

MOUNTAIN ENVIRONMENTS AND TOURISM - A EUROPEAN MODEL OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: *Tourism can be an important way of preserving the mountain communities, bringing revenue and jobs to village communities increasingly unable to survive on agriculture alone and where migration threatens their existence. The European model, through stronger stakeholder involvement, may perform better than the corporate model in managing the destination on a responsible basis, since the community directly depends on it. Therefore, by taking into account the ecological and social dimensions of sustainability, the community will protect the surrounding natural environment. However, small communities and local rivalry may make joint decision-making difficult and may lead to a lack of cohesion in consistently promoting a destination. The development of a sustainable tourism means protecting the environmental tourism resources with the help of various actions taken by the locals.*

Key words: mountain environment, sustainable development, mountain tourism

The origins of Responsible Tourism go back to 1972 when, at the UN Conference on the Human Environment, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) was created. In 1987, the WCED produced the Brundtland Report which raised the notion of sustainable development and the need for all countries to ensure they preserve resources and natural environments for future generations. The concept was gaining ground elsewhere with the similar ideas being proposed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in their World Conservation Strategy and in ‘Our Common Future’ produced by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). In 1992, at the Rio Earth Summit, 182 governments signed a declaration agreeing to five action areas which would bring sustainability principles to many areas of development. This led to the creation of Agenda 21 which comprises a set of guidelines for implementing sustainability principles at a national and local level. Tourism was not cited specifically in Rio, and only in 1996 was Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industry produced. In 1999, the World Tourism Organisation approved a “Global Code of Ethics for Tourism”, addressing both the role of tourism as a development option, and also the principles of ethics in tourism, or “tourism’s contribution to mutual understanding and respect between peoples”. This engendered the notion of tourism’s responsibility to its host destinations and communities and led to the Cape Town Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations in 2002.

A Declaration was signed by 280 delegates from 20 countries, identifying the concept of Responsible Tourism as having the following characteristics: minimising negative economic, environmental, and social impacts; generating greater economic benefits for local people and enhancing the wellbeing of host communities, improving working conditions and access to the industry: involving local people in decisions that affect their lives and life chances; making positive contributions to the maintenance of the world’s diversity by conserving the natural and cultural heritage; providing more enjoyable experiences for tourists through more meaningful connections with local people and a greater understanding of local cultural, social and environmental issues; providing access for physically challenged people and being culturally sensitive, engendering respect between tourists and locals and enhancing local pride and confidence.

Since the Cape Town conference, World Travel Market, the travel industry’s key annual trade event, has a Responsible Tourism day, and this signifies that the travel industry no longer views Responsible Tourism as a niche product, but as a mainstream principle. Its growth is happening alongside a growing consumer awareness of ethical issues, such as fair-trade food products and interest in the sourcing of products. Most recently, climate change has risen on the agenda of the media and governments, focussing especially on global CO₂ emissions. Still, Responsible Tourism is not just about the environment and there is a danger of forgetting the social and economic principles. Additionally, it should be noted that Responsible Tourism does not just apply to developing countries; it is equally applicable to developed countries. Krippendorff,

who was one of the pioneers in thinking about the impacts of tourism, based his ideas on mass tourism in Switzerland. It is arguable that the first mass tourism in natural environments was to the Alpine regions of Europe back in the 1800s, for mountaineering and health resorts.

As mentioned, Agenda 21 was agreed upon and a chapter was devoted to 'Managing Fragile Ecosystems: Sustainable Mountain Development'. It identified that "mountains are an important source of water, energy and biological diversity and a source of key resources such as minerals, forest products and agricultural products of recreation". This highlights the competing demands on mountain environments of which tourism is just one part. About 10 % of the world's population depends on mountain resources, especially on water. Mountains are also a storehouse of biological diversity and endangered species. The mountain ecosystem is one of the most complex and sensitive to climactic change and is essential to the survival of the global ecosystem, but it is rapidly changing and experiencing degradation. However, Agenda 21 does not just focus on the environmental aspects; it notes the many peoples who live in mountain environments and the widespread poverty that is often experienced. Life is hard for many mountain communities, but loss of those communities would lead to loss of indigenous knowledge. The report highlights that "proper management of mountain resources and socioeconomic development of the people deserves immediate action" and calls for research to be conducted into mountain ecosystems and programmes for their sustainable development.

