

RESORT EUROPE: THE LIMITS OF MASS TOURISM AND THE RISE OF SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

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Summary

The contested concept of sustainable tourism and its various definitions are discussed. Pressures in two of Europe's main tourist areas—the Alps and the Mediterranean coastlands—are reviewed, and patterns of urban and rural tourism are considered. Environmental impact and social impact are examined before key concepts—such as carrying capacity—and issues relating to the application of principles of sustainable tourism are analyzed. Broad approaches to achieving sustainability and specific management techniques, including for example eco-labeling and traffic management, are then reviewed. In a concluding section, some of the obstacles to achieving sustainable management of tourism are considered.

1. The Sustainable Tourism Paradigm

The current ideas surrounding sustainable tourism have tended to evolve from two main strands. One is a broader concern linked with the increased awareness of the general environmental consequences of economic development as highlighted in the influential Brundtland Report (1987), which presented a working definition of sustainable development. The other source, by contrast, was much more specific, relating to perspectives of the impact of mass tourism on the physical, sociocultural, and economic environments of tourist destination areas. The Brundtland Report established clear, basic principles for sustainable development, and while not entirely new, it gave strong recognition to the issue of equity, calling for far greater convergence between rich and poor nations in the global system if stability and sustainability are to be achieved. It also recognized:

- planning and strategy making should be holistic
- the importance of preserving essential ecological processes
- the need to protect both human heritage and biodiversity
- development should occur in such a way that productivity can be sustained for future generations
- intragenerational social considerations

Such ideas in part were already being loosely debated within tourism following the rise of mass tourism in the 1970s. In this context, commentators had already drawn attention to the destructive force of tourism, while others sought to draw together the various contexts of the impact of tourism in a range of geographical settings.

In part, these diverse evolutionary routeways, but more especially the rather protracted debates about the nature of tourism and its impact, have led to a confused situation. Such confusion takes two main forms, namely a lack of clarity over the nature, scope, and definition of sustainable tourism, and a critical, if rather unstructured, debate about its effectiveness as a management tool.

One of the major criticisms of the notion of sustainable tourism is the lack of clarity concerning its definition. According to the opening editorial of the first volume of the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* in 1993, sustainable tourism is “a positive approach intended to reduce the tensions and frictions created by the complex interactions between the tourism industry, visitors, the environment, and communities which are host to holidaymakers.” However, there is another key element that is fundamental to the concept and more in line with the definition of sustainable development which implies an approach that involves working for the long-term viability and quality of both natural and human resources. It is not antigrowth but it acknowledges that there are limits to growth. In this context, sustainable development acknowledges that limits to growth will vary geographically and according to the specific management practices adopted in different areas. Of course, such ideas may be directly applied to sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism development therefore recognizes that for many geographical areas tourism is an important form of economic development and as such should be managed effectively and in sympathy with indigenous resources. Equally, attention can be directed at tourists themselves, and in these terms sustainable tourism

development highlights the need to educate tourists to become more concerned and caring about the places and communities they visit. Some commentators have attempted to encompass all these aspects arguing that it is vital that sustainable tourism is embraced as a valued concept by planners, developers, consumers, and host communities so that tourism avoids causing its own destruction.

As a result of the nature of sustainable tourism's development as a paradigm, the notion itself has unfortunately become associated with a plethora of different terms that refer to the development of tourism other than mass tourism. Some commentators have suggested that sustainable tourism can be viewed as an alternative to mass tourism. This view has been refuted by some others, who argue that mass tourism need not be uncontrolled, unplanned, short-term, or unstable. The view has also been expressed that it has not yet been proven that all examples of mass tourism are unsustainable, and that unproven assumptions have diverted researchers away from the more important task of resolving how mass tourism can be made more sustainable.

