

ITC: LINKING CULTURE, NATURE AND COMMUNITY THROUGH ECOTOURISM

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Abstract

Innovative ITC tools and methods are used to create a network based on a “community of interest”, bringing together the stakeholders of ecotourism and sustainable tourism, as the linking of culture and environment with one type of economic development. Each of these players is dependently linked that once realized creates a symbiotic relationship.

Key words: ICT, ecotourism, sustainable tourism, E-tourism, sustainable development, conservation

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)

Stands for "Information and Communication Technologies", ICT refers to technologies that provide access to information through telecommunications. It is similar to Information Technology (IT), but focuses primarily on communication technologies.

ICT may be characterized by the use of computers, the Internet, cellular phones, e-business or e-commerce, etc. Is an umbrella term that includes any communication device or application, encompassing: radio, television, cellular phones, computer and network hardware and software, satellite systems and so on, as well as the various services and applications associated with them, such as video-conferencing and distance learning. [1]

In recent times, Information Technology has experienced a phenomenal growth both as an industry and in applications. Although, the global society is excited and basking in the euphoria of the various use of ICT, both as a private and corporate applications with all the obvious benefits.

Modern information and communication technologies have created a "global village," in which people can communicate with others across the world as if they were living next door. For this reason, ICT is often studied in the context of how modern communication technologies affect society.

1.2 Ecotourism

Ecotourism is a component of sustainable tourism. As ecotourism was originally just an idea and not a discipline, many organizations have promoted without knowing the basic principles. Efforts to establish

principles and criteria for accreditation recognized internationally have been initiated since 1990, but the process has evolved very slowly, given the diversity of fields, experiences and regions involved. The International Ecotourism Society published in 1993 a set of recommendations: "Ecotourism Guidelines for Tour Operators", which were accepted by the representatives of the tourism industry, NGOs and experts from around the world.

Ecotourism has been compared to many related tourism forms. Such an approach is justified because some of the basic principles of ecotourism are indeed shared with other tourism forms. However, ecotourism also has very unique, distinguishing dimensions. Ecotourism is related to nature, culture, farm, wildlife, and adventure tourism, and can be described as a sub-category of nature and culture tourism, a tourism form that can be practiced on farms or in wildlife, and consists of an adventurous nature.

Principles of ecotourism [2]

1. Ecotourism takes place in nature and is based on direct experience and personal in nature tourists.
2. Ecotourism contributes to a better understanding, appreciation and enjoyment of discovering and preserving nature and traditional culture, both for visitors and for the local community.
3. Ecotourism offers the best tourism practices and planning in terms of nature conservation and sustainable development. Ecotourism product takes place and is operated so as to protect and highlight the natural and cultural environment in which it is conducted.
4. Ecotourism contributes positively to protect natural areas. Ecotourism provides practical ways for good management and protection of natural areas (e.g., providing financial aid rehabilitation actions of natural areas, waste collection left by tourists or directed contributions to conservation organizations).
5. Ecotourism provides lasting contributions to the development of local communities. Local benefits can come from using local guides, local purchase of goods and services and use local amenities.
6. Ecotourism should ensure a reduction in the negative impact on the local community visited and to contribute to the conservation of local culture and traditions. Ecotourism activities while providing long-term constructive contributions this community.
7. Ecotourism must meet the expectations of tourists. Potential eco- tourists have a high level of education and expectations, so the degree of satisfaction related to ecotourism product is essential.
8. Marketing ecotourism offers customers complete and responsible that leads to the enhancement of the natural and cultural environment of the areas visited and the level of satisfaction of tourists.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

2.1 Identification of trends in E-tourism, from the perspective of the consumer and of the supplier.

This approach is particularly important for understanding how new technologies influence the decision-making process of tourists, but also for identifying strategic areas of a business interest where ICT integration is required.

