

Improving the profile of the European tourist destinations through the European tourism indicators system

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Abstract: *Within the most recent European Policy for Tourism, the competitiveness of the European tourism industry is directly linked to the image of Europe and to its perception, as a collection of sustainable and high-quality tourist destinations. In such context, improving the profile of the European tourist destinations has become a main target. During the last years, the European Commission focused on the sustainable development of tourist destinations. Several projects were developed, the most recent one introducing a practical tool - the European Tourism Indicators System (ETIS) for the sustainable development of destinations. The present paper advances the idea that such tool can be successfully used in order to achieve the goal of improving the profile of the European tourist destinations.*

Key-words: *sustainable development, tourist destination competitiveness, EU Tourism Policy, ETIS Project.*

1. Introduction

All EU Policies for tourism address the sustainability issue in the most responsible way, as being a matter of key importance in this field. According to the most recent Tourism Policy adopted by the European Commission in 2010, the main differentiation trait of the European tourist destinations has to be their sustainable way to develop (COM 2010, 5). Various instruments were created during the last years at EU level in order to support the responsible management of tourism businesses, such as the EU Eco-label or the Community eco management and audit scheme (EMAS), but, unfortunately, the response and efforts from tourism businesses across Europe were very different in this direction. Maybe because of this lack of congruence, during the last years, the EU Commission focused on the sustainable development of tourist destinations.

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2. Profiling the sustainable tourist destination

The tourist destination was defined as „*the main place of consumption of tourist services and, therefore, the location and place of activity of tourist businesses*” (COM 2001, 5). As the European Commission underlined, nowadays tourists “identify the product with (...) the destination visited” (COM 2001, 5). Therefore, the destination can be actually considered and treated as a complex tourism product; it is the tourist’s overall experience (COM 2001, 24). In the last three decades, in the tourism literature, many studies approached issues like tourist destination image or branding. An authentic perspective started to coagulate regarding the possibility to view a tourist destination as a living entity. Using the analogy of destinations with human beings, interesting concepts were formulated such as tourist destination’s *personality, soul, spirit* (del Bianco 2008) or *profile*.

2.1. The concept of Destination Profile

Most studies address the concepts of “destination profile” and “destination evaluation” as synonyms (COM 2013, Crotti and Misrahi 2015, COM 2010). In our opinion, “profiling” is a step forward compared to “evaluating” because a profile has to spotlight those specific characteristics which are essential for the research topic, while an evaluation is a comprehensive investigation of the destination. For example, a competitiveness profile should emphasize the traits which position the destination as a more or less competitive one. By consequence, profiling tourist destinations supports the positioning process. The positioning of a tourist destination means “*to identify dimensions of destination representing positions that could be developed to differentiate the destination in a meaningful way to consumers*” (Pike and Ryan 2004). The communication of the correct profile helps the destination positioning in the mind of consumers through image formation. By consequence, the destination profile also supports the process of image formation. Destination images are produced by people’s mind, following a process of synthesis and simplification regarding the various pieces of information associated with a specific destination (Pike and Ryan 2004). The conceptual clarification regarding all the above mentioned notions is presented in Figure 1 below.

Positioning of a tourist destination is the process concerned, first, with market segmentation followed by “the selection of a destination’s features to emphasize” (Alford 1998, 53-54). Therefore, according to this theory, the destination profile should resemble the profile of its targeted tourists. In this context, within the process of positioning sustainable tourist destinations, the first key step would be to correctly understand the profile of Sustainability Oriented Tourists (SOTs) (Iunius et al. 2014, 102-103). But, as Dolnicar et al. noticed (2008, 197) there is little consensus at present about who SOTs actually are.

