

OPPORTUNITIES OF ALTERNATIVE TOURISM IN ENVIRONMENTALLY PROTECTED AREAS

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is an open, multi-dimensional system that interacts with its environment. The importance of tourism worldwide is undeniable. Since the mid-70s onwards there was a turn from mass into alternative tourism. While mass tourism was until recently accused of causing serious negative environmental pressures, there were new forms of tourism developed and influenced by the new development model that emerged, the one of sustainable development. These new forms of tourism set the criterion of environmental respect. In this context, the hitherto prevailing view for environmentally protected areas, namely the ones of absolute protection without any human intervention, slowly started to be replaced by the need to connect them with their surrounding area and it became understood that protected areas are not closed, on the contrary though, they receive and exercise all those pressures from the human factor. To this direction, alternative tourism can find space to grow in environmentally protected areas, and constitute at the same time, a chance for organization and empowerment of these areas, having thus, as a final result, major benefits for the society as a whole. However, the environmental pressures of tourism, are also of great importance. The environmental impact of tourism is not negligible and should be taken under serious consideration before proceeding with the tourist exploitation of any landscape.

Keywords: Alternative tourism, sustainable development, natural environment, environmentally protected areas, benefits, environmental impact

1. Introduction

Tourism constitutes one of the most profitable activities all over the world. Around it has been developed and continues to develop an enormous industry known as the tourism industry, which includes all the organizations, public and private ones, which contribute in the production, development and promotion of those services and products, serving the needs of travelers (Gee *et al.*, 2001).

Undoubtedly, tourism constitutes a system. This system is open, multi-dimensional and interacts with its environment. The complicated form of tourism system and mainly the particularities of the demand it appears, in combination with its intangible nature, differentiate it from the other activities enlisted in the tertiary sector production.

The great economic importance of tourism has meant to attract the interest of researchers globally, resulting thus to the development of a series of studies, which were looking those special characteristics that differentiate it and the trends it appears.

This paper deals with a new holiday model, the one of alternative tourism, which attracts more and more tourists nowadays. Also an effort of correlation between alternative tourism and environmentally protected areas has been made, that can enhance development and accommodate modern tourists in the same time.

2. From the mass tourism to the alternative one

The mass tourism is the most classical form of tourism, which began to be developed systematically and internationally during the postwar decades. In this fact contributed a sequence of important changes such as the liberation of aviation, the reduced prices of fuels, the mass production and the marketing, which has promoted the mass transportation. During this period, many tourist packages have been organized and the advertising of new tourism destinations has been reinforced. Generally, it could be said that «the model of the organized, mass tourism had the main attributes of massiveness, teamwork and internationalism» (Lagos, 2005: p.68). The mass tourism was based essentially on the development model of financial enlargement, promoting the mass production and consumption.

However since '70s, many changes which happened world-widely, led to a controversy about the previous development model. The most important attribute of this change was the verification of the sustainability need. In fact, the need for bigger production levels, wielded intense pressures to the natural environment and natural sources, causing many environmental problems, that raised obstacles in the upcoming development of the societies in international-level. It is clear that the exploitation of the natural environment must be controlled by setting some limits, which shall not overcome its capacity. This new development model has been called internationally, 'sustainable development'.

This pattern of development also affected the field of tourism, since massiveness had been many times accused of its negative effects on the natural landscape. In particular, the rapid growth of mass tourism has led to natural and cultural degradation of many areas that were recipients of mass tourism (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). For this reason, the dispute of the postwar model of tourism development was followed by the turn to the environment and the emerged sustainable tourism models, with alternative tourism being the dominated one. The philosophy of alternative tourism is different, because it is connected with the nature and it does not violate the social values related with it. Simultaneously, it offers new experiences for the people through its positive interaction with the natural environment (Eadington & Smith, 1992).

3. Environmentally protected areas

The concept of the protected areas raised as a consequence of the need to protect the flora and fauna or generally the natural landscape. It could be said that the environmentally protected areas are some areas which incorporate a natural, ecological and cultural value. The International Union for Conservation of Nature defines a protected area as an area of land and/or sea, especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, managed through legal or other effective means (IUCN, 1994).

The concept of the protected areas was formed over the years, obtaining simultaneously different dimensions from country to country, depending on the existing sociopolitical forces, which were giving each time different meaning to the definition of protected areas. Generally, we could say that the initially prevailing policy for the environmentally protected areas, was the one of absolute protection without any human intervention. However, since 60s onwards, the interest for the protected areas has been increased and it was proved through their classification in 1994 by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which recognizes protected areas both for their biodiversity and the recreational opportunities that can offer to people.

The first important international-level effort for the consolidation of the institution of protected areas was made in 1872 in USA, through the proclamation of the National Park of Yellowstone as an environmentally protected area or an area aiming at recreation and satisfaction of people (Kasioumis, 1993).

Nowadays, the environmentally protected areas keep growing, while their role is evolving as they attract many scientists who want to conduct their researches, because of their rich flora and fauna, the environmental education they may offer and the possibility of using them, receiving back social and economic benefits. The environmentally protected areas play a central role in the policy of sustainable development, emphasizing to the benefits which these areas can offer to the civil society.

Consequently, the biodiversity, the natural landscape, the existence of many cultural monuments in the environmentally protected areas and the need of human to be connected with the nature and culture, promote the growth of the protected areas and their connection with the tourism activity.

