

# TOURISM IN THE CONTEXT OF A GENERAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY IN CATALONIA

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays regional and sectorial planning almost invariably incorporates the sustainable development paradigm in order to enrich its approach and procedures. To all effects, sustainability has become a fundamental component of all planning processes. This approach has been incorporated into tourism planning over the last two decades (Dutton & Hall, 1989; Inskip, 1991; Eber, 1992; OMT, 1993; Bramwell *et al.*, 1996; Berke & Manta-Conroy, 2000; Berke, 2002; Gunn & Var, 2002; OMT, 2004; Pardellas & Padín, 2004; Ruhanen, 2004; Weaver, 2006; Hall, 2007; Tourism Sustainability Group, 2007; Ruhanen, 2008; Soteriou & Coccossis, 2010). In contrast, tourism is seldom seen as a key or priority sector in overall planning processes, in spite of its economic importance in many regions (Dredge & Moore, 1992, Connell *et al.*, 2009). One of the objectives of this article is to examine the extent to which this statement holds true for a recent sustainable planning process undertaken in Catalonia, Spain.

As is well known, Catalonia is a key national and international tourism destination and tourism is a strategic sector in the region's present –and presumably also future– economy. Understandably, the regional government's *Strategic Plan for Tourism 2005-2010* (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2006), pinpointed sustainability as one of the key *liefmotifs*. More recently (2008-2010) a multi-sectorial *Strategy for Sustainable Development in Catalonia* (EDSCAT) was drawn up under the direction and coordination of the Department for the Environment (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2010). The process was divided into two phases, the first of which consisted in the analysis and diagnosis by independent «experts» in each sector who were also invited to make proposals for increasing sustainable development in their particular sector. In the second phase, consensus was sought among the sectors to draw up a common, applicable strategy. In this article the group of «tourism experts» analyze the diagnosis, explain and justify their proposals and evaluate the suitability and foreseeable effectiveness of the measures included in the final document.

## II. FIRST PHASE: 1. ANALYSIS

### 2.1. The conceptual framework of sustainable tourism

Since the original introduction of the sustainability concept in the «Brundtland Report» on «Our common future» (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) many definitions of «sustainable tourism» have appeared (e.g. OMT, 1993: 7; Eber, 1992: 3; Countryside Commission, 1995: 2; Payne, 1993: 154-5; Woodley, 1993: 94; Bramwell *et al.*, 1996: 10-11), to become an ideology, a political catch phrase, a concept, a philosophy, a process or a product, depending on the context (Wall, 1996). Coccossis (1996) suggested four possible interpretations for tourism in the context of sustainable development: economic sustainability; ecological sustainability; long-term competitiveness of a destination; and tourism seen as part of a development strategy in the overall physical and human environment. In the present case, it could be said that the first phase incorporates the first three perspectives, while the second phase -the overall strategy- is approached from Coccossis's fourth perspective.

Nevertheless, at the outset, the definition of «sustainable tourism» presents certain difficulties. An initial definition was provided by the WTO (OMT, 1993) and criticised by Butler (1993) among others. A decade later, the WTO offered a redefinition of the term (OMT, 2004) to incorporate the concept of tourism development within the parameters of sustainable development. However, the case of mature destinations gave rise to the dilemma of making massification compatible with sustainability, a problem which Butler (1999: 13) defined as being perhaps more important than that of new «alternatives». Thus, in recent WTO publications reference is made to the need to advance towards «more sustainable tourism» rather than «sustainable tourism» (OMT, 2006, 2007), placing the accent on improvement in relative terms. Farrell & Hart (1998) indicate three main conceptions of sustainability that should be incorporated in a good working definition of sustainability: 1) The critical limit view focuses on preservation of the ecosystems and respect for the limits that they impose; 2) The competing objectives view focuses on balancing economic, social and ecological goals; 3) Inter and intra-generational equity focuses safeguarding the planet for future generations, on the one hand, and guaranteeing the equal distribution of costs and benefits at present, on the other. It is in the context of these reflections that the first phase was addressed.

### 2.2. Characteristics of tourism in Catalonia

Within Spain, Catalonia plays a key role in the tourism sector, as it is the autonomous community with the biggest supply, highest number of tourist arrivals and greatest tourism income. The sum total of international and domestic tourist arrivals are now 36.7million (excluding day-trippers), thus confirming the importance of the region in global terms and its key role in the local economy (Jiménez & Prats, 2006; Priestley & Llurdés, 2007; Garay & Cànoves, 2009).