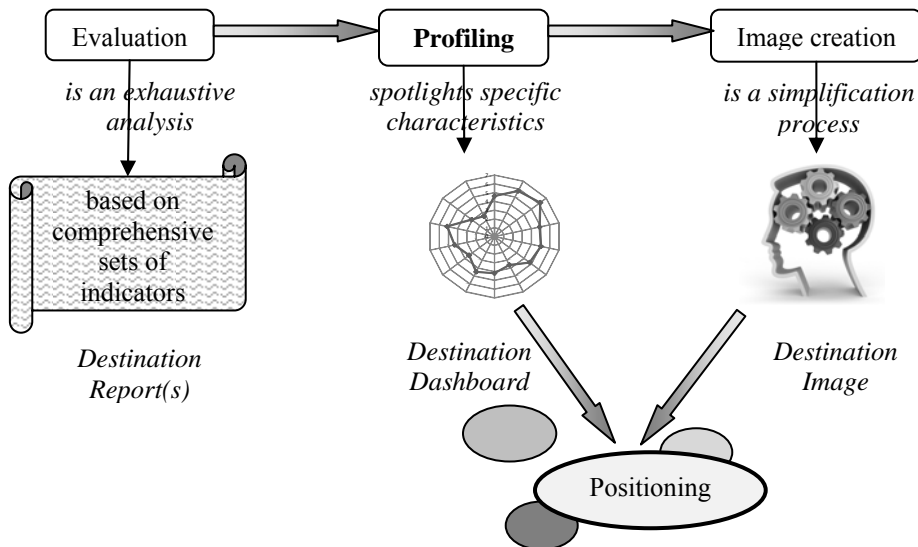


Fig. 1. Destination profiling - conceptual clarification

In the above mentioned context, in order to match the sustainable destination's profile with the profile of its consumers, we support the idea (Dolnicar et al. 2008, 197-210) that further research is needed in order to provide a deeper understanding of the Sustainability Oriented Tourists' Profile.

2.2. Specificity of a Sustainable Destination's Profile

Profiling a sustainable tourist destination refers to the use of its characteristics in order to determine whether the tourism industry develops in a sustainable way and to identify areas where interventions and improvement are needed. As depicted in Figure 1 above, profiling a sustainable destination should always be based on a comprehensive evaluation of its development. Also, a destination profile has to be a useful tool for destination management stakeholders; therefore it has to be depicted in an attractive visual form. In Figure 1, we included the spider web/web chart/radar chart because we consider it is one of the most useful graphical methods of displaying data for a destination profile. The World Economic Forum (WEF) used the same graphical method within its most recent Report regarding the Competitiveness of Travel & Tourism. Since 2007, WEF has released six Reports regarding the Competitiveness of Travel & Tourism. These documents are comprehensive studies regarding the tourism performances of more than 100 countries, analyzed as tourist macro-destinations. Each Report issued a hierarchy

using the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index (TTCI). As it has been stated within the last Report, the TTCI “*aims to provide a comprehensive strategic tool for measuring the set of factors and policies that enable **the sustainable development** of the Travel & Tourism sector, which in turn, contributes to the development and competitiveness of a country*” (Crotti and Misrahi 2015, V). An example of destination profile used by the WEF is displayed below in Figure 2. Because the present paper refers mainly to Europe, as a macro-tourist destination, we processed data and included in Figure 2. the profile of Europe, from a competitiveness and sustainability perspective.

