STRATEGIC PLANNING OF ENVIRONMENTAL TOURISM AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONAL TOURISM SYSTEMS

Kliment Naydenov
Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, 15 Tzar Osvoboditel Blvd. (BULGARIA)

Received September 28, 2017 Accepted February 04, 2018

ABSTRACT

The main objective of the present study is to prove that the implementation of the strategic planning of environmental tourism within the regional tourism system allows the creation of conditions for future development and helps to make informed decisions for the implementation of the strategic goals for development of the tourism in the regions. In the article are used primary data and secondary sources and the use of both, which is termed triangulation, or dual methodology. Primary data, which we used, is the data collected by us, i.e. interview, observation, questionnaires. Secondary sources used in the article are data that already exists - previous research, official statistics, mass media products, government reports, web information, historical data and information. The results of the survey will prove that, in the context of socio-economic transformations implying the adaptation of environmental tourism to the requirements of the regional economy of tourism and the competitive international tourism market, strategic planning is the most adequate instrument that can consolidate the efforts of the regional authorities, business structures, public organizations and others in addressing the problems of transformation of employment, technology, development and formation of new destinations.

Key Words: Environmental tourism, Strategic planning, Regional tourism system, Socio-economic transformations, Transformation of employment, New destinations

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the role of tourism has been promoted and popularized in several key areas - inclusive and sustainable economic growth; social inclusion, employment and poverty reduction; resource efficiency, environmental protection and combating climate change; cultural values, diversity and cultural heritage; mutual understanding, peace and security. Tourism in most cases is a threat to the environment and, above all, to nature. Tourism contributes to the destruction and destruction of the same natural resources that originally attracted tourists to the region. However, tourism can also make a positive contribution to improving the environment by becoming an incentive to preserve, preserve and protect natural resources. The tourism industry can focus on important environmental issues and trigger the adoption of projects that conserve and preserve the natural environment and thus become an ally of nature conservation organizations. The creation of national and nature parks helps preserve valuable natural resources while being accessible for tourist traffic. New types of tourism that are more closely linked to culture, nature, health, religion, etc., are growing three times faster than more traditional forms. In recent years, an increasing number of tourists have focused their interest on ecotourism (environmental tourism) - a meeting with the natural environment and various natural landscapes. Environmental tourism typically defined as travel to destinations where the flora, fauna and cultural heritage are the primary attractions. Very often, they seek to familiarize themselves with the authentic historical and cultural sites and traditions of the local population, combined with the surrounding environment. The data show that the share of this type of tourism is constantly increasing, exceeding 20% of the total tourist flow. Interest in ecotourism arises as a result of the combination of growing demand for authentic tourist experiences and rising interest in environmental protection. Ecotourism oc-
upies a special niche within tourism. It includes tourist forms that are compatible with natural, cultural and social values and merits, as well as which promote cultural and ecological interactions in authentic and untouched natural environments and conditions. UNWTO has defined sustainable tourism as "Development that meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future. Tourism is envisaged as a means of managing 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 aim of sustainable tourism is to capture the economic benefits of tourism without damaging or degrading the resources upon which tourism ultimately relies. Ecotourism is a type of sustainable tourism, based on nature and usually following certain principles of development and good practices. Many consider it to be a beneficial side effect from the trend of sustainable development because of the idea that environmentally vulnerable regions and nature can be protected through financial revenues from ecotourism activities. Ecotourism is a cost-effective tourism that does not destroy the resources that determine its future development, especially those of the natural and social environment. Sustainable eco-tourism is the one that meets the needs of the consumer, the tourism industry and the host community today, without ignoring the possibility of meeting the needs of future generations tomorrow. It is widely argued that ecotourism can play a significant role in sustainable economic development while conserving the natural resources, mainly in developing countries.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES
The main purpose of tourism planning can be the development of strategies and guidelines for the sustainable development of the tourism industry in accordance with the economic, social, cultural and environmental conditions and requirements of the territory or the settlement. Tourism planning is most closely related to planning for sustainable economic development. Examples include a plan to increase currency transfers, the employment plan, a plan for the economic development of a municipality with fabled tourism functions, etc. Strategic planning for the sustainable development of regional tourism systems is an integral part of the overall spatial and socio-economic planning of the respective territory. On this basis, its main tasks should be to formulate the vision for the development of the tourist destination, the definition of the qualitative and quantitative objectives corresponding to the vision, the identification of the appropriate strategies for the achievement of the goals and the indication of the content of the management process required by the tourism destination. The different aspects of strategic planning of the development of ecological tourism and its existing approaches are subject to wide discussion in our and foreign specialized literature, but in general a number of issues remain unclear. This often leads to discussions and sometimes-ambiguous interpretations of concepts and definitions from the tourist terminology. Still insufficient practical experience in the strategic planning of the development of ecological tourism makes the research in this area of knowledge and practice more relevant.

