Sustainable Tourism Actions from the National to the Local Level

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Abstract: Areas rich in natural resources make up most of their tourism attractiveness for visitors. The environmental aspect of Sustainability is essential when it comes to natural tourism attractions. Sustainability theory is comprised of a very broad framework that includes economic, environmental, and socio-cultural issues. Following the “think globally – act locally” strategic argument. Real actions and change begin with each country and each community adapting their practices and setting up appropriate policies to regulate touristic activity. The present study sets out to describe the Tourism Development Policy of Hungary on the national, and local governance level, analyze its sustainability, and apply a case study method of qualitative and interpretative nature. A high impact of the local-level management of tourism attractions is observed in a given example of the World Heritage Site Hortobágy National Park, representing the final sustainability outcomes of the selected area.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism activity has important social and environmental effects on the visited destinations and their communities and is a major force in the world’s economy. Sustainable Tourism is a concept born from the growing concern about these social and environmental issues, and it has only been expanding since the very first protection societies were born in the early 1900s. Today, sustainability is at the very center of the tourism industry development and a possible key to the industry’s recovery to pre-pandemic standards. Some countries are doing a better job than others, managing to make sustainability easy and profitable, and thriving from the development of an “Eco-Tourism” industry. This raises the question, however, of why other countries with a similar abundance of natural resources and protected regions of touristic attractiveness have failed to do the same. In this study, the case of Hungary is examined.

After a short introduction Hungary’s National Policy Framework is summarised, and to understand how the Sustainability of Tourism is managed at a local level, a World Heritage Site, the Hortobágy National Park was chosen and evaluated its sustainability actions. This showcases not only the way National policy translates locally but also might reveal the importance of the local community and businesses when it comes to the Sustainability of the Tourism sector. The present study is relevant because, in the context of rapid climate change, it is of utmost significance for the Tourism Industry to have up-to-date research upon which to build better policies and sustainable development practices. The methods can be applied to other destinations, as well.

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2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Sustainable Tourism Indicators

Sustainable Tourism definitions are varied, and its framework is wide, containing economic, environmental, and socio-cultural issues, as well as many sub-types of tourist activity. The leading management practices for Sustainable Tourism are those described by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). Their guidelines are the most agreed-upon and exhaustive, the most well-known of them being the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, along with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Creating comparative indicators of sustainable tourism has always been a challenge. It becomes easier to measure if we focus only on one specific type of tourism, such as eco-tourism, and we see some authors create a framework for its evaluation (Stronza et al., 2019). However, Sustainable Tourism, in general, does not have only one definition and besides deciding on the indicators themselves, the problem lies in measuring them, too.

The European Union is the international organism that was closest to success in creating a list of comparative indicators for sustainable tourism that included all relevant components. However, these indicators have been created with European countries in mind, which are easier to compare because of the existence of a European System of Accounts (ESA) and other unified statistical databases that facilitate the study and comparison between any two European countries, like Romania and Croatia (Bob et al., 2010). Some authors have tried to apply these indicators in other non-EU countries, such as Serbia, with modestly successful results (Jovicic & Ilic, 2010). Other authors have pointed out that there are incompatibilities between what academics and policymakers need when developing a sustainable tourism indicator, so the indicators may become scientifically relevant but too complex to be operational, or that political aspects interfere with the scientific validity of the indicators (Tanguay et al., 2013). Because of this trade-off, the authors conclude that, while core indicators can be identified, these need to be adjusted to match the destination’s policy framework to guarantee their usability. This is the strategy that will be applied in the present study.

2.2. Sustainable Tourism Policy

Sustainable Tourism policy design, implementation, and the role it plays both in Sustainable Tourism and in Tourism Development are current issues of great academic interest. There are studies about the relationship between sustainable tourism policies and other policies in general that may have prompted or inspired them. Interestingly, as one research found, oftentimes “Sustainable tourism-related policies co-evolved with, and through, policies for community well-being, actor participation, and sustainable development” (Mellon & Bramwell, 2016). This might mean that the success or lack thereof in developing a strong sustainable tourism sector may be connected not only to the specifically tourism-related policies but also to other more general ones, at the national level. This is one of the hypotheses that the present work will either help prove or refute. Finally, we do find many comparative works that study Sustainable Tourism Policy across different countries but as previously mentioned, most are done between European countries. A recent and comprehensive study is that of Wanner et al. (2020), who made an impressive assessment and comparison of European policies, frameworks, and plans related to sustainable tourism.