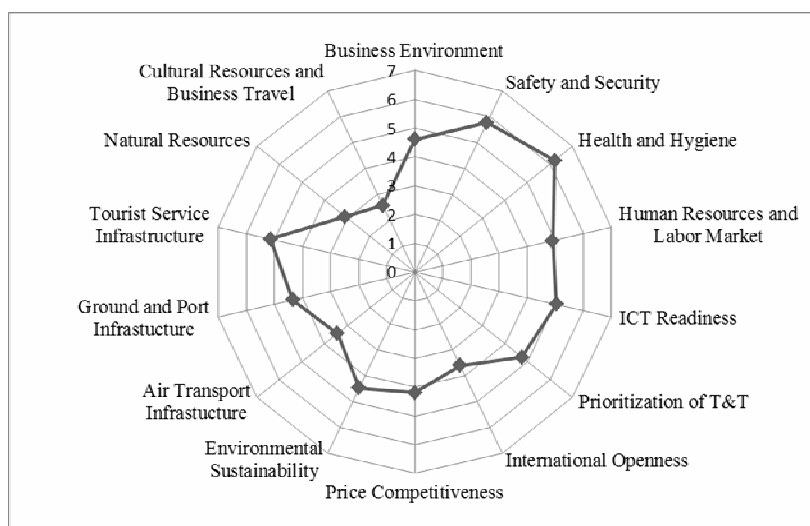


Fig. 2. *Europe's Profile within the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report released by the World Economic Forum in 2015* (Crotti and Misrahi 2015, 10-11)

Another great tool which offers the possibility to both evaluate and profile the sustainable development of world destinations (*not necessary tourist destinations*) is the Sustainability Dashboard developed in 1990 by the Consultative Group on Sustainable Development Indices (CGSDI) and the Joint Research Center (JRC). The Sustainability Dashboard can be easily implemented because a specific software application has been developed for that purpose, allowing the synthesis of “a wide variety of data and environmental, economic, and social information in a single graphical and numerical evaluation form” (Scipioni et al. 2009, 366). The graphic representation is attractive and therefore “offers great visual impact” (Scipioni et al. 2009, 366). It also offers significant benchmarking opportunities. Because the graphical representations used in the Sustainability Dashboard are very colored, we decided not to include an example within the present paper.

3. Profiling European Tourist Destinations as Sustainable Destinations

The European Commission has recently stated that tourism competitiveness “*is closely linked to its sustainability, as the quality of tourist destinations is strongly influenced by their natural and cultural environment and their integration into a local community*”. As recently noticed “the relationship between the sustainable development and the competitiveness of the European tourism industry can be seen as one of direct determination” (Cismaru 2015). In order to offer real support to European tourist destinations, the European Commission has developed in the last decades several policies and tools for the sustainable development of tourism. These initiatives can also be considered important instruments which actively contribute to the image and profile improvement of European destinations.

3.1. Europe – the no 1 Tourist Destination of the World

In June 2010 the European Commission communicated the new Tourism Policy called “Europe, the world's No 1 tourist destination – a new political framework for tourism in Europe”. International tourist arrivals to Europe in 2008 confirmed its position as the most visited region in the world (COM 352 final 2010, 3). But, as the European Commission highlighted, tourism is an increasingly competitive industry at a global level and, in such context, Europe, as a macro-tourist destination, “*must offer sustainable and high-quality tourism, playing on its comparative advantages, in particular the diversity of its countryside and extraordinary cultural wealth*” (COM 352 final 2010, 5).

The entire action framework aims four priorities: (1) Stimulate competitiveness in the European tourism sector; (2) *Promote the development of sustainable, responsible and high-quality tourism*; (3) *Consolidate the image and profile of Europe as a collection of sustainable and high-quality destinations* and (4) Maximize the potential of EU financial policies and instruments for developing tourism.

By consequence, in 2010, the European Commission established that the two most important strengths of tourism at EU level were sustainability and high-quality. In order to be able to use these comparative advantages over its competitors, the European Union needed to focus on uniformly and consistently develop tourism in a sustainable way in most European tourist destinations. Therefore, following the adoption of the last Tourism Policy in 2010, special attention has been given at EU level to the creation of efficient instruments to be implemented by interested destinations in order to develop in a sustainable way and accordingly promote their efforts.