Tourism can be an important way to preserve the mountain communities, bringing revenue and jobs to communities increasingly unable to survive on agriculture alone and where migration threatens their existence. However, tourism can cause problems and overdevelopment, as Michel Revaz of CIPRA (the International Commission for the Protection of the Alps) commented: "The Alps are totally overdeveloped; the most exploited mountain range in the world". The Alpine Convention became effective in 1995 and had the dual aims of protecting and sustaining the development of the Alps. While the Alps constitute the living and economic environment for the indigenous population, they are also vitally important for extra Alpine regions - being the site of important transport routes. They are also an essential habitat and last refuge for many endangered species of plants and animals. They identify the ever-growing pressures caused by man threatening the Alpine region and the need for economic interests to be reconciled with ecological requirements.

Throughout history, travelling for sport is evident, whether it involved journeying to the next village to play a game of football or in recent times (as mountains became an attraction instead of an object of fear) to go skiing (Matley, 1981). The concept of sport-related tourism has become more prominent over the last few years; however, there have been difficulties defining the sector and academia have frequently seen sport and tourism as separate spheres of activity. Gibson (1998) identifies three domains of sport tourism; 'active sport tourism' referring to people who travel to take part in a sport, 'event sport tourism' which refers to people who travel to watch a sporting event and 'nostalgia sport tourism' which includes visits to sports museums or stadiums. According to these definitions, skiing would be seen as active sport tourism; however, that would account for only part of the ski market, for example British skiers going on holiday to Austria. Yet a large part of the ski market is formed of locals skiing in their local ski resorts. Nogawa et al. (1996) suggest there is a difference between sports tourists who stay at least 24 hours in a destination and sports excursionists who are day trippers. De Knop (1987) described a sports tourist as an individual who participates in sports while on holiday and he identified three types of active sport vacations: the pure sport holiday, such as a dive trip; taking advantage of sports facilities at a holiday destination, where sport is not the primary purpose of the trip; the private sporting holiday, where the tourists take part in non-organised sports activities.

It seems the British have a strong tendency towards active holidays; Glyptis and Jackson (1993) report that 56% of the holidays taken in the UK by British tourists include participating in at least one sport, the same being true for 26% of British holidaymakers travelling abroad. It is likely that these percentages will have increased since then with the growing trend for active holidays over the last five years. Schreiber (1976) was one of the first to develop a profile of the active sports tourist and found that "the sport traveller is more affluent, better educated and more active than other travellers". This has been supported in further studies of the ski market, and it is indeed often the perception that you need to be affluent both to go skiing and to purchase all the equipment, although this is not necessarily the case. Kaae and Lee (1996) conducted a study to compare alpine skiers with cross country skiers and found that both groups were relatively affluent and well educated in comparison with other tourists. Redmond (1991) suggests that the development of sport tourism has been nurtured by the ascent of a highly specialised global leisure industry

flooding the marketplace with high tech sports equipment and he argues that “modern technology has served to create an international sporting playground for the reasonably affluent athletic tourist”. As Hudson (2000) notes in his study of the international ski industry, there is a vast array of companies supplying the industry with the skis, boots, clothing, safety equipment and accessories who operate at the cutting edge of technology and who perpetuate their own industry by bringing out new and better technology. It was noted during the recession of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when ski holiday participation decreased, that the sports manufacturers also suffered badly. De Knop (1990) attributed the desire for active participation in sports on holidays to increased urbanization and a wider variety of active leisure pursuits open to Europeans. In 1995, De Knop developed this theory by drawing on figurational sociology, which attributes the popularity of sport in modern society to the civilizing process. As society becomes more civilised and behaviour becomes more restrained, there are fewer ways to express emotion and engage in experiences which generate excitement; sport provides the arena for “Controlled Excitement”. Since most of the population lives in urban areas, mountains and other wild places represent escape locations that offer excitement, stimulation and potential adventure. This dislocation of the self from the ordinary to the extraordinary appears to provide a pleasurable experience that is central to sports and adventure tourism; however, the irony is that most tourists buy a holiday packaged for maximum efficiency. With the growing commodification of modern life, ‘Leisure time’ which is proclaimed and expected to be an escape from routine work, often becomes another routinised, packaged commodity, thereby failing to be anything like a carefree, relaxed alternative to work. The function of tourism is to sell a commodity to a group of consumers, whether it is a sun and sand holiday or an adventure holiday. Even climbing Everest has, to some extent, become another commodity with a price where you pay an ascent fee. In a ski resort, the skiing is the commodity and the lift pass is the package with the price attached.

