

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM – BETWEEN POSSIBLE AND IMPOSSIBLE

Otilia-Elena Vicol (married Gania)<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract.** The concept of sustainable development provides an integrating vision and urges to the harmonization of specific activities from all the economic sectors. This concept creates a proper framework for different kind of actions though its sphere of influence, which makes it difficult to apply. Regarding the implementation of sustainable tourism we observed that there are many problems especially in rural areas where tourism is often seen as a quick and safe solution for economical reviving. Unfortunately, the fragility and the great complexity of rural areas make difficult the rapid implementation of the principles of sustainability and any error can lead to important negative effects.

**Keywords:** *sustainable development, sustainable tourism, local community, ethics*

### 1. Introduction

Although there are many studies about sustainable development and sustainable tourism especially after the report called "Our Common Future" drawn up by the World Commission of Environment and Development in 1987, which defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, many researchers believe that the theoretical concepts are not yet sufficiently analysed, discussed and understood. Although the definition formulated in the Brundtland Report is the most frequently used, it is considered incomplete and the majority of the scientific world that has focused especially on the theoretical framework agreed with the fact that any attempt to define sustainable tourism should emphasize the importance of three components: the natural environment, the social and the economic framework.

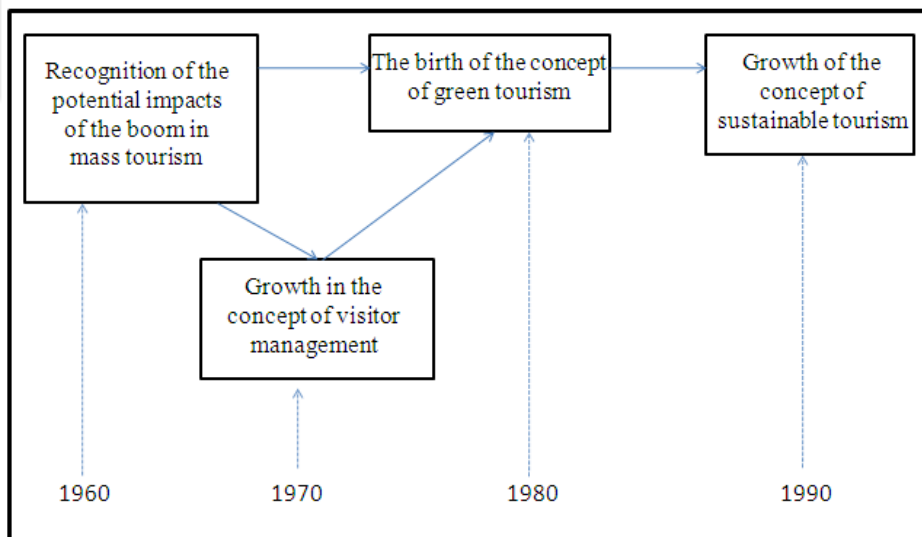
Swarbrooke, J., (1999) argues that searching a strict and a universally accepted definition of the sustainable development is not a very good purpose as general definitions may induce the idea that the concept is too simple. However, it's been over a decade since the term of sustainable development made room in every day's vocabulary of politicians, investors as well as of masses. Universal acceptance of this term is both satisfactory and alarming especially for those really interested in the long-term viability of the social and physical environment in which society lives and works. One of the most frustrating and unexpected effects of the adoption of this concept is that putting it into practice has been done with much less success. The overwhelming desire for the concept of sustainability lies in its

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<sup>1</sup> “Al.I.Cuza” University of Iasi, Faculty of Geography and Geology, Department of Geography, Bd.Carol I 20A, 700505, Iasi, Romania, otilia\_vicol\_87@yahoo.com

generality and also because no one says exactly which are the real costs of implementation (Butler, R., 1998).

