspects, together with social and cultural factors increasingly influence the tourist orientation. In addition, it is evident the progressive disintermediation of the traditional distribution channels and the consequent spread of multi-channel supply and co-production driven by the demand, at least in part stimulated by the use of the potential of the Web. In this framework, the tourist's choices are often dictated by community-based mechanisms, a fact which requires operators of the sector's ability to exploit social components of the tourist experience (Wearing, Cynn, Ponting & McDonald, 2002). The rise of alternatives for the tourist is a result, finally, that open new markets and new destinations, inaccessible until a few years ago from a commercial or geographical point of view (Franch, Sambri, Martini, Pegan & Rizzi, 2008; Goossens, 2001; Han, Hsu & Lee, 2009).

The evolution that affects the tourism sector highlights the need for the industry to direct the company's strategies in the direction of increasing the quality of the tourist product, playing particular attention to the role of the tourist and the customization of his travel experience (Pencarelli, 2003). In this respect, it should be pointed out that, in general, between the tourist and the tourism business - understood as a bidding system - there is an inevitable both information and cognitive asymmetry (Goossens, 2001).

The tourist expresses a wide and complex vision of the tourism product, against whom has expectations of functional, social, cultural, psychological, making comparisons between these expectations and lived experience; by contrast, the tourist company tends to have a more limited and circumscribed approach (Tamma, 2002; Franch, 2002; Pechlaner & Weiermair, 2000; Cherubini, 2008). The quality of the tourist offer perceived by the tourist is not based on objective characteristics of the product and on the judgment resulting from experience, which appears to be the result of the interaction between tourists and the bidding system. The satisfaction of tourists' expectations is the result of an experiential process, in which the perception of quality depends on the greater or lesser propensity to take advantage of the tourism product and the gap between expectations and experience. The quality of tourism services provided influences the overall satisfaction of tourists and consequently, the experience lived within a given territory. The perception that the tourist develops against a tourist destination is not motionless, but also significantly alters during the

process of inquiry or purchase of the travel services (Chafe, 2005; Frey & George, 2010).

In other words, the tourist, within the chosen destination, lives an overall experience that led him to make a judgment on the set of both all the material and intangible factors, with which it comes into contact, in a continuous interaction relationship with the territory and its tour operators. Hence the need for the industry to arrive at a correct identification of the level of customer satisfaction in order to improve the ability to offer and continuously monitor the evolution of the end-customer preferences.

In this framework, a tourist destination is competitive only if it can generate in the tourist a unique experience, higher than that offered by its competitors. Its competitiveness is defined by the degree of imitability and reproducibility of the attractions available; this explains the relevance of certain categories of resources (natural, artistic, architectural, anthropological and cultural ones), which can be not taken elsewhere. The development of tourist destinations is closely linked to their environment, to the cultural, social interaction, security, and wellbeing of local populations. These characteristics make tourism the driving force for the protection and development of the destinations.

This differentiation capacity comes to depend on a plurality of factors, widely investigated in the literature (Buhalis, 2000; Valdani & Ancarani, 2000; Dwyer & Kim, 2003). The type of resources (natural, landscape, cultural, etc.); the support infrastructure: the capacity of innovation; the behavior of individual traders and above all intangible and intangible elements of identity, knowledge, relational and trust funds it develops in a given context.

### **The development of sustainable tourism**

The set of changes affecting the world of tourism, both on the demand side and the supply side, is accompanied by a growing attention and sensitivity towards sustainability, understood in its broadest sense, in social, environmental and economic terms. This trend has led to the emergence of a new segment of demand, e.g. tourists who aim to interact with the local community, in a relationship of mutual exchange, thus tourism becomes experience (European Commission, 2012; Buckley, 2012; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Franch, 2000).