There are, unfortunately, a range of terms that relate to forms of alternative tourism which have evolved from the late 1980s. These include ideas of green tourism, soft, responsible, low-impact, endemic, and new tourism. There are also a number of more specific forms of alternative tourism including nature tourism and ecotourism. The confusion from this range of terms, tourism products, and management philosophies has created a tendency to ignore the fact that these different forms of tourism can potentially have dramatically different effects on the environment of a destination area.

Another legacy of these varied concepts of alternative tourism is that the notions of sustainable tourism have been criticized for being confused and not clearly focused. Other criticisms see the concept as fundamentally misguided, while some commentators have a pessimistic view of the concept, believing that perhaps there is no answer to all of the problems raised by mass tourism. Some argue that unless the central issue of volume is addressed, then claims that there are answers to the problems are not only wrong but can also be misleading. This line of reasoning is extreme, but it does give a coherent voice to the widely perceived notions about the impact of certain types of tourists. The question as to which type of tourist is likely to do more harm in the long term, the mass tourist to the Mediterranean or the sensitive traveler, is often raised, but it is sometimes also pointed out that the aware, educated, individual traveler who is forever seeking the new, the exotic, and the unspoiled may simply be paving the way for the mass package tour. Of course, this argument can be turned around and used as a powerful reason for why sustainable tourism practices need to be adopted in such circumstances where added management is required. Critics have also called into question the language and rhetoric used, because some supporters of the concept have used emotive terms such as appropriate or responsible to define aspects of planning in destination areas. One commentator summarizes some of these views by suggesting that "sustainable tourism has burdened itself with conflicting, incompatible objectives."

The sustainable tourism debate is not only confused and as some argue misplaced but is also somewhat characterized by advocacy, and lacks a critical political economy perspective. The term can be an ideology, a process, a concept, or a mere political catch phrase.

Clearly, there are concerns and criticisms over the different terms used to describe aspects of sustainable tourism, and some commentators have also raised doubts about the workability of the concept. In an effort to overcome such concerns, it is important that we establish a coherent and workable definition of sustainable tourism. The pressure group Tourism Concern has defined sustainable tourism as “tourism and its associated infrastructures that, both now and in the future:

- operate within natural capacities for the regeneration of and future productivity of natural resources
- recognize the contribution that people and communities, customs and lifestyles make to the tourist experience
- accept that local people must have an equitable share in the economic benefits of tourism
- are guided by the wishes of local people and communities in host areas.”

The core element of this definition is that tourism development, if well managed, need not lead to resource degradation and the alienation of tourists or members of the host communities. Also implicit in this definition is the notion that tourism will continue to grow as a global activity, but that there are some limits to growth and, more important, that these can be managed. It also incorporates the strong notions of equity that the Brundtland Report brought to popularity. Furthermore, this definition is not time-specific or place-specific and as such can be applied to all forms of sustainable tourism.

2. Tourist Pressures in Resort Europe

There has been an emergence and rapid growth of mass tourism and leisure. This has been spectacularly evident in the growth of international tourism, particularly within Europe. Between 1950 and 1990 the number of international tourists in Europe increased 16-fold, with the highest growth rates being recorded between 1960 and 1980 (Figure 1). In the early decades of this period it was the rise of package holidays and mass tourism that were most associated with these high growth rates. Indeed, European countries, and especially Western economies, have dominated the development of international tourism. This reflects a diverse range of tourist attractions, including coastal environments, mountain zones, and rich cultural heritages; a range of climatic zones that favor both winter and summer tourism; and a mature, well-developed tourist industry that encompasses both organizational and infrastructural aspects. Growth in the number of international tourist arrivals has continued at an average of almost 3% per annum in the period after 1992 (Figure 1), although Europe’s share of the world tourism market has declined slightly in relative terms.

