
The economy of sustainable tourism

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Abstract: Sustainability, as defined by the Brundtland Commission, which mentions the needs of present and future generations, is a concept that transcends concern with the environment, though this consideration remains important. Sustainability also relates to culture, way of living and economy. Applied to tourist destinations, sustainability offers guidance of great clarity. Tourism brings significant impacts, physical, economic and cultural, with important positive and negative aspects. A study of the subject reveals that the guidelines for sustainable tourism are exactly the guidelines for economic development and healthy living – non-sustainable tourist destinations actually tend to decline and even perish. A qualitative research was conducted in a tourist destination in Brazil, typical in several respects. Such destination has developed after the publication of the Brundtland report did not inherit certain prejudicial attitudes. The results show that the major players involved are not aware of all the challenges posed to a sustainable development, but this can be changed for the better with relative ease and highly positive consequences.

Keywords: sustainable tourism development; sustainability; tourism.

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1 Introduction

In 1983, a workgroup convened by the United Nations, the Brundtland Commission, published a significant report called *Our Common Future*. That document defined sustainable development as “development that meets present needs without impairing the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” This definition has great virtues: it is clear, balanced and without any contamination by ideology.

Sustainable development has, since the 1980s, been incorporated into the discourse and practice of corporate social responsibility and such trend has accelerated over the past several years. It is now a consensus that a company is socially responsible when it shows awareness of its “obligations to an ever-broadening group of stakeholders who claim both legal and ethical rights” (Carroll 1991). Guimarães (2008) addressed the issue of care of people (and by extension of society): there is “a complex set of social relations related to care.”

According to Moura-Leite and Padget (2011), the typical manager in the 1980s dealt with Social Responsibility in the traditional way, highly concentrated on philanthropy. In the 1990s there was an awakening of social interest and an effort to provide more adequate responses as social responsibility became established as an academic discipline. Large and midsize corporations progressively have since then placed social responsibility

higher in priority and increasingly consider it as strategic to business. Sustainability, as a pillar of social responsibility, followed this process.

Tourism is closely linked to sustainability: tourism development can be highly detrimental to the environment, while at the same time seriously disrupting the livelihoods of established residents (typically farmers) and profoundly change the economy of urban areas and their surroundings. Sustainability is also concerned with preservation of local cultures: customs and traditions can be lost.

This paper addresses the issue through successive particularisations: sustainability, sustainable development and sustainable tourism development. The objective is to study sustainable tourism in an emerging country by comparing real and ideal situations. The methodological location is a tourist destination that has become significant after the Brundtland report and after consolidation of sustainability as an item on the agendas of governments and businesses. It begins with a concise introduction to academic theories on the subject, with a brief description of the arguments of several authors; follows with a concise presentation of the resort selected for research. The core work comprises presentation and discussion of results of a qualitative survey applied to tourist trade operators. The final considerations bring proposals for an integrated and sustainable management of tourism in that location.

2 Tourism and its impacts

Tourism is an economic activity that generates income for countries, regions and cities worldwide. The WTO (2003) defines tourists as people “traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes.”

Although income generation is desirable, the displacement of visitors to tourist destinations is not always entirely positive: it can produce both positive and negative impacts. Such impacts were listed and explained by Middleton and Hawkins (1998) and, more recently, by Prayag et al. (2010). Those authors present said impacts as follows.

2.1 Physical

Negative: The pressures of overdevelopment and excessive number of tourists can wear and damage fragile environments both natural and constructed and may cause an unpleasant uniformity of buildings and urban landscape, with no respect for architectural integrity and traditional styles. Activities related to tourism may deplete natural resources such as water and land for projects that put residents at a disadvantage. It should be reminded, however, that, as Prayag et al. (2010) point out, tourism is generally less destructive than other forms of development, notably industrial production.

