

Impacts and responsibilities for sustainable tourism: a tour operator's perspective

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Abstract

Tourism is currently responsible for the largest, annual human migration in history. This great movement of people has significant positive and negative consequences on nature, societies, cultures and economies. Desired worldwide for its economic benefits, tourism is anticipated to double during the next 20 years, and the multiple consequences of such rapid growth, call for a preventative approach at all strategic and professional levels, in order to avoid negative impacts.

Considering mass tourism as a reality of our contemporary life that cannot be neglected by current efforts to endorse sustainable tourism, this paper draws attention to one of its key players—the tour operators—advancing the proposition that they play significant roles in affecting changes in behaviors and attitudes towards more responsible forms of tourism. Aiming to facilitate a constructive debate on the matter, the article presents a few of the most important arguments that underscore the potential that tour operators' have in promoting sustainable tourism.

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1. Introduction

Having its roots in the ancient history of civilizations, tourism has developed to become one of world's most important industrial sectors, growing twice as fast as the world's gross domestic product (GDP) for the last 30 years. According to the Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organization (WTO) Francesco Frangialli [1], '*tourism at the turn of the century is growing faster than even our most optimistic predictions*', and is forecasted to double in the next 20 years.

The large importance of tourism-related revenues for the world's economy, particularly for developing countries and small islands, continuously dictate the creation of policies that support its development worldwide. However, rapid expansions of tourist resorts have many negative aspects with regard to the potential of inflicting damages on nature, communities, cultures and societies. This dual nature of tourism,

projected onto its forecasted growth, requires an urgent integration of preventative approaches in all tourism strategies, development plans and actions, at all levels of governance and organization, in order to avoid the risk of '*too much tourism killing tourism*'.

Among all types of leisure activities, mass tourism is most frequently held responsible for tourism-related damages. Considered incompatible with the concept of *sustainability*, mass tourism has recently been recognized within the tourism literature, as potentially being capable of more responsible activities and able to integrate sustainability principles. However, to date not much has been done to identify applicable solutions for the mass tourism industry to put these principles into practice. Inclined to study concepts like eco-tourism or alternative tourism, the tourism research community has largely overlooked the problems caused by mass tourism in relation to sustainability. This is a vast research area that needs urgent attention from researchers and practitioners.

Avoiding the debate on the implications of *sustainable tourism* as a concept, this paper starts from the

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proposition that ‘sustainable tourism’ cannot be achieved if mass tourism practices are not adjusted to integrate sustainability. By identifying the tour operators as central players in the mass tourism system, and hoping to facilitate a constructive debate on their potential to actively promote sustainability, this paper focuses upon the less visible but very extensive influence that large tour operators have on other stakeholders. The author is convinced that they can use their influence to trigger positive changes in attitudes and practices towards sustainable tourism.

2. Tourism’s global importance

The term ‘*largest industry in the world*’ is commonly used with reference to tourism, following its recognition as the largest generator of wealth (over 11.7% of the global gross domestic product) and employment (7% of the world’s jobs) [3]. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) estimates that tourism is among the top five export earners for 83% of all countries and the top source of foreign exchange for at least 38% of all countries [4]. Comparing export earnings of different industrial sectors, tourism ranked top earner in 1998 (Fig. 1) surpassing all other international trade categories; this is a crucial reason for investors’ preference of tourism over other economic sectors.

Because of these multiple economic benefits brought by tourism, regions and nations all around the world are constantly stimulating its development, causing the rapid growth tourism has had during the past 50 years (Fig. 2). The number of *international arrivals* reached a peak in 2000, when according to the WTO, people ‘*found reasons to travel more than ever*’, registering a growth of 7.4% compared to 1999, almost double the growth registered in 1998–1999 and the highest growth rate since 1992, which brought the recognition of tourism as the world’s fastest growing industry. Over the past few years, great challenges affected the tourism industry—terrorist attacks in Bali, Mombasa and Djerba, the war in Irak and the outbreak of the severe