In recent years, it is the so-called sustainable tourism, defined in 1988 by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). In particular, the tourist activities are sustainable when they develop in order to remain viable in a tourist area for a time unlimited, do not alter the environment (natural, social and artistic) and not hinder or inhibit the growth of other social and economic activities. The concept goes back to the more general definition of sustainable development given in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development in the Brundtland Report (Wheeler & Beatley, 2004, p.56): "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The link between sustainable tourism and local communities has also been emphasized in

numerous institutional communications, among them the “Lanzarote Charter for Sustainable Tourism” in 1995.

The document states that the development of tourism must be based on criteria of sustainability in the long run; the tourist offer must be economically viable and ethically and socially equitable in respect of local communities. Sustainable development is a guided process that envisages global management of resources to ensure their viability, allowing the preservation of the natural and cultural capital. The Charter lays down the three key rules, which must be based on the development of sustainable tourism: 1) environmental resources must be protected and guaranteed; 2) local communities must benefit from this type of tourism, both in terms of income, and quality of life; 3) the tourists have to live an integrated experience with the host community.

The 1997 Berlin Declaration, which focuses attention on sustainable development, setting further cornerstones in defining the relationship between sustainable development and sustainable tourism:

- sustainable tourism is accompanied by a judicious exploitation of biological diversity, and can contribute to its preservation;
- the development of tourism must be controlled and managed wisely, to meet the needs of sustainable and lasting development;
- sustainable tourism is responsible for the collection of tourist operators, in particular, the private sector. Spontaneous initiatives should be encouraged;
- great importance is given to the local level, which accepts responsibility for sustainable development of tourism.

At European level, the reflections on sustainable tourism have been expressed in numerous documents of the European Commission, which emphasize the importance of sustainable tourism for the growth and competitiveness of an economically important industry in Europe, which the tourism itself (European Commission, 2012).

The economic literature does not show the uniqueness of views on the concept of sustainable tourism (Weaver, 2006; Goodwin & Francis, 2003; Buckley, 2003). In recent years, many studies on the phenomenon have investigated the different characteristic features (Butler, 1999). Most of the researchers focus on the economic impact of sustainable tourism, adopting the perspective of the host territory. By contrast, the tourist's point of view manager and his experience are less investigated in the literature (Frey & George, 2010; Sin, 2010).

Beyond the individual positions (Fennel, 2002; Buckley, Pickering & Weaver 2003; Goodwin & Francis, 2003), what is clear is that this market segment highlights a number of key features: the focus on the respect and protection of the environment (Krider, Arguello, Campbell & Mora, 2010), the tendency to reduce the environmental impact resulting from related activities to tourism, a particular attention to the protection of traditional culture of the local people. Significant, in this regard, the definition provided by Bramwell et al. (1996, pp.10-11): “Sustainable tourism is tourism which develops as quickly as possible, taking into account of current accommodation capacity, the local population, and the environment. Tourism that respects the environment and consequently does not aid its own disappearance. This is especially important in saturated areas. Sustainable tourism is responsible tourism”.

Sustainable tourism tends to the preservation of the landscape and environmental diversity of a territory and therefore requires a proper management of the natural heritage and cultural heritage of the territory, in order to preserve its identity. In this perspective, sustainable tourism stands as driving force for the conservation of the environment, art, culture of an area (Hunter & Green, 1995; Middleton & Hawkins, 1998).

From these considerations, it is evident the close link between sustainability and quality of life declined in its forms of economic development, social equity, respect for the environment.

### **The reasons for the development of sustainable tourism**

There are several reasons for the development of sustainable tourism (Goossens, 2000; Balmford, Beresford, Green, Naidoo, Walpole & Manica, 2009). First, it can be considered reasons for purely psychological and emotional: the restlessness and boredom are part of the pursuit of great personal experience, which gives the tourist the search for a realization in some place, in view of what could be called the perfect vacation. This desire, in general, is not satisfied by mass holidays, standardized, but try different paths, new, little explored, able to convey value and wellbeing. From this point of view, some studies consider sustainable tourism as a reaction to the impact resulting from mass tourism (Wheeller, 1990; Miller, 2003; Mckercher, 1993).

