Visitor expectations regarding sustainable tourism at the destination level

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Abstract

The QualityCoast Team at the Coastal & Marine Union - EUCC is monitoring tourism sustainability performance and policies in 1000 destinations worldwide. Holidaymakers’ perceptions and expectations in connection to tourism destinations are considered of fundamental importance for the way sustainability should be measured. Therefore, EUCC has been investigating this through a visitor survey among ca. 800 visitors of the holiday expo in Utrecht (Vakantiebeurs) in 2012 and 2013.

It appeared that holidaymakers’ main concern was that human rights of local people and children should be respected in the holiday destination, with environmental issues closely following as the second key concern. Visitors expect sustainability issues to be cared for throughout the holiday destination, and not just in their hotel or on beaches. Support is lower for wind turbines, that influence the landscape or the free horizon at sea, than for any other aspect that is usually connected with sustainability.

Introduction

According to the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC, 2013), there is a growing global trend towards sustainability in tourism. More and more tourists realize the importance of sustainability in destinations. Several definitions exist of sustainable tourism. UNEP and UNWTO (2005) define it as “a form of tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”. Public perceptions on the subject differ as well (Hawkins, 2004; Kruja & Hasaj, 2010; Jurdana & Frleta, 2011; Lertwannawit & Anuwichanont, 2011; Chand & Vivek, 2012; Cengiz, 2012). Deng & Bender (2007) suggest that visitors’ perceptions are basically homogeneous and that they are more concerned about environmental and socio-cultural sustainability than about economic sustainability.

The Coastal & Marine Union - EUCC is managing a programme promoting sustainability in tourism destinations (QualityCoast, 2013). The QualityCoast destination certification has been selected among the most credible and transparent worldwide (Venditti, 2013). As part of this, EUCC is monitoring sustainability performance and policies in approx. 1000 destinations. Whilst GSTC is developing global sustainable tourism criteria for destinations based upon expert opinions, EUCC is also interested in holidaymakers’ perceptions and expectations of sustainable tourism destinations, in order to develop appropriate indicators for sustainability. Therefore visitor surveys have been held at the QualityCoast stand at the Dutch holiday Expo (Vakantiebeurs) in January 2012 and January 2013, with the help of research students. Visitors were given a survey form to indicate their preferences and opinions. In this article the main outcomes of these two visitor surveys are presented and discussed.
Methodology

Holiday fair visitors have been asked to indicate their opinion about sustainability issues in connection to their holiday destination. In 2012 visitors were asked to express their opinion on 12 suggested aspects in relation to a sustainable tourism destination. They could add new items to the suggested aspects, and they were asked to give a value ranging from 1 to 10 to each of the aspects. 423 Survey forms could be processed for this research. See Table 1 for the list of suggested aspects.

The limitation of the 2012 survey was that respondents could give the same value to several or even all 12 suggested aspects. This might have been the reason for the small differences between some of the suggested aspects. For this reason a different survey was designed for 2013. This time holiday makers were asked to rank similar indicators from most to least important. So now they had to decide what aspect was more important to them than others (relative ranking; this time no reference was made to a “sustainable” destination). In order to facilitate respondents to rank multiple aspects, aspects were separated into two small lists: the first list included five issues associated with tourism destinations (see Table 2 for the list of suggested issues); the second list included four issues that are more closely connected to the existing eco-labels (see Table 3 for these issues). The 2013 survey resulted into 156 survey forms that were completed according to the instruction provided.

Results

The results of the 2012 survey are summarised in table 1. The results of the 2013 survey are presented in table 2 and table 3.

In both years the issue of human rights of local people was selected as the most important one. This was the case for all age groups.
Table 3. Average relative value given to each of 4 suggested aspects in a tourism destination (yr=2013, n=156. Indication of relative importance has first been expressed in points (highest importance: 4 points, lowest importance: 1 point) and then displayed in a linear scale from 2.5 to 10.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects</th>
<th>Average value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Freedom and rights of local people are respected and children are not exploited for tourism</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. My whole destination is taking much care for sustainable tourism</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. My hotel has an eco-label</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. On the beach there are ample facilities and measures for bathing</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With regard to environmental issues in the 2012 survey, holidaymakers are highly concerned about a clean and safe sea for swimmers (8.9) and about marine litter (8.8). Holidaymakers are also concerned about the protection of nature and wildlife (8.7) and of cultural heritage (8.4). In both years visitors indicated that they are also particularly interested in the preservation of the own character of the destination (Tables 1 and 2).