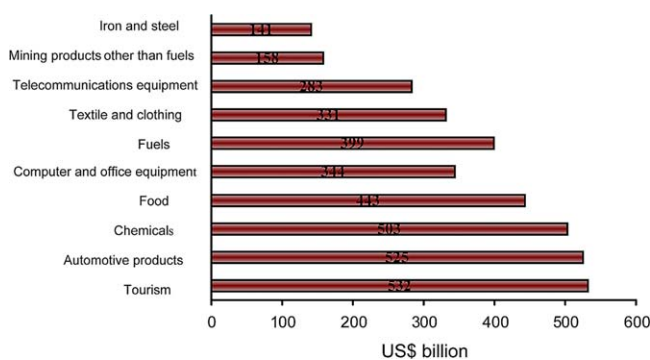


Fig. 1. Worldwide exports earnings, 1998. Source: WTO, 2000 [4].

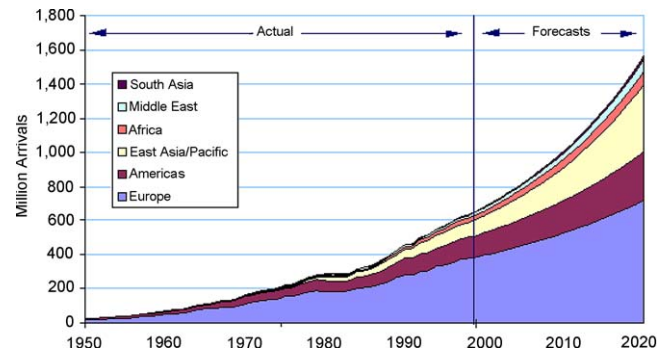


Fig. 2. International tourist arrivals, 1995–2020. Source: WTO, 2000 [4].

acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). However, tourism proves to be an industry with a high degree of resilience and international organizations have already declared the recovery of global tourism numbers, pointing out already to a growth tendency.

The estimated 698 million international travelers registered in 2000, correspond to approximately 11.5% of the world’s population at the time¹, which most likely makes the tourist movement the largest migration in the history of humankind! The annual traffic of such great numbers inevitably generates both positive and negative impacts upon nature, cultures and economies, which have to be carefully evaluated in relation to future tourism practices.

Besides the consequences generated by its rapid growth, it is also important to consider that tourism impacts are far more extensive, though less obvious, than these figures show. The newly developed tourism satellite accounts (TSA) system, made possible the separation of *direct* economic impact of tourism activities (*Tourism Industry*) from the *total* economic effect of the *Tourism Economy*, and revealed that it is exceeded by the *indirect* stimulating effect tourism has on other economic sectors such as construction or food production. (Fig. 3) Extrapolating, from the comparative data, it can be stated that besides the visible impacts generated by its direct activities, tourism also has a share in the impacts generated by its supporting sectors, less visible and potentially greater than the direct one.

In light of the obvious economic benefits of tourism that will continue to stimulate tourism’s doubling in 20 years (Fig. 2), and considering its direct and indirect impact potential on nature, societies and cultures, it is essential to implement preventative approaches when developing and operating tourism activities in such a way to avoid or reduce negative impacts.

¹ In 2000 world’s population was 6,070,581,000 according to the United Nations calculations available on line at <http://esa.un.org/unpp/p2k0data.asp>

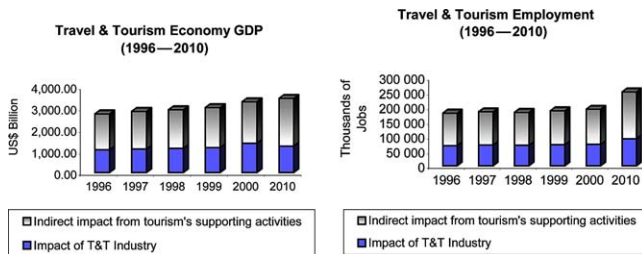


Fig. 3. Tourism & travel economic impacts (GDP and Employment). Source: WTTC, 2000 [3].