Mountains are particularly attractive destinations for adventure tourism as they offer a range of activity options in a setting steeped in actual and symbolic representations of adventure. Mountaineering and white water rafting are seen as hard adventures with the associated level of risk, skiing is seen as a soft adventure activity with many of the elements of risk reduced as much as possible. However, sports and adventure tourists (whether hard or soft) rarely leave the urban frame and their habits travel with them, thus expecting the same levels of comfort as at home and expecting to be insulated from the less desirable elements. The ski corporations have a dominant influence on how the destination is operated as a strategic business unit, as well as strong political power in the community related development of the destination. They question whether it is possible to bring about an organisational structure which has a concern for the welfare and quality of life of the local community where the system is based.

The Community model found in much of Europe is characterised by specialised independent service providers operating in a decentralised way, where no single company/organisation has any dominant administrative power or dominant ownership. The existing village community is at the core of the resort and locally owned businesses are found. Strategic leadership is anchored in a stakeholder-orientated management and is concerned with issues of sustainability. Destination planning, product development, destination marketing and management lie with the political and administrative institutions. Some parts of Europe, most notably France, have developed purpose built ski areas close to existing villages to separate the tourism from the core of the village, generally at a higher altitude, but these tend to be locally owned and developed.

The most recent analysis of the British ski market has been published by Crystal Holidays (a subsidiary of TUI Travel). It was published in July 2006 and incorporates statistics from the winter season 2005/2006. It aims to bring together various different sources of information including the tour operators’ own statistics, AC Nielsen’s TravelTrack, Snowsport GB data, CAA published statistics, tourist office figures and travel agency feedback. The British ski market rose by 6.9% in the winter season 2005/2006, reaching 1.156.000 people, thus continuing the steady upward trend that has been witnessed since 2000. Out of this number, tour operators take 58% of the market, 31% are independent travellers and the remainder is made up of the schools market. All three markets experienced growth, although the independent sector is difficult to measure with varying statistics reported from the low cost airlines (Crystal Holidays, 2006). Recent good snow has helped this rise, together with the growing popularity of snowboarding which is continuing to open up the market to a new segment.

France continues to be the most popular destination for British skiers with 36% of the market, followed by Austria (20%), Italy (14%), Andorra (12%), Switzerland (5%) and Bulgaria (3%). The proportions for Austria, France, Switzerland and Bulgaria tend to remain broadly similar year on year; the changes are

occurring with a decline for Italy and Andorra which is taken up by increases for the USA, Canada and other 'new' destinations (Crystal Holidays, 2006). The continuing appeal of France to the British market reflects a number of features; it is still seen as the country for self drive and self catering and, therefore, a lower cost holiday can be enjoyed (despite the fact that driving times can be similar for Switzerland and Austria). France has a large chalet and club hotel product which is a popular choice for the British market and the quality of which has seen a marked rise in recent times. This is effectively the "all inclusive" ski holiday with no hassle and a fixed price which is also a growing trend. Also the growing popularity of Eurostar and the ski train is currently only benefiting France.

Flying, as the method of travel, has increased by 7% in the last year; however, the no-frills carriers saw an increase of 15% over last season. The largest source of flights is the scheduled airlines (including tour operator allocations on scheduled airlines) (45%), followed by no-frills airlines (37%) and tour operator charter (17%). The number of no-frills carriers continues to rise and the route network continues to expand with smaller airports being added which often significantly reduces transfer times. However, it is notable that some no-frills carriers are beginning to have less appeal to the ski market due to tight restrictions and high costs for luggage and sports equipment.

The touroperator market is dominated by some large operators and there are also few mid size operators. The remainder of the market is made up of small specialised tour operations that specialise on either a particular market segment or a particular resort. They are often very successful with a very loyal clientele. Tour operators were threatened by the no-frills market in previous years; however, they are now succeeding in differentiating themselves and re-asserting their value. The rise in the no-frills airlines stimulated demand for the ski weekend and several shorter ski trips in a year, and for smaller airports with quicker turnaround times and short transfers. The tour operators have responded with obtaining access to the smaller airports, gaining hotel allocation for weekends, and are increasing the completeness of the package, to offer a hassle free, easy holiday as opposed to piecing the elements together. The transfer is the area of concern and expense for independent skiers; car hire is expensive when the car is actually only needed for the arrival and departure, and concerns about driving conditions, snow and the requirement for snow chains puts many off self drive. Resorts are responding to this by offering coach transfers themselves to help the no-frills /independent market but the tour operator eases this with the inclusive product and is increasingly offering many facilities for families such as day care, après ski clubs and baby sitting.

