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### **The potential of Cyprus as a sport tourism market: viewpoints of municipal administrators**

Traditionally, the sun, sea and beautiful beaches were enough to make Cyprus a prime tourist destination. Recent declines in incoming tourist visitations has enticed the Cyprus Tourism Organization to go beyond the traditional tourism marketing employed to consider new selling features of tourism such as sport tourism. The purpose of this paper is to examine the viewpoints of upper management municipal administrators for the establishment of Cyprus as a potential sport tourism market. Face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with upper management administrators from nine selected municipalities of Cyprus. Data was analyzed using Creswell's (1998) *Data Analysis Spiral*. The results revealed that: (1) municipal administrators tended to have a limited understanding of the magnitude of the concept sport tourism, (2) municipal administrators believe that they have good facilities and infrastructure that could be utilized for sports tourism development, (3) municipal administrators are in full support of the utilization of physical resources (i.e., lakes and water dams) for regional sport tourism development, (4) municipal administrators consider sport tourism to be good quality tourism, and (5) municipal administrators are in favor of sports tourism development.

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Key Words: Sport tourism; sport tourism market, Cyprus; municipal administrators

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## **Abstract**

Since the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960 tourism has become a major part of the sector of this Mediterranean country. Efforts by the Government of Cyprus to market Cyprus as a tourism destination through the promotion of sun and sea (S & S) has traditionally aided making this island a prime tourist attraction. However, this “S & S” concept has reached a saturation point and the tourism industry in Cyprus is currently facing major challenges with considerable reduction in international reservations (Cyprus Tourism Organization, 2007). According to the Cyprus Tourism Organization (2007), the trend in international reservations has continued to go downward at a steady pace during the past ten years. Specifically, the Statistical Service for the Republic of Cyprus has indicated a drop in the number of tourists coming to Cyprus from 2,434,285 in 2000 to 2,416,086 in 2007 (Statistical Services for the Republic of Cyprus, 2007; 2000).

Competition with other neighboring countries offering a good quality and similar tourist products may be one reason why the number of visitors to Cyprus has decreased. Other factors such as increased prices of the tourist packages in Cyprus, and the strength of the Cypriot Pound versus the Euro and US Dollar, may have also kept tourists away. Nonetheless, Cyprus is now facing a major challenge to revive the influx of international tourists by either establishing a new tourist market and/or changing its traditional tourist marketing approaches.

The Cyprus Tourism Organization, a governmental organization that is in charge of developing and promoting tourism on the island, has incorporated in its strategic plan for 2010 a priority towards the development of alternative forms of tourism to promote new tourism products. These alternative forms of tourism include

sport tourism, conference tourism, spa tourism, agrotourism and monastic tourism. The Cyprus Tourism Organization's Annual Report in 2006 indicate that the "S & S" concept is not selling anymore so new forms of tourism need to be developed. Sport Tourism is one of the new major pillars of development, one of the new alternative forms of tourism in which new and high hopes are devoted by Cyprus for revitalizing the nations' tourism industry.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the viewpoints of upper management municipal administrators for the establishment of Cyprus as a potential sport tourism market. Specifically, the intent of this study is to analyze the viewpoints of upper management municipal administrators on the: (1) understanding of sports tourism, (2) availability of facilities and infrastructure that could be used for sports tourism purposes, (3) degree of support of natural resources for sport touristic purposes, (4) value placed on sport tourism, and (5) potential to invest in sport tourism.

### **Sport Tourism in Cyprus**

Tourism and sport are prominent socio-economic forces that require constant renewal (de Villiers, 2001). Sport and tourism, either individually or collectively, pose a challenge to adapt and renew the supply of products and services to meet new and changing societal demands (de Villiers, 2001). Both sport and tourism products are subjected to life cycles, and with time, lose their original appeal and importance. That is, sport and tourism can exchange and share valuable experiences in the management of the process of renewal and the redesigning of products and services.

Sport tourism is conceptualized by Standeven and De Knop (1999) as consisting of the following attributes: (1) active and passive involvement in sporting activity, (2) participation in casually or organized fashions, (3) experienced for noncommercial or

business/commercial reasons, and (4) enticing travel away from home and work.