Milne, S., (1998) points out that most of existing literature on tourism and development (sustainable or not), is mostly descriptive and was weakened by a continual fascination for the theoretical models predicting linear paths of destinations or, there were focused on the radical paradigmatic shift from the "old" to a "new tourism". Regarding the acceptance of the sustainability concept in tourism this was heavily influenced by the benefits it brings to the economy, public relations and marketing processes. Swarbrooke, J., (1999) proposes a chronological evolution of the concept of sustainable tourism which summarizes its main approaches from 1960 to 1990:



*Figure 1: Chronological development of sustainable tourism between 1960-1990, after Swarbrooke, J., (1999)*

If defining sustainable tourism is not an easy task perhaps is preferable to settle several principles that are more easily understood and accepted as those of Bramwell et al (1996) cited in Swarbrooke, J., (1999):

- the approach must see policy, planning and management as the key answers to the problems of tourism and human resources due to abuse in tourism;
- the approach should not be against growth in tourism but must take into account that there are some limitations in terms of growth and tourism should be managed in accordance to them;
- the approach must be planned and thought on long term rather than short term;
- the concerns of sustainable tourism management should take into consideration not only the aspects of the natural environment but also aspects concerning the economy, culture, politics, management and the social component;
- sustainable approach must emphasize the importance of meeting the needs and aspirations of the people and at the same time they must be informed about sustainable development issues;

- while sustainable development should be a goal in itself for all policies and actions, to put ideas into practice actually means recognizing that, in fact, there are often limits to what will be achieved in the short;

- sustainable development requires an understanding of how economic markets work, an understanding of management's procedures in the private sector and an understanding of public and voluntary organizations, an understanding of values and public attitudes if necessary, in order to transform good intentions into practical actions;

- sustainable development should be aware that there are often conflicts of interest on the use of resources which will lead to many compromises in business practices.

For a proper understanding of the concept of sustainability compared to non-sustainability Swarbrooke, J., (1999) proposed a synthesis of the main features of these:

SUSTAINABILITY	NON-SUSTAINABILITY
<b>GENERAL CONCEPTS</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Slow Development</li> <li>- Controlled Development</li> <li>- Appropriate scale</li> <li>- Long term</li> <li>- Qualitative</li> <li>- Local control</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fast development</li> <li>- Uncontrolled development</li> <li>- Inappropriate scale</li> <li>- Short term</li> <li>- Quantitative</li> <li>- Remote control</li> </ul>
<b>DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Planning before development</li> <li>- Concept-led schemes</li> <li>- Attention to all five types of landscapes</li> <li>- Dispersed pressure and benefits</li> <li>- Local investors</li> <li>- Employment of local community</li> <li>- Vernacular architecture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Development without planning</li> <li>- Project-led schemes</li> <li>- Focus on "honey-pots"</li> <li>- Increase capacity</li> <li>- Foreign investors</li> <li>- Imported labour force</li> <li>- Non-vernacular architecture</li> </ul>
<b>TOURIST BEHAVIOR</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High value</li> <li>- A dose of mental training</li> <li>- Learning the local language</li> <li>- Tactful, sensitive and responsive</li> <li>- Silent</li> <li>- Repeated visits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low value</li> <li>- None or little mental training</li> <li>- Not learning the local language</li> <li>- Annoying, unresponsive and insensible</li> <li>- Noisy</li> <li>- Unlikely to return</li> </ul>

*Figure 2: Sustainability versus non-sustainability after Swarbrooke, J., (1999)*

## **2. The concept of sustainability in tourism**

Tourism can have a major contribution to the development and prosperity of rural areas but often is poorly understood and applied. More than that, the interests of both public and private sectors are presenting, erroneously, tourism as an easy way to economic development and restructuring. Unrealistic expectations from the tourism potential of rural areas are often combined with the planners and/or the authorities' ignorance or neglect. All these lead to different effects on the environment and the community that may cancel or reduce the benefits that tourism could bring.