Contrary to mass tourism, sustainable tourist wants to have the ability to customize its vacation, moving freely on multiple levels, from the sporty to the environment, from food and wine to the cultural, etc., thus placing itself as a subject investigator, open to human and natural experiences. In addition to that and in more recent years, this type of tourist becomes even more flexible, ecological, more attentive to the quality of the products we consume, all as an expression of a society more aware of the issues of sustainability and social responsibility (Ciciotti, Dallara & Rizzi, 2008; Colombo, 2005).

The sustainable tourism also recognizes the centrality of the local host community and its right to be a leader in sustainable tourism development and socially responsible (Pencarelli & Splendiani, 2008). This type of tourist looking a unique experience that allows him to live and enjoy in practice the elements of the identity of a territory and their specificity, factors closely associated with the quality of the experience (Uriely, Reichel & Shani, 2007, Sambri & Pegan, 2008).

It is not just the desire to visit a place, but above all to get in touch with traditions, habits, and lifestyles of a community. The size of the active tourist, who led a desire to interact with the local communities, emphasizes the importance of the role played by residents and a welcoming policy based on the identity of the territory. From this point of view, the need to meet the changing needs of tourists promotes the success and development of specific business formulas of receptive nature, consistent with the need for sustainability developed by tourists. Integrating the focus on sustainability in their business, the industry protects the competitive advantages of its territories, with their inherent diversity and variety of landscapes and culture (Ritchie & Crouch, 2000; Uriely, Reichel & Shani, 2007).

It is therefore of great importance to consider the link between the model of sustainable development that a territory intends to pursue and the factors of attractiveness in which it aims to achieve levels of excellence and, consequently, the segments of demand which intend to address. This suggests the importance of creating a virtuous circle among local actors-resources-attractiveness. This process starts from the clear identification of the type of attraction on which the territory excels or intends to reach levels of excellence (World Tourism Organization, 2002).

In this regard, priority is the analysis of the spatial characteristics of the offer in order to identify opportunities for improvement and enhancement. Crucial in this regard is the choice of strategic positioning, which consists in identifying the market space where a territory is able to excel. The positioning choice then arises behind the vision of a territory, which implies assumption by government bodies of a precise orientation about the bidding areas in which to invest as a priority.

All these issues require a decision-making process of a strategic type, as part of a territory, aimed at addressing the paths of the tourist development. This is even more relevant to the type community destinations (Murphy, 1985), which present some specific traits:

- resources and activities are widespread, that belong to multiple independent business units;
- the territory as a whole is on the market offering a wide range of attractions resources;
- the local government plays a vital role in tourism, as it controls the landscape resources and can support the offer through various incentives.

In the tourism sector, in fact, the wealth of natural resources is not in itself sufficient to meet the new competitive dynamics, if not handled properly in an innovative way by the operators of the system (both private and public).

The continued sustainability of an area, condition to attract sustainable tourism, depends on the ability of all actors involved to coordinate their choices in order to enhance the territory, within the limits of its sustainable use. Of fundamental importance is the participation of all public and private stakeholders, in a spirit of strategic partnerships.

### **The governance of sustainable tourism development**

The dynamics involved in the tourism market have gradually increased the importance of local territorial systems. In tourism, in fact, the competition is not played much on the individual player or locality, as among local or regional systems and their ability to respond, in a differentiated way, to an ever more selective demand, which in turn is confronted with an increasingly wide range, flexible and accessible offer (Wheeller, 1990).

In this framework, the role of business becomes meaningless. The ability to attract more tourists less depends on the action of individual components, but it is the result of the systemic and synergistic action between the various stakeholders of a territory, which is expressed in a common development plan.

In this context, an important role can be played by all the actors present in an area, which can serve as a driving force for the activation of promotion and appreciation of a territory (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Bramwell & Lane, 2000). The ability to combine the different components of the offer local, in to generate a coherent and shared image is, in fact, the essential factor in the success of an appropriate strategy for enhancing a spatial reality.