In the Hungarian case, tourism policy and tourism development have been well-researched, however mostly separately and in the specific area works, as well as published in Hungarian. We can find works specialized in one type of tourism and/or one region of Hungary. A case in point is the
study of Lakner et al. (2018). The authors study the Hungarian sustainable rural tourism development and the potential methods and policies needed to further its progress and lessen environmental conflicts that tourism development often creates. This case is limited to a sub-type of tourism (rural tourism) and a regional sphere (Balaton Lake area). There are plenty of other works to be found that are specialized and focused on one of the many sub-types of tourism popular in Hungary, such as recreational and wellness (Csirmaz & Pető, 2015), geotourism (Bujdosó et al., 2015), or rural tourism (Panyik et al., 2011). In contrast, the present work aims to study the National Tourism Strategy and how it is applied to tourism in general, with the local-level case study being an aid to exemplify this policy and with sustainability as the main framework.

We must note that although the present study will focus on Tourism Policy, this is not the only factor affecting the development of tourism activity and its sustainability. Many studies focus on the visitor attitudes and/or the locals’ perspective, as these groups can also have an impact on the development or lack thereof of sustainable tourism. Raffay-Danyi and Formadi (2022) recently published an analysis of visitor attitudes toward sustainability awareness-raising initiatives by using the Street Music Festival in Veszprém, Hungary. Interestingly, both participants and organizers of the event had a high awareness of sustainability needs but a low level of commitment to sustainability in their consumption practices.

Some indexes or rankings aim to score or measure many countries’ sustainability. One of them is The Economist’s “Sustainable Tourism Index” (2017), which was indeed comprehensive on its scale, with five categories studied (political and regulatory environment, environmental sustainability, socio-economic sustainability, economic sustainability, and travel and tourism industry). Relevant specific case study works on Sustainable Tourism Policy include that of Maxim (2016) about sustainable tourism implementation in urban areas of London, that of Mycoo (2006) about the use of policy tools such as the Green Certification in Barbados, and that of Muangasame and McKercher (2014) about the challenge of implementation of tourism policies in Thailand. The main goals of this study are developed in three stages: description, comparison, and analysis. Hungary’s sustainable tourism policies at the national and regional levels are introduced.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present empirical study is of a qualitative and interpretative nature. Its objective is descriptive inference, to be understood as the systematic observation of a phenomenon to increase our understanding of it. The index is comprised of four subindexes, 14 pillars, and 90 individual indicators, distributed among the different pillars. Shown below (Figure 1) are the main indexes and pillars.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index</th>
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<td>- ICT Readiness</td>
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<td><strong>T&amp;T Policy and Enabling Conditions</strong></td>
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<td>- Prioritization of Travel and Tourism</td>
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<td>- International Openness</td>
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<td>- Price Competitiveness</td>
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<td>- Cultural Resources and Business Travel</td>
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**Figure 1. Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Indexes**  
The pillars of interest to the purpose of the present work are Environmental Sustainability and Natural Resources, under the indexes of “T&T Policy and Enabling Conditions” and “Natural and Cultural Resources” respectively.

The pillars are measured with a 1-to-7 scale. The survey data is derived from responses to the World Economic Forum’s Executive Opinion Survey that range in value from 1 (worst) to 7 (best). To analyze the variable of the Sustainable Tourism Policy Framework, the following indicators are established:

- Policy at the National level: legislations, executive orders, proclamations, or policy plans at the national level.
- Policy at the Regional level: to get a sense of the policy and its impact on the local level, we will choose a National Park for each case to study the sustainability of their administration, functioning, and specific actions or activities.

The case of the Hortobágy National Park was selected to see how the National policy translates locally. Regarding the task of cultural protection, which is mainly focused on traditional herding practices, a semi-structured interview was arranged with Dr. Zsolt Molnár, botanist, ethnoecologist, scientist, academic, and leader in the field of Hungarian traditional ecological knowledge, to ask him about the scientific community’s point of view regarding the sustainable development of Hortobágy.

Sustainable Tourism is considered “tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social, and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities” (UNWTO, 2020). It requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building (UNWTO, 2020). It is important to note that a country’s overall sustainability may come from more than just the state’s actions and policies, given that the private sector and the civil society’s actions have huge impacts at the national level. In the Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Index, sub-index “Environment-related treaties in force”, Hungary scored 27 out of 29 points, (World Economic Forum, 2019).

