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# **SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT - GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR PLANNING AND MANAGEMENT**

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## **Introduction**

I have been given the challenging task of setting the theoretical frame work for this session. My fellow speakers will focus more on practical, operational issues related to sustainable tourism development.

This talk has four key sections, beginning with the general principles of sustainability to a discussion of leadership and sustainability:

- Strategy Sustainable development Foundations of sustainable tourism
- Challenges of achieving sustainability Leadership

Before beginning, perhaps a little background about me will you help understand the perspective of sustainability to be presented today:

1. First, I work in a business school and specialize in teaching the business of tourism, marketing and product development.
2. Second, I am a tourism professional and not a sociologist, biologist or environmentalist
3. Third, I have spent over 20 years working in, examining and writing about nature based tourism, ecotourism and cultural tourism.

As far as I am concerned, tourism can be seen as an economic activity that produces a range of positive and negative impacts. Sustainable tourism seeks to achieve the best balance between economic benefits and social and environmental costs.

## **Sustainability as a Strategy**

The idea of sustainable development is only about 15 years old. The concept of sustainable tourism is even younger and we are all still learning about it. One way to understand it is to consider sustainability in business terms as a strategy that can be used to achieve different goals.

Strategies have a number of features:

- They are developed to move an organization or destination from its current competitive position to a more desirable future competitive situation

- They adopt a medium to longer term time frame and that process evolves over a period of time
- Their achievement involves vision, objectives, direction and commitment involving all elements of the organization or destination
- Successful strategic decisions to match the organization's activities with its resources. In other words, strategies must be based on the current reality.
- They are very complex and involve many stakeholders

Ultimately, business strategies answer six questions:

- What products to I want to offer?
- What products do I not want to offer?
- Which markets do I want to target?
- Which markets do I want to avoid?
- Who do I choose to compete with?
- Who do I choose not to compete with?

The parallels between strategies in general and sustainable tourism development are strong. The six questions apply to national tourism organizations, regional tourism bodies, local governments and individual businesses. If the ultimate goal of sustainable tourism development is to move a destination from its current unsustainable position to a more favoured one then the answers to these question will achieve that objective.

No destination or business can be everything to all tourists. Destinations and businesses must make a series of hard decisions about where best to allocate their limited resources to achieve the best or optimal results. No two destinations are the same and, therefore, the choices made and the paths taken to sustainability will vary from destination to destination. Determining the best path to take involves understanding the unique situation facing each destination, its competitive situation, opportunities, strengths and weaknesses. These in turn will influence the establishment of goals, whose achievement will be affected by the ability of that destination to find or develop the necessary skills required.

So, think about what follows from the context of these six questions.

## **What is Sustainable Development?**

To understand the principles behind sustainable tourism development, it is first necessary to appreciate how the idea evolved.

During the 1980s, it became apparent that major global environmental changes were occurring suddenly and silently and that these changes had not been predicted by scientists. The world also became more aware that there was an element of uncertainty and risk in relation to the effect of a range of human activities on global environments. To rectify these problems, fundamental changes were required in our style of living.

The concept of sustainable development came from this realisation. It was first mentioned in 1987 in a report published by the World Commission on Environment and Development. It defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The report identified a number of key principles including:

- Inter-generational equity - meaning that the range of activities and the scope of ecological diversity available to future generations is at least as broad as that felt by current ones.
- Intra-generational equity, social justice and poverty alleviation - improving the well-being of all residents in a community, and not just benefiting the powerful or the rich
- Public participation – which means that we all share a role to play and that communities need to collectively make decisions rather than having them imposed by external forces
- Environmental protection as an integral component of economic development – economic development without environmental conservation is no longer acceptable
- Dealing cautiously with risk and uncertainty - in situations where environmental impacts of activities are not known, the preferred option is to proceed cautiously or not at all, until the likely impacts can be determined.

Some additional elements have been included:

- use of renewable resources at a rate equal to or less than the natural rate of regeneration
- accountability – about setting clear standards, ensuring monitoring and enforcement.

In principle, most people support sustainability. However, in practice it has been difficult to achieve because it is so broad and complex. Indeed, two different ideologies have emerged:

- One arguing for economic sustainability as the dominant characteristic (i.e. the status quo),
- And the other arguing ecological sustainability as the dominant feature.

