

# Sustainability and Tourism: the Tourism Observatory of Skyros Island

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**Abstract** Tourism is one of the most important sectors of the world economy, but it has a serious impact on the environment. As a result, the trend of sustainable tourism has evolved through the search for strategies that will ensure tourist development and at the same time will not affect the environment (Karavitakakis & Chondromatidou, 2016). In this research, the data bank impact of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Tourism Observatory of Skyros Island will be presented. The Tourism Observatory formulates and implements sustainable management strategies, policies and procedures through the use of Sustainable Tourism Indicators and Information Assessment Techniques (UNWTO, 2015). In particular, the Observatory gathered questionnaires that were distributed to tourists and residents of the island in order to draw conclusions about their preferences, as well as their place selection for summer holidays. The aim of this research is to determine whether tourists' and locals' actions are prone to a long term sustainability for the area, as well as if tourists' choice of a holiday spot is driven by their ecological awareness.

**Key words:** tourism observatory, sustainability, climate-change, small-island

## 1 Literature Review

Since the mid-twentieth century, the tourism sector has been thriving. It is set on a trajectory of fast-pace growth on a global scale without showing any signs of deceleration (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2017). This trend has put excessive pressure on tourism destinations and their resources, leading to a gradual deterioration that subsequently compromises their touristic appeal and even their very existence (Liu, 2003; Michalena et al., 2009; TorresDelgado & Palomeque, 2014; Carayannis et al., 2018).

Tourism has significant effects on economies, environments, societies and cultures around the globe (Pan et al., 2018; Wearing, Stevenson, & Young, 2010), and can “be a factor for environmental preservation, promotion and cultural appreciation and understanding among people” (UNWTO, 2016). Whilst sustainable development is an overarching goal for most nations engaging tourism as a tool for development (Ellis & Sheridan, 2014), many have argued that implementing sustainability principles is a difficult task (Pan et al., 2018; Tosun, 2001; Waligo et al., 2013). Good destination governance is, therefore, recognized as key to achieving sustainability goals (Bramwell, 2011; Hall, 2011). Destination governance refers to the process of tourism planning, policy- and decision-making, through stakeholder interaction and participation in collective actions, and it is aimed to improve stakeholder and destination performance (Beritelli, Bieger, & Laesser, 2007; Padurean, 2010; Pechlaner, Volgger, & Herntrei, 2012).

Many countries declare that they are pursuing, or wish to pursue, policies for ‘sustainable tourism’. Despite this interest, there remains a degree of uncertainty over the scope and priorities for making tourism more sustainable and only partial appreciation of how to put this into practice (UNEP,

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2005). Leiper (2004) views tourism stakeholders as a system of individuals and organizations involved in tourism activities within the generating region, the transit region, and the destination region.

The development of community-based tourism (CBT) increases the number of facilities, roads, parks, and recreational and cultural attractions, which benefits residents' quality of life and respects their culture (Brunt & Courtney, 1999). In some developing countries, scholars and NGOs provide education on sustainable tourism to train residents on how to protect local natural and socio-cultural resources (Rodríguez-Martínez, 2008; Sebastian & Rajagopalan, 2008; Sebele, 2010). Moreover, the interaction between residents and tourists may be limited, which leads to limited tourism revenues in this stage of CBT development (Uysal, Woo, & Singal, 2012); thus, the perception of economic sustainability is lower in the involvement stage than that in the consolidation and development stages. Tourism is considered an effective method of reducing poverty in some traditional communities (Croes, 2014) because tourism offers jobs other than traditional livelihoods (World Tourism Organization, 2002) as well as opportunities to sell local products (Lee, 2013, Lepp, 2007). Consequently, traditional communities such as rural communities (Wang, Cater, & Low, 2016), fishing communities (Thompson, Johnson & Hanes, 2016), small islands (Teh & Cabanban, 2007) Indigenous communities (eg Reggers, Grabowski, Wearing, Chatterton, & Schweinsberg, 2016) could develop the CBT to improve their financial situation. In exotic communities, tourism offers residents the opportunity to appreciate and respect the local culture of the socio-economic system, thereby increasing the sustainability of the socio-ecosystem (RuizBallesteros, 2011).

As UNEP (2009) emphasized that, "*tourism is in a special position in the contribution it can make to sustainable development and the challenges it presents. It is because tourism is an activity, which involves a special relationship between consumers (visitors), the industry, the environment and local communities. This special relationship arises because, unlike most other sectors, the consumer of tourism (the tourist) travels to the producer and the product. This leads to three important and unique aspects of the relationship between tourism and sustainable development:*

- *Interaction: The nature of tourism, as a service industry that is based on delivering an experience of new places, means that it involves a considerable amount of interaction, both direct and indirect, between visitors, host communities and their local environments.*

- *Awareness: Tourism makes people (visitors and hosts) become far more conscious of environmental issues and differences between nations and cultures. This can affect attitudes and concerns for sustainability issues not only while travelling but throughout people's lives.*

- *Dependency: Much of tourism is based on visitors seeking to experience intact and clean environments, attractive natural areas, authentic historic and cultural traditions, and welcoming hosts with whom they have a good relationship. The industry depends on these attributes being in place."*

This close and direct relationship creates a sensitive situation, whereby tourism can be both very damaging but also very positive for sustainable development (UNEP, 2005).