3. Tourism's negative potentials

Recently, under the scrutiny of the general public and specialists, it has become increasingly clear that tourism is not *'the smokeless industry it claims to be'* [5]. Often, the economic benefits of tourism come at a high price paid by nature and societies, endangering the core assets of tourism itself: nature and human cultures. Although this is not characteristic for every tourism activity, it certainly puts tourism's benefits into perspective and demonstrates the need to have a holistic and preventative view on the overall effects tourism has on nations, economies and the ecosystems upon which all depend.

The most praised economic benefits of tourism are increased opportunities for employment and income generation for locals at the tourist destinations. However, experience shows that most jobs in tourism are seasonal, with low wages, no guarantees for future employment or assurance of work-related medical benefits. The employees receive little or no training, nor do they receive recognition of the skills and experience they bring to the industry. Besides this, the glamour of tourism diverts crucial workforce from other economic sectors in the region, which might result in a gloomy outlook for employment in other sectors. Furthermore, a great part of the tourist-generated income is leaked away from the destinations, due to foreign ownership of hotels, excursion organizers and transportation services, or because of imports of high quality products demanded by sophisticated tourists (e.g. Kodak film, special food, Guinness beer, etc.). The World Trade Organization estimates that 50–70% of the gross tourism receipts leaks out of the country of destination through imports [6].

Socially, tourism has an important role in enhancing cultural exchanges, improving living standards, supporting cultural preservation (e.g. museums, monuments) and stimulating locals' pride for their homeland. Although it creates numerous opportunities for such good outcomes, it does not necessarily mean that they are always the results obtained. When locals perceive the tourists' lifestyles as more desirable than their own, the phenomenon of 'relative deprivation'

can occur, with effects varying from adopting tourists' fashion, to the formation of a 'developed culture' that often includes aspects such as drug consumption and prostitution [7]. Wishing to live like tourists live often makes locals feel unhappy, frustrated or angry, thoughts stimulated at least partially by the fact that locals have to work to provide quality leisure for the tourists. These kinds of feelings sometimes lead to peculiar expressions, as reported in Cornwall where some locals put stickers on their cars saying, *'I'm not a tourist: I live here!'* [8].

Cultural exchanges necessitate long-term interactions between representatives of different cultures, in order to develop respect and understanding for each other's values. Unfortunately, this is rarely the case for tourists, although the possibility exists. Most frequently, the relationships between tourists and locals are rather superficial and unbalanced due to language barriers, financial status differences, and the short time tourists spend in destinations. Tourists are often happy, relaxed, and unwilling to break these barriers, while locals are too busy working to ensure the relaxation. Instead of exchanging cultural experiences, in many cases locals become 'attractions' for tourists, altering their own traditions and culture to exploit their commercial potential, and gradually forgetting their importance. A small but sad example is the replacement of beautiful flower leis that welcomed tourists to Hawaii, with plastic flowers, because they are cheaper and more readily available for the large numbers of tourists that currently arrive everyday.

Some of tourism's damaging effects are shocking through their irreversibility for which we must answer to future generations. A study of 100 schoolchildren in Kalutara, Sri Lanka, showed that 86 children had their first sexual experience at age 12 or 13, the majority with a foreign tourist [9]. Although internationally fought, sexual tourism is a reality and there are currently available holiday packages offering 'sexual attractions' to tourists.

Tourism, maybe more than any other human economic activity, is based on human interactions, which are severely harmed when tourism development gets 'out-of-hand' especially considering that many tourism activities occur at deeper levels of human nature, affecting behavior and moral values. In the author's opinion although these facets have been addressed repeatedly in some tourism studies, because of the complexity, intangibility, diversity and difficulty to measure the human dimensions of tourism, there is still much to be elucidated about the full effects of tourism on societies and cultures.

