Politics and sustainable tourism: The case of Cyprus

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Sustainable tourism implementation in complex political contexts is problematic.
- Strong influence of politics on sustainable tourism development and implementation.
- External axes of power shape the political milieu of tourism.
- Interface between the political system and social environment is influential.
- Sustainability discourse requires a sophisticated approach regarding 'power'.

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ABSTRACT

Cyprus' volatile political environment lends an interesting case for enhancing knowledge on the politics of tourism. The importance of tourism for the island's economy makes the study of the political influences on the new-found goal of sustainable tourism development imperative. This paper investigates the political factors influencing sustainable tourism implementation in Cyprus. Analysis is informed by Lukes' conceptualisation of power relations. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders, the findings suggest that sustainable tourism implementation continues to be problematic, given Cyprus' complex political context, which is highly susceptible to external axes of power. The strong influence of the socio-cultural environment on the politics driving sustainable tourism inhibits its effective implementation. This paper proposes a theoretical framework and a methodology for studying the politics of sustainable tourism development.

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1. Introduction

There are few messier political environments worldwide from which to advance knowledge on the politics of tourism than Cyprus. Centuries of contested national identity and occupations by political dynasties and colonial powers, form a staggeringly complex political milieu on the island. Cyprus is a full member of the European Union (EU) but in practice only the south of the island, with its strong economic and cultural ties to Greece, is active within the EU. Since 1974, the island has been divided by a UN buffer zone. The north of the island forms the Turkish Cypriot State, recognised only by Turkey and highly dependent on Ankara. Recent economic activity in southern Cyprus has been significantly bolstered by capital investments from Russia, but in 2012 Cyprus' economy was badly hit by its extensive exposure to the recession-hit economy of Greece, forcing the country to seek emergency help from international lenders. Additionally, the island's proximity to the Middle East makes it a vital NATO base from which to monitor developments in the region. Thus, the political influences felt on this island are distilled from several axes of power including the multinational NATO Western alliance, supra-national states in the form of the EU and the Russian Federation and the neighbouring nation states of Greece and Turkey. Given this political context, it is hardly surprising that tourism on the island has also passed through turbulent times. In this volatile economic and political environment, the spectre of the stable influence of sustainable development increased in credence on both sides of the island, albeit for quite different reasons. The specific conditions we refer to are laid out below in a rationale for the focus of this article on the politics of the implementation of sustainable tourism on Cyprus.

As southern Cyprus relied on mass tourism for its recovery, it experienced steady growth with reaching 2,700,000 arrivals in

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2001. In the subsequent decade, fluctuating and steadily declining tourist arrivals and revenues have marked the performance of the industry, with numbers dropping below 2.0 million in 2009 (Country Profiler, 2011). However, in 2011 the first significant increase since 2011 occurred (9.2% in comparison to 2010), sparking optimism in the industry. This positive trend continued in 2012 with an increase of 3%, despite the economic crisis and political uncertainty (CYSTAT, 2013).

On the other hand, northern Cyprus had to cope with the consequences of being a non-recognised state and was forced into acute financial and political dependency on Turkey (Alipour & Kilic, 2005). This affected not only the promotion of northern Cyprus, but also its attractiveness for foreign investment and employment (Altinay, Altinay, & Bicak, 2002; Altinay & Bowen, 2006). Declining tourist arrivals, continuing economic decline and a shrinking market were the damaging consequences (Alipour & Kilic, 2005). Despite these challenging circumstances, the tourist industry in northern Cyprus succeeded in developing and is today one of its major economic engines. In 2012, the tourism industry reached a net income of $459.4 million, created 12,053 jobs and 1,166,186 tourist arrivals were registered. In comparison to 2003, net income achieved an increase of 157% from $178.8 million to $459.4 million (TCRN Ministry of Tourism, Environment and Culture, 2012). Although tourism development has not been as successful as in southern Cyprus in terms of volume, it is argued that tourism development in northern Cyprus holds enormous potential as the area remains one of the few unspoiled corners in the Mediterranean (Altinay et al., 2002; Yasarata, Altinay, Burns, & Okumus, 2010).

