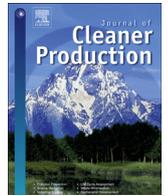




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Barriers to stakeholder involvement in the planning of sustainable tourism: the case of the Thrace region in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the barriers to stakeholder involvement during the planning process of sustainable tourism development of the Thrace region in Turkey. The dimensions analyzed to assess these barriers included stakeholder awareness of critical issues and the current state of tourism, their knowledge of sustainable tourism principles, and their vision of the planning process and effective governance models for their region. The research is based on quantitative and qualitative data obtained from leading stakeholders through workshops. The integration of respondents' individual opinions and group consensus results indicates that lack of institutional structures for effective collaboration and leadership hinders stakeholders' participation in the planning process. Additionally, stakeholders' narrow vision, lack of strategic orientation and financial focus based on self-interest may impede the realization of sustainable tourism despite the local community's involvement in the planning process.

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1. Introduction

Tourism has experienced a tremendous growth worldwide in the last few decades since it is increasingly viewed as a possible solution to many of the economic and socio-cultural problems affecting certain regions. In particular, tourism is seen as an agent for development, creating employment opportunities and increasing the level of earnings in the community. While tourism has indeed contributed to economic development and made a substantial difference in some areas, it has failed to live up to expectations in others (Sharpley, 2009). In addition to the level of expected contributions not materializing, the realization that tourism may have a negative impact on the environment and the community has driven the recognition of sustainability as a *sine qua non* of the implementation of tourism projects.

The term sustainability, used in a multitude of contexts and settings, means various things to different people (Butler, 1999). Sustainability is seen as difficult to measure and operationalize (Murphy and Price, 2005) and presents other challenges related to a given destination's specific cultural, institutional and political

context (Tosun, 2000). In particular, the extent to which participatory approaches to tourism decision-making can be applied in a particular destination and the ability of local residents to consider tourism development in their locality from a perspective of sustainability have been questioned (Blackstock, 2005; Tosun, 2000). A participatory approach to tourism implies a greater involvement of the community in the tourism planning process in order to create high quality, high value-added components at the destination and to ensure that strategic plans are accepted and implemented at the operational level (Haywood, 2011). Indeed, a critical aspect of sustainable tourism includes the sharing of information, which fosters learning among stakeholders and the involvement of all interested parties in the decision-making process (Ladkin and Martínez Bertramini, 2002; Wray, 2011). The participation of the local community in the tourism planning process at the destination is essential, since any tourism development should be aimed at improving the socio-cultural and economic conditions in the community. The present study adopts McIntyre's (1993, as cited in Yu et al., 2011) definition of sustainable tourism as that which increases the quality of life of the local people, improves the quality of the tourist's experience, and preserves the environment on which both visitors and the community depend.

The current research focuses on the views and priorities of local stakeholders during the destination's planning phase. It aims to identify the barriers to stakeholder involvement during the planning process of sustainable tourism development in the Thrace

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region in Turkey. Thrace is currently attempting to overcome some of its economic and social problems by encouraging tourism activity in the area. The research considers the issues hindering a participative approach in the tourism planning process in the region within the context of Turkey's prevalent state-centric institutional system. Thus, some of the problems identified may also apply to other regions in Turkey and potentially to other countries with a similar institutional framework (for example, see the case of Peru described by [Ladkin and Martinez Bertramini, 2002](#)).

In order to identify barriers to stakeholder involvement, special attention is given to the local community's awareness of the critical issues and the current state of tourism in the community, their knowledge of sustainable tourism and their vision of the tourism planning process and effective governance models for their region. The investigation is part of a larger project aimed at defining tourism strategies for the Thrace region. This article is based on the views and suggestions of opinion leaders and main stakeholders that were expressed at the initial consultation stage of the project, with the aim of identifying factors that hinder the participation of interested parties in planning sustainable tourism in this specific destination. For the purpose of this study, main stakeholders are defined as those interested parties that are active in the community, who are referred to by others as having a leadership role and who have shown interest in the region's strategic development as indicated by their attendance at various meetings of the Thrace Regional Development Agency since its establishment in 2009. The views and priorities of the host community, consisting of local authorities, industry members, local civic organizations and associations, and universities, have been included in this research.