But tourism can help in diversifying the economy, creating new business opportunities, new jobs and new sources of revenue especially in rural areas.

Unfortunately, there was a tendency for rural tourism to develop in an ad-hoc manner, without any coherent strategy based on sustainability or marketing perspective. That led to tourism products which did not take into account the environmental impact, competition and competitiveness. Therefore, providers are facing a number of problems (Jenkins, T., Parrot, N. 1997):

- Lack of knowledge concerning the demand factors;
- Lack of knowledge necessary for product presentation;
- Limited knowledge about the market;
- Poor marketing.

Tourism and recreation are not suitable development means for all rural areas. Rural tourism is best to be developed as an extracurricular activity in addition to a diverse local economy. If it is developed in a weak economy it may create inequalities of income and jobs. Goodwin, H. (2003) argues that the success appears when there is a good participation and cooperation of local communities and also where there are strong long-term partnerships that can diversify the existing offer and avoid possible conflicts through permanent dialogues. For sustainable tourism to occur, it must be harmonized with all other activities taking place in the region (Harris, R. et al, 2001). Sustainable tourism is not only about protecting the environment, but also aims to create long-term sustainable economy and social justice (Swarbrooke, J., 1999).

Nobody can ignore the feeling that the concept of sustainable development was and is seen as a blessing by the media, then strengthened by the public and thus, all sustainable products are enthusiastically accepted. Many forms of tourism have gained in popularity only by being labelled as sustainable (Butler, R., 1998). It is easy to see why this concept has quickly gained in popularity as it confers the feeling of empathy and respect for the natural environment and makes the tourist activity a beneficial one in all respects.

After Bramwell and Lane (1993), sustainable tourism is based on three principles:

- Quality - sustainable tourism provides qualitative tourist experiences while improving the life quality of host community and also protecting the quality of the environment;
- Continuity - sustainable tourism assure the continuity of the natural resources and of the community culture continuity and tourism services;
- Balance - sustainable tourism balances the host - tourists – environment relationship.

### **3. Towards achieving sustainable tourism**

Much of the debate on sustainable tourism sought to differentiate more sustainable activities than others (ecotourism, alternative tourism) in opposition to mass, industrial versions that are considered less sustainable (Milne, S., 1998). This approach is quite immature as there is no particular form of tourism "more sustainable" than others, unless there are fully understood the ways by which it harmonize with all the other forms of industry. It must be also pointed out that sustainable tourism is not really a result but a process of tourism restructuring on more responsible principles. However, things cannot be seen as simplistic as

that, concluding that the mass tourism decline and its replacement with new forms of tourism will inevitably lead to sustainability or to tourist activities less harmful with the natural environment. In order to reduce the negative impacts of tourism there is often call for an efficient communication with tourists. Thus, tourists will empathize with the place, respecting and protecting it. In many tourist localities, communication and interpretation are either a component of the tourist experience or the experience itself (Moscardo, G., 1999). Krippendorf, K. (1987) points out that tourists are not properly and/or on time informed about the negative effects that tourism can have on a tourist destination. He also points out that no one should put the blame only at the “tourist’s door” but they must become aware of the situation thus, a better communication, will stimulate their attention and care. In accordance with this, Moscardo, G., (1999) proposes even a model (fig. no. 1) - *Mindfulness Model for Communicating with Visitors* - which suggests that two important factors, *communication* and *visitor interest*, combined in different ways, can show the behaviour of tourists during holidays and after.