The main characteristics of tourism in Catalonia can be summed up as follows: (López, 2009): tourism forms part of the region's economic structure and has served a vertebrate role in the territory; demand, largely based on the 3S product, is highly seasonal and supply is

concentrated on the coast; the source of demand is diverse; both the private and public sectors participate actively; it is a very mature but dynamic destination where signs of changes can be distinguished in recent years. The wide variety of landscapes have made it possible to develop other traditional types of tourism, such as winter sports and urban / cultural tourism, together with more innovative forms, including rural and gastronomic tourism. This is not only a response to demand, but also to the creation of new products and supply –especially inland– where tourism is seen as an opportunity able to contribute to the economic and social sustainability of many rural areas.

### **2.3. Spatial and temporal patterns**

The autonomous government has divided the region into ten «tourism brands» (Figure 1). However, the statistics demonstrate that supply is highly concentrated: consisting of hotels and campsites in the coastal brands, with a second focus of camp sites in the Pyrenean brands (Table 1). Rural tourism, while much less well developed, is growing fast and spreading throughout the territory and especially into the inland brands. The huge number of second homes generates considerable impact, due not only to their volume, but also to the predominantly low density construction, their dispersion and preference for attractive locations. Moreover, they are notably less sustainable in social and economic terms than commercial forms of tourism.

Logically, the distribution of demand (Table 2) follows a similar pattern to that of supply, with a concentration of foreign bed-nights on the coast and in Barcelona, where demand has grown spectacularly over the last 15 years. The pattern of domestic tourism is quite different, especially that of the Catalan population, who show a trend towards the diffusion of demand inland.

An additional aspect closely related to tourism sustainability is the temporal pattern of demand and, in the case of Catalonia, demand is highly seasonal (Table 3). Moreover, even in the high season, maximum occupation levels seldom reach 100% except in a few coastal destinations in the height of summer, thus further demonstrating the spatial asymmetry. Hence, in spite of trends towards product and territorial diversification, the reduction of seasonality remains as a key challenge.

## **III. FIRST PHASE: 2. DIAGNOSIS**

It must be borne in mind that the vast majority of tourism development in Catalonia took place between 1960 and 1990, before the application of sustainability principles. Hence, the sector is faced with two different challenges: the correction of faults in consolidated resorts and the implantation of sustainable practices in currently developing destinations. With regard to the former, Butler's (1980) cycle foresees long-term success through rejuvenation and further growth, not necessarily in application of sustainable parameters. However, in order to achieve the relative sustainability of mature destinations –Lloret de Mar, Calella or Salou, for example– an alternative model should be applied, in which a balance must be found between the relatively low carrying capacity of many natural resources and the operative viability of certain consolidated infrastructures and services that generate employment, in order to

achieve overall sustainability (Figure 3). It is in the light of these considerations that this analysis has been undertaken, bearing in mind the inherent difficulties of the reconversion of such destinations, a process that is already being addressed by many municipalities through product diversification and destination quality improvements (Donaire & Mundet, 2002; Santos & Fernández, 2010; Vera & Baños, 2010).

Meanwhile, new factors have appeared to complicate the scenario: a worldwide economic crisis and the acceleration of climate change. Tourism has always shown resilience in the face of crisis, but, even so, increasing international competition makes it absolutely essential to apply sustainability criteria in all future developments. The main risks as a result of climate change are: a rise in sea level which would undoubtedly affect the infrastructures associated with coastal tourism; increase in temperatures, which could affect the seasonality of activities and hence demand (with a move towards spring and autumn), the viability of winter sports tourism, and water and energy consumption in general (Esteban *et al.*, 2005; Saurí & Llurdés, 2010). Hence, planning for the future is fundamental in guaranteeing the sustainability of the «tourism environment» and of the economy and will require actions that affect the land, infrastructures and the configuration of products.

The key variables for understanding the challenges in achieving sustainability in the future are included in Table 4, grouped by tourism types. The main objective is to emphasise the location and territorial impacts, indicate desirable future trends and limits to expansion. Thus, some types have already reached or surpassed carrying capacity limits –3S, winter sports, city tourism (in Barcelona, but not other cities), nature tourism in certain destinations—whereas others have a considerable margin for further growth.

#### IV. FIRST PHASE: 3. PROPOSALS

The next –and complementary– step in the diagnosis process was the analysis of the main impacts, which led to the identification of a number of related strategic objectives (Llurdés *et al.*, 2009b), based on the analysis of a wide range of technical documents and regional reports (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2006; Secretaría de Estado de Turismo y Comercio, 2007; Comisión Europea, 2003; Comisión Europea, 2007; Tourism Sustainability Group, 2007).

##### 4.1. Strategic Objectives

Territorially oriented objectives: a) Landscape and heritage conservation, recognised as the main tourism resource; b) Planning of lodging capacity, with a view to restricting future growth –especially of the second home component– and the degradation of surrounding areas, encouraging the provision of higher value-added lodging; c) Redistribution of visits from overloaded to popular areas; to reduce seasonal imbalances; d) Improved management of public use of protected natural areas, to favour leisure activities while avoiding environmental damage.

