Sustainable Tourism Development in the Greek Islands and the Role of Tourism research and Education

G. ZAHARATOS
P. TSARTAS

1. Tourist development and labour market features - in relation to education - in the Greek islands

In the post-war period, Greek islands have been one of the most important tourist poles of the country. Their development features, which vary considerably and form different tourist development patterns, constitute an interesting research subject, especially in the context of sustainable tourism.

In the first part of our paper, we shall examine the tourist development features in the Greek islands and the characteristics of the tourist labour market in conjunction with the education level of people employed in the tourist sector. In the second part we shall elaborate on those factors which contribute towards more sustainable development patterns in the Greek islands. Finally, in the third part, we shall suggest a set of measures and interventions in tourist research and education, which can shape a positive framework for the sustainable tourism development in the Greek islands.

(a) Tourist development features in the Greek islands

Tourist development in the Greek islands is characterised by a wide variety of types and models of infrastructure and services supplied. The most important factors which have contributed in shaping this insular tourist development are the following:

- The non-coherent nature of tourist development together with the lack of programming and planning in the islands.
- The effort to adjust infrastructure and services to different demand requirements - especially those of international demand.
- The post-war tourist policy at both national and regional levels.
- The role of individuals, e.g: professionals, local representatives, groups of residents, people employed in the tourist sector who contribute to local development.
- The tourist resources of each island, which determine the infrastructure it offers.

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After the Second World War and, more specifically, after 1970, Greek insular tourism was developed through existing patterns and models. Their predominant tendencies are:

1. **Development heavily characterised by infrastructure and services for organised and individual mass tourism demand.** This type of demand is characterised by seasonality (2-7 months), the linkage of travelling with vacationing and the large number of foreigners in total tourist arrivals. In most islands which have adopted this model their whole development depends on tourism, influencing the local socio-economic structure. Quite often, this model has been developed in an unprogrammed way, with considerable consequences in local socio-economic and environmental structure.

2. **Development in which tourist infrastructure and services are gathered in specific - spatially - clusters (settlements or regions) which either have tourist resources or organised infrastructure.** It mainly concerns areas with geographical comparative advantages. In most cases, tourism follows the “mass” model and is linked with holiday making. However, there are islands with different types of development patterns (mass tourism, holiday tourism, cultural tourism, etc). The lack of planning and the dominant role of tourism, constitute a characteristic feature of this model.

3. **Development in which tourism constitutes a structured production activity and a special feature of the island’s overall development, without affecting or competing with the other production sectors.** In this case, tourism is developed in parallel to and complements the other sectors of the local economy. In most cases, tourism is the most dynamic sector in the island, while in some cases it is merely one of the sectors making up the local production structure. In this model, tourism is more “integrated” to the local structure, either because there were elements of programming or because different factors contributed towards this direction.

4. **Development in which different types of infrastructure and services co-exist and are addressed to different types of demand.** A characteristic feature of this model is that it constitutes either a combination of special and alternative forms of tourism, or a mixed model where both infrastructure of these forms and mass holiday tourism infrastructure can be found. In most cases, this development model is “integrated” to local socio-economic and environmental structure. It was developed either because there were elements of programming, or as an effort to adapt to competition or, finally, because different factors contributed towards this direction.

In conclusion, we would like to note that the aforementioned models usually relate to one island. However, there are cases where more than one of these patterns or models co-exist in an island. Some demonstrate a larger number of sustainability elements, while others only a few. The role of research and education is decisive not only in supporting these elements but also in shaping a structured sustainable development framework.

**(b) Characteristic features of the tourist labour market - relating to employees’ education - in the Greek islands**

Most of these features are also found in regions where tourism is characterised by: mass development, organised infrastructure and services, seasonality in demand, production dynamism and variety in development models. The main characteristic features are:

A small or medium share of employees having some kind of tourist education; they are usually employed in medium or high class hotels and organised tourist agencies.