2. Tourism planning: sustainability and participation

2.1. Sustainable tourism planning and participative approaches

While tourism can be an effective tool to increase local economic growth and encourage job creation and employment ([Rylance, 2008](#)), the extent to which the community is able to profit from this activity has been questioned, since tourism often benefits the richer constituents in the community and so does not result in an equitable distribution of the gains. In addition, the prevalent philosophy of tourism development within the sustainability paradigm limits the ability of governments to develop tourism at all costs, and encourages them to take into consideration the negative impacts on the environment and the culture at the destination ([Chok et al., 2007](#); [Sharpley, 2002](#)). Tourism needs to be advanced in consonance with the principles of fairness and equitable distribution, and to balance development with conservation of resources. In order to address these issues, a preventive and strategic approach is essential ([Budeanu, 2005](#)). Policy and planning become indispensable to minimize the negative impacts of tourism ([Ruhanen, 2004](#)) and to optimize its contribution to the quality of the environment and the welfare of the community ([Tosun and Timothy, 2001](#)). [Hall \(1998\)](#) advocates the need for an overall integrative framework for planning that includes objectives and strategies to achieve the desired goals.

Various approaches to tourism planning have evolved over time ([Ruhanen, 2004](#)). These include economic, land-use, environmental and community approaches ([Ruhanen, 2004](#)), all of which focus on a single, specific perspective. Each has been criticized for a narrow focus ([Getz, 1986](#); [Ruhanen, 2004](#)). By contrast, a sustainable approach to planning has a broader perspective, as it takes into consideration the balance between development and sustainability in all three sustainability dimensions – economic, environmental and socio-cultural ([Cooper, 1995](#); [Ruhanen, 2004](#)). The sustainable approach to tourism planning has therefore been widely accepted,

and the principles it defends – namely strategic orientation and participation of stakeholders at multiple levels – are generally recognized ([Ruhanen, 2004](#); [Simpson, 2001](#)). The contribution and commitment of interested parties is considered essential to ensure that the benefits derived are shared by all locals and that the overall quality of life of the community is enhanced. Furthermore, the local community may act as a gatekeeper to protect indigenous resources and values. Therefore, recent studies ([Bramwell and Lane, 2011](#); [Hall, 2011](#); [Yüksel et al., 2005](#)) support institutional frameworks that allow multiple levels of participation and decision-making and that coordinate the actions of various players. However, such systems may face problems when confronted with the realities of the destination's institutional structure and the community's internal dynamics.

Indeed, barriers to the participation of local stakeholders in the tourism planning process have been identified in previous studies. Lack of a shared vision, along with clear leadership and a long-term strategy, are some of the most important factors hindering collaborative planning approaches ([Ladkin and Martinez Bertramini, 2002](#)). The absence of a common vision among stakeholders is highlighted in several studies as a main challenge to participatory approaches, given the diversity of views on tourism that various interested groups may hold: while some see tourism as a force that enhances the economic position and quality of life of the local people, others consider it a force disruptive to the culture and way of life of the community ([Sautter and Leisen, 1999](#)). This absence of shared vision is also one of the main criticisms of community-based tourism and participative approaches, which assume that the local community is a homogeneous body capable of making decisions through consensus ([Blackstock, 2005](#)). In reality, collaborative planning processes are often characterized by conflict and power struggles that detract from the attention paid to important issues ([Dredge, 2006](#)). According to [Blackstock \(2005\)](#), the literature on collaboration and stakeholder participation does not sufficiently address structural power relations and inequalities that may affect decision-making at the local level. Residents of a given community are often not able to decide on the development of tourism in their region, as this activity may be imposed from the outside or by the capital holders in the community ([Sautter and Leisen, 1999](#)). Authors such as [Blackstock \(2005\)](#) contend that many community-based tourism projects may be more concerned with economic profitability and long-term survival of the industry than with the realization of social justice within the community.

Despite these criticisms, participation of the local community in the development of tourism is deemed desirable, since it ensures that the image of the destination matches the local vision and guarantees implementation of the projects, ultimately resulting in a more visitor-friendly destination ([Okazaki, 2008](#)). Different levels of participation have been identified in the literature. Early theories such as Arnstein's participation ladder have determined several degrees of participation – non-participation, degrees of tokenism and degrees of citizen power ([Arnstein, 1969](#); as cited by [Okazaki, 2008](#)). The destination's institutional and political context, as well as the power relations within the community, influence citizens' participation in the development of tourism at the destination.

The level and form of community participation in tourism planning is also shaped by the local people's understanding of the process and the issues at hand, and by their access to knowledge ([McCool, 2009](#)). The World Tourism Organization identifies "informed participation of all relevant stakeholders" as one of the key factors of sustainability ([Byrd et al., 2008](#), p. 193). The empowerment of stakeholders and their ability to participate in the decision-making process concerning the sustainable development of the destination is therefore dependent, at least in part, on their level of education ([Tosun, 2000](#)) and their understanding of the

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