Thus, it can be said that sport tourism is travel away from one's local base to experience sport as participant or spectator. Sport tourism consists of: (1) traveling to play sports (active sport tourism), (2) traveling to watch sports (event sport tourism), and (3) traveling to visit or venerate famous sport-related attractions (nostalgia sport tourism).

Recent research by Yiannakis (2006) identifies two types of sport tourism services that exist in Cyprus: (1) recreational sport tourism, and (2) tourism of professional sports. Recreational sport tourism involves activities such as sports events, cultural inheritance, fantasy camps, sports cruises, adventure and outdoor activities, travel and health spas (Yiannakis, 2006). Professional sport tourism includes the training of foreign professional athletes and teams, international / regional sports events, tourist and marketing management agents' travels, congresses/travels of National Federations (Yiannakis, 2006).

Research conducted in the new millennium has enticed interest for the potential of sport tourism development. In 2002, Kartakoullis and Karlis performed a SWOT analysis on developing Cyprus as a sport tourist destination. The results of this SWOT analysis indicated that there is some potential or prospects for the development of sport tourism in Cyprus and the strengths and opportunities are plenty. However, Kartakoullis and Karlis (2002) did caution that proper strategic management would be required to administer sport services. That is, administrators of touristic municipalities would first have to recognize the need and value of sport tourism and then plan accordingly to implement sport tourism services in their regions. The Republic of Cyprus is a small nation with only 750,000 inhabitants. Cyprus is a country with a growing need and expansion of sport services. Kartakoullis (2000)

stated that in the past twenty years the Cypriot population has experienced a more favorable attitude towards sport and active living. The number of sport services, athletic facilities, and athletic stadiums has increased in Cyprus, as this society appears to have a growing interest in the sporting industry, not only as viewers, but also as participants (Kartakoullis, 2000). Cyprus may thus be an ideal society for sport tourism to develop.

Brackenbury (2002), who is President of the International Federation of Tour Operators, and Chairman of the World Tourism Organization Business Council, stated during a visit to Cyprus that Cyprus has much to offer in the way of sport and tourism. During this same presentation Brackenbury also argued that sport could become very useful to the Cypriot tourism industry, particularly relevant to the shoulder seasons when the weather is better than in Northern Europe.

Further evidence of the growing need for sport tourism services in Cyprus was the signing of a letter of intent for collaboration between Cyprus and England. The Honorable Minister of sport of England, Richard Caborn, and the Chairman of the British Olympic Association, Craig Reedie, signed in 2002 a letter of intent for collaboration with the President of Cyprus National Olympic Committee, Kikis N. Lazarides. This letter of intent involved the use for sports facilities in Cyprus by Team Great Britain (the British Olympic Team), for preparation for the Olympic Games in Athens in 2004. This move by the British sports authorities created a new momentum and considerable interest by all involved parties in establishing Cyprus as a sports tourism destination. Moreover, the clear stand of the British Minister and the Chairman of the British Olympic Association to develop Cyprus as a permanent warm-base training destination because of the many advantages it offers (i.e., excellent weather conditions all year around, good sports infrastructure, excellent

hotels, medical support, regular flights to London and the rest of Europe) has created an immense interest for the establishment of the sport tourism industry in Cyprus. The Cyprus Tourism Organization, the Government of Cyprus and private tourism and sport organizations have welcomed the idea to complement Cyprus' "S & S" touristic appeal with non-seasonal sport tourism industry. What does this mean for Cyprus? It means that Cyprus has not only started to receive local but also international recognition as being a sports tourism destination. This has caused concern for the Cyprus Tourism Organization, the Government of Cyprus and the private tourism and sport organizations of Cyprus, and municipal administrators that have done little in the past to prepare for this needed area of growth in the tourism sector. As a result, the tourism and sport sectors of Cyprus are in need of research that will contribute to a better understanding of sport tourism and what it actually entails.

## **Methodology**

Municipalities in Cyprus play an important role in the provision of tourism services as municipalities own facilities, promote tourism and provide extensive infrastructure for tourism development. For this reason, their views and feedback is important and is sought in this study.

