What is Sustainable Tourism?

An attempt at explanation by

Naturefriends International

Based on:

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1. How did the notion of "Sustainable Tourism" develop?

1.1. From nature tourism…

Up until the late 19th century, nature journeys were not very popular and, therefore, poorly developed. Travellers that reported about their experiences and discoveries (e.g. Herodotus and Aristotle in old Greece and Marco Polo later on) as well as explorers and "science travelers" of the Age of Enlightenment such as Georg Forster, Alexander von Humboldt, James Cook or Charles Darwin remained the exception for a long time. Although tourism focussed on the Alpine region in the 18th century already, "nature tourism" only came into existence later on with the first discovery tours to the European Alps and the establishment of Alpine associations. The labour and youth movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries also contributed to the rising popularity of excursions to the countryside.

However, up until the mid-20th century, "world trips" remained possible only for the upper class. For the (male) "average" citizen, "travelling" was exclusively linked to soldership until after the Second World War. It was not until the technological development of the transport system and mass communication that more and more people started travelling.

Although tourism was considered "white industry" until the 1960s, it was increasingly criticised, especially because of the emerging mass tourism and its associated social and ecological impacts.

1.2. … over Soft Tourism…

In search of specific alternatives to mass tourism, the term "Soft Tourism" was introduced in German-speaking countries in 1980, when futurologist Robert Jungk presented "Soft Travelling" as opposed to "Rough Travelling" of mass tourism in the magazine GEO.

The meaning of this term has been in the centre of controversies ever since. However, several tour operators and tourism regions have adopted it as the epitome of an alternative to mass tourism for diverse reasons since the 80s.

In practical implementation, a distinction was made according to two options for action: In the broad sense, Soft Tourism was taken to mean the intent of reducing or undoing contentious consequences of tourism development by taking restrictive measures within spatial planning and regional policies and avoiding those consequences in the future. In the more narrow sense of the word, Soft Tourism was taken to be an approach to develop structurally alternative tourism offers ("niche tourism") with a special focus on environmentally and socially acceptable holiday planning.
At the end of the 1980s and during the 90s, the concept of Soft Tourism was increasingly replaced by discussions about "Sustainable Tourism". Current literature about tourism development rarely uses the term Soft Tourism anymore.

1.3. ... and Ecotourism...

The term "Ecotourism" was introduced in 1965, when ecological issues were first integrated in tourism. It was mainly considered to be a form of tourism confined to visiting (and, later on, co-financing) protected areas. This definition was later expanded to include near-nature areas and the interests of the local population. Nowadays there are so many definitions of "Ecotourism", that Figgis (1995) said defining Ecotourism could even be nominated an Olympic sport.

Due to its focus on ecological issues only (apart from the fact that planes are the means of travel often used for ecotourism offers, despite their big footprint), Ecotourism is not compatible with the holistic objectives of Sustainable Development. Upon the United Nations' designation of 2002 as the "International Year of Ecotourism", the discussions about social components of Ecotourism and its relation with Sustainable Development were renewed. Nowadays, the issues of "traditional use" of biological resources and - in case of tourism offers in developing countries - land rights and right of ownership of the indigenous population are acknowledged to be of utmost importance to Ecotourism as well.

Near-nature tourism and especially ecotourism were seen as an opportunity to regain financial independence and thus control over their territories by several indigenous peoples. Ecotourism can create an incentive for environmental protection and preservation of protected areas, as near-nature tourism and outdoor leisure activities enable people to better appreciate the environment and be more conscious about the consequences of our lifestyle. This in turn will raise the awareness of how important it is to preserve our environment.

Even though Ecotourism is not to be considered a synonym of Sustainable Tourism, for the purpose of development it is an important step towards Sustainable Tourism. However, there is neither a binding definition of Ecotourism nor transparent and internationally verifiable development of strategies. Furthermore it has been criticised that Ecotourism has too unilateral an approach on protection and thus should develop to become "Sustainable Ecotourism".