Positive: Tourism offers a justification for long-term protection, preservation and strengthening of savvy use of resources, both natural and developed, including protection of biodiversity. It also stimulates improvement of the physical environment available to residents and provides economic justification and means for regenerating damaged or unused cultural heritage.

2.2 Economic

Negative: Tourism operators can use environment for maximise profit without any positive contribution to residents well-being – in many cases, management jobs are awarded to non-residents, and only low-paying and menial jobs are left to residents; tourism can indeed lower the quality of living by introducing an industry whose aim is to benefit a dominant, powerful invader, imposed and controlled externally, thus creating animosities and divisions between locals and tourists.

Positive: Tourism generates income that can be used for preservation, provides employment opportunities for small businesses and encourages new economic activities to meet tourism industry needs; it improves life standard of residents, especially if it generates cash and taxes that cannot be obtained otherwise.

2.3 Cultural/educational

Negative: Tourism tends to weaken local arts and cultural traditions, turning them into artificially staged events to collect profits, thereby corroding and ultimately destroying identities and traditions. Messages encouraging destruction of the environment can be conveyed through examples of improper practices.

Positive: Tourism operators can support and help to fund music, theatre, arts, folk traditions, festivals and local events; can also reinforce local traditions and special places; provide the means to demonstrate and convey appreciation of the environment and of sound environmental values, both by tourists and residents.

In addition to these effects, it is important to the study of long-term effects of tourism in a locality to consider a life cycle, as explained by Swarbrook (2002). According to that author, a tourist destination goes, as a standard, through the following stages: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation and stagnation. The latter two are considered by Butler as the critical period – a number of situations may occur, both positive and negative such as renewal, reduced growth, stabilisation or decline, medium and long term.

The actors involved in tourism ultimately decide what will happen to a tourist location – they must be able to discern the stage and schedule policies as needed, basically revitalisation of existing attractions and creation of new and redirection of marketing actions. The theory argues further: that life cycles of tourist regions are actually getting shorter due to two main factors: the desire of tourists to always seek new places to visit and competition by new destinations.

This context led to scholarly discussion of theories of sustainable development. In general, the main objective is to lessen, delay or even eliminate negative impacts of tourism, thereby providing increasingly longer life cycles. Nunkoo and Ramkissoon (2011) developed research on the factors that influence the perceptions of residents about the benefits and disadvantages of tourism. Saarinen (2006) showed that the study of sustainability in tourism can be divided into three groups according to the emphasis on resources, activities, or community. This study expects to show a balanced view.

Concepts and principles of sustainability are detailed in the section that follows.

3 Sustainability

As mentioned earlier, the generally accepted definition of sustainability is meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept is simple, clear and has proven accurate enough to become widely accepted. Its application, however, may present political complexity, due to the existence of two opposing extremes: on one side, the rudeness of those who do not want to be monitored and prefer to ignore the law and on the other side, contamination of the issue with ideology with no concern for the needs of the present and gross exaggeration about harm to the future. Technical aspects misunderstood by those who want to substitute ideological slogans for study and hard work cause unnecessary confusion. It is necessary to set clear and achievable goals and promote sound technical practices, unfortunately absent from many discussions on the issue.

Ruschmann (1999) emphasises that in order to seek sustainability it is necessary to consider the dimensions of local development planning classified and discussed below. It should be noted that Briassoulis (2002), examining simultaneous use of resources by residents and tourists, uses a very similar classification.

- Ecological and environmental sustainability: Acts on the physical part of the development process and aims to preserve (through rational use) natural resources involved in tourist activities. Includes ability to support ecosystems in order to stand for anthropogenic assaults and/or to recover from them.
- Economic sustainability: Pursues growth/economic development through efficient resource management and attainment of objectives of investment in order to ensure not only microeconomic profitability, but also effectiveness of social functions.
- Socio-cultural sustainability: Engages in maintenance of cultural diversity, values and practices, in construction of citizenship and in social integration of individuals into a culture of rights and duties.
- Institutional and political sustainability: Reinforces democratic mechanisms that foster formulation and implementation of public policies, strengthens institutional arrangements and organisations whose design and apparatus are guided by sustainability criteria.

