



A European Sustainable Tourism Labels proposal using a composite indicator



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ABSTRACT

The tourism sector in Europe faces important challenges which it must deal with to promote its future development. In this context, the European Commission considers that two key issues must be addressed. On the one hand, a better base of socio-economic knowledge about tourism and its relationship with the environment is needed, and, on the other hand, it is necessary to improve the image of European areas as quality sustainable tourism destinations. In this paper we present analytical tools that cover these needs. Specifically, we define a system of sustainable tourism indicators and we obtain a composite indicator incorporating weights quantified using a panel of experts. Employing the values of this global indicator as a basis, we define a Sustainable Tourism Country-Brand Ranking which assesses the perception of each country-brand depending on its degree of sustainability, and a system of sustainable tourism labels which reward the management carried out.

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1. Introduction

The importance of tourism as an economic activity having a great impact on economic growth and job creation is well-known. Globally, Europe has occupied a prominent place for several years, being the main tourist destination in the world. This prominent place of tourism in Europe is mainly due to this area's important cultural and natural heritage, as well as the fact that other competing countries in this matter, located in North Africa and Middle East, are immersed in situations of political instability that discourage stays there. However, tourism is an activity which, by definition, affects the cultural and natural heritage, as well as the traditions and the contemporary cultures of the European Union. This favours the need for a sustainable development of tourist activities. This requirement is reinforced by the growing competency framework within which European tourist destinations are involved, due to the emergence of new tourist areas trying to achieve a competitive advantage through lower prices (European Commission, 2010).

In this context, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) establishes the need to manage the destinations to obtain long-term sustainable tourism (UNWTO, 1993). The goal is the reconciliation of the development of tourist activities with the protecting and conserving of the natural and cultural resources which back this activity.

In Europe, the difficulties encountered in these years of economic crisis of the global economy since 2008 show the need for adapting the sector to act on the factors that influence its development. These are an increasing competition in the market, new behaviours of tourists

associated with demographic change, the effects of climate change and the scarcity of resources, the consequences of information technologies and communication for the relationship between supply and demand, among other specific problems of European tourism (European Commission, 2010). In this situation, the European institutions are setting up a new framework for the sector that has the primary objective of promoting competitiveness without forgetting that, in the long term, competitiveness is closely related to the sustainability of tourism activities.

To boost the sector's competitiveness and promote the development of sustainable, responsible and quality tourism, the European Commission considers it essential to have, at a European level, a better socio-economic knowledge base concerning tourism and its relationship with the environment, so as to consolidate statistical data and analysis regarding this sector (European Commission, 2010). In this sense, the systems of sustainable tourism indicators are a tool for the evaluation of the degree of sustainability of a destination from a multidimensional perspective.

In a complementary manner, the new framework for European tourism establishes the need to improve the image of Europe and its perception as a set of sustainable and quality tourism destinations (European Commission, 2010). The improvements achieved in this regard will be a reinforcement of the attractiveness of the European destinations and an increased flow of demand, not only for the greater volume of non-European tourists, but also due to the consolidation of a volume of internal demand within the continent. In this sense, the image of a destination identified by a specific country-brand plays a key role within the marketing developed in this matter, because it differentiates its identities and underlines the uniqueness of its product, providing information about how it is perceived by tourists.

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One of the most internationally-used instruments to assess the perception of the country brand is to obtain rankings using indicators based on relevant information for demand and which determine the choice of a certain area as a travel destination. One of the most relevant rankings in this sense is the Country-Brand Index prepared by the specialised consultancy *Future Brand* (2012). In this way, we considered that a classification of the brand of the European destinations depending on their degree of tourism sustainability – obtained on the basis of a composite indicator which adds information from a system of sustainable tourism indicators – is a good instrument to improve the image of European destinations. This classification would likewise identify destinations with more sustainable management practices that provide better results. It could be defined as a label for sustainable tourism for European destinations which the better placed destinations could access. This would create a European brand that rewards the best management based on each country's national experience, thus increasing confidence in tourism products and consumers' safety. The continuous updating of this classification would be a stimulus for ceaseless improvement for individual national governments, enhancing the exchange of experiences and cooperation between different Member States through benchmarking practices.

With the creation of this brand, we would put into practice Action 18 of the proposal in the Communication “Europe, the world's No. 1 tourist destination – a new political framework for tourism in Europe” adopted on 30 June 2010 (European Commission, 2010), in line with the Lisbon Treaty and the objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy: “Create a true ‘Europe brand’ in cooperation with the Member States to complement promotional efforts at national and regional levels and enable European destinations to distinguish themselves from other international destinations” (Action 18).