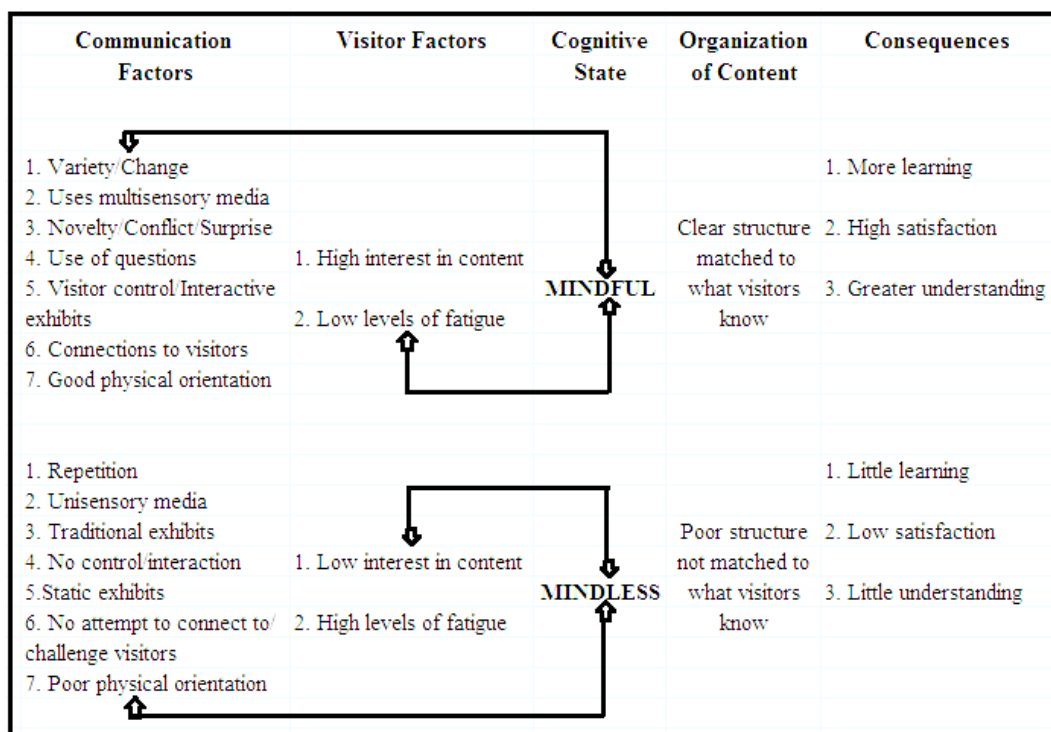


Figure 4: *Mindfulness Model for Communicating with Visitors*, after Moscardo, G., (1999)

Local community involvement and local control is a subject amply analysed in sustainable development strategies and as a result, the community occupies a special place. However, there are many problems that might appear, as Swarbrooke, J., (1999) identified:

- the community rarely speaks with one voice, there are many groups of interest and individual points of view that makes it difficult to reach a consensus;
- if a destination is trying to have control over its activities and these are not in line with what the tour operators want, they simply will redirect their attention to other less demanding destinations;

- political decisions on a particular area may or may not be consonant with the community vision (that's the case where the community has a voice).

The most worrying thing is that the community itself becomes commodified and the territorial limits of the tourist area can often become blurred. It is an essential dichotomy between residents who see the place as their home and tourists who see the place as a product (Urry, J., 1995, *Consuming places*, Routledge, London, cited in Gill, A., 1998). This territorial invasion can lead to hard feelings against tourists since residents seek and proclaim their own spaces. Most tourists are from the city so who benefits and who loses from tourism development in rural areas? Many countries and regions are now sold to tourists by strengthening the so-called traditional image based on the "authentic rurality" as it is perceived by policy makers in tourism in order to meet the expectations of visitors but it can strongly contrast with the reality of the destination. It is possible that residents do not coincide or even despise the image are supposed to represent or are associated with. Thus, rural communities were encouraged to identify themselves, especially for tourists, with what they were "appointed" and "intended" to be, namely tourist attractions (Hall, D. et al, 2003). Although it seems somehow exaggerated, this practice is very common especially in the United States, the United Kingdom and Western European countries, considered role models in tourism.