Each year, islands are a top destination for millions of tourists, because their special geographical situation and their natural and cultural heritage richness make them unique for visitors, but at the same time, confront them with a number of challenges and vulnerabilities (UNWTO, 2019a). The UNWTO International Network of Sustainable Tourism Observatories (INSTO) was created in 2004 with the main objective to support the continuous improvement of sustainability and resilience in the tourism sector through systematic, timely and regular monitoring of tourism performance and impact and to connect dedicated destinations in order to better understand destination-wide resource use and foster the responsible management of tourism (UNWTO, 2019b). Through the systematic application of monitoring, evaluation and information management techniques, the initiative provides policy makers, planners, tourism managers and other relevant stakeholders with key tools to strengthen institutional capacities to support the formulation and implementation of sustainable tourism policies, strategies, plans and management processes. In Greece, there is the Aegean Islands Observatory, which is sited only on the island of North Aegean (UNWTO, 2019b).

## **2 Method and Empirical Findings**

### **2.1 Study Area**

A world wide environmental campaign, under the brand name “SKYROS Project”, has launched in a small Greek island, known as Skyros Island. This Project has attracted the interest and respect of travelers (Antonopoulos et al., 2016). It is the product of an innovative cooperation initially with University of the Aegean and the Skyros Port Authority and presently the University of West Attica has joined the collaboration. In Greece, Skyros Island is an island in the heart of Aegean Sea. Linaria Port, the island’s small harbor, has distinguished itself in environmental infrastructures and influences. The Research Center of Environmental Education and Communication of University of the Aegean had set a remote research spot there, enforcing environmental campaign activities. The enthusiastic students through their daily environmental investments led the way to a permanently established training site that invested in environmental research and education practices (Skanavis et al., 2018a; Antonopoulos et al., 2017). This campaign project received the brand name SKYROS Project (Foundas et al., 2018). Based on another tedious research about “SKYROS Project”, a Tourism Observatory at Skyros Island was established (Skanavis et al., 2019b), having its collected data, twice evaluated, once in 2016 (Karavitakis & Chondromatidou, 2016) and then in 2018. It is significant to mention that this Tourism Observatory has been awarded with a GOLD Award on Greek Tourism Awards in 2015 and a SILVER Award on Greek Tourism Awards in 2016.

## **2.2 Methodology**

Successful tourism development depends on the evaluation of up-to-date statistics and the redesign of strategies aimed at increasing the sustainability of destinations (Spillanis I., 2014). This assessment can be based on both quantitative data from questionnaire surveys and from qualitative data through public opinion polls (Ko, TG 2005). For the operation of the tourist observatory and for the development of sustainable tourism, it is necessary to inform and raise the awareness of all operators, residents and tourists visiting each destination area. In addition, it is necessary to cooperate with all the above in providing the necessary information (I. Spilanis, E. Vagianni, S. Karabella 2011).

For the purposes of this research a questionnaire was developed in order to collect data on the behavior of tourists at the destination and the impact of their decision (costs, accommodation, travel, etc.).

The questionnaire is written in 2 languages (Greek-English) for the convenience of foreign tourists. To identify the tourist profile, we have included a set of behavioral and pre-travel questions, as well as the total cost and degree of satisfaction related to their destination. There is also a set of personal questions, placed at the end. According to the guidelines given in previous studies (Spilanis I., Vagianni E., Karabella S., 2011), respondents should be tourists, holidaymakers or visitors and not permanent residents of the destination. Questionnaires were anonymous and data was only used for research purposes. In order to obtain a sufficient number of questionnaires, the researchers had to be at the tourist destination before the ships or planes arrived. For optimum results, only one person per family should complete the questionnaire. Respondents should be able to answer all the questions, so questionnaires were only given to adults. Tourists were mainly interviewed in the port and airport area going through final preparation for their departure, having therefore free time to answer questions. The processing of the results aims to study the above three important and unique aspects of the relationship between tourism and sustainable development.

## **2.3 Empirical Findings**

The means of transportation to reach Skyros is by plane or by boat or by private or rented boat. Out of the 100 respondents 26 chose a plane, out of which 6 are Greek and 20 foreigners, and 74 chose the ferry line or came by private boat, of which 66 were Greek and 8 were foreigners. Of the total questionnaires collected, 72% were Greeks and 28% were foreigners. For Greeks 64% were men and 36% were women, while for foreigners 46% were men and 54% women. The Greek tourists surveyed had an average age of 32 years for men and 31 for women. On the other hand, foreign tourists had an average age of 41 years for men and 34 for women. In terms of educational level, the majority of both Greeks and foreigners had a university education. For the Greeks, 75.27% responded on single status and 34.72% were married with many of them stating that they had children. On the other hand, foreigners were 57.14% single and 42.85% married.