Tourism and nature are closely interlinked, since much of tourism depends directly on the environmental quality of its product. In many cases, the tourism industry supports environmental protection as business

insurance, preserving its natural assets by financing protective establishments or activities, awareness campaigns or events, research or educational initiatives. However, as pristine landscapes and exquisite sceneries become popular, they gradually become replaced by anonymous sites made of concrete and steel, with no personality and evolve into types of facilities that are perfectly replicable anywhere in the world as nature is gradually wiped out by tourism developments. Pollution, waste generation and land degradation, all too frequently occur as a consequence of the success of overpopulated destinations, where tourists compete with locals for available resources (water, land), and with biodiversity species (for their basic needs of food, water or breeding habitat) leading to over exploitation of the natural resources. Estimations made by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) [10] show that the environmental impacts (resource consumption and waste generation), created during a 2-week holiday, account for 20–50% of the earthshare of one person for an entire year. This number illustrates very well the intensity of tourism-related consumption and production, the severity of impacts generated and the urgency to take reductive measures before all resources are consumed.

The long time necessary for symptoms of environmental degradation to occur, makes them less visible, but does not prevent them from happening, and many signs are already visible at many tourism destinations. Ironically, once the effects become fully evident, they strike back affecting the core value of the tourism business: *the environment*. Probably, the most eloquent example of environmental degradation striking back on tourism is *global warming* that threatens coastal areas, small islands, and ski resorts. According to the World Resource Institute studies, an increase in global temperature would cause the sea levels to rise by almost one meter by the end of the XXI century, which would result in extreme coastal flooding [11], a scenario also supported by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [12]. The same report provides a list of ecosystems likely to be threatened by a drastic change in climate, most of them being major tourist attractions: coral reefs, tropical forests, alpine regions and wetlands. By having these ecosystems endangered, tourism would lose much of its attractiveness and business. Furthermore, according to the WWF [13], if global warming continues at the current rate, in approximately 100 years some of the most popular tourism destinations located in the hottest regions of the globe, will become undesirable due to severe increases in temperature, which is an incentive for all tourism stakeholders to reduce or avoid activities with global warming and other environmentally damaging potentials.

Although the highly damaging potentials of tourism are not yet generalized, existing signals indicate high risks from and for tourism. Bearing in mind that tourism may double in the next 20 years, one might expect its negative environmental impacts to also double. This should create a strong pressure upon all tourism stakeholders, to implement preventative approaches and not to rely solely upon remediation activities after habitat destruction has been done. Moreover, considering the complexity of environmental, socio-cultural and economic impacts that occur especially in overcrowded destinations, there is a clear need to have a holistic, preventative, sustainability approach, with special attention on mass developments of tourism resorts.

4. Mass tourism and sustainability

The debate on the possibility to integrate sustainability principles into tourism strategies and practices is still ongoing. As the literature available on the matter is abundant, this paper summarizes a few arguments that place mass tourism in the discussion on sustainability.

Traditionally, mass tourism activities are considered responsible for generating the most severe negative impacts of tourism, and consequently large-scale tourism, by its very nature, is unable to fulfill the requirements of sustainability. In contrast, small-scale activities ('nature tourism', 'alternative tourism' or 'eco-tourism') are seen as beneficial and more responsible, thus they are able to incorporate sustainability principles. Challenging this antagonistic view, Hunter and Green [7] find that it is highly possible to locate sustainable tourism between the two extreme types, acknowledging the potential of mass tourism to incorporate more responsible policies and practices.

An extensive literature study made by Clarke [14] looks directly at the compatibility between the concepts of mass tourism and sustainable tourism. He recommends that in contrast with the either sustainable or mass tourism approach, the goal should be that all scales of tourism should be designed and implemented with sustainability as a driving goal. In addition, Clarke highlights some characteristics of mass tourism, as beneficial to the promotion of sustainable tourism:

- Large industry players have greater lobbying power for the protection of nature and societies (as tourism's main assets), against the impacts of other economic activities (e.g. oil industry or mining); and
- Large-scale operators have connections with millions of consumers and numerous suppliers, representing a great persuasive force for sustainability in tourism.