4. Alternative tourism and environmentally protected areas

The continually changing economic, social, cultural, political and technological environment brings about tumultuous changes in the preferences and trends of the consumers - tourists. The activities closely associated with the nature and the environment are very popular in tourists of all ages. Moreover, the change in the standards of tourism behavior, the development of technology and the improvement of the transport services, that connect even the most remote areas, as well as the international interest in the environment and culture, result in an increase of demand for alternative forms of tourism. In this context, it was observed that people with high educational levels have been also related to the demand for alternative forms of tourism (Wight, 2001). The natural and cultural resources of the protected areas offer potential opportunities for the development of alternative forms of tourism and they simultaneously cover the current trends in tourism demand, which want tourists to be close to nature. The environmentally protected areas constitute in fact potential ways to promote the alternative forms of tourism. In the environmentally protected areas, the cultural and ecological aspects of landscape are well - combined in order to conform an ideal location for those tourists, who seek alternative tourism (Wallace & Russell, 2004).

As the sustainability of protected areas, according to alternative tourism, is vital for all, it is recommended as a form of tourism, which applies negligible force to the cultural or ecological resources of an area. The most essential goal for the environmentally protected areas is the proper utilization of demand for alternative forms of tourism existing in market, through its proper management, the limitation of target market and the supply of mild activities satisfying the demand and the sustainability of the area (Eagles *et al.*, 2002). Within the alternative forms of tourism there are all those special characteristics, which constitute the basis for a sustainable model of tourism development. Therefore, having as a keystone the respect and love for nature, the alternative tourism is an opportunity for development and utilization of the environmentally protected areas.

5. Social implications

The economy of tourism, commonly known as the tourism industry, is one of the fastest growing international- level economies. The economies of many countries (including Greece) are based on the tourism and their revenues are accruing from it. Those ones, who are responsible for tourism policy, must include to their policy planning the new trends of tourists, regarding tourism behavior and mostly the importance of the selection of the vacation place, as well as the type of holiday.

The encouragement for the exploitation of protected areas with the view to develop alternative forms of tourism should be the main priority of tourism policy. The financial benefits developed in the protected areas (like tickets, souvenirs, services, drivers etc.) because of tourism, are enormous at local, regional and national level. Therefore it is required, the systematization of their management as well as their proper utilization. Nevertheless, the increased interest in sustainable and alternative tourism raises social concerns about the impact of tourism and the quality of the natural environment (Tourism Canada, 1995). At this point, we must mention that the proper management of these areas, which strengthens their economic opportunities attracting tourists and their protection, are promoted through their sustainable management.

6. Environmental impact

The quality of tourism depends on the environment and vice versa the environment depends on tourism. For example, in some areas particularly popular to tourists, tourism has declined because of the environmental effects (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996).

Each and every type of tourism, applies in some way, a form of force to the natural environment. The mass tourism particularly, was accused of exercising significant pressures on the environment. It could be argued, that during the period of mass tourism development, the need for economic growth including the misuse of natural resources, infrastructure construction e.t.c., outweighed the need for conservation of the natural environment. However, even the alternative tourism may become a potentially threat to environmentally protected areas, when developed without an effective design. The impact of tourism in environmentally protected areas is classified into two major categories, the direct and indirect one (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). The Direct impact is related to the presence of tourists, while the indirect one is related with the infrastructure and the activities related with the tourism demand. In general, the impacts associated with the natural environment of protected areas concern the degradation of flora and fauna, the pollution of water resources, the land degradation and its geological morphology (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). More specifically, soil degradation is mainly related with the area under management and its respected components, which cause weakening of the higher levels of the ground and destroy the natural ecosystem, in order to bind the physical space, limiting thus the growth of microorganisms (Kuss *et al.*, 1990). In addition, activities involving alternative tourism, such as sailing, are leading the chemical pollution on the shoreline. Even tourist facilities near the coastline can lead to soil erosion.

All the above constitute just a few examples of the environmental pressure from tourism on protected areas. According to Speight (1973) based on a research for the breeding status of *Sterna Albifrons* in Britain, the mere presence of people in an area is sufficient enough to distort the reproduction procedures of fauna. The uncontrolled tourist activities may also cause serious negative impacts on the aesthetics of the landscape. Supriadi and Dudung (1992) emphasized that garbage, cans, cardboard, plastics and overeating, endanger flora and fauna of the protected areas and disturb the pleasure enjoyed by other tourists visiting a natural landscape.

In any case, the tourist exploitation of environmentally protected areas should be accompanied by a plan of targeted management actions, which recognizes the dynamics of each region and delimits those tourist activities that do not exceed the carrying capacity of the region.

For a very long time the studies concerning the environment were incomplete and sometimes, even non-existent. Following the European indications, the awareness of the negative environmental impact, promoted the creation of a legal implement, suitable for the environmental impact study, which plays an important role in all interventions in the natural landscape. According to the strategy of the environment assessment, which concerns mainly political projects and programs, the protected areas are registered against any human intervention, as part of the sustainable tourism, aiming at the conformation of an area and the hospitality of tourists.

7. Conclusions

The declined course of the mass tourism and the reinforcement of the new development model, the one of the sustainable development, led to the emergence of a new form of tourism, the alternative one. This new concept of tourism includes all those forms, which are in harmony with the nature.

Therefore, as a result of the increasing number of tourists who actively participate in actions related with the natural environment, all the protected areas have become very attractive to tourists. These areas were defined as protected ones, because of the conservation of their flora and fauna. This is also the main reason that attract tourists who both desire to admire the wealth of these areas and develop inside them, mild forms of tourism associated with the nature, leading them to inner pleasure.

Within the framework of the tourism exploitation of the environmentally protected areas, raises concerns about the environmental degradation of these areas, originated by their financial exploitation. However, the connection of tourists, who aim at alternative forms of tourism, with the areas which meet their expectations, creates a framework for cooperation between human factor and area, reduces the negative impact on the protected area, augments the financial benefits and makes it possible for visitors to be satisfied.

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