The underlying circumstances of tourism development on both sides of the island have resulted in a shared imperative to progress sustainable tourism, shaped however by very different sets of issues in each side of the island. In southern Cyprus, the pursuit of sustainable tourism has entered official government policy as a response to market volatility, increasing environmental consciousness in consumer markets and previously damaging development regimes. The story in northern Cyprus is markedly different, as the drive for sustainable tourism emerges from private sector players seeking to capitalise on perceived environmental quality gains, unintended consequences of its political isolation. Thus, in both parts of the island there are equally compelling, but quite different, justifications for the implementation of sustainable tourism. The extent of success or failure in implementing sustainable tourism on the island of Cyprus is, as yet, unreported in the literature.

Reports of research into the political factors influencing the development and implementation of sustainable tourism are rare, an exception being Yasarata et al. (2010) who argue that an important challenge to the research community in seeking to understand the trajectory of sustainable development is to document the political ideologies and power structures of destinations. As a response to this challenge and the general goal of promoting rigorous, context specific analysis of the politics of tourism, this article aims to make two distinct contributions to the understanding of the politics of tourism. First, in the complex political context of Cyprus we will show how the implementation of sustainable tourism continues to be highly problematic. In our analysis we draw on Lukes' (2005) conceptualisation of power relations and exemplify its application to the politics of sustainable tourism. From our study, we propose a general set of mechanisms that act to enable and constrain the implementation of sustainable tourism. These are offered as a theoretical frame for further studies of sustainable tourism in complex political contexts. Second, we will make explicit a methodology for studying the politics of sustainable tourism at the destination level that incorporates key concepts

from the extant literature with empirical fieldwork in a novel data analysis framework.

The article begins with a brief overview of tourism development in Cyprus. Two relevant areas of the literature are then reviewed. First, the literature on the role of politics in tourism policymaking is discussed. Second, the inhibiting factors and challenges identified in the literature in relation to sustainable tourism implementation are reported. The methodology adopted in the study is then described, followed by the study findings. In our findings, the particular political challenges inhibiting sustainable tourism development and implementation in Cyprus are exposed by comparing and contrasting the views of informants from northern and southern Cyprus.

2. Tourism development in Cyprus

Prior to its independence from Great Britain in 1960, tourism development in Cyprus was minimal and mainly concentrated in the Troodos mountains. Acknowledging the potential benefits of tourism, the newly-founded Cyprus government initiated a tourism development plan by concentrating facilities in the northern coastal towns of Kyrenia and Famagusta. Tourist arrivals grew rapidly and by 1973 the island was accepting approximately 240000 tourists (Ayres, 2000). However, tensions between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot inhabitants of the island escalated when Turkish troops intervened in response to a military coup that was backed by Greece, leading to the partition of the island in 1974. As a result two administrations developed: the Republic of Cyprus − an internationally recognised state and member of the EU − in the south and the Turkish Cypriot administration in the north, which remains a non-recognised 'de facto' state, economically and politically highly dependent on Turkey.

2.1. Southern Cyprus

From the perspective of the south the 1974 war had a crippling effect on the Cyprus tourism industry, as the majority of tourism development was concentrated in the northern part of the island (Sharpley, 2003). The need to relocate tourism development to the south of the Green Line became imperative and so investment incentives, targeted economic policies, institutional restructuring and policy reformations were deployed (Ioannides, 1992). The southern part of Cyprus became a well-known sea and sun destination, accepting by the end of the 1990s more than 2 million tourists annually and almost €1927.7 million in tourism revenue. Attracting tourists mainly from European countries, southern Cyprus' target markets are the UK, Germany, Greece, Sweden and Norway with 80% of all tourists arriving between April and October. In recent years, Russia has become an important new market.

The rapid growth and reliance on mass tourism yielded several negative effects including environmental degradation, unskilled foreign labour, perishing cultural identity and a persistent sea and sun image that are considered counter-productive to product diversification and initiatives to extend out-of-season visitation (Clerides & Pashourtidou, 2007). By the early 2000s, it was clear that the tourism product of southern Cyprus had reached stagnation and was further being threatened by emerging competition and changing tourist needs. With tourist arrivals fluctuating throughout the last decade, tourism authorities in southern Cyprus highlighted the need to adopt a more sustainable development strategy to distribute economic benefits to local communities, extend seasonality, minimise environmental pressures on the coastline and preserve traditional culture (CTO, 2010). Following the euro debt crisis and the exposure of the frailty of south Cyprus banks, the need to further boost the economy has