

Sustainable Urban Tourism

Lecture 2 Sustainability of Urban
Tourism Development
DD / MM / YY

Sustainability of Tourism Development

It is evident from the analysis developed in the first lesson of this course, that the market alone and, hence, a tourism policy that is merely based on improvisation do not guaranty an optimal allocation of tourism resources. The heritage in cities is absolutely unique and non-reproducible and therefore virtually priceless. Moreover, these resources are public goods and the absence of some kind of a market price make it that visitors do not perceive any scarcity and are not paying the full cost of their behavior. In fact, the majority of these costs are often spread over the local society.

An alternative paradigm to the market that allows destination to make an optimal use of their resources is therefore urgently needed. This has been found in the concept of sustainable tourism development. Sustainability has become a central issue in much of today's tourism development literature. However, the practical application of the concept of sustainable tourism development has traditionally been limited to non-urban or rural areas. But what is actually meant with sustainable tourism development?

Sustainability of Tourism Development

Several authors have stated that tourism permanently changes a local society subject to tourism flows and that sustainability is very much connected with such changes or, more precisely, with 'acceptable' change. But not only does the local society continuously undergo modifications, tourism in the destination itself tends to change over time.

The development process of any tourist location may be represented cyclically. This "life cycle theory" of tourist destinations is an elaboration of the product life cycle used by business economists to describe the fluctuations in the sales volume of a product. Instead of the quantity of products sold, the life cycle theory of tourist locations uses the number of visitors as the indicator. The life cycle theory of tourist locations tells us that, in the absence of drastic external interventions, the number of visitors changes cyclically. Initially, the locality that stimulates tourism experiences a very slow rise in the number of visitors. In the second stage, tourism is booming, while in the third stage growth stagnates and turns into decline (the fourth stage). Not only the volume of the visitor flow changed over the cycle, but also its composition (i.e. the mix of tourists and excursionists).

Sustainability of Tourism Development

Since different types of visitors generate different positive and negative impacts, costs and benefits vary over the different stages of the cycle. Growth in tourism demand will positively affect income and employment levels of a relevant part of the population. At the same time, increasing numbers of visitors will generate negative effects, or 'costs' borne by the physical and cultural environment, the local population and the visitors themselves. By comparing benefits and costs in each heritage city, it is possible to determine whether tourist flows are either insufficiently voluminous or excessive. In reality, the assessment of the benefits and the costs of tourism is difficult because there are several 'parties' involved, which perceive benefits and costs in a different manner. The concept of sustainability and the life-cycle of the tourist destination are therefore closely related.

Sustainability of Tourism Development

If tourism development gets stuck in the initial stage, investments are unable to trigger the social and economic change desired. There are too few visitors, and the opportunities that tourism offers are not fully used. Tourism is costing the destination money. If growth in tourism demand is such that the quality and accessibility of attractions are compromised, the society and eventually even tourism suffer and change is no longer acceptable. Then, tourism demand has become excessive, and, instead of delivering growth, it threatens the local society's continuity.

Tourism management strategies for cities that face the problem of how to overcome the minimum limit to sustainability have been described in Law (1993) and Van den Berg, Van der Borg and Van der Meer (1995). In the case of heritage cities, the maximum limit to tourism development, very much related to what is more generally known as the carrying capacity, that is the most relevant.

Developing tourism in a sustainable manner means using the scarce resources a destination possesses in an optimal manner for tourism purposes, safeguarding not only the interests of today's tourists and the tourism industry, but also of tomorrow's. An optimal use of these resources implies that the net impact of tourism development for the local society is being maximized over the different stages of tourism development.

Sustainability of Tourism Development

Using Butler's life-cycle model, it can be shown that a development process of the destination contains both sustainable and not sustainable stages. Typically, the first stage of tourism is hardly profitable: investment costs are huge and benefits meager. Therefore, developing tourism only makes sense if one may expect that after having invested in attractions and facilities the number of visitors will rise sufficiently. The saturation stage tends to generate a net loss for the local society: benefits no longer compensate for negative externalities, such as congestion and pollution. In general, negative externalities appear when a limit to development has been surpassed.