With 58% of the ski market (670,000 skiers), the British tour operators exert a lot of power over the British ski industry. They are important intermediaries and "can influence the choices of consumers, the practices of suppliers and the development patterns of destinations" (Tour Operators Initiative, 2003).

Means End Theory is the integration of the push and pull factors. It focuses on the cognitive linkages between the relatively concrete attributes (the 'means') and the more abstract consequences these attributes provide for consumers and the highly abstract personal values (the 'ends') these consequences help reinforce. It provides a way to understand the relationship between consumers and the products they purchase and consume; how the attribute of a destination can fulfil a need of an individual. In a skiing context, a product attribute would be the number of black runs in a resort. The consequences are the perceived benefits or costs associated with the attribute, thus, in relation to the number of black runs the consequence might be 'feeling challenged'. The personal values are the end states of existence the consumer seeks to achieve; in response to 'feeling challenged' this might be achievement or excitement. Traditional multi-attribute models of choice tend to concentrate on if and to what degree an attribute is important. The means end approach focuses on how and why something is important (Gutman, 1982).

It takes an "avoid, minimise, mitigate" approach to natural resource management that aims to promote "beyond compliance" in the following areas: stewardship of the natural surroundings; balancing human needs with ecosystem protection; concentrating activities to limit impacts on wild areas; sustaining ecological, climatic and hydrological systems; maintaining characteristics that make landscapes unique; reducing the greenhouse gas emissions; placing priority on safety; planning design and construction; operations: water resources for snowmaking, facilities, landscaping, summer activities, quality management and waste water management; energy consumption and clean energy: facilities, snowmaking, lifts, vehicle fleets; waste management: waste reduction, product re-use, recycling, hazardous wastes; fish and wildlife; forest and vegetative management; wetlands and riparian areas; air quality; visual quality; transportation; education and outreach.

The development of a sustainable tourism means protecting the environmental tourism resources with the help of various actions taken by the locals. For the planning, development and administration of a sustainable tourism at local and regional level (in this case: Sibiu area) it is necessary to have a partnership between the researchers, the tourism industry (represented by the owners of tourist enterprises), the specialists that ensure the environmental protection, the community, the interest groups, the local leaders and the authorities. (Guide, 1999 - L'intention des autorités local: Développement Durable de Tourisme, O.M.T.). This partnership can also lead to the development of a sustainable and efficient tourism, to the improvement and growth of the quality of life into the local community.

The experience obtained thanks to the program "Sibiu-European Cultural Capital 2007", has proven the necessity to develop the mountain tourism in the area. This can happen by improving and diversifying the tour-operators' offers, but only in collaboration with the local institutions and authorities, and with The District Tourism Association.

Several surveys made by a French institute have revealed that the visitors of some mountain spas in France, Italy, Switzerland and Austria prefer the mountains during winter. Regarding the distribution of preferences, it has been seen that: in summer, almost 65% of tourists prefer mountaineering, travelling or are being sedentary, and 35% are practicing different sports; in winter, 80% like to go skiing, 6% like to go skating, 4% practice some other winter sports and only 10% prefer mountaineering, travelling or are being sedentary. The segment that frequents the mountain resorts the most is the youngsters, but there are also people with high incomes that can afford to stay in luxurious winter resorts. These aspects are very important when adopting some strategies regarding the setting up of mountain resorts and they suggest the importance of "après-ski" activities, as well as that of recreation facilities. At the same time, with the changing demands, some tendencies have emerged in the evolution of an offer. A variety of aspects must be taken into consideration, as for example: providing the ski domain with up-to-date installations, modernizing the ski-lifts, organizing ski schools, creating reception structures that are modern and comfortable etc.

The environmental factors with tourist potential are the landscape, the relief (through altitude), the slope and the orientation of the slopes, the vegetation, the waters, the position of the mountains within the geographic area and of course, the climate conditions. The climate is a dynamic element with special tourist potential. In mountain tourism, natural conditions have a fundamental importance, ensuring the quality of services, integrating the location in the mountain area and offering favourable conditions for practicing winter sports, mostly ski.

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