METHODOLOGY
Realistic planning strategies can only be developed in partnership with all stakeholders (universities, NGOs, business organizations and citizens). Stakeholders should be involved in the process of developing strategies. At all times, citizens, social and business partners need to get acquainted with cooked changes in government-regulated areas. They can state their position and make suggestions for change. New approach and method of planning and programming of regional development of ecotourism with particular emphasis on territorial cohesion is dictated by the development and implementation of macro-regional strategies for integrated development. The current study of strategic planning of ecotourism and the development of a sustainable tourism product, and hence of regional tourism
systems, is based on 6 basic principles: realism - realistic goals must be formulated in strategic planning, which means that they must be tailored not only to the potential for development but also to factors such as institutional environment, tourism development trends, staff training, financial security and a number of others that can play the role of retention factors for its effective absorption; comprehensiveness - In the case of strategic planning, consultations must be national, sectoral and regional; sustainability - Strategic planning should not include tasks, events and specific activities, the solving of which has an isolated campaign character, with a short-term and rapid "dulling" over time effect on the implementation of the formulated goals in the strategy; transparency - All strategic documents of government / local government and all opinions expressed by participants in the planning process should be publicly available; continuity - strategic tourism planning should not start "from scratch" - continuity with the planning of the territory as a whole must be ensured; to have a connection with the other strategic documents in the respective territory; partnership and equality - Strategic planning for sustainable tourism development should be the result of joint efforts of many stakeholders (representatives of state and municipal authorities, tourism businesses, cultural institutions and the non-governmental sector).

In the article are used primary data and secondary sources and the use of both, which is termed triangulation, or dual methodology. Primary data, which we used, is the data collected by us, i.e. interview, observation, questionnaires. Secondary sources used in the article are data that already exists previous research, official statistics, mass media products, government reports, web information, historical data and information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sustainable destination management is crucial for tourism development, notably through effective land-use planning and land use, construction control, and investment decisions on infrastructure and services. (Fig. 1)

Fig. 1: The 4 pillars of ecological tourism

Strategic planning of the development of ecological tourism in regional tourist systems follows the three main approaches typical of the strategic planning of tourism as a whole. The first approach is that regional and local policies in some sectors of the economy, including tourism (in particular ecotourism), are often not conducted individually but integrated into the policy of other sectors of the economy. In regional and local development strategies and plans, districts, municipalities and some cities include as part of their tourism development strategies and plans / programs for which there are a number of reasons. Firstly, tourist organizations are an integral part of the overall economic and social system of these territorial units. Tourism has a strong influence on the state of lending, the level of development of the
"neighboring" (tourism-related) economic sectors, service industries, etc. Secondly, the development of the tourism sector needs a concentration of considerable financial resources and in many cases implies the presence of a significant number of participants, both at the stage of investment portfolio formation, construction and reconstruction of the material and technical base of tourism and infrastructure, the stage of operation of the individual tourist organization. Third, as practice shows, the highest returns on return on capital are achieved in the formation of a competitive complex tourism product, which implies the existence of a well-developed concomitant infrastructure and specialization at all stages of the creation and realization of the tourist services. The second approach is based on the fact that for the areas characterized by high tourist attractiveness and developed tourist sector, independent strategies for development of tourism are being developed. This approach is appropriate in cases where the development of tourism is expected to promote a dynamic and balanced development of the territorial-territorial units, as the strategy (the plan) focuses on the main (in this case only the tourism sector) to increase the competitive ability of the territory. The third approach takes into account the fact that often attractive places for tourists are located at the border or fall into more than one administrative-territorial unit, which requires the need for close interaction and cooperation between them. Such cooperation may provide for the use of a common infrastructure (water, sewage, roads, telecommunications, etc.).

In this approach, the development of tourism implies coordinated action of the local government with state power at regional, regional or national level. This is particularly true for municipalities with limited financial capabilities. Strengthening such cooperation makes a significant contribution to the development of tourism, as the overall effect will be higher than if each individual municipality were positioned separately. In this sense, a cooperation program should include: Creating and offering a tourist attraction and tourist business image of the municipalities included in the program with general advertising and information activity; Development of the infrastructure and the material base of tourism; Development and supply of a common tourist product; Creation of conditions for tourism development of individual settlements; Improving the structure of tourism management; Staff training; Information and scientific and methodological support for the activities of the tourist organizations. (Fig. 2)

![Diagram](image_url)

**Fig. 2**: Analytical and evaluation procedures during the different stages of strategic planning of ecological tourism as a tool for sustainable development of regional tourism systems (adapted from a Strategia za razvitie na turizma v obshtinite Kyustendil, Kriva Palanka i Shtip)

