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## Does sustainability enhance tourism destination competitiveness? Evidence from Italian Destinations of Excellence

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## ABSTRACT

This paper extends the Ritchie, Crouch (2000) model on destination competitiveness by introducing a set of sustainability indicators and testing their role in explaining the competitiveness of a tourism destination. The model is tested on a unique dataset of small Italian “Destinations of Excellence”, i.e., outstanding tourist destinations recognized by prestigious national and international awards. Both a principal component analysis and a regression analysis are applied to test the empirical validity of the model. Empirical results show that factors directly referring to sustainability have a positive impact on all the competitiveness indicators used as dependent variables. Furthermore, the impact of sustainability variables is larger in value than other variables, thus confirming the role of sustainability as a crucial determinant of the competitiveness of a tourist destination.

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### 1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing industries in many countries around the world, and the main source of foreign income for a significant number of developing countries. Therefore, the study of tourism destination competitiveness (TDC) has attracted the attention of policy makers, public and private organizations, and tourism researchers (Pearce, 1997; Crouch, Ritchie, 1999; Kozak, Rimmington, 1999; Buhalis, 2000; Hassan, 2000; Dwyer et al., 2003; Enright, Newton, 2004).

After the milestone study by Ritchie, Crouch (2000, 2003), a number of theoretical models have been developed to explain destination competitiveness (De Keyser, Vanhove, 1994; Hassan, 2000; Heath, 2002; Dwyer et al., 2003), as well as to analyze the competitive positions of tourism destinations (Sirše, Mihalič, 1999; Dwyer et al., 2003; Enright, Newton, 2004; Gomezelj, Mihalič, 2008). Many authors have highlighted the relationship between sustainability and the competitiveness of a tourism destination and suggested, with different emphases, that sustainability can improve competitiveness (among others, Ritchie, Crouch, 2003; Hassan, 2000).

However, the large debate on the role of sustainable development has partly overlooked the call for a deeper empirical test, and there is still no clear empirical evidence of sustainability's role in explaining the competitiveness of a destination. The empirical models developed in the TDC literature (e.g., De Keyser, Vanhove, 1994; Sirše, Mihalič, 1999; Dwyer et al., 2003; Enright, Newton, 2004; Gomezelj, Mihalič, 2008) provide very useful insights into destination competitiveness, but partly neglect the role of sustainability factors.

This study aims at contributing to this literature by integrating a basic model of TDC (Ritchie and Crouch, 2000) with features related to sustainability. To test the relationship between factors of sustainability and TDC, we operationalize the conceptual approach by analyzing a number of indicators we have found to be important in defining sustainability. The study also has the potential to offer a more comprehensive assessment of the factors that influence TDC. We follow the Dwyer et al. (2003) approach in identifying a list of indicators derived from previous empirical models of TDC and from the literature in sustainable tourism and tourism planning and management.

Furthermore, little empirical work has focused on small tourism destinations, and practically no research on TDC has been applied to small destinations such as villages or small towns. The existing literature has mostly dealt with countries or large geographical areas, whereas the issue of TDC has been assessed by considering the prevalent role of large tourist destinations. However, there are a

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number of countries where a significant part of the tourist competitiveness actually relies on small places because of the highly fragmented cultural heritage, or the inherent nature of the tourist sites. Italy is a paradigmatic example of this pattern: the four major destination cities (Rome, Milan, Florence, and Venice) account only for a part of the tourism flows (24.7% in terms of total international bed nights), whereas a great number of minor destinations constitute the largest remaining part. Surprisingly, the empirical literature neglects the role of these small centers almost entirely: these destinations need attention not only because they account for a sizable share of the total arrivals, but also because they represent a tourism model that is common to many other tourism countries. Therefore, our result could be of interest for a larger audience.

We selected small Italian “destinations of excellence” as those that have been awarded important international (“Blue Flag”) and national certifications (“Orange Flag,” “Most Beautiful Villages in Italy,” “Blue Sail”). To test the role played by sustainability factors on the competitiveness of a tourist destination, we studied the relationship between TDC, measured by four dependent variables (environmental impacts, socio-cultural impacts, economic impacts and tourists' satisfaction), and some explanatory variables that can be identified in terms of sustainability. To reduce the large set of independent variables to a smaller set, we performed a Principal Component Analysis (PCA), as in Dwyer et al. (2004), and used these results in the subsequent OLS estimates of the model. As opposed to previous indicators of TDC such as arrivals, bed-nights, revenues, or market share, the TDC measures we use in the paper acknowledge the view of Müller (1994), Hunter (1995), Buhalis (2000), Ritchie and Crouch (2000), and others who recognize that a competitive destination pursues and establishes the right balance on the following different objectives: optimum satisfaction of guest requirement, subjective well-being of the residents (economic health), unspoiled nature, and healthy culture.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 sets the theoretical framework. Section 3 gives details about the empirical analysis (variables, case study, data and methodology). Section 4 provides a discussion of the main findings. Conclusions are drawn in the last section of the paper.

