Regulation of Tourism: Institutional Responsibilities and Frameworks. Theme B.

Francesc Giró
Fundació Natura
Rambla de Catalunya, 121, 6-9
08008 Barcelona
Spain
f.giro@fundacionatura.org
www.fundacionatura.org

Abstract

One of the themes discussed in all preparatory meetings for the World Ecotourism Summit was: Monitoring and regulation of ecotourism: evaluating progress towards sustainability. The development of ecotourism is very different around the world and while in some areas the main need is an institutional framework that helps the development of this kind of tourism, in other areas the main need is to regulate and monitor this industry to make sure the impact upon the environment and local culture is minimized and that local people will benefit from it. This paper is a selection of some of the most important issues that were discussed in the meetings and tries to reflect the existing great differences between regions and countries, but also the similarities in the need for monitoring, regulation, being it on a voluntary basis or by law, and the need to evaluate how things are being done.

Resumen

Uno de los temas discutidos en todas las conferencias preparatorias de la Cumbre Mundial del Ecoturismo fue: Monitoreo y regulación del ecoturismo: evaluando el progreso hacia la sostenibilidad. El desarrollo del ecoturismo está siendo muy distinto alrededor del mundo y mientras en algunas áreas la necesidad principal es un marco institucional que facilita el desarrollo de este tipo de turismo, en otras zonas la principal necesidad es regular y monitorear esta industria con el objetivo de garantizar que se minimiza el impacto sobre el medio ambiente y las culturas locales y que éstas se beneficien. Este escrito es una selección de algunos de los principales temas discutidos en las conferencias e intenta reflejar las grandes diferencias existentes entre las regiones y países, pero también las similitudes en la necesidad de monitorear, regular, tanto si es de forma voluntaria como por ley, así como la necesidad de evaluar cómo se están haciendo las cosas.

Introduction

A number of issues were discussed at the different preparatory conferences in relation to the need to monitor and regulate ecotourism, and stressing the need and importance of evaluating progress towards sustainability. There is a wide range of situations, depending on which part of the world we are talking about. In some areas ecotourism is well developed, the governments have set up regulations, a number of certification
systems are available and there is only a need to evaluate if there is a real progress towards sustainability. On the other hand, there are regions where ecotourism is just appearing, there is a lack of institutional support and regulations are inexistent. In between these two extreme cases, there are a number of varied situations in the different continents, with different needs and with one common issue, which is the development of ecotourism.

WTO has been devoting a great effort to the development and dissemination of methodologies for the identification and use of sustainability indicators in tourism development. The WTO publication “A Practical Guide to the Development and Use of Indicators of Sustainable Tourism” defines a set of core indicators, which would be of potential use in all destinations, together with supplementary indicators for specific types of destinations (e.g., coastal resorts, small islands, eco-, cultural and community tourism sites). Another very interesting development related to evaluation is The Global Reporting Initiative, set up by UNEP and other institutions, which is producing specific indicators for reporting on the activity of Tour Operators, within the UNEP/WTO/UNESCO Tour Operator Initiative for Sustainable Tourism Development.

**ISSUES DISCUSSED**

**Institutional framework**

A common problem in many parts of the world is the lack of an institutional framework for the development of ecotourism. Besides that, in many countries the presence of many governmental ministries who have intersecting responsibilities regarding the developmental, planning and marketing issues relating to ecotourism, can become a problem since such bodies have contradicting agendas: balancing development of tourism (in this case ecotourism) and conservation of the natural and cultural assets. The need to develop umbrella mechanisms that allow such bodies to work successfully together in order to create the balance necessary for the development of ecotourism was also stressed. In some areas there was an agreement in the fact that Governmental commitment to conservation and ecotourism development is one of the most important factors for operational success. Since the natural environment is the primary attraction in many ecotourism destinations, it is imperative that public, private and non-governmental organizations co-operate in regulating the industry and enforcing the institutional framework. In some areas such as Europe in general, and the Mediterranean countries, the situation is different. Institutional frameworks are in place to guarantee proper development of ecotourism. However, in general there is confusion between ecotourism and other kinds of sustainable tourism and also the situation and real potential for ecotourism is very different depending on which country we are talking about.