3.2. The European tourism indicators system for the sustainable development of destinations

In 2013, the European Union launched the European Tourism Indicator System for Sustainable Destinations (ETIS). ETIS includes a number of 67 indicators (27 core and 40 optional), grouped into four categories: (1). destination management indicators, (2). indicators related to economic value, (3). indicators related to social and cultural impact and (4). indicators related to environmental impact (COM 2010, 18-20). As stated in the implementation toolkit, ETIS was conceived to be an easy and useful instrument for tourism stakeholders which “aims to contribute to improving the sustainable management of destinations” (COM 2013, 3).

We consider that the process of profiling tourist destinations is an iterative one (Figure 3.), continuous monitoring being needed, including reevaluating and reprofiling the destination.

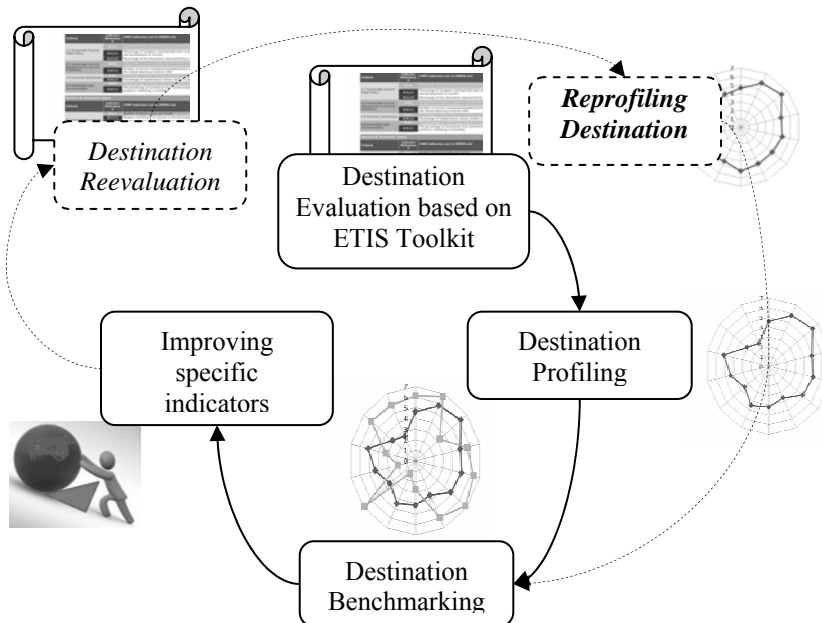


Fig. 3. *Destination Profiling - Iterative process*

Also, we support the idea that when the simple evaluation process develops into a benchmarking approach, important strategic options may appear. Therefore, after the destination has a profile, benchmarking is the next necessary step to take in order to completely and correctly understand its strengths and weaknesses in a highly competitive environment.

ETIS actually provides a theoretical sustainable development model for tourism which European destinations can use on a voluntary basis. It is an evaluation tool which can be developed into a profiling and benchmarking tool. Following the above mentioned example of the Sustainability Dashboard Project, we support the idea that creating specific software for the implementation of ETIS might be a very useful approach. Also, we consider that an attractive graphical method should be included, the spider web being a suitable one.

4. Conclusion

Being based on a comprehensive evaluation, followed by benchmarking and improvement of specific indicators, the profiling process of European destinations founded on ETIS can be a truly efficient one. But, as we mentioned above in section 3.2., further research and support are needed in order to create proper software for implementation. In this context, we advance the idea that such tool can be successfully used in order to achieve the goal of improving the profile of the European tourist destinations.

Analyzing the strategic approach of the European Commission regarding the sustainable development of European tourist destinations and the struggle to develop the image of Europe as a collection of sustainable destinations, an interesting discussion can be advanced on its real strategic goal: does the European Commission aim to adapt the supply (destination) to the demand (SOTs) or is it a strategic attempt to educate the consumer of tourism products, as well as the provider of tourism products, the authorities and the local communities in the spirit of sustainability oriented behavior (Năstase et al. 2011, 58)? It is a direction for future research into the process of profiling sustainable tourism destinations which is important for the correct implementation of ETIS in European tourist destinations.

5. Acknowledgements

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