Without dismissing the faults of some mass tourism developments, their large size provides an opportunity to obtain more widespread benefits. Butler questions the positive image of small-scale tourism developments, by arguing that they frequently have limited means to reduce the unavoidable impacts on sensitive natural areas (where they are often located) [15]. He points out that the pollution reduction and pollution control measures that have been taken for reducing or preventing mass tourism-caused problems (i.e. sewage treatment) can potentially also benefit other stakeholders than the tourism facilities, i.e. the entire local community.

Regardless of the degree of sustainability encompassed by one or another type of leisure activity, annually, millions of people choose to utilize mass tourism products and continue to generate impacts at a very large-scale. The severe and continuous character of such impacts requires that we place a greater focus on the problems generated by mass tourism, rather than only on the local solutions of the small-scale tourism facilities. However, failing to recognize this aspect and avoiding the issue of scale, a large number of studies have concentrated on developing forms of responsible tourism for small numbers of tourists, most likely because of commonalities in principles between sustainable and alternative types of tourism [15]. Without a doubt, small-scale responsible initiatives can be successful in preventing many of tourism's negative impacts, but are incompatible and incapable of meeting the demands for mass tourism requirements. Also, they cannot prevent the problems created by mass tourism moving to new locations and creating new impacts. Therefore, a more sound approach for achieving sustainable tourism must also address the problems caused by mass tourism.

The extensive rhetoric associated with the concept of sustainable tourism, due to the ambiguity of definitions and confusing abundance of terms such as 'eco-tourism' and 'adventure tourism', emerged as an echo to sustainable tourism, keeps the attention too much on the issue of explaining what sustainable tourism should be, overlooking the problems of implementing existing improved concepts and approaches. By emphasizing the urgency of managing current and future impacts of tourism, Welford et al. [18] drew attention to the gaps in finding ways of applying the sustainability principles in practice, where industry has a crucial role to play. Analyzing the implementation of possible sustainable tourism strategies, they identified as a prerequisite, the need for both the supply and the demand sides of the tourism market to take environmental protection actions. As an intermediary between the two sides, the tour operator has been recognized as holding a great possibility and responsibility for triggering such essential changes in attitudes and actions of producers and

consumers, towards more sustainable tourism practices.

Considering mass tourism as a reality of our time, that will not disappear but continue to expand, the greatest challenge of sustainable tourism is to find ways of incorporating strong preventative approaches in all tourism activities, be they mass or small-scale. Tour operators, particularly large-scale ones with great economic power, are in an ideal position for facilitating the dissemination of these attitudes into the entire tourism industry.

5. The tour operator's role in the package industry

Estimates made by the Tourism Concern organization for 1999 reported that 80% of the 663 million international travelers used the services of a tour operator [9], which demonstrates the significant potential for tourism operators to influence a large number of customers.

The activity of tour operating consists of buying tourism services in bulk, from a direct provider (e.g. hotel, airline), assembling them in attractive holiday packages, which are then sold directly to the customer or through a travel agent (Fig. 4). Although the functions of tour operators may appear to be replaceable since increasingly customers can contact the producers directly, via Internet booking systems, the existence of tour operators is essential for the good performance of the industry overall, as it will be discussed below.