**Regulation**

There has been a general agreement in pointing Ecotourism Certification and regulation as key factors of evaluation with a view to sustainability. An important point discussed was the need for public-private sector cooperation with a view to establishing policies, strategies and regulations relative to sustainable tourism development. Emphasis was made on how important it is to consult with all the players in protected areas, including the administrative bodies on the matter of regulating ecotourism flows. In desert
countries where borders very often have nothing to do with geographical limits, there was an agreement in the fact that regulations for ecotourism in protected areas should be extended beyond the frontiers of the neighbour countries. In some cases there was some resistance against the definition of regulations and it was suggested that a better approach would be to establish guidelines, and only after, a next step could be to transform a list of optional guidelines into obligatory regulations. In general, it was recognised that a variety of regulations need to be developed such as codes of conduct, guidelines and so on, together with legal regulations that help reduce negative impacts. Finally, in many cases there was agreement on the need and interest and very often there was not more regulation because of a lack of financial and technical resources.

Certification and labelling

In continents where ecotourism is well developed, one of the main issues that were discussed was certification and labelling. The experiences analysed during these conferences confirmed the need for basic guidelines, which should be adapted by each country to meet its specific conditions. Attention was drawn to the risk of certification being used as a non-tariff barrier by external buyers, which would have a particularly detrimental effect on small businesses.

Quality labels such as The European Charter for sustainable tourism in protected areas are very useful tools for helping such areas/destinations and tourism business/enterprises to define their sustainable tourism strategy by means of a strategic and participatory approach. Such labels aim to ensure the development and management of tourism in protected areas in a sustainable way, taking into account the needs of the environment (efficient protection), local residents (economic benefits and living standards improvements), local business (higher profits due to a high selling value of the labelled area) and visitors (high quality tourism experience). Labelling was agreed to be one of the ways to regulate ecotourism. In countries where ecotourism and certification are less developed, there was some resistance to it, with the belief that small-scale ecotourism products could not reach the standards.

Definition of evaluation and monitoring criteria

There are few examples of monitoring of ecotourism in order to evaluate progress towards sustainability. Communities need to identify what needs they have, the ways in which tourism can meet those needs and the delivery of those needs then need to be time lined in order to define evaluation and monitoring criteria. In a number of preparatory meetings, there was an agreement in the fact that there is a need for some kind of monitoring and evaluation of the degree of success of ecotourism projects, which can be used as case studies in the region to show, in a practical manner, the benefits of ecotourism development both for local people and for conservation. The situation is very different in each country but the experiences presented have shown that there is a need for basic guidelines for ecotourism development that can then be adapted to the context of each country. Evaluation and accreditation where found to be important tools for the improvement of ecotourism products and also for making easier the process of progress monitoring.
Identification of indicators

The identification of indicators and its difficulty was a subject of debate in a number of meetings. One of the indicators used was the collective welfare of the community, as it covers both community and individual benefits from ecotourism. One important point was to find out what proportion of income is going to individuals, households and to community projects and then how to monitor this. It was pointed out how important it is to secure information about community benefits from ecotourism. Sometimes the indicators set by governments are difficult to use, particularly where the indicators suggested by government are intrusive, such as the monitoring of household earnings in rural communities, which can have constraints. Other indicators are more suitable, in that they are in the public domain: for example the number of bicycles, better housing, ability to send children to school etc.

