Sustainability standards and certification

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Integration of sustainability labels into Mediterranean tourism policies

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Content:

1. Sustainable Tourism History

The environment became an issue of international importance in 1972 in Stockholm, following the **United Nations Conference on the Human Environment** (also known as the Stockholm Conference). During the Conference, a Declaration of 26 principles and an action plan were issued, containing 109 recommendations for incorporating the environmental dimension into both national and international policies.

Subsequently, in 1980, the World Tourism Conference, convened by the World Tourism Organization, was held in Manila, with the participation of 170 State delegations. The Conference aimed to clarify the true nature of tourism in all its aspects and its influence on the establishment of a new international economic order.

The exponential growth experienced by the tourism sector at that time turned it into a focal point globally. This expansion began in the 1950s and was made possible by the development of means of transport and communication, the regulation of working hours that ensured more free time for workers in developed countries, and an increase in purchasing power and, therefore, in spending. As a result, more people began to travel and move around, eventually leading to the emergence of the phenomenon known as "mass tourism".

Given the significant weight that this area represented in the world's economy and due to the growing demand for tourism in international dimensions, global institutions began to consider tourism as a beneficial resource and a business that deserved investment. However, at first, they did not find the potential problems and conflicts that could arise as a result of the sector's development.

During the following decades, not only did the benefits linked to the evolution of the tourism industry began to be taken into consideration, but also the costs derived from its activity. Due to the interdisciplinary nature of the sector, it became clear that its impacts did affect not only the economy of the regions but also many other activities related directly or indirectly to it. Tourism then began to be valued as an ambivalent asset: on the one hand, as a phenomenon with the capacity to contribute to the socio-economic development of countries, and on the other, as a possible cause of the loss of local identity and environmental degradation.

In 1987, the Brundtland Commission created the document "Our Common Future", which defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This definition, which primarily highlights an intergenerational pact, is still the most widely and globally accepted nowadays.

In 1992, the Earth Summit was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a decisive event regarding international negotiations on environmental issues and the sustainability of the planet. The fundamental goals of the Summit were to achieve a fair balance between the economic, social and ecological needs of present and future generations, as well as to establish the foundation for a global partnership between developed and developing countries, and governments and sectors of civil society, based on an understanding of everyday needs and interests. During this Summit, Agenda 21 was developed, a project which gathered the issues to be addressed at a global, national and local level to achieve more balanced and sustainable development.

During the same year, the UN General Assembly established the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). Its mission was to ensure effective follow-up to the Conference held in Rio de Janeiro. The commission, whose last meeting was held in 2013, represented a high-level forum for sustainable development within the UN system through which dialogue was encouraged and facilitated between policymakers in the fields of environment and development from different nations, and between these and civil society.

It was in 1995, at the World Conference on "Sustainable Tourism: Towards a New Tourism Culture", held in Lanzarote, that tourism began to be decisively connected to the concept of sustainability. During the conference, the need to develop a tourism industry capable of satisfying the economic expectations and environmental demands of the moment was recognised, which would be not only respectful of the socio-economic and physical structure of each destination but also the receiving communities and populations. It also considered the priority of protecting and strengthening human dignity, both local communities and tourists. As a result, the "Sustainable Tourism Charter" was drafted, a document that described a sustainable tourism development model: tourism capable of meeting the needs of tourists and host regions, providing and increasing opportunities for the future. All resources should be managed in a way that the economic, social and environmental needs can be met while maintaining the cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life systems of the area in question.

In 2015, after a process of reviewing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which were adopted in 2000 and consisted of eight human development goals, a new global agenda was born which contained the SDGs. The purpose of these new goals was to be a guide for intensifying countries' efforts to combat poverty in all its forms, reduce inequality and combat environmental degradation. The 2030 Agenda is developed on the fulfilment of these goals, which defines itself as "ambitious and transformative" since it proposes the total and uncompromisingly achievement of the 17 SDGs and the 169 targets that form them by 2030.

In 2015, twenty years after the Conference held in Lanzarote, the "World Summit on Sustainable Tourism: 20th Anniversary of the World Charter on Sustainable Tourism" was organised, creating two decades later a new Charter of Sustainable Tourism +20. This document was presented as the great

international reference to bring together the main actors of sustainable tourism in the search for a new impetus to advance towards the global tourism goals set through the SDGs.

