An Introduction to Sustainable Tourism Concepts and Principles

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As we head toward the 21st century, tourism destination managers and planners around the world are faced with a number of pressing issues. Foremost in the minds of many, is the need for global sustainability and developing the means to effectively manage the growing pressures of human use and impact on natural and cultural environments. This Briefing Note provides the reader with an overview of some of the challenges of sustainable tourism and strategies for assisting those who are embarking on this challenging journey. This Briefing Note has based produced by the Canadian Universities Consortium Urban Environmental Management Project at AIT. The Briefing Note is based on a similar publication produced by the Centre for Environment Development Research and Outreach , Faculty of Environment Design at the University of Calgary.

The Need for a Sustainable Approach

"Sustainable tourism" and "sustainable development" are terms that generate varying responses from tourism managers, planners, and environmental advocates, ranging from skepticism to concern. Some argue that these are oxymorons, i.e. if development implies growth, then it is not sustainable. Meanwhile, we are faced with realities of increasing human use and occupation of limited planetary resources, including forested and wilderness areas. The 'democratization' of mass global travel in the 1950's, due to technological innovations and the improving economic conditions of some countries, is expected to continue. The World Tourism Organization estimates that international tourism arrivals by the year 2000 could range from 637 to 956 million, up from 443 million in 1990 and 528 million in 1994. As the world's largest industry, the close inter-dependence of tourism with the global ecosystem means that a key challenge for tourism related businesses and destination managers is the sustainability of the natural and cultural resources upon which tourism depends.

Tourism is a complex and fragmented socioeconomic activity, which cuts across many industry sectors and contains many product-market segments (e.g. sporting, cultural, adventure, and special interest activities). Transportation, accommodation, food and beverage, health, financial, and banking services are required to service the tourist. The use of natural and cultural attractions in a community-based destination, for example, involves interaction between visitors, the host community and the environment, as well as government involvement (infrastructure, public resource management, etc.) from a local to a global level. A tourism destination, therefore, has multiple stakeholders, who may hold divergent views on tourism development and growth within their area. Managing the diverse values and attitudes of the numerous stakeholders associated with tourism related resources is a major task of the tourism industry.

Research has revealed a multitude of negative social and cultural impacts, such as increasing congestion, noise, prostitution, and the loss of traditions and habits. The fragmentation of wildlife migration corridors and habitats, as well as the destruction of natural habitats to enable the construction of visitor access and facilities has resulted in severe environmental degradation and the loss of ecological integrity in destination areas worldwide. While tourism can be a means of diversifying a destination's economic base, its economic impacts have to handled carefully (e.g. managing leakage of tourism revenues from the destination to externally based developers and marketers). Some of the costs and benefits of tourism development are listed in the following table.

Potential Costs	Potential Benefits
· provision and maintenance of infrastructure and pubic facilities for tourist use · destination promotion · policing (traffic, crime, etc.) · managing growth and conflict related to the use and provision of public parks and resources · loss of community character and "sense of place" · loss of quality of life (e.g. due to noise, congestion, degradation of built and natural attractions used by residents and tourists) · erosion of cultural traditions and habits · environmental degradation · loss of biodiversity and ecological integrity · increase in use and exploitation of sensitive environmental habitats · loss of "wilderness" experience through increased use · destination and market risk (loss of destination popularity, changes in consumer preferences, political problems in visitor market or destination) · environmental conflict management	· tax revenues · foreign exchange · economic evelopment · financial assistance for economic development from private sector capital investment in tourism · employment · improved infrastructure · new facilities and services · business opportunities · social and cultural exchange (fosters awareness, education, cultural tolerance) · preservation/revival of local crafts and heritage · assistance (financial and other) for protecting and managing natural environmental resources and attractions · employment and local involvement in resource management and interpretation increases education, awareness, and involvement in protecting these resources · economic profit for local and regional businesses · increased competitive advantage and strategic opportunities

The challenge of tourism destination managers is to achieve the potentials of tourism activity while avoiding the costs that often accompany tourism development. Sustainable tourism approaches promise to achieve these objectives.

What is Sustainable Tourism ?