The majority of Greeks visit the island mainly for recreation (56.94%), to visit acquaintances and relatives (36.11%) and to get to know the place (20.83%). A percent of 71.42 of foreigners responded that they came to Skyros to relax, 46.42% said they are visiting relatives and friends, and 32.14% said they came to see the place. According to the survey, the majority of tourists were visitors who chose to come to Skyros for the first time. A 62.5% of surveyed Greeks come to Skyros for the first time, as well as the 67.85% of the foreigners. The average number of visits per person is about 9 times. For Greeks, the majority responded traveling with friends (43.05%) while foreigners were traveling with their families (50%). According to our survey, Greeks chose Skyros for its natural beauty (41.66%), because they haven't been to Skyros before (33.33%) and for getting together with relatives (34.72%). Almost for the same reasons and in the same order of priority foreigners chose to visit Skyros with the only difference being that 32.14% of them were interested in sightseeing.

Both Greeks and foreigners, were informed about Skyros, first came as information source the relatives and friends and then via Internet. Of the 100 people asked, no one came through a tourist holiday package. Visitors either Greeks or foreigners mainly chose to stay at the port, Linaria. Greeks and foreigners preferred for accommodation, rented rooms at a ratio 44.44% and 57.14% respectively. The results showed that both Greeks and foreigners chose only a room as a place to stay, with 44.44% and 35.71% respectively. Average overnight staying was stated as 7.85 nights per person. The majority of Greeks (56.94) preferred to visit the various local settlements. The same applied to foreigners at 85.71%. Last but not least is the mode of transport chosen by visitors for their trips to the island. The results differ because Greeks prefer their private car or motor with a percent of 43.0, while foreigners preferred to rent a car or motor from the island with a percent of 57.14.

The largest percentage of Greeks (55.55%) said that they spent up to 500 euros for their holidays, while foreign visitors between 1000 and 1500 euros. When they were asked if the money they spent on the trip was generally in line with the benefits they received, Greek tourists responded with 43.05% satisfaction, while foreigners with 57.14%. The Greeks were impressed by the cleanliness, the service in the port and the food with a response rate 43.05%, 48.61% and 22.22% respectively. On the other hand, foreign visitors left positive comments on the management of the port, for hospitality and cleanliness services with 39.28%, 35.71% and 35.71% response rates respectively. Most of the negative impressions from Greek visitors were recorded for the high prices (12.5%), while foreign visitors highlighted with a 46.42% for the scattered trash seen out in the streets and generally throughout the island. A 97% of tourists would visit the island again. A 98% of tourists would recommend it to others.

### **3 Conclusions and implications**

In the last sixty years, tourism has experienced a continuous diversification and expansion, becoming one of the world's greatest and fastest-growing economic sectors to attain sustainable development (Butler, 1999; Weaver, 2006; UNWTO, 2018). This is the reason for the importance of policies in this area having to be centered on making the conservation of the environment compatible with the local values, there being an improvement of competitiveness and tourist productivity (Exceltur, 2017). Sustainable tourism implies carrying out a medium- and long-term planning of the activity, defined using benchmarking practices aimed at improving competitiveness (Lozano-Oyola, et al., 2019).

There are five major challenge areas that future sustainable tourism researchers need to cope with, and possibly to overcome, if they are to become successfully sustainable. They need to grapple with complexity, to change their working practices, to somehow encourage changes within the journal world, to change the thinking of many Universities and to learn to work with industry and policy makers much more effectively (Lane, 2018). The SKYROS Project, this academically oriented environmental campaign assesses and promotes solutions on sustainable tourism with one of its accomplishments, the establishment of the Tourism Observatory of Skyros Island.

The important and unique aspects of the relationship between tourism and sustainable development (UNEP, 2005) about Skyros Island have been confirmed; those being the ones below.

Interaction: tourists did not choose a destination for their vacation based on the weather. The biggest factor was the economic one. Also, atmospheric quality was a factor that affected the areas of choice for visitation on the island based on responses from those who traveled with a private boat. Beaches were on top of the list of destination choices. Daily temperatures do not influence individuals' survey responses because individuals have a clear expectation of what the temperatures at their destination will be before they arrive, an anchoring effect (Chapman & Johnson, 2002).

Awareness: Three out of four tourists chose ferry line or came by private boat and preferred to stay in Linaria Port and live in the environmental friendly lifestyle that the port promotes.

Dependency: tourists mainly come in order to rest on the quiet island in the Aegean Sea, associating it with the reunion with relatives or just because they wanted to experience themselves the beauty of Skyros Island.

Wise tourism is an attractive opportunity for sustainable development of Skyros Island. This island was recorded as a holiday destination from many of tourists.

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