Starting from Kotler's approach on the process of making a purchasing decisions has been identified the impact of ICTs on the five phases travelled by one of the digital age by the time of completion of a transaction.[3]

The tourist information available through search engines and online shopping environment offered by Internet a decisive impact on tourists both in the early stages of awareness of the need for purchase, search of information, evaluation of alternatives, and making purchase decision and post-purchase phase, there is a tendency in the increasingly large share travel experiences with other users in the virtual environment after returning home to tourists.

From the perspective of the supplier, the main strategic areas where there is a the strong trend of integration of new technologies are: online marketing (a successful marketing strategy should integrate compulsory measures online advertising, the website is not only a marketing channel and a electronic business platform), the vendor-client relationship (new traits in the age digital technology), technology known as E-relationship marketing (they are today used with much success, most sites of interest being interactive), pricing policy (is also influenced by the expansion of channels of communication; prices must be correlated with actual costs, but at the same time we must be competitive because it can be easily compared with other offers), strategic management (becomes increasingly more complex in the Digital age; computerized management improves business profitability by lowering administrative costs and can control in real time upon all sectors of activity), risk management (it adapts likewise at the new ongoing business conditions; tourist organizations must consider not only external security to a secure reviews, as well as domestic, securing valuable data against the action of viruses).

An important conclusion is that both consumers and tourism service providers have to adjust their behavior according to how they obtain information. In an efficient client-supplier relationship, such changes occur simultaneously and are inter-conditioning. Supply and demand is new technical connotations, and the information becomes a decisive role in the conduct of tourist activity. [4]

2.2 The role of the e-tourism in promoting sustainable ecotourism development

Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have been transforming tourism globally since the 1980s [5]. In [5], Buhalis and Law (2008) also state that since 2000 the truly transformational effect of ICT has been witnessed, giving scope for the development of a wide range of new tools and services which have transformed the ways tourism companies do business and how tourists seek information and experience a destination. The Internet is regarded as a valuable tool for consumers and suppliers to use in communication, online purchasing, and information dissemination. The popularity of the technology is apparent in the increasing rate of online transactions and the number of online users [6].

E-Tourism is part of electronic commerce and unites some of the fastest growing technologies such as the telecommunications and information technology and the hospitality industry management / marketing / strategic planning. "E" indicates the electronic is electronic markets (e-marketplace in English), where electronic business (e-business in English) meets e-consumers, e-government, e-business partners and other electronic platform. [7]

Development processes within the ICT and the Internet in particular have revolutionized the entire tourism industry, creating new business models, changing the structure of distribution channels, redesigning tourism and all processes related to the industry and, not least influencing providers packages, destinations and stakeholders. [7]

E-tourism provides opportunities for business expansion in all geographical, marketing and operational senses. As a result of Internet developments, a number of new players have come into the tourism marketplace.

At the beginning of this century and millennium, tourism and travel industry has been, worldwide, the most dynamic sector of activity and, at the same time, the most important sector generator of jobs. In economic terms, tourism is, at the same time, an important source of national economy recovery of those countries that have significant tourist resources and exploit them properly. Given that tourism resources are practically inexhaustible resources, tourism represent one of the economic sectors with real possibilities of long term development. If the sustainable development principles are respected and promoted, tourism is a way of protection, conservation and recovery of cultural, historical, folkloric and architectural potential of country. [8]

Ecotourism is a sub-category of sustainable tourism and thereby contributes to sustainable development and sustainability. Sustainability is an umbrella term that describes a situation when all human activities are

practiced so that the society and its members are able to meet their needs and wants, while preserving environmental and socio-cultural systems indefinitely. Sustainable development was introduced in one of the seminal environmental documents of the 20th century, The Brundland Report (Our Common Future), and defined as 'to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future'. [9]

RESULTS AND DISSCUSIONS

3.1 Ecotourism: a vehicle for preserving, culture, nature & community participation for sustainable development

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." A walk through the rainforest is not eco-tourism unless that particular walk somehow benefits that environment and the people who live there. A rafting trip is only ecotourism if it raises awareness and funds to help protect the watershed.