Sustainable tourism is not just ecotourism, or green tourism, or alternative tourism. Underlying the concept of sustainable tourism are some specific values and principles, related to the benchmark definition and discussion of sustainable development in the seminal report of the Brundtland Commission, entitled Our Common Future. Some key principles of sustainable development which have valuable application to sustainable tourism development are:

· intergenerational equity and the equitable distribution of wealth, resources, and food within the generations, on a global basis,

· the maintenance of ecosystems and biological diversity,

· observing the principle of optimal sustainable yield in the usage of natural resources, and living off the 'interest' rather than the 'principle' of these resources,

· the need for effective management practices, cooperation, and local participation in decision making.

Several definitions of sustainable tourism (development) have evolved from various researchers, tourism organizations, and initiatives. V@hile these definitions vary in description, they hold in common the importance of meeting the needs of visitors and host regions, while ensuring cultural and ecological integrity, for the present and future generations. A useful definition is:

Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future. It is envisaged as leading to the management of *all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity. essential ecological processes, biological diversity, and life support systems. (World Tourism Organization, in Agenda 21 for the Travel and Tourism Industn)*

Destination and organizational stakeholders in the tourism domain frequently face complex issues, often with underlying conflicting values and interests. Some of these issues are discussed below, together with guidelines for managing them.

Increasing Corporate Stakeholder Responsibility

It is important for organizations to take the needs of its stakeholders (as opposed to only its stockholders), into consideration where a stakeholder is defined as anyone who is affected by or has the ability to influence the actions and decisions of the organization. Hence, the stakeholders of the tourism industry include host communities and environmental groups, among others. It is clear that a broader stakeholder perspective requires a business philosophy to shift from short-term profit horizons (which tend to focus on the immediate bottom line), toward the assumption of long-term planning and profit horizons. Instead of viewing sustainable development as a barrier to free enterprise, one can consider it as a source of competitive advantage. A growing number of companies are adopting techniques such as life cycle analysis, environmental auditing, corporate environmental reporting, and using suppliers who also practice sustainable development.

Achieving Suitable Forms of Tourism

Small-scale and low-impact forms of tourism which emphasize environmental protection and local involvement in tourism have been advocated as an attempt to avoid the detrimental effects of mass tourism. It has been argued by a number of researchers that alternative tourism (e.g. ecotourism) is not a panacea to the problems generated by large-scale tourism, since, it cannot provide the employment and income afforded by mass tourism and it can also exacerbate negative social and cultural impacts. It has, therefore, been suggested that a more suitable approach might be to apply the concepts of sustainable resource and tourism management to both conventional and alternative forms of tourism, recognizing that mass tourism is a phenomenon to be dealt with. In addition, we must develop techniques for making mass tourism more sustainable through improved design, planning, and policy measures as well as adherence to environmentally sound practices.

Sustaining Social and Cultural Resources

Improving the quality of life of the host community is cited as one of the goals of sustainable tourism. Relative to the ecological (natural) environment, much less attention has been directed to the preservation and protection of sensitive ethnic cultures in developing countries. Already, sensitive cultures in Africa, Asia, and elsewhere are experiencing socio cultural erosion through tourism. If tourism development is to be sustainable, it must address how tourism should be planned when dealing with sensitive indigenous cultures which have had little prior contact with civilization. In addition, since culture is dynamic, we have to decide how much planning effort should be dedicated to preserving local cultures as opposed to allowing assimilation and exchange.

Sustaining the Natural Environment

Tourism has benefited from the growing information base in the area of environmental protection. Conducting environmental impact assessments, environmental audits, carrying capacity studies, and developing full-cost accounting measures for natural environmental resources, are important directions for organizations involved in tourism development. A few key guidelines for balancing the needs of tourism and the environment are:

Thresholds of acceptable environmental change and visitor use need to be established for sensitive environmental and cultural resources, based upon studies of the impacts of various types and levels of visitor and human use on these resources.

Environmental impact assessments and cumulative effects assessments should be a necessary component of tourism related development, as well as full-cost accounting of the use of heritage resources (natural and cultural).

Appropriate design of facilities related to heritage attractions, and interpretation activities which provide an educational experience as part of the visitor experience, are important to the preservation of valuable heritage assets.

Codes of ethics for tour operators, developers, and visitors are a useful policy tool for guiding the practice of environmentally and culturally sensitive behaviors toward heritage resources.

