Achieving Sustainable Tourism through Regional Collaboration: Evidence from the TransTourism Project

Whilst it is commonly accepted that tourism can provide substantial economic opportunities to destination regions, there has been increasing research on the environmental impact of tourism, particularly among isolated or rural regions where seasonality has a significant impact on visitor numbers. Actions need to be taken to prevent environmental damage caused by tourism. Despite this, various barriers have led to difficulties in implementing policy changes, leading to less progress than desired. The barriers are intensified in areas of natural outstanding beauty, whereby footfall and tourism infrastructure can damage the aesthetics, atmosphere and surrounding environment, if not carefully managed.

The Northern Periphery Programme was an EU initiative to help peripheral and remote communities on the northern margins of Europe develop their economic, social and environmental potential. The programme funded several transnational research projects. One such project was TransTourism (TT), led by Trafikverket (Swedish Transport Administration), involving five Northern Peripheral regions of Europe. The aim of TT was to develop new transportation solutions and optimise existing services through intelligent technologies, effectively increasing footfall in peripheral tourism destinations whilst mitigating the environmental damage caused by increased visitor numbers.

The mantra of sustainability has historically been strong in the Balearic Islands, often presented as a best practise example of sustainable mass tourism. Having seen visitors to the island increase continually since the 1970s, Majorca’s economy is almost entirely based on tourism. Subsequently the Balearics has implemented a series of policy changes to promote sustainable tourism, including: an eco-tax, with monies collected reinvested in the countries natural and built environment; quotas on the number of new hotel beds; and legislation to ensure the creation of new green space on the opening of each new hotel bed. These last few years, the fiscal crisis has deepened the need for increased tourist numbers, and consequently some argue that “the sustainability-led agenda of the 1980s and 1990s aimed at containing growth is abandoned in favour of a boosterist approach that prioritises short-term gains” (Obrador 2017).

Whilst participating regions in the TT project have minimal climatic similarities with the Balearics, the destinations often share situational parallels such as coastal access, scenic landscapes and rural attractions. In addition, both the Balearics and the NPP (now renamed NPA) share fiscal pressures to generate more revenue from tourism. The Balearics also have a revered status as a champion of sustainable tourism, whilst the fiscal pressures are seemingly placing that status under pressure. It is with these commonalities in mind that the Balearics and Northern Peripheral regions of Europe could share experiences, best practise examples, and potentially benefit from cross national knowledge transfer and research. This main paper highlights the findings of the TT project and outlines the barriers to achieving sustainable tourism. Given its current stance on sustainable tourism, potential implications for the Balearic Islands will be provided. In addition, the paper also illustrates learning experiences from Majorca's sustainable tourism policies for consideration by Northern Periphery regional stakeholders.