As a component of the regional socio-economic potential, local businesses and tourism organizations and hoteliers have a significant impact on the functions that the
Step 1: Establish the strategic objectives and the relevant criteria for the sustainable development of ecotourism in the region (quantitative and qualitative indicators); Step 2: Resource provision and the formation of a legal base for ecotourism planning; Step 3: System analysis of the current state and trends in ecotourism development (including assessment of previous plans and clarification of the reasons for their non-compliance, SWOT, PEST); Step 4: Develop a plan for the sustainable development of ecotourism and resource provision for its implementation (including corrective measures and resources needed for them). The plan should be in line with the region's socio-economic development plan and maintain a permanent exchange of information with it; Step 5: Development of a mechanism for implementation of the Ecotourism Sustainable Development Plan, including specific measures and contractors with appropriate deadlines; Step 6: Implementation of the Ecotourism Sustainable Development Plan; Step 7: Permanent monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the sustainable ecotourism development plan; Step 8: Results (intermediate and final) of the plan implementation and their evaluation. They are in constant correlation with the strategic objectives (quantitative and qualitative indicators) to correct current and formulate new strategic objectives. Here are also the main conclusions for the future development of ecotourism in the respective regional tourist system. (Fig. 3)

In order to implement the strategic planning of the development of tourism (and ecotourism in particular) as part of a regional tourist system, a regional tourist administration is required to be set up by the regional authorities. In addition to planning tourism related activities, it also needs to engage in activities related to the promotion of the region's potential. Particularly important for the development of ecotourism is that it should be carried out under permanent regional tourism monitoring. It represents a constant observation of the tourism industry in the region through quantitative and qualitative assessment of processes based on a set of indicators for effective management and opportunities for forecasting future development. Regional tourism monitoring needs to monitor whether ecotourism development has a positive impact on nature and local society. Particularly important for the development of
ecotourism is interaction between stakeholders. They all play a role in organizational
policy and structures for ecotourism development and marketing.

**Fig. 3**: Interested parties for the development of ecotourism

It is of paramount importance in the strategic planning of the development of ecological tourism for the sustainable development of regional tourism systems to cooperate with the local population to determine the level and type of tourist development of the destination and to encourage individual entrepreneurship, the public sector and the employment opportunities of the local population. It is very important to strengthen links with business, local people and local and national authorities through which commercial, social and environmental goals can be achieved. International tour operators play an important role not only through promotion of ecotourism but also through the advice they provide for product development and quality of the destination as they meet the requirements of tourists. Parks and other protected areas are the ones that attract tourists, enabling the local population to derive economic benefits by providing facilities and services.

**CONCLUSION**

Promoting alternative forms of tourism and diversifying tourism offers are the main challenge for policies in depressed regions. Sustainable development of regional tourism systems through strategic ecotourism planning and diversification of activities related to it is an opportunity to limit the seasonal nature of tourism. Diversification can help boost the attractiveness of destinations in underdeveloped regions and enable them to move beyond the traditional tourism model. Alternative forms of tourism (such as ecotourism) can help extend the season by creating numerous benefits, some of which are: New sources of income, which are a prerequisite for greater development and employment; Limiting the impact on the environment and the economic and social impacts and pressures caused by the concentration of tourism within several months of the year; Creating new activities to support the conservation and development of the region’s nature.

Sustainable development of ecotourism in regional tourism systems has made a positive contribution to raising environmental awareness and disseminating information on sustainable development goals in regional planning, raising the issue of sustainable development as a major cross-sectoral priority.

Regional decision-makers for ecotourism development should encourage a transition from physical infrastructure investments into activities that "create" the site, diversify products and services through activities that "transform" the site. This can be achieved by complementing the traditional product for the region (eg sun, sea and sand for coastal areas) with recreational activities related to nature (eg eco-schools). Traditional
regional tourism systems can be diversified by creating thematic routes and paths to familiarize themselves with regional natural resources. The analysis of the place and role of strategic planning of ecological tourism in the system of sustainable development of regional tourist systems shows that ecotourism has an important place in the structure of different regions and an important place in their socio-economic development. In conclusion, in the context of socio-economic transformations implying the adaptation of environmental tourism to the requirements of the regional economy of tourism and the competitive international tourism market, strategic planning is the most adequate instrument that can consolidate the efforts of the regional authorities, business structures, public organizations and others. in addressing the problems of transformation of employment, technology, development and formation of new destinations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In world practice there are different labels and standards reflecting the desire of environmental stakeholders for tourism - European tourist accommodation label. EETLS - European Ecotourism Labeling Standard. www. ecotourism-network.eu; Global Sustainable Tourism Council - GSTC. www. gscouncil. org; Green globe. http:// www.greenglobe.com; Green key; Environmental Organization for Environmental Protection with Certification (GEO). http://www. golfenvironment.org. An opportunity to turn ecological tourism into a tool for sustainable development of regional tourism systems is the introduction and distribution of an international green hotel classification. The certificate will be issued to hotels that reduce the harmful impact on the environment by reducing their own waste, using less water and energy. It is also important to combine the development of tourism infrastructures and basic environmental protection measures. An important part of turning ecological tourism into a tool for sustainable development of regional tourism systems are programs to popularize it among the public and to attract more people to ideas for environmental protection through the development of tourism. Ecological (environmental) tourism enables new destinations to be formed and new employment structured among the local population. It provides the opportunity for economic benefits for local communities and raising the awareness of locals and tourists about the need to preserve natural and cultural values.

REFERENCES