Discussion guided by environmental, economic, cultural and political aspects leads to an understanding that can reduce the complexity of a subject usually loaded with diffuse ideas and opinions.

The concept of sustainability can be deepened to a more dynamic model. The next section concisely describes sustainable development.

4 Sustainable development

The discussion of the expression 'sustainable development' has been active since its proposition and developed in international events such as the United Nations Conference on Human Environment (Stockholm, 1972) or Brazil (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. Over time, the meaning of the expression acquired increasing complexity and ambiguity, since sustainability is now

very frequent in speeches by CEOs, politicians, development planners and international humanitarian agencies, it is pertinent to present questioning by a few critical theorists. It is fair to comment on their statements that some advances, albeit small, have taken place within the last decade.

Luke (1995) argued that sustainability is 'fraught with unresolved targets'. For example, very few people are concerned with the duration of activities taken in behalf of sustainability and the duration of their effects. Another important point, according to that author, was the level of human appropriation of those activities: individual households, local towns, major cities, entire nations or the global economy.

Leff, wrote in 2001 that the actions being undertaken on behalf of sustainable development had been, to that date, ambiguous, fragmented and had poorly performed the task of facing the complexity of the practical challenges associated with sustainability issues such as social justice, reduction of inequality, planning and control of economic growth, rehabilitation of degraded lands, appropriate use and management of resources, effective participation of society in decision-making, and internalisation of a genuine and lasting symbiotic relationship of human beings with nature.

Dahl, also in 2001, treated sustainable development as a concept referring to values, which relate to principles, ethics and beliefs that underlie a community. In other words, we can affirm that there is flexibility in determining whether or not a particular project is based on sustainable development, since this quality is related to factors intrinsic to a particular community.

While authors in general encourage debate and reflection on the theme in search of answers, they are more or less unanimous in predicting that those answers will not come easy. There are theorists who are more pessimistic and consider the idea of sustainable development a utopia, as Irving (2002) "political discourse tends to focus on sustainable and at the same time give different meanings to it, transforming them into a contemporary utopia." Candiotta and Correa (2004) place ideology in the discussion and add that sustainability is "nothing but a vague utopia of little applicability in the global political and economic structure, where the predominant interests are neo-liberal and imperialist."

Ranauro (2004) provides some kind of summation. Although it is applied to tourism, the subject of next section, it can be used in a more general context. The author proposes that while utopia and its unattainability are discussed, we must find mechanisms for implementation of sustainable tourism wherever and whenever attainable goals do exist. According to that author, a new pace and direction of social relations should be established, which includes not only knowledge, ethics and logic, but the fostering of common grounds and common understandings of the world in order to find a real prospect for sustainability.

5 Sustainable tourism

The adjective sustainable is used in a number of contexts such as sustainable cities, sustainable buildings, sustainable projects and others. The word is also used in tourism, and there is a discourse of sustainable development of tourism, or in its reduced expression, sustainable tourism.

The WTO (2003) relies on the definition of sustainability of the Brundtland report:

“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 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 system.”

The term sustainable tourism is the subject of much theoretical discussion. Butler (1999), for example, rejects the expression with the argument that it implies maintenance of tourism itself as main objective, whatever the impacts associated. He views as more important the preservation effort of the physical and human context in the places where tourism occurs. For the author, sustainable development of tourism is a more appropriate nomenclature – implies that development and maintenance of tourism in an area (community and environment) should be done in a manner and on a scale that remains viable in the foreseeable future and will not degrade or alter the environment (physical and human) to a degree that would prevent the successful well being and development of other activities and processes. Dymond (1997, p.279) emphasises the distinction between sustainable tourism (the goal to be achieved) and sustainable development of tourism (the process).