Face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted with an upper management administrator of nine selected municipalities of Cyprus. Face-to-face in-depth interviews was the data collection method employed as Silverman (1993) posits that this is an effective technique to yield results on viewpoints or feelings. The following nine municipalities were self-selected: Nicosia, Limassol, Larnaca, Pafos, Paralimni, Agia Napa, Pegeia, Polis Chrysochous, Agros. These nine were self-selected as they were identified by the researchers as being the nine most visited municipalities in

Cyprus by both domestic and international tourists. The upper management municipal administrators were also self-selected coming from a directory of municipal government officials. The criteria for selection of upper management administrators were based on having authority to make decisions for sports or sports related services. The face-to-face interviews, which lasted about one-hour, took place in the office settings of the nine municipal administrators. The municipal administrators were asked a series of open-ended questions that focused on finding out information on: (1) understanding of sports tourism, (2) availability of facilities and infrastructure that could be used for sports tourism purposes, (3) degree of support of natural resources for sport touristic purposes, (4) value placed on sport tourism, and (5) potential to invest in sport tourism. The data collected from each interview was transcribed upon collection by the interviewer.

Data was analyzed using Creswell's (1998) *Data Analysis Spiral*. Creswell's *Data Analysis Spiral* is identified by Leedy and Ormrod (2005) as being an effective means to analyze qualitative data collected from face-to-face interviews. Creswell's *Data Analysis Spiral* consists of four steps. The first step was to organize the data. In the case of the current study this was done by breaking down larger bodies of descriptive text into sentences. The second step consisted of a perusal review of the entire body of data collected to obtain an understanding of what it consists of as a whole. Here, margin notes were jotted down that suggested possible categories and interpretations. The third step was to identify general categories (and subcategories) or themes (and subthemes). The final step, the fourth step, was to integrate and synthesis the data according to collective points that addressed the purpose of the study.



## **Results**

The following results revealed that municipal administrators: (1) tended to have a limited understanding of the magnitude of the concept of sport tourism - in most instances the concept of sport tourism was depicted as referring to the training of athletes, and precisely football teams in Cyprus during the winter period, (2) believe that they have good facilities and infrastructure that could be utilized for sports tourism - municipal administrators stated that the local authorities can support different forms of sport tourism development, that is, not only high level, competitive sport, but recreational sport as well, (3) are in support of the utilization of physical resources such as lakes and water dams, (4) consider sport tourism to be “good quality” tourism as athletes are well behaved – they do not cause noise or anti-social behavior, and (5) are in favor of sports tourism development and they are willing to engage in investments and other initiatives as long as they have specialized support in this respect by the federal Government (financial support) and the Cyprus Tourism Organisation.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The concept of sport tourism is relatively new as more research in this area started to expand in the 1990s (Karlis, 2006). It is thus not surprising that municipal administrators have such a limited understanding of the concept sport tourism. In the case of the administrators interviewed however, it seems as though their awareness of sport tourism as concept and practice was enhanced as a result of the training of the British Olympic team in Cyprus leading up to the Athens Games of 2004. Municipal administrators indicated that their respective municipal areas are well prepared for development as potential sport tourism markets. By positing that an

“availability of facilities and infrastructure exists” and by noting that “support will be provided for the use of natural resources”, a desire by municipal authorities to expand respective tourism markets to include sport tourism is evident. Perhaps, this willingness to act as a sport tourism market is a result of the emerging trend in Cyprus indicating a drop of incoming visitors.

The municipal administrators also placed a high value on sport tourism and its potential. Research by Standeven and De knop conducted in 1999 indicated that the majority of government administrators tend to not have administrative frameworks for sport and tourism. Based on the value placed on sport tourism and its potential by participants of this study, it may be that a trend is now emerging for the establishment of sport tourism frameworks in municipal markets.

Based on the viewpoints of municipal administrators, it appears as though the potential for Cyprus to develop as a sport tourism destination exists, yet more research is needed to ascertain that this is indeed the case. Research needs to be expanded beyond the perspectives of municipal administrators to include an analysis of reasons for travel by sport tourists to Cyprus. Research should also be expanded to include the perceptions of federal government administrators and the viewpoints of administrators of sport governing bodies. Neuroti (2005) posits that an expansion of research is needed before identifying a market as being an emerging sport tourism market. From expanded research, the Cyprus Tourism Organization and the Government of Cyprus will be in a better position to diagnose the potential of Cyprus as a sport tourism destination.

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