Another possible approach shown was to measure household income and other community indicators from the demand side. Surveys of tourist expenditure can reveal a great deal about community benefits without having to investigate household earnings in rural communities. It is possible to discover from tourists what they have been spending and where, and from this information to make good estimates of the amount of money flowing into local communities from tourism. Similarly it is a relatively easy matter to identify from the tourism industry the amount of money that is being spent in the local community. It was finally pointed out that performance indicators needed to be determined and agreed in the design phase of programmes and projects and to be related to clear development objectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Regulation of ecotourism

- Move gradually from optional guidelines and simple codes of conduct, into obligatory regulations.

- Legal regulations may be necessary to help reduce the negative impacts of ecotourism.

- Governments should provide leadership, coordinate planning and set the legislative and regulatory framework needed for successful ecotourism.

- Establishment of suitable legal frameworks underpinned by effective tools for controlling and monitoring ecotourism activities, along with other instruments, such as certification and accreditation, which contribute to improving the quality of ecotourism products.

- In order to become credible, certification processes must be transparent, readily understandable and broadly publicized, in addition, to which they should be subject to periodic updates.

- It is essential to consult with all the players in nature parks and with the administrative bodies involved on the matter of regulating ecotourism flows, safeguarding threatened sites and training guides while also creating awareness.
• Development of International, Regional and National Policies in order to address issues affecting the development of ecotourism. They should include guidelines, codes of conduct and best practices that define ecotourism.

• Establishment of management plans in protected areas which include sustainable development of tourism, zoning, codes of conduct, and land use planning, etc, in order to regulate ecotourism activities.

Labelling

• The enforcement of control mechanisms and monitoring of eco-quality has to be done with the participation of all stakeholders involved.

• Accommodation classification should include an ecolabel or eco-certification scheme in order to improve sustainability performance of accommodation facilities in ecotourism and provide consumers with reliable expectations and advice before booking.

• Involve all stakeholders in the acceptance and use of all tools for achieving sustainability in eco-tourism (eco-labels, brands, indicators, carrying capacity assessment, even the legislation).

• Compliance with general tourism regulations and codes should be stricter in the case of ecotourism, combining supervision and monitoring, with awareness raising campaigns among business people and tourists, training of service suppliers and possibly sanctions against those who do not comply.

• The participatory design and implementation of a voluntary certification system of sustainability of ecotourism activities should be promoted.

Monitoring

• The monitoring of the benefits of ecotourism for the local community should not be solely based on monetary indicators but also on socio-cultural factors such as infrastructure development, education and health services, as well as the community’s changed perception of its natural assets and their conservation.

• It is also important to measure changes in the level of awareness and acceptance of conservation in particular communities over periods of time.

• There needs to be transparency and independent review of the performance of projects in their contributions to both conservation and local communities.

• Setting targets and monitoring performance against the targets is important in assessing the scale of the achievement. This requires a record keeping system e.g. numbers of visitors, visitor satisfaction and expenditure etc.
Effective monitoring needs defining targets, which should be achieved in a certain time period (e.g. the number of tourists, ratios between modes of transport in terms of arrivals, water purification, reduction of noise and traffic, raising local generated income of people, employment etc.).

Indicators to measure performance and impacts should be defined. The range of indicators should include the social, ecological and economic development. They should cover those elements which are most crucial for local sustainability (e.g. water, area, bio-diversity, transport, employment, local income, local quality of life, security, crime);

There should be continuous data collection involving business and tourists (e.g. questionnaires); the involvement of all stakeholders in the monitoring process and monitoring institutions; and regular revision of the local ecotourism strategy taking account of the results of the monitoring process.

Local governments need to strengthen their technical capabilities to be able to monitor the performance of commercial tourism companies and of tourists within protected and non-protected mountain areas.

National subsidies and support for local projects and strategies must ensure that monitoring is a prerequisite of the projects, and that adequate financial resources are devoted to the monitoring process after the life of the aid programme.

NGOs should be involved in monitoring progress, since they can play an important role in order to guarantee the benefits of ecotourism development, both for local people and for the conservation of the diverse natural resources of the region. At the same time, taking charge of these operational activities allows a high level of control and monitoring of ecotourism.