The development of a sustainable city is possible only when the local community is part of the process. According to Vargas-Sánchez et al. (2011), it is important that local residents perceive tourism as positive to the community and actively participate in actions to implement sustainability, since they have their own identity as a community already organised. That perception makes possible open and intense dialogue between promoters of sustainable development and residents, avoids one-sided views and encourages diversity of opinions. Ranauro (2004) agrees with the argument of the importance of local community participation in asserting that “there is no sustainability without the fair contribution of communities and their knowledge.” All these authors show that in order to develop destination-based tourism, involvement of the local community must necessarily be part of the effort. Community feedback must be heeded at all times, under penalty of failure.

Tourism is business. All stakeholders with some form of power over such business need to perform the necessary actions in order to see their interests met. Residents should have a voice in all environmental, economic and cultural issues. In other words, actions will have to meet sustainability criteria. The stakeholders of tourism are the residents of the location, the entrepreneurs of the trade (owners of places of lodging and restaurants, operators of tours and tourist attractions, travel agents), public and private institutions, tourists themselves and non-governmental organisations directly or indirectly involved. The development of sustainable tourism depends on all these players.

Holden (2009) includes one more factor: market ethics, by definition associated to the concept of sustainability by the Brundtland report: “[...] though environmental policy could possibly increase its influence in the future, the environmental ethics eventually assimilated by the market will be the determining factor for the balance of the relationship between tourism – environment.”

Eagles (2002) reinforces the role of the market in sustainable tourism development and shows clearly what the market wants:

“In all sustainable tourist destinations, limits of acceptable use should be developed and implemented, to avoid unacceptable levels of social and ecological change. Training of staff in private and public sectors is vital. A

large number of sophisticated consumers is heading to destinations [...] who are unable to deliver the services expected. The long-term economic sustainability [...] is essential, and a major effort is needed to help developing countries build their management and institutions.”

6 Cunha: a typical tourist destination in an emerging country

The Paraíba Valley is the region between the two largest and most important cities in Brazil: Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. It is an area loaded with history: in the 18th century, gold and gems were mined in the hinterland and sent to Europe through the Paraíba Valley; the economic cycle of coffee production was centred there until the late 19th century. Coffee plantation more or less ended when slavery was abolished and the 20th century saw the Valley become heavily industrialised. Just about everything is manufactured there, from steel and processed food to electronics and airplanes. The whole region has only about 15 thousand km² and a gross internal product of around US\$65 billion.

The Paraíba Valley is also home to many tourist destinations, with groups of cities offering mountain resorts, beaches, historical and cultural tourism. There is also a well-known cluster of religious destinations. Business tourism is present as well, due to a number of cities holding hefty industrial concerns.

Cunha is part of Brazilian history – located between the gold mines and Rio de Janeiro harbour, was home to bands of gold thieves in the early 18th century. Today, visitors find a quiet town of 20 thousand residents and a recently developed tourist destination. It has a nice climate, with gentle summers (very desirable in a tropical country) and mild winters. In the late 1940s, Cunha received from the State of São Paulo Tourist Authority a sort of good climate certificate, which enabled local business to get tax exemptions and other benefits. The idea of developing tourism was nevertheless mothballed for decades, except for scant initiatives, and the economy went on based on agriculture and cattle raising. In the 1970, a watershed event took place: a group of Japanese ceramic artists settled in Cunha. They worked with raku, a kind of hand-modelled pottery with special firing and cooling techniques. With time, people started coming to the town, to admire and buy the ceramic pieces.

Finally, in the first decade of the 21st century, a group of businessmen and members of the local elite devised a plan to develop Cunha as a serious tourist destination. The project used the potential for several modalities of tourism: hiking, ecotourism, gastronomy, local art and folk events. The results showed up within a few years – the infrastructure improved, successful marketing actions did attract significant numbers of visitors and, most important, a variety of places of lodging was built. Today, Cunha is definitely a tourist destination: it is informally known as ‘the Brazilian capital of artistic pottery’. There are around fifty hotels and inns, more than forty restaurants, plus bars, pastry stores, camping sites and shops. Craft beer made locally is a success. Folk events bring in more and more visitors, and cultural events have been created, with various degrees of success. Most visitors are families, but there are also singles and couples without children. They come from places, mostly big cities, within a 200 miles radius.