This is true because firstly, tourism services are produced in bulk (e.g. a carrier has a fixed number of seats) and producers operate at a certain capacity regardless of the level of occupancy (i.e. a scheduled flight has to take off even if only a few seats are occupied). In order to keep prices low, the carrier has to maintain a high level of occupancy, which is very difficult to ensure on their own. By buying in bulk, the operator takes the burden of selling the products and

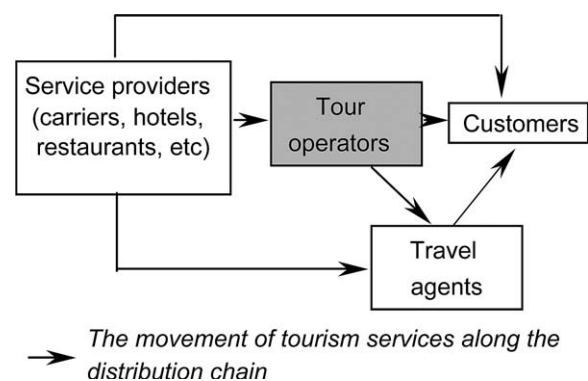


Fig. 4. The place of the tour operator in the tourism system. Source: adapted after Holloway, 1998 [8].

absorbs the risks of having unsold products. Due to large distribution networks and the ‘last minute offers’ option, the tour operator can minimize losses and make many low budget travelers happy. Thus, the tour operators’ activities are essential for tourism producers, for reducing risks and costs.

Secondly, from the customers’ perspective, with increased stress and less free time becoming two intrinsic characteristics of modern society, already-made traveling packages provided by tour operators save precious time. Furthermore, by buying in bulk, the operators get better deals from producers, which allows them to offer low prices for the entire package, difficult to obtain by the individual customer. For both reasons—time and price—the tour operators’ services are highly desired by a great number of customers.

By acting as an intermediary, the tour operator links the supply and demand for tourism, and thus holds the essential role of facilitating the circulation of products and information between these two. Having producers and customers dependent on them for reaching each other, gives operators a tremendous influence over the distribution and sale of leisure products. This is particularly visible in the case of small enterprises or isolated communities, with limited or inadequate distribution networks of their own, which can easily become dependent on tour operators for reaching the tourist markets. Some small islands and developing countries are highly or almost totally dependent upon tour operators (e.g. Cyprus, Gambia), for attracting tourists.

Being the main information channel through which customers’ preferences reach the producers, and services reach the markets, tour operators are able to know the levels and trends, of supply and demand for leisure products and can have a significant influence on the equilibrium and on the way markets evolve [16]. Studies of Ytterhus [17] found that this flow of information is often inadequate and thus, stressed the crucial role and importance of tour operators in influencing how the tourist market can evolve towards more responsible practices and products [2].

Due to the extensive influence they have on individuals, companies and even regions, the tour operators are considered to be a crucial pressure point of the mass tourism system, which can trigger responsibilities and actions of other tourism stakeholders in pursuit of sustainability [2,18].

6. The domination of transnationals

Besides the importance given by the position and role that the tour operator holds in the industry, the influence on other tourism stakeholders is enhanced tremendously in the case of large international compa-

nies due to their economic power. This aspect is very relevant for the European tour operators’ sector, which in recent years witnessed consolidation of power in the hands of a few transnational companies, as a result of convergent influences of globalization, integration and consolidation trends. Market studies from 1998 show the dominant players in the mass tourism industry as presented in Fig. 5.

Following this trend, 1999 was characterized by a high frequency of takeovers and mergers through which major travel groups expanded their business volumes and profitability at the expense of middle-sized operators who lost their independence [20]. In 2000, studies by the European Environmental Agency [21] found that numerically, small and medium-sized enterprises dominate the European tour operator sector while fewer than 10 large tour operators dominate the industry, accounting for almost 2/3 of the market [22].

Taking the examples from Fig. 5, one can see the dominating size in terms of turnover, of the top four companies: Touristik Union International (TUI, from Germany), Airtours Travel Group (from the UK), Condor & Neckerman (C&N, from Germany) and Thomson Travel Group (TTG, from the UK). Furthermore, each of these companies’ holds a leading position in their national markets. In the UK, 22.4 million travel packages were sold in 1998, of which TTG had 24% and Airtours has 18%, together covering 42% of the UK holiday market [23]. In Germany, more recent data show that TUI had 23% of the market while C&N had 21%; together they sold 44% of all travel packages purchased in 2000 [24]. As these figures clearly show, in each of these two important generator countries in Europe, two companies held nearly 45% of the market, which demonstrates their dominant positions.