Yet, if you consider sustainability in the context of a strategy both economic and ecological considerations are needed, for you cannot have true sustainability with addressing both concerns.

## **Sustainable Tourism**

Tourism is most ideally suited to adopt sustainability as a guiding philosophy. There are many reasons:

- apart from transport, tourism does not consume additional non-renewal resources.
- a community's resources, its culture, traditions, shops, leisure facilities, etc represent the core resources base for tourism

- tourism use of resources, both natural and cultural, should be non consumptive, making them renewable
- tourism represents one of the few economic opportunities available to remote communities
- tourism provides a real opportunities to reduce poverty, create employment for disadvantaged people and stimulate regional development
- tourism has proven to revitalize cultures and traditions
- tourism can provide an economic incentive to conserve natural and cultural assets.
- tourism has been shown to foster greater understanding between peoples and a greater global consciousness

But, historically much of tourism has been unsustainable. Why?

- Tourism is a fierce competitor for resources - the provision of cultural and ecotourism opportunities for tourists may mean that local residents are displaced
- The needs of tourists are different than those of local residents and, thus, serving tourists may again not suit the needs of local residents
- Few people understand tourism and what is required to develop successful tourism products, meaning that a lot of countries have made unwise investments in tourism
- Tourism is often imposed on local communities, especially rural and minority communities, at level and speed that causes great social disruption.

And so, sustainable tourism is really an issue of how best to encourage tourism while minimizing its costs.

The World Tourism Organization defines sustainable tourism as “tourism which leads to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be filled while maintaining cultural integrity, essentials ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems.”

Over the last 10 years sets of principles have been developed to try to operationalise the idea. These principles identify sustainable tourism as having four pillars economic, ecological, cultural and community sustainability. Various guidelines have been developed for each.

#### **1. Economic sustainability - that is profitable in both the immediate and long term**

- Form partnerships throughout the entire supply chain from micro-sized local businesses to multinational organisations
- Use internationally approved and reviewed guidelines for training and certification
- Promote among clients an ethical and environmentally conscious behaviour
- Diversify the products by developing a wide range of tourist activities
- Contribute some of the income generated to assist in training, ethical marketing and product development
- Provide financial incentives for businesses to adopt sustainability principles

- 2. Ecological sustainability - development that is compatible with the maintenance of essential ecological processes, biological diversity and biological resources**
  - Codes of practice should be established for tourism at all levels
  - Guidelines for tourism operations, impact assessment and monitoring of cumulative impacts should be established
  - Formulate national, regional and local tourism policies and development strategies that are consistent with overall objectives of sustainable development
  - Institute baseline environmental impact assessment studies
  - Ensure that the design, planning, development and operation of facilities incorporate sustainability principles
  - Ensure tourism in protected areas, such as national parks, is incorporated into and subject to sound management plans
  - Monitor and conduct research on the actual impacts of tourism
  - Identify acceptable behaviour among tourists
  - Promote responsible tourism behaviour
  
- 3. Cultural sustainability - increase people's control over their lives and is compatible with the culture and values of those affected and strengthens the community identity**
  - Tourism should be initiated with the help of broad based community input
  - Education and training programs to improve and manage heritage and natural resources should be established
  - Conserve cultural diversity
  - Respect land and property rights of traditional inhabitants
  - Guarantee the protection of nature, local and the indigenous cultures and especially traditional knowledge
  - Work actively with indigenous leaders and minority groups to insure that indigenous cultures and communities are depicted accurately and with respect.
  - Strengthen, nurture and encourage the community's ability to maintain and use traditional skills.
  - Educate tourists about desirable and acceptable behaviour
  - Educate the tourism industry about desirable and acceptable behaviour
  
- 4. Local sustainability - that is designed to benefit local communities and generate/retain income in those communities**
  - The community should maintain control over tourism development
  - Tourism should provide quality employment to community residents
  - Encourage businesses to minimize negative effects on local communities and contribute positively to them
  - Ensure an equitable distribution of financial benefits throughout the entire supply chain
  - Provide financial incentives for local businesses to enter tourism
  - Improve local human resource capacity

## **Why Sustainability is hard to achieve?**

Many people support the principles and guidelines in theory. And, as a guiding strategy it also seems to make sense, especially given that:

- the absolute tourism resource base is limited and will come under increasing pressure from modernization and continued economic development
- more and more people are travelling each year, meaning:
  - use pressures will increase,
  - the number of first time tourists who need to be taught appropriate behaviour will grow
- consumers are becoming much more sophisticated and worldly and are increasingly making ethical choices about some of their tourism purchases
- ecotourism and cultural tourism represent low-cost product development opportunities for destinations, and
- ecological and cultural assets are one of the few truly unique features of countries and regions, giving them a competitive advantage

Yet, few if any tourism products are truly sustainable and fewer if any destinations can be called sustainable. Not only that, but tourism on a global scale seems to be moving farther from sustainability now than ever before.

