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The Role of tour Operators and Tourist Agencies in Promoting a Sustainable and Socially Responsible Tourism

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Abstract: The paper aims to present the honesty of tourist activities and the approach of ethical principles based on basic values in the case of tour operators and tourist agencies, which carry out activities that promote sustainable or socially responsible tourism. Both forms of tourism can influence tourist behavior and promote sustainable and socially responsible tourism practices and products through a range of actions. The applicability part with details on how the values and vision are intended to be highlighted, as well as guidance to the executive staff on ethical standards and how to achieve them, remains a challenge, however.

Keywords: certification for sustainable tourism; sustainability; eco-friendly experiences

JEL Classification: Q26; Q56; Q57

1. Introduction

Imagine yourself in a remote land, connected to nature in the midst of the local community, learning about culture and traditions, sharing experiences and connecting with people, walking through orchards and vegetable gardens, or walking eco-trails, admire spectacular natural landscapes and discover rare and protected plants and animals.

In these places, tourism has a different meaning, one that focuses not only on meeting the needs of tourists, but above all on protecting the environment, supporting local economies and promoting local culture and traditions.

This is sustainable and socially responsible tourism, an approach that aims to provide an authentic and healthy tourism experience for both tourists and local communities. *“In this way, tourism can be a powerful tool for the sustainable and balanced development of the regions and communities in which it takes place”* ([#](https://webapi2016.cor.europa.eu/v1/documents/COR-2020-00303-00-00-AC-TRA-RO.docx/content)).

These are just a few examples of sustainable and socially responsible tourism experiences. On such trips, tourists can enrich their experience by being actively involved in the local community and supporting local economies, and local communities can benefit from tourism without harming their environment and traditions.

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“Sustainable and socially responsible tourism is an innovative and viable way to travel and discover the world around us” (<https://gala.green-report.ro/raport2022/raport-gala-2022.pdf>). It is a way to discover the beauty of nature and authentic local culture, while supporting the sustainable development of communities and the environment.

2. Presentation of Sustainable and Socially Responsible Tourism

2.1. Sustainable Tourism

“Sustainable tourism is a concept that involves approaching tourism in a way that reduces negative environmental impacts, protects cultural heritage and brings economic and social benefits to local communities” (Marin-Pantelescu, Tăchiciu, Căpușeanu & Topor, 2019) This requires a balanced and integrated approach to the development of tourism, which is sustainable in the long term, so that it can also benefit future generations.

“Sustainable tourism aims to reduce carbon emissions, use natural resources responsibly, manage waste and water, and protect biodiversity” (EBRD 2019) These objectives are achieved by adopting responsible business practices such as the use of renewable energy, responsible management of resources and the involvement of local communities in decision-making related to tourism development.

“Sustainable tourism can bring economic and social benefits to local communities by creating jobs, improving infrastructure and promoting local culture” (Diaconescu, Moraru & Stănciulescu, 2016). This can be an effective way to support economic development and encourage the conservation of cultural and natural heritage.

In general, “sustainable tourism considers the balancing of economic interests with those of the environment and local communities, so that long-term sustainable tourism can be maintained, bringing benefits to all involved” (<https://gaianca.ro/sustainable-tourism-responsible-tourism-and-ecotourism/>).

2.2. Socially Responsible Tourism

“Socially responsible tourism is a form of tourism that aims to develop tourism programs and services that bring social benefits to local communities and contribute to their sustainable development” (<https://www.padis.ro/ecoturism-padis/eco-tourism/>). It focuses on ensuring equitable benefits for all involved in the tourism industry, including tourists, local communities and the environment.

“Socially responsible tourism involves an ethical and responsible approach to tourism development that provides real benefits to local communities” (Marin-Pantelescu, Tăchiciu, Căpușeanu & Topor, 2019). This can include, for example, the promotion of cultural tourism, which will capitalize on local traditions and culture, the involvement of local communities in decisions related to tourism development, the use of services and local products and the promotion of a sustainable tourism infrastructure.

In addition, “socially responsible tourism can help reduce poverty and social inequality by creating jobs and improving access to basic services such as education and health” (MO, 2022). It can support the development of local communities through volunteer activities, donations and investments in local development projects.

In conclusion, socially responsible tourism involves a balanced and integrated approach to tourism development that is sustainable in the long term and brings benefits to all involved. By promoting

socially responsible tourism, it is possible to contribute to a sustainable and balanced development of tourism, which ensures economic, social and ecological benefits for all those involved.

3. The Role of Tour Operators and Tourist Agencies in Promoting Sustainable and Socially Responsible Tourism

Tour operators and travel agencies play an important role in promoting sustainable and socially responsible tourism, as they can influence tourist behavior and promote tourism practices and products that are sustainable and socially responsible through the following actions.

3.1. Sensitizing Tourists to their Impact on the Environment and Local Communities:

“By informing and educating tourists about how their actions can affect the environment and local communities, tour operators and travel agencies can promote responsible travel behavior” (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0109_RO.html).