With their extensive distribution networks, these few large tour operator companies have become very important in potentially inducing behavioral changes in the tourism industry. Recently, TUI and TTG merged

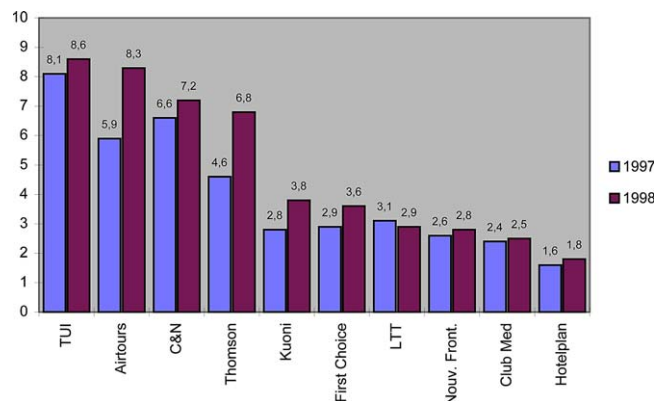


Fig. 5. The 10 largest European tour operators (turnover in million DM). Source: Hildebrand, 1999 [19].

under the ownership of the Preussag Group, a German holding company. Generating over 12 billion Euros in sales and having a total of 20 million customers every year [25], the new Preussag Tourism Group (PTG) is the largest tour operator group in Europe and probably in the world. Its distribution network is impressive, operating in 70 destination countries, running 250 hotel organizations, with a total of 115,000 beds in 19 countries and six airlines with 90 aircraft, carrying more than 10 million customers yearly [26].

A large distribution network brings great buying power and influence on the suppliers to such large tour operators. Additionally, there is great opportunity and responsibility on the shoulders of large operators for influencing the behavior of millions of tourists. No doubt, changing the mentality and performance of such a complex organization, to incorporate real concerns for sustainability and to identify concrete actions for reducing the impacts created by its operations, is a more difficult task than doing the same for a small-scale operator. Nevertheless, once the challenge is taken, the benefits of having such a large player working for sustainability can ensure a rapid dissemination of a sustainability message through its extensive distribution network to millions of people, worldwide, every year.

7. Preventative actions in mass tourism

Most environmental initiatives in tourism, from a cleaner production perspective are focused on improving environmental performance of tourist facilities (e.g. hotels) [27]. In addition, the severity of environmental impacts is also influenced by the type and quality of services included in a holiday package. Since the tour operator controls the elements included in a holiday package and partially influences the management of tourist facilities, it also holds the main potential for improving their performance and reduce negative impacts.

A study done in 1999 by the IIIIE [2] showed that the level of actions taken by European tour operators to reduce their environmental impacts was lagging behind those of the other sectors of the tourism industry: accommodation, transportation, etc. Most of the large European tour operators had a high level of awareness about tourism's negative potentials, and recognized that they have the responsibility for reducing the negative impacts of tourism. Nevertheless, facing low requirements from customers for responsible tourism services, and having little regulatory pressure for better environmental or social performance in their operations (most of the tour package legislation is quality and safety related) tour operators have had few incentives to invest efforts in improving their perform-

ance, thus leaving the largest share of practical responsibilities to local authorities in tourist destinations. As a result, concrete activities actually implemented by tour operators to reduce their impacts were, at the time of the study, found to be very infrequent and superficial compared to their true potential [2].

Only recently, a number of large tour operators have taken a more proactive attitude and have started to develop environmental policies and plans including green purchasing strategies, and environmental training for their staff. In addition, they take frequent initiatives for education, sponsorship of environmental protection activities in destinations, although these activities are considered 'soft' compared to the true potential of tour operators [28]. Some large tour operators have also started to develop environmental management systems for the hotels and airlines under their direct ownership. Although these facilities cover only 10–15% of the tourism services sold by a tour operator—the rest being secured by sub-contractors—it represents an important step forward in terms of commitment taken by operators to reduce their impacts. The next step is to undertake responsibility and to secure a good environmental performance from the suppliers of the remaining 85–90% of the services they sell [29].