The reasons for selecting Cunha as methodological space for research are listed below. Basically, Cunha is a fairly typical touristic town within an emerging country whose economy is fuelled by a growing middle class; besides, Cunha has very recently

developed into a significant tourist destination (this happened after Brundtland Report publication).

- a Tourists in Cunha are middle class: it is not an expensive resort with luxury hotels and at the same time tourists do not come by bus in large groups to spend one day.
- b Visitors can enjoy beautiful landscapes and hiking but also artistic and cultural events. This allows Cunha to attract more than one kind of tourist.
- c Travellers do not find a large, metropolitan city like Rio de Janeiro, but Cunha is definitely more than a small urban core surrounded by inns. In one word, midsize.
- d Vacationers started coming in substantial numbers after the 1990s, and sustainability has been considered since the beginning, without contamination by old practices.

Completing the methodological space, interviewees for the research were selected among the agents of change: the tourist operators, businessmen whose concern about sustainability, according to Holden (2009) is an “indication of the status and ways of sustainable tourism development”.

7 Research methodology

The investigation that took place in Cunha was meant to find out to what extent sustainability is part of everyday life in that tourist destination. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions exploring the dimensions proposed by Ruschmann (1999). The interviewees were selected in the approximate proportion of the numbers of stores dedicated to their kinds of business as a percent of the total. 87 out of 200 owners of hotels, inns, ceramic stores, craft stores, restaurants and bars were interviewed.

The methodology proposed by Choi and Sirakaya (2005) was adapted to Brazil and to Cunha. Variables were limited to the ones that reflect the perception of the interviewees so focus was narrowed. The variables considered were:

- a knowledge of sustainability as object of concern
- b sustainability as actual practice
- c purpose of sustainable practices as such
- d distinction between Brundtland sustainability concept and the environmental paradigm
- e knowledge of the link between local economy and sustainability.

Questionnaires were applied with questions specific to the variables mentioned. The next section shows questions, results and analysis. All questions were self-evaluative.

8 Results

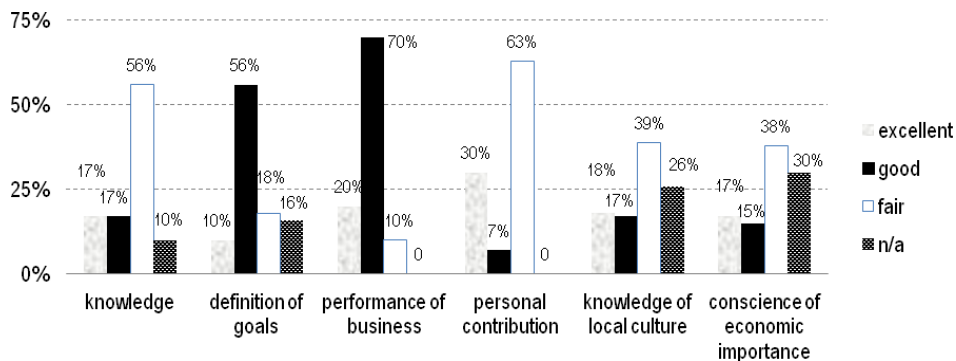
A brief explanation on the concept of ethos can be helpful to the understanding of the analysis. Ethos was initially proposed in ancient Greece. Aristotle used ethos to refer to individual character, demonstrated by spoken or written texts. The modern concept

(Perelman and Tyteca, 1999) associates ethos to the image an individual projects of himself or herself. In other words, ethos is what a person wants other people to think about him or her. The subjective evaluations prompted by the questionnaire reveal what degree of importance those businessmen in Cunha give to sustainability, though answers may reflect more the wish to provide proper answers than the actual set of actions taken. In short, the questions intend to measure the image the respondents try to convey, rather than evaluate their deeds.