The year 2017 was designated by UN as the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. This temporary scenario became a unique opportunity to raise the awareness of decision-makers in public and private sectors regarding the contribution of sustainable tourism to development while mobilising all stakeholders to ensure that they work together to make tourism a catalyst for change. The hashtag created by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) for this celebration was #travelenjoyrespect, which summarised perfectly and synthetically, the true meaning of responsible travel: travel, enjoy and respect.

Today, tourism is still recognised as one of the most powerful engines of the contemporary economy. It has positioned itself as one of the main economic activities, generating a large number of jobs (currently, one out of every eleven people works in the tourism sector). The demand for travel continues to rise (in 2017 alone, international tourists spent 1.332 billion dollars worldwide), which is why the tourism sector currently represents more than 10% of the world's GDP.

In this sense, tourism developed sustainably, represents a support to the economic growth of a destination. Furthermore, by providing employment, tourism can contribute to aspects such as poverty reduction or social inclusion. As a reflection of this influence on the social issues of the regions, the tourism sector has a significant presence of women among the entrepreneurs, whose numbers almost double those of other economic areas. The commitment adopted by this sector in the fight for efficient use of resources and environmental protection deserves special attention.

Due to the constant flow of people it generates, tourism, faced from a sustainable perspective, promotes principles such as the protection of identity and cultural diversity, breaks down barriers, offers opportunities for intercultural encounters and revitalises traditional activities and customs.

2. So, what is sustainable tourism?

Tourism-related concepts such as rest or pleasure, are the current typologies most closely linked to the traditional conception of tourism. In this sense, the resources that position a destination have to be managed under the framework of the 2030 Agenda and its 17 SDGs to adapt them to new trends and needs raised by the current tourism market and demands.

The inclusion of sustainable principles in destinations should be approached as a transversal and integrating process involving their citizens, companies and services, as well as the destinations' governing bodies. Its scope should be extended to the mechanisms of promotion and communication with tourists. The strategy to integrate sustainable development into the actions and policies of the

destination starts with the generation of collaborative synergies between local businesses that favour the development of sustainable experiences and products. It will allow positioning the region and its companies in the tourism market responsibly.

The challenge of maintaining and improving the resident's life quality and optimising the tourist experience of the visitors must join the advancement on the path of sustainability by sharing responsibility among all the tourist actors and agents of the destination. To this end, it is essential to ensure that the destination's tourism governance includes all stakeholders, especially at the local level, and that the role and responsibilities of each are clearly defined. Sustainable destinations must constitute areas of plurality open to innovation through which they can promote the empowerment of citizens and the commitment of local businesses and services in line with SDGs.

Sustainable tourism is not a static state, but a path of continuous improvement along which the ambitious and transformative goals of the 2030 Agenda must be advanced and, where possible, surpassed. For this, we must generate tools and processes to smooth the transition towards sustainability in all the destination's areas of action. The possibility of having indicators and specific goals allows for a parameter of measurement and verification over time, necessary for decision-makers and not just public policy planning, but also managers of tourist enterprises.

Thus, we can define sustainable tourism as one whose management and results are aligned with achieving as humanity the 169 goals defined in the 17SDGs of the 2030 Agenda.
And to achieve this end, among other resources, there are sustainable tourism certifications.

Therefore, a certification in sustainable tourism, whether for destinations, large companies or small businesses, should offer a methodology of measurement, continuous improvement, involvement and recognition that values the actions and activities aligned in a balanced way with Agenda 2030.

3. What is a certification?

Certification is a way of ensuring that an activity or product meets certain standards. Thus, there are nationally accepted and regulated standards in the world, which guarantee the fulfilment of these requirements between countries in order to be able to trade between them, or other standards adapted by the market itself, which is valued by the consumer or company, in order to opt for consumption.

Bearing in mind that certification should be an instrument, not an objective, the correct approach to certification in sustainable tourism in destination would be one that:

- Analyses the contribution that tourism makes to achieving the 169 goals of the 17 SDGs and helps to improve and measure them.

- Helps the Administration and Public Policies to diagnose themselves and create a process of improvement.
- Involves and engages the tourist/client in its conception and appreciation of the sustainability of the business and its services and products, both tangible and intangible.
- Involves the different tourism actors and stakeholders.
- Can be adapted to large and small businesses in the destination, considering that 90% of the world's tourism companies are SMEs, and include requirements for procedures and objectives.
- Can be adapted to large and small companies by cost.
- Group many typologies with their characteristics and specificities.
- Have international presence and recognition by the market.
- There is a third-party check.
- Have an international presence.
- The certification body has a high reputation.