Environment related objectives: a) Reduction of water consumption per tourist; b) Relative increase in renewable energy production and consumption; c) Increase in solid waste recycling; d) Improvements in environmental management, through the introduction of certification systems in tourism lodging.

Objectives related to climate change: a) Identification of responses to the effects of climate change on the coast, according to different scenarios and the implementation of systems of systematic monitoring and parameter control; b) Design of measures to guarantee winter sports tourism in the face of climate changes.

Socio-economic objectives: a) Increase in the average daily expenditure per tourist; b) Increase in average occupation levels in registered lodging and a reduction in the seasonality of demand; c) Improvements in job quality through training, with a view to increasing the permanent employment.

#### 4.2. Planning instruments and measures

The next step consisted of the definition of a number of tools and measures, based on the strategic objectives identified and composed essentially of a series of policy proposals, recommended for application by the public administration in the framework of the *Sustainable Development Strategy for Catalonia*. They include planning (P), management (M), legislative (L) and social (S) initiatives, together with fiscal and financial measures (F) (Table 5), as outlined below.

- **Draw up and implant sustainable tourism development plans in existing destinations (P/M):** Draw up a plan requiring «tourist» denominated municipalities to carry out measures to increase overall sustainability: the rational use of natural resources; the integration of tourism in local and wide scale planning; employee training, etc.
- **Apply environmental certification systems (ECS) at all beaches (L/P):** Introduce regulations that oblige coastal tourist municipalities to apply an ECS (ISO 14.000 or EMAS) on their beaches.
- **Draw up and implant viability plans in all ski resorts (P/M):** Extend the application of the current (2006-11) Mountain Resort Plan (*Plan Director de Estaciones de Montaña*); encourage initiatives to reduce seasonality through the development of activities not associated with snow; apply strict controls on urban planning to reduce dependence on real estate.
- **Encourage the use of collective tourist lodging (hotels, camp sites, rural tourism establishments) (M):** Draw up a strategic plan with the participation of both administrative bodies and the private sector to incentivise the use of collective lodging. Imaginative measures are needed: special offers for regular clients, «season tickets» applicable in the low season, family packages, etc. This would not only help increase demand but could also serve to discourage the purchase of second homes.
- **Encourage and incentivise the creation and expansion of tourism products that favour diversification and reduce seasonal concentration of demand (P/M):** Draw up a strategic plan for specific products that can achieve these purposes and guarantee their application. The public administration must assume leadership in both the design and promotion of such integrated products through the coordination of all the stakeholders throughout the region. Initiatives should include: the design of routes; the creation of multi-products at local scale; comprehensive promotion and

commercialisation structures for all Catalonia, including a web site that facilitates bookings and uses the latest social communication channels (Facebook, Twitter, etc.); enhance the image of Catalonia as a unit.

- **Guarantee the application of public use plans in natural protected areas (M):** Draw up management plans that permit public use without degradation, including elements such as: use zoning to guarantee environmental management, incorporating, for example, a «pre-park» providing many leisure activities and services; laying out and signposting of walking and cycling paths and tracks.
- **Incentivise water saving in tourism establishments (F):** Set up a grant programme for the introduction of measures and technological advances leading to water saving and recycling in hotels and other tourism related establishments.
- **Incentivise the use of renewable energy sources in tourism establishments (F):** Draw up a grant plan for the introduction of renewable energy sources beyond the existing obligatory regulations (*Código Técnico de Edificación*), to allow the sector to become a benchmark in renewable energy production and consumption.
- **Incentivise waste reduction and the increase in waste recycling in tourism establishments (M):** Draw up a plan for this purpose with ambitious but feasible objectives.
- **Incentivise the obtainment of environmental certification systems (ECS) in tourism accommodation (F):** Draw a public administration assistance plan for the obtainment of ECS, for both environmental management systems (ISO 14.000 or EMAS) and environmental quality branding (*Distintivo de Garantía de Calidad Ambiental* –Catalan ecolabel– or European Ecologic Label).
- **Encourage tourism activities that favour sustainable mobility (M):** Create walking and cycling routes at local and regional administrative level; promote both traditional and new routes through a wide-embracing catalogue; promote their commercialisation.
- **Encourage the consumption of local products in tourism establishments (F/M):** Apply tax reductions or offer grants for the purchase of local food products by tourism companies; incentivise quality improvements through sustainable practices in local production to favour their competitiveness (e.g. award quality labels); set up boards of representatives of the agricultural and hotel / restaurant sectors with a view to reaching agreements on the purchase and distribution of local products; create a label for establishments that use a certain percentage of local products and give additional publicity to them.
- **Apply measures to increase training in the tourism sector (S):** Widen training opportunities through recycling and upgrading courses for current employees, in collaboration with the employers and assisted by a grant / scholarship programme (bearing in mind new markets, such as China); improve understanding of the sector among related employment sectors (e.g. taxi drivers, etc.); improve and enhance existing studies in the tourism, hotel and restaurant sectors, ranging from professional training to undergraduate and post-graduate level university studies, reinforced with a system of scholarships.
- **Incentivise the creation of permanent jobs in the tourism sector (L/F):** Introduce regulations or legislation to reduce taxes in tourism sector companies that create new permanent jobs.