As already said, the limit to tourism development is called the tourist carrying capacity, that is the maximum number of visitors a destination can host. Notwithstanding the criticism to which the carrying capacity as a planning instrument has frequently been exposed, it is very difficult to deny that an upper limit to tourism development actually exists; in fact, the concept has proven its value for visitor management in Venice.

Sustainability of Tourism Development

Residents are an important part of the tourism system around a destination. They form an important ingredient of the "hospitality" of a destination. The reaction of the inhabitants of a tourism city to tourism in general, and to tourists and excursionists in particular, determines the social impact of tourism on the local society and thus the social-anthropological carrying capacity of the destination.

The problem of determining the social-economic carrying capacity for the centre of Venice has often been formalized by translating the conflict between tourism and other functions into a fuzzy linear programming model that maximizes the income from tourism under capacity restrictions. These restrictions take into account, for example, the availability of accommodation, catering facilities, parking facilities, intra-urban transportation, waste disposal services and the space available in Saint Mark's Cathedral.

Sustainability of Tourism Development

The philosophy of the linear programming model is very close to the sustainability approach, namely that of the quest for the optimal use of resources. Until now, the model has been applied with success to different mature tourist resorts, such as Cambridge (urban environment), Crete, Capri and Vis (islands) and Cortina d'Ampezzo (mountain resort). In the case of Venice, the historical settlement in 1988 could support about 25,000 visitors in one day, of which about 15,000 tourists (60% of tourism demand) and 11,000 excursionists (the remaining 40% of the total number of visitors). Among the active restrictions were: the number of beds (the model tends to fill Venice first of all with tourists and then starts to look whether there is still space available for excursionists); the availability of local water transport (which determines the number of excursionists); and, relaxing this restriction, Saint Mark's Cathedral.

Sustainability of Tourism Development

Although the model lacked an explicit temporal dimension, its results were of great interest for visitor management. It taught the city first of all that the 'optimal' visitor mix differs from the measured one. In fact, instead of a weight of 60%, tourists represented slightly more than 20% of the actual total tourism demand. Secondly, one may conclude that given these findings the overall pressure from tourism seemed close to being -at least in theory- compatible with the total stress the social-economic texture of the city is able to support. In the absence of fluctuations in demand, the total carrying capacity of Venice is slightly less than 10 million visitors, With respect to a few years ago, tourism demand is now structurally conflicting with the most restrictive dimension of the carrying capacity.

Since 1991, the carrying capacity of Venice has been steadily expanding, mainly because of a substantial increase in the number of tourist beds and of investments in a number of critical subsystems, in particular local public transport and parking space. It is estimated that Venice may now host around 30.000 visitors a day, 18.000 tourists and 12.000 excursionists. Another recent phenomenon is the increased availability of low cost accommodation in Venice's historical centre. This has shifted the attention of low-budget tourism from accommodation in the mainland to cheap beds in Venice itself, favoring residential tourism and discouraging excursionism. Notwithstanding this less stringent carrying capacity, tourism demand in Venice remains excessive.

Sustainability of Tourism Development

Currently, the city of Venice is yearly visited by 27-28 million people, almost twice its carrying capacity, and 80% are still excursionists. Moreover, an analysis of the distribution of demand over the year shows that demand continues to be concentrated at weekends and in the spring, autumn and particularly summer months. During ten days of the year, total demand amounts to more than 100,000 persons. Peaks of 200,000 visitors on special occasions are no exception. But what is worse, two-thirds of the year, the number of visitors easily surpasses the social-economic carrying capacity. Thus, sustainability of tourism development depends on one hand on the mix of the visitor flow and on the other on the seasonal fluctuations in tourism demand. In effect, the number of excursionists should be reduced, while that of tourists enhanced. At the same time, peaks in demand need to be smoothed out and the low season utilized more intensively.

Furthermore, a better distribution of demand over space would be welcomed. These then become the two priorities of the visitor management strategy of Venice and of any other heritage city and site that is confronted with excess tourism demand during peak seasons. In the next module we will try to explain how to manage tourism in such a way as to make or keep tourism development sustainable in the way that was explained before.