The Need for Effective Plans for Destination Planning

Strategic, integrated, local, regional, and national tourism plans are critical in order to effectively allocate the resources of a destination and develop appropriate product-market mixes. Such plans are also useful in providing direction and strategic information to destination developers and other tourism-related businesses.

The Role of Carrying Capacities and Indicators in Sustainable Tourism

The success of the tourism planning effort is greatly dependent on the ability of a community to monitor the implementation of action plans, achievement of the objectives, and the setting and monitoring of critical indicators and carrying capacity thresholds related to the resources being used. Carrying capacity in this context refers to the level or threshold of use or impact that a resource can handle without seriously affecting the health or survivability of that resource. Indicators and thresholds need to be established which provide decision makers with information which enables them to evaluate and make timely decisions on changes caused by tourism.

Avoiding Conflict

As part of a stakeholder management strategy, tourism organizations should develop processes for conflict management and conflict resolution. Experience has demonstrated that proactive management of stakeholders can provide a number of benefits (e.g., time and money saved from not having to deal with conflict, delayed approvals, and potentially adverse media attention). Meaningful community involvement in tourism planning and development decision making requires participation mechanisms that are able to obtain and incorporate a wide diversity of community opinions. interests, and values.

Increasing Community Involvement

Opportunities and mechanisms have to be created to enable community members to participate in directing the tourism development of their community since this creates a sense of ownership in the outcome of a process. Local people can be involved in tourism to varying degrees, ranging from information gathering on community attitudes and values, to direct decision making, ownership, and employment in planning, project development, and service delivery. Local citizenry can become directly involved in tourism planning decision making (e.g., via committees and workshops), and less directly through consultation mechanisms such as public meetings and surveys. No one mechanism is the ideal approach to involving the community; rather, the selection of involvement mechanism (s) should be tailored to the situation.

Directions for the Future

As travel and tourism continue to dominate in a global economy faced with serious environmental pressures, environmental and economic values will need to be reconciled and balances found between protection and use. Both visitors and tourism managers will be required to accept the responsibility of environmental stewardship, and to evaluate some necessary trade-offs in the provision of a quality visitor experience. A number of principles and guidelines for sustainable tourism planning, development, and management have been introduced in this Briefing Note. Key principles are summarized below to help those engaged in the challenging and critical task of ensuring that tourism becomes, as much as possible, a part of the solution, and not the problem of planetary sustainability.

· Strive for the equitable distribution of tourism benefits with the local community and the destination.
· Create opportunities for meaningful local employment
· Collaborate with key stakeholders in order to ensure that the planning and development of tourism projects is integrated and compatible with community and environmental needs.
· Strive to provide a high quality visitor experience within the guidelines of sustainable tourism.
· Incorporate sound environmental values and environmental management practices into planning processes.

Note

The Project welcomes your comments on this Briefing Note and would also appreciate receiving examples or case studies that could constitute instructional material for students and practitioners of sustainable tourism. These examples will be posted on our Web page with your permission.

Further Reading

There is a significant amount of material available that explores various issues in sustainable tourism. The following are some important illustrative examples:

Bramwell, B. and B. Lane, 1993. "Sustainable Tourism: An Evolving Global Approach". Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 1, 1: 1-5.

Butler, R.W., 1990. "Alternative tourism: pious hope or Trojan horse?" Journal of Travel Research, Winter, p. 40-45.

Freeman, R.E., 1984. Strategic Management: A Stakeholder A12proach. Pitman Publishing Inc., Mashfield, IIA.

Getz, D. and T. Jamal, 1994. "The Environment community symbiosis: a case for collaborative planning". Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 2, 3: 152-173.

Harrison, D., 1992. "Tourism to less developed countries: the social consequences". In Tourism and the Less Developed Countries. Belhaven Press, London, U.K.

Lane, B., 1994. "Sustainable Rural Tourism Strategies: A Tool for development and conservation". Journal of Sustainable Tourism, Vol 2, No. 1 & 2, p. 102-111.

CUC UEM Project Tourism Resources

The Project has developed a number of resources related to tourism planning and development. They are available at the address below. A full listing of the Project resources can be found onthe web at www.cuc.ait.ac.th.

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