In this framework, it becomes crucial to managing the relationships between the tourism system and the tourist and, at the same time, to govern upstream relationships between all stakeholders in the tourism industry. This presupposes the need to identify a governing body capable of developing a strategic plan that values both the businesses and the set of attractions of a given territory.

The identification of the authority of government land (Pencarelli & Splendiani, 2008) able from one hand to set clear development goals shared among the actors of the tourism system and front the other hand to determine the strategic orientation of the territorial destination, is of paramount importance for the competitiveness of the territory. However, the identification of the candidate for the strategic coordination of a territorial destination is not an easy task. In particular, in the areas where prevails a certain fragmentation of the tourist offer, it can be problematic to express a strategic coordination unity for the governance; conversely, in local territories where prevails the collaborative logic it seems easier to identify a person acting as the control room in steering a path of the tourist valorization.

The difficulties of the government of a territorial system in tourist destinations are particularly evident for the community type. In these destinations, in fact, it is the territory and not the individual company to present itself to the tourist attractions with a set of resources. The latter are therefore not owned by a single entity, but several different business units, each of which expresses its own objectives and strategies. This prevents the outright implementation of typical enterprise management models in the field of community-type destinations since the latter are similar to business networks that work together. It is thus the need to coordinate, in the medium to long term, the services offered by the different actors (public and private) contributing to building the tourist offer, leading to the definition of a unified strategic vision. Hence, the opportunity is to frame the tourist offer of the kind of community destinations within the framework of the network approach and the stakeholder theory (Bramwell, Henry, Jackson, Prat, Richards & van der Straaten, 1996).

An effective system of exploitation and tourism promotion of a territory and the problem of governing its development cannot be separated from the introduction of innovative ways of collaboration between multiple stakeholders, enabling extended forms of participation to all stakeholders (Velo, 2004).

The complexity of government of a territory also stems from the fact that the government of economic development belongs to multiple institutions that operate on different spatial planes; besides, the progressive presence of innovative forms of public-private partnerships lead to the affirmation of new actors, active in promoting local development initiatives. Such entities (special purpose agencies, joint bodies, representing subjects of social forces, etc.) act on different levels and increasingly are

tied to public institutions from direct and indirect relationships, influencing the local governance process (Andersen & Van Kempen, 2001). In particular, a greater involvement of public and private actors on a territory has the potential to increase the shared decision-making process and its concrete implementation.

The above considerations show that the complexity of community destinations requires the taking of a governance process that follows, at the same time, both a top-down and a bottom-up approach. Each of the two mechanisms has significant strengths to an adequate system of government land. The first ensures the overall consistency of the system, in terms of strategic planning and optimal resource allocation; the second favors the direct relationship between the various departments within the local community.

It does not seem longer sufficient to manage the relationship between the tourism system and the tourist but is fundamental to govern upstream relationships between all stakeholders involved in the tourism industry. This assumes that each tourist destination defines a governing body, public or private, able to develop a strategic plan that enhances the area's attractions. The need to integrate the actions of the different actors towards innovative and advanced forms of offer, which combine private business interests with public development needs, highlights the role of a subject involved in the tourist that could act to guide and coordinate both the goals and activities of all different local tourism operators involved in the territory. Such territorial government body, with the role of the control room, should constantly ensure the convergence of top-down and bottom-up processes and must be able to implement strategic actions together with the local tourist system management, to improve the competitiveness of the territory as a whole.

Given these considerations, however, it emerges as the need for a strong and focused synergy between the different actors involved in the tourism offer often represents one of the most critical aspects of the tourism industry. Only by overcoming the fragmentation both of goals and interventions and by providing tools for the coordination of the different actions and actors, sustainable tourism can become an important driving force for the development of territories far from main roads of tourism, but rich in excellence and development potentials.

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