If all this is achieved, there will be a connection between the tourists' experiences, the enterprise management and the public policies within the indicators that measure how tourism helps to achieve the 169 goals of the Agenda 2030.

So, sustainable tourism certification does not have just an environmental scope, should not be a methodology in a destination that does not include the companies, or must not be implemented in enterprises with just internal processes without workers and tourist participation.

Thus, at a general level we would have two types of certification: of processes and of performance/objectives.

The first most accepted type is the ISO type. These certify entities (public administration, companies, etc.) that have established and documented systems to guarantee an improvement in quality, environmental performance or any other scope. This type of certification works very well in large structures, but not well in small and medium sized ones, although it is always good to have your services proceeded. However, they do not determine specific performance results, other than the entities own and those required by law. They must show continuous improvement, but only in comparison with their own previous performance. And all these processes work within the entity, without the active participation of the citizen or the tourist.

And of the second most common would be the EFQM type. They certify whether an entity or activity meets objective external criteria. For example, how many companies in a destination have an environmental certification? Or how many tons of CO_2 does a hotel emit per month per tourist? This allows a direct comparison between two entities to show which one is better performing. In principle, this type of certification is more appropriate for small and medium-sized entities, but it is always easier

to achieve these goals if they have them in the procedurizing of their processes, no matter if it's a big or a small entity.

One could thus extract that certification systems by objectives are better than those of processes, but it is not so simple, since including procedures in data taking, decision making and so on are more effective. This is why there is a consensus that the most effective certifications for tourism are those that incorporate elements of process-based systems, as well as performance-based systems in a more in-depth way.

However, in the tourism industry, including destination management, which is a service industry, both approaches together or separately have not achieved widespread acceptance and introduction either, mainly due to the following reasons:

- It does not take into account as a focus the final consumer: the tourist.
- They involve high associated costs of on-site auditing.
- They are not necessary to operate/sell between countries or in markets
- They do not take into account the different actors of tourism, which goes beyond the management of the destination.

4. Involving stakeholders

As previously mentioned, today the tourism industry represents an important driver of change through which to induce and encourage the implementation of sustainable models at different scales and through the multiple services that make up today's global tourism offer. To guarantee the successful implementation of this model, the active participation of all the agents involved in the sector, both at public and private level, must be ensured.

The networking of these agents should be of vital importance for the creation of collaborative working synergies which promote the exchange of knowledge and experience regarding the motivations and effects of this industry in all possible dimensions and its consequences on the tourists, host destinations and companies in the sector. These synergies must be under the integral perspective of the SDGs for their application at a global level.

In line with this strategy, tourist destinations must work on the integration of SDGs to achieve their inclusion in the public policies of the administrations responsible for the geographical and tourism management of the territories. These destinations must join forces to strengthen the principles of sustainability and its variables in the socio-economic, environmental and cultural framework of their area. They should also participate in decision-making regarding global tourism development through collaboration with international organisations such as UNESCO or the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), among others.

We cannot understand sustainable development of tourist destinations without the absolute involvement and integration of the companies and entities that make up the sector. These are a link or connection between tourism management bodies and tourists, who are increasingly demanding authentic and sustainable products, services and experiences, based on the protection of the social, cultural and natural heritage of these host regions.

As in any other sector, consumer confidence is the key to success. Visitors' demands and preferences directly influence new industry trends which, in turn, shape today's tourism model. In this sense, it is crucial to involve tourists in the commitment to sustainability and bet on those products and/or services that are responsible for the environment and local populations; thanks to whose activity generates real assets and fairer economic flows with the communities. Considering the influence of the tourist profile on the industry, we must develop tools to raise awareness and directly engage visitors to learn, value and enjoy sustainable experiences while adopting more responsible behaviours and measures towards the destinations and their inhabitants.

In an industry where administrations, businesses and tourists play such a decisive role, it is essential to take care of and unify the language and communications that are transmitted concerning sustainability, so that everyone can understand the importance of applying the sustainable development approach in the different areas of tourism. For this reason, a global message must be created to bring the culture of sustainability closer to the public, tourists, administrations and businesses, and act as a call for their participation, at all levels, for the common good.