1.4. ... to Sustainable Tourism

The UN World Commission on Environment and Development adopted the idea of sustainability in the "Brundtland report" in 1987 and defined "sustainable development" as follows:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." [UNEP, 1987]

On the occasion of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the concept behind this definition was developed to become a binding guideline for general ecological, social and economic development for 179 countries within the Agenda 21.
Over the following years, this guiding principle was seized by many organisations related to the tourism sector and adapted for specific application in global tourism. The German Forum on Environment and Development presented the following definition for “Sustainable Tourism” in 1999 at a UN Conference in New York:

“Sustainable tourism has to meet social, cultural, ecological and economic requirements. Sustainable tourism holds a long-term view, for present and future generations, ethically and socially just and culturally adapted, ecologically viable and economically sensible and productive.” [Translated from the definition of the German Forum on Environment and Development 1999]

As it cannot be said whether sustainable approaches designed today will really prove to be sustainable within 25 years, "sustainability" has to be taken to mean future-oriented requirement rather than a fixed plan. This means that its contents need to be redefined from time to time and that futurologists have to learn to consider unpredictable factors. So it can be commented critically that real "Sustainable Tourism" is almost impossible; what is possible and highly desirable however is "More Sustainable Tourism" or "Sustainable Tourism Development".
2. Premises of Sustainable Tourism

The objective of Sustainable Tourism Development is to implement all areas of Sustainable Development (ecology, economy, social issues, cultural issues) in tourism. Tourism policies unilaterally focussing on the environment cannot claim to be "sustainable". According to Müller [1999], sustainability in tourism can be depicted as pentagon pyramid:

![Pentagon pyramid: Sustainability in Tourism](Müller, 1999)

Enhanced to include the institutional dimension of networking between touristic sending regions and destinations and the political responsibility of higher levels of the political system, seven premises can be deducted according to Baumgartner [2005]:

1) Functioning natural environment and landscape as well as environmental management systems are prerequisites for the tourism of the future, both in rural peripheral areas and in intensively used tourist destinations. (Ecological dimension)

Measures to protect nature and the environment are not strategies that prevent economic gain, but forward-looking approaches for image building that can even lead to economic growth. Legislative measures, voluntary incentives and guiding measures support regional aims.

Tourism policies of the future have to take on ecological and social problems of mass tourism, implementing legislative measures as well as voluntary guiding and regulation instru-
ments. Management systems that consider environmental and social factors holistically have to be developed for and applied in businesses, communities and regions. Furthermore, the value of infrastructure and ecological measures for locals has to be reviewed.

In intensively used areas, hoteliers are often confronted with indebtedness because of high competition and decrease in overnight stays. Funding possibilities are needed in order to withdraw from the tourism sector, thus enabling the reconstruction of hotel rooms into apartments for locals.

2) Tourism is an integrated part of sustainable, interrelated economy specific to the region. (Economic dimension)

Economically far-sighted tourism planning involves all relevant and regionally present sectors in order to trigger regional circuits and avoid or reduce touristic monocultures. The most visible example is sustainable cooperation between tourism and agriculture – this cooperation exists in many areas and both parties profit from it (second source of income in agriculture / improvement of the touristic image by quality products).

The regions that were able to retain a balanced mix of handicraft, trade, business, agriculture, forestry and services are least prone to crisis if single sectors show decreasing trends. Tourism can be integrated into economic activities as an enriching external factor. Especially in developing countries, the importance of tourism is still on the rise. However, developing countries need a mix of added value to avoid unilateral dependence from tourism and thus, vulnerability to crisis.

For European tourism, future is in the quality of its services, in the uniqueness of its landscapes and in the diversity of its cultural heritage. In order to have a safe economic future, it needs quality enhancement (not implying high prices but improved support and consulting), development and preservation of the diversity of culture and protection of the environment. For if Europe engaged in ruinous price fights with discount destinations, this would inevitably have a negative impact on the quality of offers.