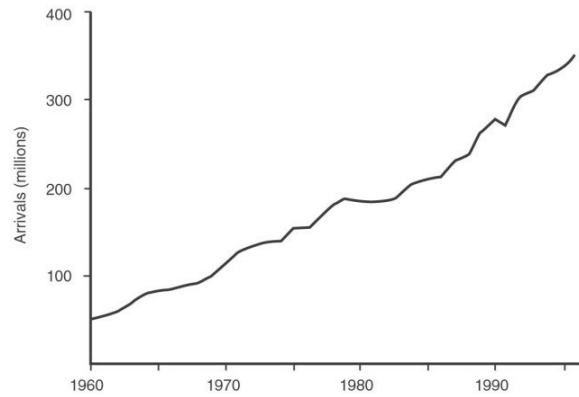


Figure 1. International tourist arrivals in Europe since 1960 (modified from European Environment Agency, 1995 and 1998)

Europe also has a strongly developed market for domestic tourism, because of its sizeable urbanized population which is relatively affluent and practiced in holidaymaking. While domestic tourism has seen less spectacular growth, there was still an estimated 300% increase in this sector of the market between 1950 and 1990. Accurate data are hard to come by, but estimates by the World Tourism Organization suggest that there are at least 2 billion domestic tourism trips worldwide, and about half of these are in Europe. In the course of this expansion, virtually all places and regions within Europe have experienced elements of the phenomenon of tourism. The diversity of types of tourism and the range of environments affected is considerable as coastal, urban, rural, and mountain environments have all become destinations for waves of tourist arrivals. Indeed, growth in international tourism is greatest in the eastern Mediterranean, parts of central Europe, and in a number of key European cities (Figure 2). It is not only the numbers of tourists that have increased the impact on these different environments as, with increasing demand for a range of activities, there has also been a change of pressures of use.

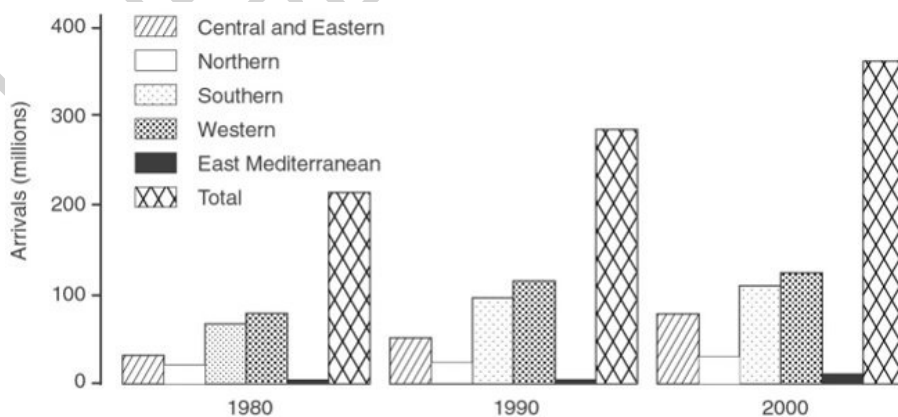


Figure 2. International tourism arrivals to European regions (modified from WTO, 1993, and European Environment Agency, 1995)

A significant and critical challenge has been provided by the rapid growth and spread of mass tourism since the 1970s. It is usually characterized by being large-scale and

relatively low-cost tourism for those on relatively low and middle incomes. This form of tourism has commodified international travel within Europe by creating inclusive holidays. It is often contrasted with elite or luxury tourism which, of necessity, tends to be on a much reduced scale, attracting those with relatively high incomes. As we shall see, much of the debate on the environmental impact of tourism has focused on mass tourism because of its scale and obvious visibility. However, it would be wrong to equate the more luxury/elite form of tourism with sustainable tourism as it may well be as equally as destructive in resource terms as mass tourism. Certainly, luxury hotels may demand more land, use disproportionately more energy and water, and their tourists may expect far more facilities, e.g., marinas, golf courses. Of course, set against this is the fact that far fewer tourists are involved, so the impact associated with large numbers of tourists that may exceed local carrying capacities, are to some extent removed (see *Key Concepts*).

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