To achieve this end, sustainable tourism certification must involve all these actors, facilitating communication and collaborative work to develop a competitive industry in the territory. It must be considered that generally a tourist chooses a tourist destination because of the accumulation of experiences that will be offered by multiple companies in the same territory, in this way the companies within the destination are allies not competitors, and therefore it is key to work together to achieve greater sustainability. The tourist does not usually choose the company where to stay and live experiences and then the destination, but the other way around. And we must not forget that tourism is one of the few industries that cannot be relocated, so a collaborative commitment by public authorities, businesses and citizens to a sustainable tourism model will have a positive impact over time on the competitiveness, differentiation and authenticity of sustainable tourism in the territory.

The introduction of the sustainability approach in the tourism products and services of a destination must be constituted as a process of strengthening and transformation through which the territory, involving its host community, consolidates the development of new economic, socio-cultural and environmental policies beneficial to all, including the visitors.

The sustainable governance of destinations, beyond the competencies of governments and administrations, has become one of the main challenges of today's tourism industry. It is, therefore,

essential to involve all the tourism agents or forces that interact with the destination. It is also necessary to have a joint project, with a shared vision that defines its management and adequate administration.

Tourism governance of destinations involves its local administrations, businesses and services, and civil society. To this end, an optimal governance system will have adequate coordination and management tools, procedures and a balanced representation of all stakeholders. A Sustainable Tourism Round Table or sustainable governance body of the destination or country must be created to ensure the leadership of its sustainability policies in a cross-cutting and participatory manner. It should be understood as a participatory instrument made up of representatives of the public administration, the private tourism sector, civil society and academic institutions.

- ### PUBLIC SECTOR

Governing bodies play a decisive role in the development of tourism policies and the definition of their performance frameworks, eventually also being service providers or tourism business actors. Given the complexity of the areas affected by the development of tourism activity, public action should be of a transversal and interdepartmental nature, adapting the different competencies and regulatory and legal frameworks to the objectives pursued, with adequate and correctly articulated representation in the management body.

- ### PRIVATE SECTOR

The destination's tourism companies and services can and should be part of the sustainability actions that constitute an integral part of its tourism policy. For this reason, the sector must develop a series of participatory and methodological tools, such as the commitment of companies and services to the destination's sustainability as a necessary step to support this process. It includes the coordination of initiatives, awareness, information and training.

- ### CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society, through its representative structures, has the right and the duty to actively participate in the governance of the destination in a responsible, constructive and objective way. It must contribute its points of view and defend its positions, from a perspective of awareness, regarding the importance of tourism activity and its sustainability in terms of employment, wealth creation, positioning of the destination and reception capacity of people and projects.

- ### KNOWLEDGE CENTRES

For effective tourism governance of the destination, it is necessary to have a system of tourism knowledge and intelligence that allows decision-making processes to be developed based on objective and verifiable information. This information should be generated from the public and private spheres, with the participation of academic institutions and opinion centres.

Another primary role of the management body is to serve as a tool and motor for the identification, promotion and creation of sustainable tourism products and experiences, and their subsequent marketing.

The implementation of a reliable system for collecting the data needed to monitor progress towards SDGs compliance is equally important, and this must be made known, participated in and valued by the citizens themselves, tourists and businessmen.

Thus, an efficient certification system is capable of analysing, measuring and linking progress in sustainable tourism at the business and destination levels. It must be economically viable, with the capacity to adapt to the business reality, and that places value on the attributes of sustainability for the client, in addition to helping to improve internally in efficiency and monitoring of key indicators, legal compliance, and others.

5. Sustainable Tourism Innovation

Without a doubt, the Internet has revolutionized the way of communicating, hiring, valuing and living tourism. Bearing this in mind, the successful development of sustainable tourism must include this reality in its execution, communication, assessment and participation.

A tourist experience is not such until a company puts it on the market, therefore it has some attributes and a price. And how can it then be shared and valued by other potential tourists. If these attributes could be sustainable but are not valued and measured by the tourist, they will not have a real impact on the overall sustainability of the business and the destination. Similarly, if there is no communication and contracting channel for this sustainable tourism experience, it cannot be developed in an adequate and powerful way.