3) The image of holiday destinations is characterised by self-determined cultural dynamics. (Cultural dimension)

The aim is to carefully (re)integrate tourism into local and regional culture and not to integrate culture into tourism. The right degree of tourism intensity is an important prerequisite for conveyance of "real culture" and self-determination of cultural development. Furthermore, locals need to be given the opportunity to not only keep their traditions for visitors, but also live family culture and rites to the exclusion of strangers.

4) Good working conditions and social satisfaction of the population will bring quality in tourism. (Social dimension)
Quality in tourism is determined by quality of service, therefore improvement of the education level of those working in tourism – including tourism-critical contents knowledge for the set-up of several sources of income – and improvement of the social protection of those employed in the tourism industry are of utmost importance.

The high proportion of adolescents and women as well as high seasonal unemployment has to be taken into account and requires specific legislative and voluntary measures. The difficult social situation of children in tourism businesses has to be considered and the multiple burden of women has to be met with appreciation and compensation.

Especially in developing countries, the attention has to be directed to qualification and support of local workers.

5) Considerate tourism regions bear in mind the needs of special guest groups

The group of guests aged 50 and more will constitute a growing and ever more important part of touristic target groups. In order to be successful with this group, potential special needs have to be considered without emphasising them blatantly.

People with special needs (“handicapped persons”) as well as guest groups like non-smokers, families with children, single travellers etc. have special demands on accommodation, destinations and transport service providers.

6) People as creators are at the heart of tourism policy – the whole population has access to all information and is equally involved in all decision-making processes. (Intergenerational dimension)

In respect to institutional sustainability, the planning and implementation of any measures related to tourism must involve all implied actors of tourism and leisure policies: those politically or administratively responsible for tourism, travel agencies, organisations, those affected by tourism and consumers. Through project development based on partnership, identification and entrepreneurial initiative can be achieved, which in turn will lead to cooperation between economic sectors. All interested parties have access to all information and are enabled to actively and equally participate in decision-making processes. Such regionally taken decisions are supported by the integration of relevant external know-how.

7) Sending regions in conurbation areas and higher levels of the political system take responsibility for the effects of tourism in destinations. (Institutional dimension)

Regional aid of disadvantaged regions is one of the strongest instruments in European spatial and economic development, just as funds for development cooperation in many potential tourism regions in developing countries. Special attention has to be paid to the characteristic needs of the region – concepts of economic development in conurbations cannot be applied equally in remote, structurally and economically weak regions and concepts from European regions cannot equally be applied in developing countries.
It would be counterproductive to use regional aid funds for the expansion of hotels and infrastructure, as this would seriously affect these structurally weak regions and would not bring economic benefits. Instead, investments into „soft“ infrastructure such as cooperation organisations, trails, culture routes and an improvement of education are needed.

Problems caused by tourism are not only problems of the destinations. Rather, motivation and behaviour of tourists are a contributing factor. On the one hand, political and legislative conditions have to be created at all levels, thus enabling the regions to take decisions on sustainability of their tourism development themselves. On the other hand, the quality of living and working environments needs to be improved in tourists’ home countries in order to heighten sensibility for problems in the respective destinations.
3. For further comprehension

There is no general and universally applicable formula to initiate ecologically, socially and culturally acceptable tourism. However, the fundamental agreement is that it is necessary to break through the growth spiral, or tourism will destroy its own base – the natural environment, the regional characteristics and the intact social structures. Beyond that, solutions will differ and depend on the prevalent preconditions, structures and problems in the region. However, it is important that all measures and plans always take into account all sectors and areas of economy and be developed, intensively discussed and implemented together with the affected population.

In case of conflicts of use or if plans overstrain one of the desired objectives, clear priorities have to be set and environmental and cultural aspects and the population have to be given priority before economic decisions.

Further information on the development of the concept of Sustainable Tourism, on sustainability in chosen tourism policies, on global connections and a well-founded approach for assessing sustainability in tourist destination can be found (in German) in the book "Nachhaltigkeit im Tourismus: Von 10 Jahren Umsetzungsversuchen zu einem Bewertungssystem" by Christian Baumgartner (2008, Studienverlag, Vienna, ISBN: 978-3-7065-1784-3).

Naturefriends International

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