The frequent argument of industry representatives against the idea of being proactive in offering tourism services that are less harmful for societies and environments is the low consumer demand for such services and their low willingness to pay for the additional costs of implementing responsible tourism practices [2]. Without denying this argument, it is more important to focus on the positive potential of tour operators to use its vast contact with the tourists—as customers—to educate and to raise the awareness of tourists upon the levels of tourist consumption, its effects (e.g. energy consumption, waste generation), and possible preventative measures to avoid the occurrence of negative impacts. With an audience of 20 million tourists every year, one single company can have a tremendous yield in terms of raising awareness and in decreasing harmful consumption levels that are leading to unsustainable societal practices.

Even with all the unexploited possibilities of tour operators to integrate sustainability into mass tourism, it is highly relevant that all of the top 10 European tour operators are now seeking ways of integrating sustainability principles into their activities. Considering the competitive environment of the tour operating sector, the success of this attitude and approaches requires that all tour operators share a common commitment to promote environmentally sound practices. Probably, the most important action along this line was the establishment in 2000 of the *Tour Operators Initiative for Sustainable Tourism* [30]. This was the first forum that brought tour operators together to discuss com-

mon strategies for sustainable tourism development. It served as a starting point for enhancing the sector's awareness and for facilitating exchanges of experiences. With the largest companies on board (TUI, British Airways Holidays, TTG) the initiative demonstrates that strategic alliances are possible and necessary to move sustainable tourism practices forward [2].

8. Conclusions

Figures show that tourism is clearly one of the most important industries for the world's economy. Facts demonstrate that it can also bring benefits in terms of environmental protection and socio-cultural conservation. Its share in the world's progress is so fundamental that any efforts to reach sustainable development globally or locally are doomed to fail without considering tourism's implication and ensuring that tourism activities are fully integrated within sustainable development policies and procedures.

Due to its beneficial aspects, tourism is being strongly encouraged in most countries and is expected to continue growing. At the same time, there is an increasing recognition that tourism in its extensive developments has potentially damaging effects on nature, societies and cultures. Therefore, concerns for responsible tourism practices should have an equal focus on correcting past mistakes and on preventing future ones from occurring; thus, a clear preventative approach must be embedded into current tourism policies and strategies at all levels, if tourism is to help society make progress towards sustainability.

Identified as the central player in the mass tourism industry, the tour operator has a pivotal role in the policies and actions designed to help all tourism stakeholders make positive contributions to ensuring environmental, cultural and economic sustainability. This is especially valid and urgent for the large tour operator companies. They can advantageously use their leadership roles in promoting the dissemination and implementation of sustainability principles in tourism. Instead of considering size as a threatening feature, this author suggests that large tour operators can become the opening wedge on the way towards sustainable tourism.

Currently, large operators are demonstrating their environmental responsibility by supporting environmental institutions and environmental research and by taking actions to correct the negative environmental impacts generated during their operations. The efforts made by the largest European tour operators in these areas are impressive and deserve a lot of credit for intent and early successes. However, this paper advances the idea that tour operators could do much more, by expanding their influence onto their suppliers and

customers, steering them to adopt more responsible attitude towards nature and society when providing leisure time opportunities for large numbers of people each year. Given the lack of incentives for tour operators to undertake such actions, there are numerous questions related to the practical ways of pursuing such goals by proactive tour operators, which this paper advances as subjects of further research, encouraging a new perspective for sustainable tourism research. Fundamentally, is there a possibility for mass tourism to become sustainable? The author believes there are many opportunities for making progress in this area and also that the tour operators are uniquely positioned to play catalytic roles in making such progress.

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