- A small share of tourism entrepreneurs having some kind of tourist education.
- A small share of executives in tourist enterprises with university or post-graduate degrees in tourism or other disciplines.
• Considerable differences in employment patterns for men and women, especially those employed in hotels and agencies; these differences concern the posts, the education level and the period of employment during the tourist season.
• High percentage of unqualified - and often “underground” - employment in all types and sizes of tourist enterprises, which usually concerns women and young persons.
• Empirical knowledge in small-medium tourist enterprises (hotels, rooms to let, hostels, etc.) with a parallel lack of employees with tourist education or training.
• Considerable lack of local administration executives trained in tourism; this lack is also apparent in other public services and private enterprises which are indirectly related to tourism (commerce, transport, services, restaurants, etc.).
• The continuous specialisation and diversification of tourist services offered has led to a relevant demand for executives or employees with specialised tourist education in: organisation and planning of tourist development, group leaders for alternative forms of tourism (ecological tourism, excursions, cultural tourism, etc.). Generally, the lack of such executives bears upon the Greek tourist labour market and, especially, areas - e.g. islands - where the tourist product is characterised by variety and specialisation.
• Tourist education of the majority of employees concerns mainly secondary education or vocational training programmes.

The conclusion which can be drawn is that the level of education of people employed in the tourist sector has considerable weaknesses; measures have to be taken in order for the sector to be able to respond to the special features of demand.

2. Factors influencing the elements and procedures of sustainability in the Greek islands

The period after 1980 could be considered as an interesting transitional period in tourist development of the Greek islands, as regards the diversification in their development features. Our analysis focuses mainly on issues which support the “sustainable” features of this development. We shall point out that this has not been the result of an organised attempt or a structured policy, but rather a series of developments which, directly or indirectly, have supported the procedures of sustainable tourist development in Greece and, in particular, its islands. The lack of organisation and planning poses threats similar to those of “spontaneous” and unprogrammed mass tourism development which took place in the Greek islands in the ’60s and ’70s. This caused many problems in tourist development and the tourist “product” Greece offered at the time. This does not reduce the importance of factors supporting sustainability; it merely records the framework in which these factors are manifested. The most important of these factors are:

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a) Efforts made by enterprises and local authorities to support competitiveness of the local tourist product

We refer to efforts aiming at supporting activities - and developing infrastructure - in order to create a product with “sustainable” features. These efforts are evident in many islands and mostly concern: organisation of alternative tourism activities, services and infrastructure for special or new tourist products, professional training in services which support the diversification and specialisation of the tourist product.

b) The policy of the European Union

After 1990, EU tourist policies and initiatives support sustainable tourist development, especially at a local level. Such developments are apparent in: development of special and alternative forms of tourism; tourist development programmes in the countryside linking tourism to other production sectors; training programmes for the unemployed; programmes for the protection of the environment and cultural heritage. One of the geographical areas where such policies have been implemented is insular Greece.

c) Greek policy on tourism

The effort to diversify and improve the tourist product through the specialisation of supply and the development of new services (special and alternative forms of tourism) constitutes a constant parameter of tourist policy, especially after 1970. Even though this policy cannot be assessed as a whole, it has contributed in supporting elements of sustainable tourist development in the country. Two parameters which should be assessed in parallel are: linkage of this policy with European Union policies (one of the most interesting examples is the programme “Tourism-Culture”) and efforts to upgrade the country’s tourist product in view of the more intensified international competition.

d) Local tourist development plans and programmes

In the past years, a large number of local development plans and programmes - designed and promoted at regional, prefectural or settlement level, e.g. seaside zones, regions with special environmental/cultural resources, etc. - were based on sustainable tourism and its elements. Islands benefited from such programmes, while local authorities, public entities and the European Union played an important role in assigning, promoting and monitoring them.

e) Certain parameters of tour-operators’ policy

It is a factor which, indirectly, has contributed towards supporting sustainable tourist development. They concern: i) the turn of tour-operators to new or specialised tourist products and services, mainly related to cultural, educational, scientific, ecological, sea tourism, etc., ii) the effort to support entrepreneurial policies which aim at a balanced “integration” of tourist activities into the local social and environmental structure.

f) Changes in motives of both Greek and foreign tourists

In the past decades, Greece has responded to the new demands by gradually developing the necessary infrastructure and services related to modern tourist motives: cultural travels, travels to the countryside, excursions, travels to traditional settlements, travels with a naturalist content, etc. These travels shape a new, dynamic tendency of foreign and domestic demand. This demand contributed to the development of infrastructure and services with sustainable features in many areas and islands of the country.
g) Local socio-professional groups and agencies

It is a factor which functions indirectly, by supporting initiatives and procedures which contribute to sustainable tourist development. Some examples are: programmes supporting activities and infrastructure related to special forms of tourism, programmes relating to the environment or the protection of countryside settlements; promotion of production and handicraft activities relating to tourism; activities and infrastructure promoting local tradition and culture. Quite often, such initiatives are generated by local development agencies, which can be found in islands, as well.