Table 1 Questions and results

Question: how do you evaluate yourself in relation to	Excellent	Good	Fair	n/a
1 Knowledge on what makes a project sustainable?	17%	17%	56%	10%
2 Definition of sustainability goals in your business?	10%	56%	18%	16%
3 Performance of your business as far as sustainability is concerned?	20%	70%	10%	Zero
4 Personal contribution to sustainable tourism in the city?	30%	7%	63%	Zero
5 Knowledge of local culture and cultural manifestations?	18%	17%	39%	26%
6 Conscience of economic importance of sustainability?	17%	15%	38%	30%

Figure 1 Results, plotted



Answers to question 1 simply reveal that the municipality never developed a plan to foster sustainable tourism – should that plan exist, local business would certainly know it in some detail. The knowledge those managers actually possess comes from plans conceived elsewhere. Answers to question 2 confirm that – should a significant leadership by local officials exist, business would have developed formal goals and most businessmen would be somehow involved.

This leads us to believe that sustainability actions in Cunha are isolated movements by individuals, who promote engagements and define independent goals, each one limited to the confines of one business. Answers to question 4 clearly confirm a conscience on business responsibility – owners set goals for their businesses but not for themselves.

Answers to questions 5 and 6 demonstrate that those individual actions are focused on the environmental dimension of sustainability, with little or no concern for cultural and

economic dimensions. The feebleness of economic conscience (close do 1/3 of the businessmen found that economy and sustainability are foreign to each other) indicates that those businessmen simply do not think long-term. This is at the same time the most important result and a summary of research findings: good will is not followed by adequate knowledge.

The existence, therefore, of a latent desire for proper behaviour is clearly not completed by sufficient information about the issues involved. It should be noted that this is a recently developed tourist destination – this unawareness cannot be explained by the presence of old prejudices. At the contrary, there is an evident willingness to act properly.

9 Conclusions

The theoretical study on sustainable tourism and results of the qualitative research lead to the conclusion that tourism in the city of Cunha cannot be considered as sustainable, although there is a strong conscience of the importance of sustainability. Since Cunha is fairly typical, as explained in Section 6, this should reflect Brazil in general and possibly other emerging countries.

Sustainability is known by tourism professionals and arguably by the general public only in its environmental dimension. This lack of knowledge points to the existence of an oversight in government programmes. Government is the sole agent that can not only provide education and examples, but also direct actions through legislation and rules. In Cunha, small as it is, there is no integrated tourism management, only disconnected programmes and initiatives, although there are some good programmes and some good initiatives.

If nothing is done to foster sustainability in its entirety, the Swarbrook life cycle will go through its phases and the city will stagnate. This applies to tourist destinations in the whole country.

The possible, concrete actions that can be taken are listed as follows, with concise comments.

- 1 Creation of a municipal tourism council: A decision-making group, it will involve representatives of at least two levels of government, touristic trade, residents and repeat visitors – decisions will be taken based on a plurality of opinions.
- 2 Design and implementation of an educational campaign, with community leaders and teachers as priority targets. Focus on presenting sustainability, all its dimensions and importance. Emphasis on prevention of economic stagnation.
- 3 Oversight of municipal and state government by the local press (specially the radio stations): Officials should develop an explicit strategy to foster sustainability. The press should be used to promote understanding of sustainability as the only way out of long-term economic sluggishness.
- 4 Incentives to local culture: The process starts with a survey of local cultural signs by a team of specialists.
- 5 Sensitisation of business leaders to the positive effects of understanding and adopting a sustainable mentality.

Those propositions are relatively simple, quite feasible and will make the city develop, since the potential is there. This is true of most tourist destinations in Brazil and in other emerging countries.

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