Small scale tourism is considered better than large-scale one and cultural tourism is considered more sustainable than hedonistic tourism. However, it seems that there is little or no evidence to show that this is indeed true. Moreover, there can be brought a lot of counterarguments if we take into consideration the most famous resorts of the world designed for masses (thus, for large-scale tourism) which are well managed and have adequate infrastructure designed to support mass tourism as they can be easily considered sustainable because:

- Provides employment for a large number of people;
- Meet the needs of a large number of tourists who, in that manner, will not look for their holidays other destinations as fragile environments or protected areas;
- Does not cause negative socio-cultural impacts since few local people work in this kind of resorts.

There are very few research and evidence on the interest that tourists have for sustainable tourism, outside the care they have towards the quality of the natural environment of their holiday destination. It is even possible that tourists that are using in their everyday the principles of sustainability, when on vacation, they consider that is their only time when they can behave hedonistic and not have to be responsible (Swarbrooke, J., 1999).

Many discussions about sustainable tourism seem to be based on ecotourism, a type of tourism rather controversial even if it is presented as being less harmful and more sustainable than mass tourism. But if we consider that ecotourism is in general placed in areas with fragile and vulnerable ecosystems and that eco-tourists are mostly motivated by the desire of seeing the environment as pure and unaltered as possible and not by protecting it, it will be easy to conclude that ecotourism is as harmful as other tourist activities.

The role of the public sector in developing sustainable tourism is often treated in specialized researches although it is difficult to see how the state can help planning tourism in an area where it has no control on many key-elements of the tourism product such as accommodation units, the decisions of the tour operators, bars or private buses. Also, in order to develop a successful sustainable tourism one cannot exclude the role of the media. This could help by becoming a little more ethical giving, for example, objective advices in order to

raise awareness on social issues and government policies to a certain destination. Therefore, the concept of partnerships has greatly increased in popularity in recent years, often cited as crucial for sustainable development. Classic marketing techniques could also be used to create more sustainable forms of tourism through the help of a new form of marketing *ethic marketing*. Ethic marketing is a marketing approach which recognizes social responsibilities of an organization and seeks to minimize the negative impacts and to enhance the positive ones. It is also about having a long term vision considering the influence of today marketing on tomorrow's society and environment. In relation to sustainable tourism, ethic marketing may include offering services specifically designed to meet the needs of consumers with special needs, being honest and providing ample information in the tourist brochures in order to provide true and realistic expectations. Thus, the promotion should not create expectations that the product cannot rise but rather it should arouse to tourists the concern for sustainability. It must be recognized that sustainable tourism is perhaps an impossible dream and the best thing to do is to develop more sustainable forms of tourism. This is because decision power lies in the hands of a very large number of actors but not all of them assume the responsibility of their actions. (Swarbrooke, J., 1999).

## **Conclusions**

Sustainable development and sustainable tourism are two concepts that have gained greatly in popularity in recent years becoming a global priority. Although sustainability concept seems easy to understand at first sight, it raises a series of questions and problems. The generality of the concept gives birth to a number of interpretations and often it is treated in the same manner as ecotourism, cultural tourism or rural tourism even if its sphere of influence is far greater. Although the idea of sustainable development is to rethink everything on more responsible principles, its implementation has proved to be very difficult. Therefore, was needed to find ways to ease its implementation. Among the solutions found are: a more effective communication with tourists (whether direct, like tourist-guide interaction, either indirect through codes of conduct, informative panels), educating tourists, local community involvement, public sector involvement, creating partnerships, ethic marketing, promotion of smaller scale types of tourism but all these have several strong drawbacks. But one thing is known for sure, that great efforts are being made in order to gain sustainability in every domain even if the means used are not that efficient as desired. But the problem is not that the means used are inefficient but until each of us will assume the responsibility of their actions nothing will ever change. In conclusion, sustainability is most of all about responsibility but in everyday life it has to face a series of personal (egoist) interests and a series of different and sometimes opposite points of view.

## **Aknowledgements**

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