4. HUNGARY’S NATIONAL POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Hungary participated in the 2018 edition of the Voluntary National Reviews, and this remains the most updated review from the country. Hungary reported on all 17 of the 2030 SDG goals and their progress toward their achievement. Hungary included a final section describing the partnerships, dialogues, and consultations established as well as defined Stakeholder engagement on these projects. On the national level, we can identify several types of policies, projects, and initiatives. Hungary’s tourism framework is fairly linear. The overall responsibility for tourism was recently transferred from the Ministry of National Development to the Cabinet Office of the Prime Minister, which shows the increasing importance of the sector for the country. The Hungarian Tourism Office is then tasked with the responsibility of the management and development of tourism. The main tasks are designing the tourism strategy and allocating the resources according to the budget, but the Office also engages with private, academic, and civil society sectors. The delivery of this strategy is underpinned by the following principles:

- Tourism developed in balance with local communities and the natural environment.
- An emphasis on family-friendly tourism facilities and experiences.
- A focus on accessible tourism, particularly for visitors with disabilities.
− A clear offer and comprehensive guide for visitors, including multi-lingual information, signage, etc.
− The creative and innovative use of technology through digital applications and support to businesses.

The values represented in these main principles are inclusion, innovation, and Sustainability in all three dimensions (NTDS, 2030). We can see social and environmental aspects of sustainability indirectly mentioned in the so-called “Horizontal intervention area H1: Cooperative tourism”, as the goal is described as allowing visitors to live together with local communities in harmony with the environment. Economic considerations are also included, as providing high-quality, accessible experiences, utilizing new solutions, providing a favorable and inclusive career path, and contributing to local communities and national values.

Aside from the goals established, we see several pieces of legislation have been introduced in the country that promote social sustainability and fulfill the principle of accessibility mentioned in the NTDS as a central value. Such legislation could be very beneficial for the tourism sector, which typically offers flexible and diverse employment opportunities for different types of people and is used to provide a welcoming environment for all visitors and employees. The assessment criteria are divided into seven main categories, each with several indicators to which a weight and a score were assigned. The main categories are as follows:
1. Description of the document and elaboration process;
2. Situation analysis and programming;
3. The grade of enhancement on a sustainable approach to tourism in policies;
4. Participation of institutions in tourism management;
5. Sustainable development of tourism businesses, supply of services, and special enhancement addressing nature-protected areas;
6. Tourism strategy measures;
7. Financing and Implementation of the National Tourism Strategy.

The total score is divided by the maximum score and multiplied by 100 to obtain a final percentage in which the national strategy fulfills the given indicators. The final percentage for the Hungarian National Strategy is 44,66%, which earns the “intermediate” result.

The areas in which Hungary scored highest include, for example, the linkage of tourism to other sectors. Health policy, environmental policy, agriculture and forestry, regional and rural development policy. Another indicator fulfilled with maximum points relates to whether there are responsibilities determined for the strategy implementation for ministries, local and regional governments, tourism-based associations, the non-governmental sector, environmental institutions, etc. In contrast, one of the lowest points in the National Strategy was the lack of reference to important sustainable tourism agreements, conventions, protocols, or EU policy toward the development of sustainable tourism and nature conservation. Another area of improvement identified is the grade of incentive and encouragement to sustainable practices in tourism companies. In this case, Hungary has sustainable policy and relevant legislation for energy efficiency, water management, and waste management, but the legislation does not provide alternatives for the usage of these resources, nor do they stimulate sustainable practice with financial benefits.
5. THE CASE OF THE HORTOBÁGY NATIONAL PARK, A WORLD HERITAGE SITE

In the next section, the study focuses on a specific tourist attraction, a case of a protected natural area, - the Hortobágy National Park, a World Heritage site - to get some impressions of how the Sustainability of Tourism is managed at a regional or even local level. This might reveal the importance of the local community and businesses when it comes to the Sustainability of the Tourism sector.

Hortobágy National Park, the biggest National Park in Hungary, is located in the Hajdú-Bihar County, to the northeast of Hungary. The main goal behind the Park’s creation was described in 1990 as the protection of the area’s natural flora and fauna, the safeguarding of the migration and procreation of the region’s birds, and the authentic preservation of the Hortobágy traditional way of life as well as their cultural values, practices, and historical monuments. The Hortobágy Park’s attractions are many and varied. Amongst the cultural attractions, we find thermal and medicinal baths, museums, visitor centres, and cultural activities centres (such as ceramics, handcrafts, etc.). As for the natural sites, the animal reserves stand out, as well as the Tisza Lake, the Tiszakürt Arboretum, and the Cégénydányád Castle Park. (Tikász, 2004).