Historically, the concept of sustainable development has been linked by the general public, entities and communicators, to the environmental area, and more specifically to energy management. This was logical because it had a direct impact on the income statement and being able to make a calculation on the ROI was much easier. With this in mind, no clear link was found between the tourist's choice of a tourism experience based on the energy efficiency of the tourism provider's facilities.

Nevertheless, in the last years there has been some important issues that has attracted the idea of sustainable tourism in destination in a bigger umbrella: plastic, gastronomy heritage, worker conditions, climate change, etc. So, there is more knowledge of what sustainable tourism is by citizens and tourists.

Therefore, the innovative challenge is to bring together all the sustainable attributes of an experience, aligned with the 17 MDGs, so that it can be effectively lived and valued by the tourist, without forgetting the benefits of developing appropriate management procedures, setting concrete objectives, and

having a criterion of key and appropriate monitoring indicators. In this way, a real change and continuous improvement of the tourism sustainability of the companies, and therefore of the destinations, can be developed, working on the culture of the entity, the quantifiable and technical objectives, and the participation and value of the attributes of the sustainable experience by the tourist. The role of the destination is then to help, promote and show these authentic experiences sold by their companies.

A sustainable tourism offer in a destination is therefore based mainly on the sum of the experiences offered by its companies, facilitated and promoted by public bodies. If these are offered by companies in a destination that have developed processes and objectives that are aligned in an integral and balanced way with the 17SDGs, and they can be linked to larger projects and analysis of how tourism contributes and helps to achieve the 169 goals of the 2030 Agenda, and finally it can facilitate the involvement of tourists and citizens, who cannot only participate but also help to improve, value and disseminate these attributes of sustainability, the structure will really be created to advance along the endless path of continuous improvement that is sustainable tourism.

Without a doubt, new technologies and the Internet can be a great ally to develop a certification system that brings together all these functions, actors and objectives. This include marketing, promotion, measurement of objectives, evaluation, society participation and many more.

6. Sustainability tourism communication

Just as it happened with the appreciation of quality received, which went from a static classification system of the stars of a hotel, the appreciation of the same by professionals through guides, or to implement management systems such as ISO 19000, when an online rating system was developed (Booking, TripAdvisor, Airbnb, etc..) really these systems of assessment of the quality received by the client, of course did not replace the previous systems, but were a revolution in the concept of communication of the same one. We must not forget that the destinations managers do not sell products, but they must first and foremost help companies to improve their sustainable behaviour, put in value their services (marketing and promotion) and even penalize those not aligned with the sustainable tourism policies.

Therefore, a certification system in sustainable tourism for destination should include the concept of what, how and where to communicate the sustainability attributes of the tourism experience, so that it not only helps to know and measure its impacts, links you to your territory and your business partners, is not alienated from the official United Nations concept of sustainability (Agenda 2030), but also helps you sell more and better. Because you do not only have to be sustainable, but you also have to communicate it – in a serious and responsible way.

It may be a very simple resume, but a) to visitors, sustainable tourism should mean authentic experiences, b) to local inhabitants, it must be shown how sustainable tourism helps them to improve their quality of life, and c) to business, it must be explained how can sustainable tourism help them to improve their benefits. Because if it really is sustainable tourism, all these is true!

7. Benefits and characteristics of a sustainable tourism certification in destinations

For a certification system to be beneficial to the full extent, it must answer the following issues:

- It helps me understand what sustainable tourism is. That includes destination managers, companies' managers, workers, citizens and tourist.
- It allows me to continuously improve.
- It makes it easier for me to measure the key indicators based on the 17ODS.
- It is flexible with my reality (type of territory, extension, competencies, etc.).
- It is flexible with my companies´ realities (typology, size of the company, tourist specialization, etc.).
- It is economically viable for both destination and their companies.
- It helps develop the culture of internal sustainability.
- It involves and values the sustainable attributes of my experiences to my tourist.
- Its verification process is credible and adaptable.
- It gives me a market-valued recognition.
- It is both in its procedures, certification body, and scientific and technical validity credible.

8. Tourism after the COVID-19 in the certification market

Today with the pandemic, more than ever we can say that "if it is not sustainable, it cannot be considered development". It should be the time to really use this time to create a more sustainable tourism.

In a practical way, without a doubt all services and process, also in tourism, would be more efficient using new technologies and online verification. And of course, within tourism we should work in a holistic way, not just in the sanitary field, and analyse how sustainability and pandemic have been affected.

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