h) The contribution of specialised scientists

This factor functioned widely - at the country as a whole - and indirectly supported the tendency to search for sustainable development models. We consider that the contribution of specialised scientist is important, especially in the following issues:

- The promotion of the need to have balanced tourist development models, integrated in the local socio-economic and environmental structure.
- The special features of the insular area, as regards its social, cultural and environmental structure and its geo-morphology.
- The critic assessment of the dominant mass tourist development model in all areas which have the relevant resources.
- The promotion of the view that tourism, culture and environment should coexist in efforts aiming at developing tourist regions.

The aforementioned factors support sustainable tourist development in the islands and other regions. However, the non-coherent nature and the lack of co-ordinated development in the islands hinder the shaping of structured “sustainable tourist products”. The third part of our analysis examines the issues in which tourist research and education must focus, in order to accelerate sustainability procedures in the islands.

3. Tourist research and education in the islands: a framework of interventions and measures supporting sustainable development

a) Tourist research

i) Registering tourist resources connected to sustainability

An analytical and complete registering of these resources aims at the following:

- To reveal geographical entities (region, island, group of islands) offering comparative advantages and which could be developed as “sustainable tourism areas”.
- To promote the characteristic features of these resources in order to lead to the formulation of a special promotion policy of the areas offering such resources.
- To register the special needs that these resources require in terms of local organisation and management and the development programmes required.

ii) Research of the potential and the needs of the islands’ labour market

This research constitutes a basic parametre in investigating the medium-term potential of sustainable development in the islands. It aims at:

- Registering the labour market needs to promote sustainable tourism programmes.
- Pointing out to the potential of some islands over others where specific factors (number of residents, demographic composition etc.) hinder the formulation of sustainability.

**iii) Examination of existing development models in the islands, in order to assess the possible relation with sustainable tourist development**

This will allow to assess some of the development features directly connected with the possibility to support sustainable development. It aims at analysing the following:

- Which development models are potentially related in a sustainable tourism context.
- Which are the necessary terms and conditions in order for areas offering special and alternative tourism infrastructure and services to acquire a structured and organised sustainable development framework.
- To what extent is it possible to achieve “co-existence” of areas where the dominant development pattern is mass tourism with areas where this pattern is the sustainable one.
- Which are the local production branches and sectors which can be linked to tourist development by promoting the necessary interlinking of the area’s production structure.
- Which are the possible necessary adjustments of tourist supply - based on the sustainability targets - in the medium-term characteristics of demand.

**b) Tourist education**

**i) Education and professional training structures in the islands: upgrading and specialisation aiming at sustainability**

The problems of tourist education in the islands are multiple and are directly related to the “tourist product” offered. To achieve sustainability, measures and interventions in the following areas are required:

- Upgrading the educational level of all employees in the tourist sector. This can be achieved through tourist education and training programmes. Emphasis should be placed on the increase in employees with higher and post-graduate tourist education.
- Specialisation of tourist education by enacting curricula focusing on sustainable tourist development requirements. These are: studies on special or alternative forms of tourism; studies in organising tourist enterprises; studies in planning and programming tourist development; studies in environmental management in tourist areas and enterprises.
- Upgrading the role of the Aegean University as regards both Tourist Studies programmes offered and their systematic interrelation with tourist research.

**ii) Innovative tourist education programmes in the islands**

Sustainable development is supported by innovative programmes which aim at creating a tourist product with long-term production features. In this context, the following tourist education and sustainable development training programmes are suggested:

- Distance learning curricula of three types: a complete tourist studies programme, continuous training programmes for people already employed in the sector and training programmes in tourism.
- “Polyvalente” education programmes in tourism for businessmen and people employed in tourist enterprises. This kind of education offers different courses within a thematically coherent education programme; it aims at offering knowledge on the operation of a tourist enterprise. It can improve the quality of services offered, especially in this area which is dominated by unqualified and empirical employment.

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- Training programmes in tourism for those indirectly employed in the sector, e.g. traders, individuals employed in transport, services, etc. This way, the educational level of people employed in a growing branch of the wider tourist sector will improve.

In conclusion, supporting the elements and procedures for sustainable tourist development in the Greek islands is directly linked with the quality upgrading and the specialisation of tourist research and education.