The issue is particularly problematic in the developing world and in the economies in transition from a demand economy to a market economy. Indeed, many newly emerging destinations promote sustainability but adopt the same old practices with the same adverse effects that have been troubling tourism for decades.

There are many success stories, but there are also many failures

Why is there such a gap between ideology and practice? These are some of the reasons that have been identified:

### **Economic**

- Improving the economic well-being of residents through economic growth and job creation is a higher national priority than conservation
- Tourism, and especially large scale mass tourism is pursued because of the foreign direct investment and foreign exchange it generates
- Tourism is a means to attract foreign aid for large scale infrastructure development, without any ongoing funds for maintenance

### **Structural**

- A lack of a strong national sustainable development framework under which tourism can fit
- A weak institutional framework with inadequate control mechanisms
- A failure to plan comprehensively for large flows of tourists to remote areas in relation to local resources, electricity and water supply

- Tourism is the only option for economic development, even though the area lacks assets required to be a viable destination.

### **Tourism**

- The environment and local cultures represent the easiest, low-cost and fastest way to develop tourism attractions so they are exploited
- A lack of understanding about what tourism is and how it works
- A lack of commitment by tourism operators to safeguard the local environment and host cultures
- The misguided belief that small is good

### **Social / Community**

- Communities pursue tourism without understanding fully its implications
- Tourism can be imposed on local communities by the dominant ethnic, cultural, or business group, or by political leaders

As you can see, many of the structural issues fall outside of the direct control or influence of government tourism officials and members of the tourism industry.

But, academics, government officials, community leaders and the tourism industry can take an active role in addressing most of the other issues. It is not hard, but it does take vision, commitment and a shared goal.

### **Leadership**

Government must take the lead, but in doing so it must work in partnership with other levels of government, host communities and the tourism industry.

Leadership involves:

- establishing national tourism objectives that reflect the unique character, opportunities and constraints in Kyrgystan
- developing a shared vision of what type of tourism is wanted and how to achieve that goal
- establishing a policy framework to achieve those objectives
- developing, in collaboration with others, guidelines, policies and practices for both new tourism projects and the management of ongoing tourism activities
- working with the Academy, educational institutions and other organizations in education, training and development programs
- providing a longer-term commitment to move from the current situation to a more attractive future position.

In other words, adopting a strategic outlook and answering these six question can set a country on the path to sustainable tourism.

- What products to I want to offer?
  - high quality, ethical and sustainable that benefit local communities



- What products do I not want to offer?
  - low quality, mass and exploitative products that do not benefit local communities
- Which markets do I want to target?
  - upmarket, affluent, educated, aware tourists. Target exclusivity and quality
- Which markets do I want to avoid?
  - High volume, low yield markets
- Who do I choose to compete with?
  - Other quality special interest tourism destinations
- Who do I choose not to compete with?
  - mass market, low quality destinations

## Conclusions

This paper has introduced some of the key features behind sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism concepts have grown out of the idea of sustainable development which was first identified about 15 years ago. The principles of sustainable development focus on taking a longer-term and more cautious approach to development to ensure that our children can enjoy a quality life.

Sustainable tourism has identified how the tourism industry can contribute to overall sustainable development and continue to provide high quality, low impact experiences. Sustainable tourism is built around four pillars of tourism, economic sustainability, ecological sustainability, cultural sustainability and local sustainability. All four of these elements must be addressed if we are to achieve sustainable tourism.

As somebody from a business school background, sustainability can be considered as a strategy, which moves it away from the abstract into the practical. Strategies are designed to move an organization or destination from a current less favoured position to a more favoured future position. In doing so, strategic decisions are based on vision, the identification of shared goals, and leadership. And, ultimately, strategies involve answering the six questions raised earlier.

Thank you.

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