## **V. SECOND PHASE: INTEGRATION OF PROPOSALS IN THE OVERALL STRATEGY**

Obviously consensus on these tools and measures had to be reached between the public administrations and the private tourism sector. Then, in the second phase of drawing up the Strategy, two main difficulties arose in the preparation of a unified document covering all sectors: a) priorities –and the corresponding instruments– in one sector did not always coincide with those of others and b) valid indicators for monitoring progress were not always available, a problem also identified elsewhere (Orams, 1995; Berry & Ladkin, 1997; Swarbrooke, 1999; Ruhanen, 2008). Moreover, in this wider and multi-sectorial context, tourism lost protagonism. Aspects related to the natural and rural environment (protected areas, agriculture) and transversal objectives (improvements in the use and management of water, energy and waste) took preference over specific sector-related priorities. Hence, of the 40 challenges identified for the different sectors, (industry, construction and regional planning, agriculture, commerce, tourism, energy, transport and mobility, home and administration), only 16 were classified as of very high or high incidence in tourism (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2010). Another element with negative consequences for the role of tourism was the decision to exclude challenges that could not be monitored with quantifiable indicators. Hence some challenges had to be discarded and others evaluated with indicators that constitute only a partial measurement (Table 6). Thus, there is a clear difference between the challenges, objectives and measures outlined in the first phase tourism report and the contents of the general strategy drawn up in the second phase.

## **VI. CONCLUSIONS**

The authors initially drew attention to the fact that tourism is seldom recognized as a key / priority element in broad-based planning processes, in spite of its economic importance (Dredge & Moore, 1992; Connell et al., 2009) and set out to analyze the role of tourism in the Sustainability Strategy recently drawn up in Catalonia.

Given that the construction of tourism infrastructures has already had a considerable and, by and large, irreversible impact in Catalonia, expansion can be slowed down and the quality of the «tourism environment» upgraded, but major changes cannot be contemplated. Mass tourism cannot and should not be abandoned, as a significant drop in visitor numbers would generate highly negative effects on the economic sustainability of tourism. Besides, at present, no other economic sector capable of compensating a drastic reduction of tourist arrivals can be identified. Hence, sustainability can only be achieved through restructuring to raise quality, diversification through the development of specialised products that will attract a wider range of client types, additional added value and less concentrated in terms of season and location. All this requires impact control, regional planning and management, improved training, incentives for local administrations and private companies, and innovative initiatives and promotion methods.

Catalonia relies heavily on four major products (3S, winter sports, urban and cultural tourism) and these should retain their predominating role, as they have certain competitive advantages. However, they are threatened by their own excessive success and the first two by the effects of climate change. The types of tourism that have been expanding in recent years

(rural, nature and ecotourism, adventure and active tourism and golf) could be developed further, especially as they have certain advantages over the more traditional forms. For example, they do not inherit mass structures and practices, so suitable sustainable strategies can be developed; their location is less concentrated, so the benefits can be distributed better; they can be adapted better to the effects of climate change. The challenge is awesome and the measures needed are numerous and varied, but the future, not only of tourism in Catalonia is at stake, but also a significant proportion of the region's economy and its sustainable development.

Nevertheless, the final EDSCAT document has not incorporated all these recommendations, although the sectorial reports are annexed. The quest for transversal objectives, consensus on priorities and the cross-sector applicability of instruments obviously reduced the importance of individual sectors. Nevertheless, in spite of the significant contribution of tourism to the GNP, this sector was clearly relegated to a secondary role. This is partly explained by the «intersectorial» nature of tourism and partly by the statistical gaps that would make monitoring impossible in some cases and only partially viable in others. Hence, the final document constitutes a programme for working towards overall sustainability, its effectiveness in achieving such goals for tourism risks being limited, unless the authorities take into account the numerous recommendations outlined in the sector report.

It should be made clear that, by indicating these defects, there is no intention to invalidate or even criticize the Strategy. The lack of valid statistics to facilitate the monitoring process has also been identified in other countries (see section V), so Catalonia is not an exception. There is certainly a considerable difference between the challenges, objectives and proposals for action outlined in the first phase and the contents of the strategy that was finally drawn up. As a result, it is essential to complement this strategy with sector-specific plans incorporating the recommendations in the first phase report.