



Luxury sustainable tourism in Small Island Developing States surrounded by coral reefs



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ABSTRACT

The environment of small islands makes them favorable locations for luxury resorts and these play a significant role in the economic development of Small Island Developing States (SIDS). However, these resorts provide activities and services that can affect the islands' ecosystems and thus, a way to make luxury and sustainability compatible must be found. The main purpose of this study is to detect patterns for sustainability in SIDS surrounded by reefs from the conceptual framework of sustainable tourism. The study is based on a survey responded by 61 deluxe resorts in French Polynesia, the Seychelles and the Maldives. Responses were analyzed statistically to compare and group this population. Two important conclusions can be inferred from the results obtained in this analysis: a) luxury can go hand in hand with sustainability in the three SIDS and b) there is a pattern in their sustainability behavior based on how resorts manage sustainability and their willingness to improve environmental practices, and even sacrifice some activities and services, whether they have an environmental certification or not. The results of this study may contribute to the academic knowledge of environmental patterns in luxury SIDS destinations. Many studies have confirmed that possessing eco-labels and standards are a good reason to call tourism sustainable. However, this study proves that to achieve a sustainable target certain activities must be sacrificed. In addition, we provide advice to deluxe resorts that would like to be more sustainable and background information to policymakers which should help to find ways to enhance public environmental policies.

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1. Introduction

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are found in the Caribbean, the Pacific and the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean, and the South China Sea. They are states in which there is limited room for economic growth and sustainable development (OHRLS, 2011b). Despite this, the SIDS tourism sector brings annual revenue that exceeds US\$38 billion, a figure which has increased by over \$12 million in the last decade (UNWTO, 2012).

However, this industry depends on many types of human activities that damage the environment. Human alterations to the coast are rarely limited to a single activity (Sealey et al., 2014). The majority of authors coincide that environmental issues in SIDS include a lack of regulations and policies (Delmas and Toffel, 2004; Enz and Siguaw, 1999; Haufler, 2010; Law et al., 2008; McKercher

and Prideaux, 2010; Nidumolu et al., 2009; Puvanarasan et al., 2010; Sheng and Chen, 2010; Tarí et al., 2010). In addition, tourist activities and services, such as scuba diving, which are offered on the islands are harmful to their coral reefs (Davis and Tisdell, 1996; Haddock-Fraser and Hampton, 2012; Hansen et al., 2009; Hawkins and Roberts, 1993; Pandolfi et al., 2011; Pillai, 2010; Webb and Kench, 2010). However, authors such as Fotiu et al. (2002) believe that tourism can contribute to look after the marine and coastal protected areas of small islands, and that the utilization of an eco-label or a certificate may encourage hotels to provide such protection. Moreover, according to Segarra-Oña et al. (2012), hotels which do not have an eco-label but are located in natural surroundings may also be environmentally friendly.

Our paper's goal is to examine the relationship between sustainable image, sustainable management and willingness to sacrifice activities and services as an additional step in the study of environmental proactivity in small islands from a conceptual sustainable tourism framework. For this purpose, we put forward two questions with reference to three SIDS surrounded by coral reefs: the Maldives, the Seychelles and French Polynesia,

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- (1) Does a sustainable image go hand in hand with sustainable management in the luxury resorts of these three SIDS?
- (2) Are luxury resorts in these three SIDS more willing to sacrifice activities and services when they have an eco-certification system?

To find out the answers we conducted a survey among the managers of deluxe resorts in the three SIDS to find out about their certifications, environmental management systems (EMS) and their willingness to sacrifice any harmful activity or service.

2. Luxury sustainable tourism and SIDS

Literature about luxury tourism is scarce (Atwal and Williams, 2009; Barsky, 2009; Ciornea et al., 2012). One reason for this limitation might be that the concept of luxury has changed dramatically across time and cultures (Koch, 2007; Ryan and Stewart, 2009; Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie, 2006).

According to the UNWTO (2001, p. 331), luxury tourism includes five-star hotels (deluxe hotels) and four-star hotels (first class hotels). However, there is not one sole definition for luxury resorts. According to Mazzucchi (2007) and Moscardo and Benkendorff (2010), a deluxe resort is traditional, sophisticated, unique, expensive, and environmentally sustainable. This status is found in the comparison of the three small islands analyzed in this paper, although differences do exist in terms of sustainability between them. The unmatched marine fauna and the biodiversity, the crystal clear lagoons and the pristine beaches provided by the reefs form a premium and niche product for tourism (Jaleel, 2013). Most visitors are engaging in an exclusive market, visiting various high-cost nature holiday destinations around the globe (Kerr, 2005).