When looking at the results of both years, the appreciation of visible wind turbines in the sea and in the mountains is particularly low. The low score for wind parks in the 2012 survey has been looked at more in detail. Fig. 1a-b shows that the mode for wind turbines in the destination and in the sea is only 7 whilst for the most favoured aspects like human rights and cleanliness of beaches it is 10. Fig. 1. also shows that only 1.2% of respondents give a rates less than 6 to the importance of human rights, whilst 28.4% of respondents give a rate below 6 to visible wind turbines in the sea; 10.4% give a very negative rate of 1, 2, or 3. This indicates strong negative feelings of a substantial part of the holidaymakers against wind parks interfering with the landscape, especially in the seascape.

The 2013 survey paid particular attention to issues connected with eco-label programmes. Table 3 shows that holidaymakers did not give high values to issues related to the Blue Flag (ample facilities and measures for bathing) or related to accommodation eco-labels, but clearly indicated a strong preference for taking the entire destination as the scope for socially responsible and sustainable tourism, as is done in QualityCoast. In addition, QualityCoast has several indicators considering performance re: Blue Flags & beaches. Another important QualityCoast indicator is the percentage of accommodations that have been certified in a reliable sustainability programme (e.g. Travelife).
Conclusions

Respect for human rights, care for a clean sea and beach, and the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage and the local identity, appear to be extremely important for Dutch holiday makers. But first and foremost, Dutch holidaymakers expect destinations to care for responsible and sustainable tourism throughout the destination, and not just in one aspect of the destination (like the hotel or the beach).

Support for wind turbines that influence the landscape or the free horizon at sea is lower than any other aspect that is usually connected with sustainability. Survey results indicate negative feelings against marine wind parks visible from the shore among almost 30% of holidaymakers.

Discussion

Implications for tourism destination management

Assuming that this research is representative for larger groups of Northern and Western European holidaymakers, destinations targeting these holidaymakers should change their policies and destination management in order to better care for socially responsible and sustainable tourism throughout their destination. So far, environmental and sustainability policies in destinations are largely aimed at a safe and clean beach, whilst hotel managers limit their scope to accommodation eco-labels. If a large group of European holidaymakers are to be satisfied, a more holistic destination management is urgently required. This research is a clear encouragement for any ambitious tourism destination to participate in the QualityCoast or QualityDestination programme.

Implications for the planning of wind parks

The results regarding holidaymakers’ perception of wind parks impact on landscapes and seascape is in line with the findings of The Tourism Company (2012) in several other countries. Where a series of studies have sought to draw conclusions on the overall impact of wind energy on tourism as a whole, they tend broadly to suggest that this overall impact is not large but that there are issues of visual impact which affect some visitors and therefore care should be taken in future over the siting of wind turbines, particularly in sensitive and attractive landscapes (The Tourism Company, 2012). The Glasgow Caledonian University et al. (2008) suggested that leaving many areas with no turbines in view, would be preferable to a scattering of smaller wind farms across the landscape. In the literature, the authors have not found proof for substantial economic damage of wind park creation to tourism destinations.

Implications for the QualityCoast programme

The results of the surveys supports the QualityCoast approach to adopt a very broad indicator set covering nature, environment, local identity and cultural heritage, business involvement and community participation. The results also support the decision to add a human rights criterium in 2011. Finally, the results provide justification for the current view of the QualityCoast Jury, that the visibility of wind parks from the shore are evaluated as negative for the open seascape.

Destination preferences versus selection behaviour

It is interesting to discuss the results of this survey to the visitor survey that has been done by the Dutch island of Ameland (which has Blue Flag and QualityCoast) into the impact of sustainability and eco-labels on destination selection. Only 5.8% of the tourists who are aware of eco-labels on Ameland, indicated that the presence of the eco-labels influenced their decision to visit Ameland (Draaisma, 2011). Of the 249 tourists who want to be informed about the sustainability of the destination,
45.5% would prefer to see visible activities (such as use of solar energy and degradable plastic bags) and 18.8% through an eco-label, while 35.7% rely on the destinations’ public image (Draaisma, 2011). A complication in measuring the role of “sustainability” in tourism is that most researchers and visitors assume that “sustainability” is equal to carbon emission, which plays a very small role in destination selection indeed. In contrast, QualityCoast adopts a much wider approach, incorporating major triggers for holiday selection such as nature, hiking & biking, clean beaches etc.

Research suggests that sustainable or green tourism is part of visitors’ expectations when visiting a destination and not a main motivator for visiting a destination (e.g. Trembath, 2007). This leads to the conclusion that the broader field of sustainability (or eco-labels covering this) should not be ignored by destinations. Improved destination management, e.g. as a result of QualityCoast recommendations, and the visibility of a QualityCoast flag throughout the destination, is likely to increase the satisfaction and feel good factor of tourists, which may have a positive effect on the visitor return percentage and encourage positive visitor reviews. This will then influence other people's holiday destination selection. With the increasing importance of social media we are only now beginning to understand that good or bad reviews from complete strangers can make or break the perception of a destination among increasing numbers of people.

References