By carrying out a series of actions and implementing policies aimed at canceling environmental damage, they could encourage tourists to use public transport, travel in small groups, the exclusive use of recyclable materials, directing part of the income to reforestation actions, active participation in local events with the aim of promoting sustainable tourism, or recommending eco-certified accommodation options. A guide to travel to reduce environmental impact includes:

Pack smart - no plastic only with paper or fabric;

Plant some trees - or choose another way to offset the carbon footprint of your travels;

Do not leave traces - on trees, on architectural elements, do not throw garbage anywhere;

Eat and buy local - buy products from people who produce them, choosing this option there is the certainty that the amount spent will go to the communities and the local economy. As for restaurants, the recommendation is to go to small local restaurants and bars;

Save water

Be a traveler, not a tourist - respect the customs and culture of those you meet;

Don't scare local wildlife - Avoid disturbing wildlife and don't damage their natural habitat;

Explore less popular areas – “Overtourism” is a phenomenon that most of us have encountered in at least one of our travels;

Travel with a responsible tour operator - when selecting the company you want to vacation with, ask questions to ensure their practices are socially, environmentally and economically responsible.

3.2. Promotion of Destinations that Respect the Principles of Sustainable Development

Tour operators and travel agencies could include in their offers destinations that respect the principles of sustainable development, such as those that use renewable energy sources, manage water resources and waste responsibly, or involve communities local in decisions related to tourism development.

3.3. Working with Local Communities

By working with local communities, tour operators and travel agencies can help develop responsible tourism that brings real benefits to local communities. Tour operators and travel agencies can involve local communities in the development of tourism products so that they align with local needs and values and contribute to community development.

3.4. Involvement in Environmental Conservation and Sustainable Development Projects

Tour operators and travel agencies could be involved in environmental conservation and sustainable development projects, such as restoration of natural areas or rural tourism development projects.

The certification for sustainable tourism (Costa Rica being the first country to implement this system, and which by 2025 intends to have zero carbon emissions) is the first “*system, which integrates the main elements of sustainable tourism, analyzing good management practices, social impact and on the environment of the services, as well as the customer’s perception of the service offered and the promotion of the product*” (<https://www.solimarinternational.com/what-are-sustainable-tourism-certification-schemes-and-do-they-work/>). The sign of this certification in a company implies:

- avoid gas emissions and damage to the environment due to pollution or other chemicals;
- carry out nature management and conservation actions, always protecting it;
- manages the waste it produces so that it does not create a negative impact on the environment;
- invites you to know the natural wealth of the country and urges you to care for and protect it;
- comply with standards, especially those relating to the environment, archaeological heritage and safety;
- hires and trains the residents of the community in which they operate, always having teams made up of experts in the area and nature;
- promotes the traditions and customs of the country, consumption of local food and national handicrafts.

3.5. Promotion of Sustainable Destinations

Tour operators and travel agencies can promote tourist destinations that have implemented sustainable practices, such as the use of renewable energy, environmental protection and the involvement of local communities in decisions related to tourism development. The communities visited should receive a direct benefit in order for the travel programs to be sustainable. (Tourism providers in Costa Rica are eco-certified and permanently carry out actions to protect the environment. Due to sustainability policies, the following eco-friendly experiences are internationally recognized certificates: The Certification for Sustainable Tourism Program, National Carbon Neutral Mark, UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, Gender Equality.)

3.6. Use of Local Products and Services

Tour operators and travel agencies can promote the use of local products and services to help develop the local economy and reduce environmental impact.

3.7. Educating Tourists about Sustainable Practices

Tour operators and travel agencies can educate tourists about sustainable practices, such as saving energy, reducing water consumption, and using public transportation or bicycles (defining actions in this sense: consumption of local, biodegradable natural products, application of the 3 R's – Rejection, Reduction, Recycling, or the application of water and electricity saving programs).

3.8. Promoting Sustainable Cultural Tourism

Tour operators and travel agencies can promote sustainable cultural tourism that offers a new perspective, placing cultural heritage and local communities at the center of decision-making processes.

“Involving local communities and other stakeholders in decision-making processes is essential to bring benefits to both cultural heritage and the local population. The objective of sustainable cultural tourism is to ensure good conservation practices, along with an authentic interpretation that supports the local economy” (<https://culture.ec.europa.eu/ro/cultural-heritage/cultural-heritage-in-eu-policies/sustainable-cultural-tourism>).

4. Conclusions

There is a close link between sustainable tourism and socially responsible tourism, as both approach tourism development in a responsible and sustainable way that ensures economic, social and environmental benefits for all involved.

Sustainable tourism focuses on minimizing the negative impact on the environment and promoting sustainable economic development, and socially responsible tourism aims to develop tourism programs and services that bring social benefits to local communities and contribute to their sustainable development.

In practice, socially responsible tourism can contribute to the promotion of sustainable tourism by involving local communities in decisions related to tourism development, the use of local services and products, the promotion of sustainable tourism infrastructure and the valorization of local traditions and culture.

On the other hand, sustainable tourism can support the development of socially responsible tourism by promoting sustainable economic development that benefits local communities, the use of renewable energy, the reduction of carbon emissions, the responsible management of resources and the protection of biodiversity.

In conclusion, sustainable tourism and socially responsible tourism are two interconnected concepts that complement each other and that can contribute to a balanced and sustainable tourism development that ensures benefits for all involved.

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