In the Maldives, deluxe resorts are accredited by international tourism agencies which measure the number of visitors, the quality of services, and the green scale of the hotel (Rayna and Striukova, 2009; Taylor and Finley, 2008). By contrast, in the Seychelles and French Polynesia, public agencies decide whether a resort is a deluxe resort, based on a number of standards and requirements linked to regular luxury standards such as quality of service and quantity of amenities (Cordato, 2008; Sherman, 2007; Young, 1977).

The deluxe resort industry is significant to these islands' economic development (especially in the Seychelles and the Maldives, see Table 1) in the same way that the luxury sector is a good investment for big hotel chains around the world (Klaus-Dieter, 2009; Phillips and Jones, 2006). Moreover, luxury sustainable tourism can deliver a marketing advantage over competitors as long as tourists are willing to pay more for luxury in a different environment which indirectly provides exclusivity to economic development (Brenner and Aguilar, 2002; Yeoman and McMahon, 2006).

Table 1
Differences between the three SIDS.

	French Polynesia	Maldives	Seychelles
Approx. population 2011 (in thousands)	87.4	390	290
Total resorts	47	97	22
Deluxe resorts	7	40	14
Who categorizes the deluxe resorts?	Tahiti Tourism Authority	Travel Agencies	Seychelles Tourism Office in Spain
Tourism GDP	6%	30%	40%
Marine protected areas	7	25	25
Endangered species	52	190	160

Source: MTAC (2012); MTTAI (2010); NBS (2012a); NBS (2012b); NBS (2012c); OHRLS (2011a); Service Du Tourisme (2010).

For decades, literature about sustainable tourism in SIDS has studied the implementation of environmental measures to protect their natural resources, such as the coral reef ecosystems on which the islands' economies depend (Baslin, 1984; Croes, 2010; Neroni, 2001; Maragos et al., 1996; Pickering and Hill, 2007). Sustainable tourism (including ecotourism) is officially acknowledged as an important tool for achieving objectives such as biodiversity conservation (Wood, 2001).

Managers and hoteliers are often directly responsible for the introduction and implementation of environmental programs and they are perceived to be particularly important stakeholders in the industry. Some managers obtain eco-tourism certification as a tool to reward their best tourism operations which use environmental practices (Cheyne and Barnett, 2001). In this vein, deluxe resort hoteliers are doing their best to acquire eco-certification systems which include the audit and development of policies that control environmental measurements in hotels to make them unique because they are sustainable (Neroni, 2001; Pahl-Wostl et al., 2007). However, there are barriers that surround existing sustainable tourism models in deluxe resorts and are attached to the fragility of the islands' biodiversity (De Miguel et al., 2011). Even though deluxe hotels are applying standards to prevent environmental damage and conserve the environment, these are not sufficient due to the construction or re-construction of hotels (Forster et al., 2011; Medio et al., 1997; Morri et al., 2010).

The three SIDS analyzed have their most important biodiversity in the sea. Services have indirect and immeasurable ecological effects on coral reefs because they utilize water resources which are limited and need large amounts of energy to operate (Jennings, 2007; Nidumolu et al., 2009; Sheldon and Park, 2010).

Crowley (2000) and Vitousek (1994) explain that human activities such as outdoor activities that depend on specific resources, i.e. water, increase global climate change in various forms of contamination. Within human activities, the tourism industry generates cultural and ecological impacts on or near coral reefs (Buckley, 2002; Fraser and Hamptom, 2010; Pandolfi et al., 2011). Hansen et al. (2009) and Pickering and Hill (2007) mentioned that these effects can occur in any type of island and can affect SIDS around the world directly or indirectly. Literature about the negative impacts of scuba diving and snorkeling, and how coral reef management strategies must be an incessant mission, has become popular in the last thirty years (Faurea, 1989; Allison, 1996; Dearden et al., 2007; Scott and McBoyle, 2007).

Currently, all SIDS rely to a large extent on reef resources and, therefore, the maintenance of healthy reefs is especially important (Salvat and Garde, 2008; Trapon et al., 2011). Davenport and Davenport (2006) and Webb and Kench (2010) explained that the increase in water sport activities appears to have accumulated damage and has engendered serious environmental impacts. Therefore, these activities plus the management of increasing tourist numbers will have to be measured to prevent irreparable damage (Pillai, 2010; Wong, 1998). Hoteliers must develop and implement specific and individual policies and standards that highlight the limitations on the number of divers and the pooling of resources (Musa, 2002; Worachananant et al., 2008).

The solution to this problem is not just to limit guests and their tourist activities (Rumiche et al., 2011). It is also essential to minimize water consumption through conservation and renovation, and there is also a need for Environmental Impact Assessment (Domroes, 2001; Wong, 1998). In fact, it has been proved that nature conservation in islands and tourism activities are not entirely incompatible as expenditure of scarce resources to maintain the vitality of the environment on the islands is fundamental (Fraser and Hamptom, 2010). Nevertheless, Fabinyi (2010), Nergiz et al. (2011) and Roe (2010) argued that although the assumed pleasant

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