In this context, in the present paper we propose to fulfil the following objectives. First, we define and quantify a system of sustainable tourism indicators which are suitable for the analysis of the sustainability of tourism in European destinations. Thus, we will respond to the recommendations of the European Commission, proposing a new instrument that will improve and strengthen the knowledge of the tourism sector to ensure a more sustainable management leading to an improvement of the competitiveness of these destinations.

Secondly, in response to the need to improve the image of European destinations, we propose the defining of a Tourist Country-Brand Ranking. Our proposal is to delineate this ranking of European destinations in terms of sustainability, based on the information provided by the indicators system previously defined. To achieve this ranking, it is necessary to determine a composite indicator which provides an overall assessment of the situation of each destination without having to analyse the initial indicators separately. To obtain these composite indicators we will use a methodology based on set goal programming to reduce the associated subjectivity and provide synthetic indicator values which are easy for operators in the sector to interpret (Blancas et al., 2010a,b; Lozano-Oyola et al., 2012). Also, unlike other previous studies that have applied this methodology, the composite indicator proposed used a weighting system obtained via a panel of experts in sustainable tourism.

Finally, using the composite indicator values we define a Sustainable Tourism Labels System that aims to incorporate sustainability as a descriptive feature of the destination country brand. International literature has supported the brand identity and image of the destination having an influence on the destination selection process when tourists perceive a positive brand image (Bigné et al., 2001). The positive perception of a destination brand by tourists is defined when brand associations are implemented, that is, when new attributes are associated with the destination brand (Keller, 1998). In this regard, we consider that the incorporation of sustainability principles as a brand association is a key issue in the present global tourist market. The Sustainable Tourism Labels System that we define in this paper allows potential tourists to value the destination brand in terms of sustainability and determine

their behaviour as consumers (e.g., influencing their choice of destination). In this manner, the improving of the image of a destination through labels proposed is influential in tourist behaviours. Specifically, the intentions to revisit the destination and to spread a positive word-of-mouth have been the two most important behavioural consequences of destination, branding as post-consumption behaviour studies have showed (Qu et al., 2011).

To achieve these objectives, the structure of this paper is as follows. In the next section we define and quantify a system of sustainable tourism indicators. In Section 3 we present the methodology proposed for a composite indicator that allows us to establish the aforementioned Tourist Country-Brand ranking. In Section 4 we analyse and discuss the main results and in the last section we consider the conclusions.

2. A sustainable tourism indicators system for European destinations: definition and database

2.1. Definition

As laid down by the European Commission, to promote sustainable tourism and stimulate the competitiveness of the tourism sector in the European market it is necessary to have a system of sustainable tourism indicators (European Commission, 2003, 2007). Indicators of sustainable tourism can be defined as “the set of measures that provide the necessary information to better understand the links between the impact of tourism on the cultural and natural setting in which this takes place and on which it is strongly dependent” (UNWTO, 1996).

We believe that the information contained in a set of indicators of sustainable tourism is a suitable tool in order to have a better socio-economic knowledge of the tourism sector and its relationship with the environment. In this sense, this panel of indicators provides information on the many aspects that allow the evaluation of a complex and multidimensional phenomenon and which has no definition agreed upon at the international level. Also components of the system allow us to identify the different aspects that influence the sustainability of tourism, providing an operational knowledge of it which more than offsets the conceptual ambiguity.

In this section we define a system of sustainable tourism indicators that can meet the targets set by the European Commission and which are useful from a practical point of view. To do so, our first task is to define the concept evaluated by the system of indicators: sustainable tourism.

We define sustainable tourism as tourist activity which centres on resource management in such a way that all economic, social and aesthetic needs are met, while abiding by cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and the life-support system (UNWTO, 1993), using the institutional definition for a “convergence” position (Clarke, 1997; Hardy et al., 2002). Hence, touristic policies ought to be worked out to safeguard the protection of natural, social and cultural resources that uphold the activity and their ability to fulfil the requirements of both present and future tourists and residents populations. To integrate these needs into an operational framework we followed the established guidelines of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (2004).

This organisation provides an indicative list of issues on which action is needed to achieve the goal of sustainable tourism, identifying those considered as basic for their importance in assessing the sustainability of the tourist activity. This institution also provides a set of alternative indicators that can be used for the evaluation of each issue considered. These indicators, proposed by the UNWTO, are purely suggestive. Therefore, the final decision of the analyst is what determines their inclusion in the analysis or not, depending on the characteristics and objectives of the study proposed, the destination type analysed, the statistical information available, and so on.

In this context, we delineated our system by choosing from the UNWTO guidebooks the baseline sustainability aspects and indicators

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