

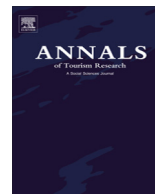


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Measuring sustainable tourism at the municipal level



Anna Torres-Delgado^{1,2,*}, Francesc López Palomeque²

University of Barcelona, Spain

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to provide a scientifically sound, applicable method for studying tourism sustainability at the local level. This is done by developing an indicator system based on an initial literature search that serves to compile a preliminary list of indicators, which are then verified and scientifically validated by conducting a Delphi survey. This process is used to develop a consensual indicator system that is adapted to the tourism sector and includes 26 indicators of social, economic and environmental sustainability. To ensure the applicability of the system, indicator values are then calculated for 20 tourism municipalities in Catalonia (Spain). The results confirm the proposed system is an effective tool for planning and managing tourism at municipal level.

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Introduction

Sustainability has become a key variable in the competitiveness of tourist destinations (ECORYS, 2009; World Economic Forum, 2013) and therefore a primary objective for public managers (Navarro Jurado et al., 2012). However, making tourism sustainable is not easy, mainly because the imprecise nature of the concept of sustainability makes it difficult to apply. In fact, this vagueness is the main reason for the spread and general acceptance of the term, but also accounts for its

* Corresponding author at: C/Montalegre 6, 08001 Barcelona, Spain. Tel.: +34 93 403 78 95.

E-mail addresses: anna.torres@cett.cat, annatorres@ub.edu (A. Torres-Delgado), lopez.palomeque@ub.edu (F.L. Palomeque).

¹ Address: CETT-UB, Av. Can Marçet, 36-38, 08035 Barcelona, Spain.

² Address: Dept. de Geografia Física i Anàlisi Geogràfica Regional, Universitat de Barcelona, C/Montalegre 6, 08001 Barcelona, Spain.

rhetorical use and the erosion of its meaning (López Palomeque, 2007). The “sustainable tourism” label has been applied to many tourism practices that can hardly be said to adhere to the principles of sustainable development, or which do so in a partial way in one of the dimensions of sustainability (economic, social or environmental). It is therefore necessary to clarify the concept and develop instruments that transform it from an abstract notion into a practical tool, that is, into a series of identifiable and quantifiable operational parameters for measuring sustainability. This step should allow tourism sustainability to go from being a general strategy, with many possible interpretations and concomitant actions, to an achievable reality adapted to the specific circumstances of each place.

Yet the complexity of tourism sustainability makes it difficult to develop a method for measuring it. Although various indicator systems have been proposed, some have significant limitations when it comes to practical application, allowing for only partial comparisons, while others are scientifically relevant but too complex to be operational, or the result of political consensus and therefore liable to generate conflicts of interest (Tanguay, Rajaonson, & Therrien, 2013).

Our research is driven by a desire to fill this gap: by the need to develop a method that can be applied at the local level to guide municipalities in their efforts to achieve a higher level of tourism sustainability. The sustainability paradigm is clearly consistent at the level of discourse, and even in planning, but does not translate sufficiently into action. In order to address this shortcoming, we propose a method based on a system of indicators that measure social, economic and environmental sustainability. This system is the result of a literature search and academic discussion among experts, combined with practical application in pilot cases. This dual approach provides scientific rigor and consensus while also guaranteeing the practical effectiveness of the proposed system, which is intended to provide an operational framework for tourism managers, enabling them to make sustainability an integral part of decision-making and management processes.

Objectives

Within the framework of the study of sustainability in tourism, the research reported in this paper has the following objectives:

1. to closely examine methods developed for studying tourism sustainability, particularly indicators and indicator systems;
2. to propose an indicator system that is applicable at the local level and which allows for the identification and quantification of parameters for measuring tourism-related impacts; and
3. to identify tourism municipalities in Catalonia (Spain), select a representative sample, and study the sustainability of tourism at these destinations.

Sustainable development and tourism

The relationship between tourism and sustainability has always existed. However, it was not understood until much later when the sustainable tourism paradigm was recognized and defined by official institutions, though the initial focus was mainly on the environmental dimension. As far back as the mid-1970s, the first studies carried out by the International Union of Official Travel Organisations (now the World Tourism Organisation, WTO) identified the dependence of tourism on the preservation of natural resources as attractions and factors of production. These early studies also highlighted the negative impacts of tourism on natural resources and the risk that these effects would become more severe with the expected increase in tourism activity (Vera, 2001). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recognised that maintaining a good environment was essential for the growth of tourism and that the activity could generate environmental degradation, leading to the decline of tourist destinations, or, conversely, contribute to improving the environment (OECD, 1980). Thus, acknowledging the need for sustainability in tourism is nothing new in the field of tourism planning. However, combining social, environmental and economic principles in the integrative concept of sustainable development is an innovative contribution.

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