According to a study by Martonné Erdős and Vasvári (2012), there were twenty-one sustainable tourism development projects implemented in Hortobágy between the years 2000 and 2013. Amongst them, the authors emphasize the Eco touristic commercial products that are already generating a notable difference in the growth of touristic demand in the region, and they conclude that this development was made mostly within the sustainable development framework and guidelines.

An interview was carried out with a local scientist and researcher, an expert in the area. Interestingly, in Dr. Molnár’s opinion, it is more difficult to protect a cultural heritage site than a natural one, due to the intangible nature of this type of heritage. Additionally, he considers the herding traditions preserved in Hortobágy to be in a precarious state, but not particularly due to the touristic activity. In this case, the expert expressed that tourism is not a strong threat to the ecological and cultural conservation of the park because the area is not fully open to the public, and the visits are limited and restricted to brief periods. “If it were a mountainous area, in which mountain hiking or cycling was practiced, and more infrastructure was needed, such as bathrooms, etc., the natural integrity would be more endangered. However, in Hortobágy the people do not walk too much, and the natural area of the park is extensive and restricted to the common public”, explained the professor.

He believes that the protection policy in place, as well as the governmental actions, could be greater. In the first place, he outlines the fact that some local scientists, as well as governmental actors, prioritize the protection of wildlife over human traditions, even though the two are intrinsically connected. To his opinion, the Park could increment regulations that protect the traditional herding practices. For example, requiring herding to be done by a traditionally trained professional, or the use of electric fences. This modern practice eliminates the need for the shepherd and harms the preservation of traditional knowledge on the caretaking of the herd. On the other side, the centuries-old practices lack support, visibility, or marketing as a product of national artisanal quality. The communities themselves, according to Dr. Molnár, invite the shepherds to the traditional festivities, highlighting the importance of this figure, their traditional dress, in short, their symbolic appearance, over the knowledge that is the true value of the practice.
Lastly, the scientist commented on the need for better organization and unionization of the shepherds themselves to protect this immaterial good that is their knowledge and practices. Surprisingly, there is no shepherd’s union either in Hortobágy or in Hungary itself that would serve to raise their voices, concerns, and claims for better working conditions and inclusion like there are in other countries. The shepherds do not participate in any committee or working group within the National Park despite being a group of major importance in the area. In countries like Australia or Canada, explains Dr. Molnár, it is a common practice for members of the shepherding community to be included and consulted in the decision-making process. These are the biggest areas of opportunity for the Hortobágy National Park concerning achieving better protection of its heritage, aligned with the standards of other countries with similar traditions.

6. CONCLUSION

It is vital that the countries create a cohesive, detailed, and clear national tourism strategy, at the national level. If sustainability in all areas is not made a priority, or if goals are set without a clear plan on how to achieve them, the country is likely to fail in establishing a clear destination image. Additionally, the country is most likely to succeed if deadlines are established, and if the progress is followed throughout the plan’s execution. When it comes to the regional level, we conclude that the actions taken not only have a direct effect on how tourism develops but also on what kind of tourist is attracted which, in turn, affects the tourism destination. The suggestion would be to establish the so-called “Smart Goals”, this is, goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time-based. It is encouraged and advised for the country to make use of international cooperation and communication in order to learn from others and apply solutions that work in similar countries.

At the regional level, we distinguish the importance of the smaller institutional actions that can create real change. The way that all National Parks studied were managed, made a notable difference in the impact of the visitors, especially in the environmental aspect. The most important and impactful practice observed was the visitor management strategy. Hungary is a good example of good conservation practices as well, both cultural and environmental. We highlighted particularly the numerous areas restricted to visitors as well as the well-defined “influence zone” or “buffer zone” that prevents negative impacts on the area. Locally, it is also important to distinguish between a tourism attraction whose main goal is to be a source of income, from a protected area that is part of the natural and cultural heritage and that also can serve as a tourism attraction. Because in the latter, there needs to be a priority on conservation, non-modification, and protection, rather than just attempting to mitigate the negative effects of mass visitation.

Reference