This means that those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should adhere to the following principles:

- ✓ Minimize impact
- ✓ Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect
- ✓ Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts
- ✓ Provide direct financial benefits for conservation
- ✓ Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people
- ✓ Raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate
- ✓ Support international human rights and labor agreements

Sustainability Principles:

Ecotourism development guidelines and management practices are applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments. Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established among these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability.

Thus, ecotourism should:

- ✓ Make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity.
- ✓ Respect the society and culture of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance.
- ✓ Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed,

including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.

3.2 Innovative approaches to ecotourism and conservation

Ecotourism, responsible tourism, jungle tourism, and sustainable development have become prevalent concepts since the mid-1980s, and ecotourism has experienced arguably the fastest growth of all sub-sectors in the tourism industry. The popularity represents a change in tourist perceptions, increased environmental awareness, and a desire to explore natural environments. [10]

The sustainable development of ecotourism, is based on the integrated elements of ecological, economic and social-cultural sustainability. Ecotourism is based on the conservation of biodiversity, mainly in protected areas, and minimizing the impacts of tourism in natural areas [11]. The economic benefits of ecotourism aim to assist nature conservation as well as provide returns to local communities through employment, the purchase of goods and services and other fees.

Ecotourism, the subset of sustainable tourism that focuses on responsible travel to natural areas worldwide, has been documented to have sustained positive economic impacts in regions of high ecological value because it attracts travelers interested in viewing wildlife and visiting parks. Ecotourism is defined by two primary objectives – ‘to conserve natural areas and sustain the well-being of local people’ [11]. Ecotourism development methodologies and analyses are entirely consistent with international development goals in economic growth, human development, and ecological sustainability. Though ecotourism projects and enterprises operate primarily in biodiversity zones and around natural areas – ecotourism has a very strong role not only in conservation of natural resources, but also in the alleviation of poverty – particularly in rural areas.

The discipline of developing tourism for the purposes of economic development must become part of the larger economic development strategy approach that is applied to all nations. Until sustainable tourism and ecotourism is understood as an economic development tool and an industry, there will be confusion and inadequate expertise applied to the development of sustainable tourism and ecotourism projects by development agencies worldwide. [12]

CONCLUSIONS

ITC: steps to implementation for sustainable ecotourism development

Using ITC tools we can create a network based on a “community of interest”, bringing together the stakeholders of ecotourism and sustainable tourism, as the linking of culture and environment with one type of economic development. Each of these players is dependently linked that once realized creates a symbiotic relationship.

This network aims to improve the knowledge of both businesses and associations that grant quality certificates in the field of ecotourism; and create the necessary tools to harmonies ecotourism quality certification in Romania. To achieve this aim innovative IT tools and methods are used to facilitate certification, supported by e-learning resources and users’ networking across Romania.

The network targets are:

- ✓ leading Romanian ecotourism and sustainable tourism quality schemes, associations of tourism providers, education and training institutions, rural development or protected area NGOs as well as ecotourism businesses and professionals in the field of sustainable tourism;
- ✓ create an integrated methodology for evaluating the quality standards of ecotourism infrastructure and services, allowing mutual learning between the main stakeholders, i.e., quality labeling agencies, expert evaluators who perform the quality assessment and tourism businesses;
- ✓ enhance the business prospects of ecotourism businesses, which are often micro- or small companies located in remote areas, by opening the Romanian market to their activities through certified compliance with a European quality standard; and enhance the career opportunities of tourism professionals in the ecotourism and sustainable tourism field;
- ✓ enrich the curricula of tourism departments in higher education and vocational training institutions with innovative content and learning tools;
- ✓ disseminate the project products as widely as possible so that the highest possible number of organizations and individuals join the network and receive the benefit.

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