Monitoring systems should be established in order to evaluate the economic, social and environmental impact of ecotourism.

Local communities should be supported so that they could take part in the process of monitoring the impact of ecotourism.

Evaluation

Evaluation systems for sustainability of tourism have to choose indicators and criteria for an assessment scheme that balances between indicators for state of society and state of environment, socio-economic driving forces, socio-economic and environmental pressures and driving forces and indicators for institutional frames. Such evaluations should be done and published on a regular basis, allowing for voluntary benchmarking of destinations.

ISSUES FOR FURTHER DEBATE
The reduction of the uncontrolled launch of pseudo-eco-labels. Creation of an “umbrella” eco-brand by joining tourism, environment and consumer associations.

Extend Certification to other aspects of ecotourism activity such as service quality and the participation of local communities in the management of ecotourism and the benefits thereof, besides environmental issues.

To establish Certification on a voluntary basis or as an instrument to complement the regulation of ecotourism ventures.

The certification of ecotourism products should pave the way for benefits and incentives for certified companies.

To explore easily accessible funding formulae to cover the cost of international certification systems which makes them inaccessible to small businesses.

Ecotourism certifiers must be guided by social criteria geared to facilitating the integration of small businesses at preferential rates and through technical contributions or the promotion of collective certification alternatives.

Financially sound NGOs should shoulder the role of a certification body at a cost more affordable for local entrepreneurs.

Local certification initiatives must be extended with a view to promoting the creation of regional networks, which could in turn be recognized (accredited) by international systems.

In the light of the proliferation of “eco-labels” and certification systems, steps must be taken to promote the establishment of an equivalent system or certification based on international parameters, which involves the concept of accreditation.

Certain laws and regulations within protected areas should be extended beyond their frontiers.

To promote a constructive public-private sector relationship. Private sector operators should take responsibility for the economic, social and environmental impact of their activities.

The private sector should be included in the process of designing regulations.

Establishment of an international award scheme for ecotourism destinations, associated with the UNESCO world heritage site designation, as an incentive for improved ecotourism planning and management.

Most of the existing concepts for eco-labels, brands and certification systems have to be enlarged by social and cultural aspects to reach the aims of sustainable eco-tourism.

To establish legally binding instruments for the implementation of sustainable ecotourism and avoidance of non-sustainable forms of tourism for sensitive areas, especially mountain regions, if the implementation is accompanied by specific regional strategies and measures.

The development of legislative frameworks at the regional level should be supported, because they can positively influence sustainability issues, including the promotion of eco-tourism and similar types of tourism harmonized with the environment.

Some countries have suggested that strict regulations for ecotourism at an international level should be avoided, while guidelines are acceptable.

Consideration of the obligatory introduction of certification systems for ecotourism facilities and operations, at least at regional and possibly at worldwide level, to guarantee that the quality provided is consistent with the principles of sustainability.
• One proposal was made in order to raise financial resources from visitors in order to fund conservation and management the natural environment and cultural heritage, as in many countries in Asia this proved to be one of the problems limiting the proper development of ecotourism.

Francesc Giró (Badalona, Spain 1956) has a degree in biology from the University of Barcelona and a Master of Science in Conservation from the University of London. Was granted by the “Centro de Estudios de las Universidades de California e Illinois” a one year exchange program to follow courses in wildlife management at the University of California, Berkeley.

Has worked as a biologist in a wetland Natural Park, working in habitat management as well as design of visitor trails and facilities. Worked later on, in the regional ministry of the environment in Catalonia (Spain) in protected areas planning and in a program to promote the conservation and management of wetlands and rivers. He is one of the founder members of Fundación Natura (Spain) and its present director. He is one of the earliest Spanish members of The International Ecotourism Society and member of its advisory board. Combines its work at Fundación Natura with consultancy in ecotourism and wetlands and river conservation and restoration.