## 2. Sustainability and competitiveness in small tourism destinations

Many studies and models have identified destination competitiveness by using the lens of high visitor numbers and market share as contributing factors to a competitive destination. This view has a major limitation in that it ignores the sustainable perspective of not overloading the carrying capacity of a destination, or preserving its environmental integrity (Croes, 2010). Many authors seem to agree that the competitive destination is the one that preserves natural and cultural resources and increases long-term well-being for its residents by delivering an experience that is more satisfying compared to similar destinations (Hassan, 2000; Heath, 2002; Ritchie, Crouch, 2003; Bahar, Kozak, 2007).

The concept of sustainability was introduced to tourism from the notion of sustainable development, following the publication of the World Commission on Environment and Development Report, known as the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987). Even though after a quarter-century the world is an enormously different place (Sneddon et al., 2006), and the Report has been criticized for its central approach (Adam, 1990) and the lack of attention given to power relations among local-to-global actors (Lélé, 1991), it represented an important starting point for the formulation of sustainable policies. In Sharpley's view (2000), sustainable tourism development does not appear to be entirely consistent with the

developmental aspects of sustainable development, but has a larger inward and product-centered perspective.

Tourism researchers have been trying to define sustainable tourism development (STD) for many years. Despite the fact that it is widely accepted that STD is a long-term goal (WTO, 1992), or a concept that is constantly evolving (Inskeep, 1991) and intrinsically dynamic (Liu, 2003), there is no standard definition for “sustainable tourism destinations” (Tepelus and Cordoba, 2005). Lee (2001, p. 314) observes that, “Since destinations are unique, so are sustainable development issues in these destinations.”

However, there is an emerging consensus that STD aims to minimize environmentally negative impacts, preserve cultural heritage, while at the same time provide learning opportunities, including positive benefits for the local economy and contributing to the enhancement of local community structures (Weaver, 2005).

Practical evidence shows that STD can not only stop further deterioration, but it can also contribute towards the appreciation of the destination (Aguiló et al., 2005). Various mass tourism destinations are trying to move toward a more sustainable approach for the tourism development model (Fortuny et al., 2008; Rodríguez, 2008). Mass tourism was initially considered incompatible with the notion of sustainability (Krippendorf, 1987; Butler, 1991; Valentine, 1993), as they were seen as polar opposites by Pearce (1992). This idea was followed by the position of the “movement,” resulting in the demand to change mass tourism into more sustainable forms (Cohen, 1987; Butler, 1990), and finally to the idea of “convergence” between the two types (Inskeep, 1991). Inskeep (1991), Hunter, Green (1995), Clarke (1997), Swarbrooke (1999), Budeanu (2005), Tepelus (2005) highlight that all types of tourism can aim to be sustainable. Budeanu (2005, p. 90) asserts that, “Sustainable tourism cannot be achieved if mass tourism practices are not adjusted to integrate sustainability.”

Hence, economic benefits for locals and the minimization of environmental and social repercussions could be complementary aims in every kind of destination: the key factor could be managing and controlling the tourism activity. That is the main reason why we aim to demonstrate that a more sustainable tourism policy and destination management could have a positive impact on destination competitiveness.

Furthermore, two other aspects of sustainability need to be considered. Firstly, Liu (2003) and Kastenholz (2004) observe that sustainable tourism cannot be achieved without proper management of tourism demand. Notwithstanding, demand issues have often been neglected in the sustainable tourism debate. This may be due to the fact that the concept of sustainability was simply transposed from the broader concept of sustainable development, where the nature of demand is considered as a given condition. This is not the case for tourism – which is both supply and demand driven – requiring consideration of the demand factor in the explanation of TDC (Dwyer et al., 2003), and also in the case of small tourist destination competitiveness.

Secondly, many authors agree that the competitive destination is the one that increases well-being for its residents in the long term (Crouch, Ritchie, 1999; Bahar, Kozak, 2007; Dwyer et al., 2003; Heath, 2002). In this sense, Bramwell, (1996) observed that “locals” need to be empowered in order to move towards sustainable tourism development: if tourism is an income-generating sector for local communities, and it can have a multiplier effect, then the host population has to feel empowered, fully participating in the development process, which could be even easier in a small community.

Based on the previous analysis, sustainability is initially regarded here in the sense of sustainable tourism policy and management, but also in the senses of both empowerment of locals and

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