

Tourism Professionals' Attitudes towards Climate Change and their Strategies to Respond to Global Warming

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Abstract

This paper discusses three aspects of the interrelationship between tourism and climate change: the perception of the problems related to global warming by tourism professionals, their suggestions concerning possible actions that can be taken to reduce tourism's impacts on the world climate and the actual actions implemented by their organizations.

Background

Global climate change is arguably the most serious environmental issue of our time, and tourism is not just a potential victim of it. This paper bears in mind that tourism's contribution to climate change only accounts for a minor share of global greenhouse gases. However, within the context of tourism and leisure, today it is widely accepted by both tourism professionals and tourists that air travel - the fastest growing source of greenhouse gas emissions - will significantly contribute to global warming and therefore affect many destinations negatively (WWF, 2001). Air travel is not the only source of greenhouse effects since emissions from other sectors will also add considerable pressure on the natural environment. The tourism industry's heavy reliance on the local environment and climate to sell holidays means that it could face serious challenges as a result of climate change. More frequent periods of extreme heat will cause discomfort in many Eastern Mediterranean resorts where the number of days above 40 degrees Celcius is expected to increase. Winter tourism may also be affected as the Alps and other European skiing destinations experience less snowfall and shorter skiing seasons (Beniston, 2005; Fischer et al., 2006; Scott et al., 2007). Furthermore, an increase in extreme weather events such as floods and storms is also expected. Coastal regions as well as alpine regions are to address the issue of global warming urgently and adjust their management strategies accordingly in order to remain attractive destinations. Since the appeal of many of the most popular tourist destinations in Europe relies heavily on a mixture of natural beauty, good weather and safe conditions, one would expect global warming to raise strong concerns on the destination management level. However, despite the increasing media coverage and worries expressed by the population in western countries, little public and industry response is noteworthy. Although numerous studies have focused on public or

tourists' attitudes towards climate change (see Henry, 2000; Becken, 2004 and 2007; Norgaard, 2006; Gössling et al., 2006; Gössling and Peeters, 2007), tourism managers' perceptions and their strategies have been under-researched thus far. Becken (2004) found that, overall, tourism experts - mostly academics - were better informed about the effects of climate change than tourists. A previous study on tourism professionals' attitudes towards climate change at the ITB Fair in Berlin (Lund-Durlacher et al., 2007) revealed that there was a high awareness of climate change among tourism professionals and strong impacts on tourism were expected. On the other hand, tourism's contribution to that problem was seen as only moderate. When asked about the specific causes and suitable mitigation strategies, it turned out that many of those surveyed had only limited and sometimes inaccurate knowledge. As far as mitigation strategies were concerned, in general, technological solutions were preferred as opposed to travel behavior change and different or green tourism products. Apart from public educational campaigns, fiscal and other regulatory instruments were supported by a sizeable number of respondents. In their study on voluntary carbon offsetting schemes, Gössling et al. (2007) pointed out that offsets are an unconvincing tool for sustainable tourism management and that behavioral change would be a far more effective solution.

Methodology

This paper includes an academic reflection on the past research on climate change within a tourism context as well as an analysis of destination managers' attitudes towards this issue. At the time of writing, data are collected at the ITB Fair in Berlin using a two-fold methodological approach. A representative sample of 300 exhibitors has been randomly selected and participants are asked to fill in questionnaires to gain an initial understanding of their knowledge and willingness to mitigate their impacts from air travel. In addition, in-depth interviews are carried out with twelve top destination managers of European towns or cities in order to extract more detailed data on local management strategies implemented to reduce tourism contribution to global warming. Compared to last year's results, the current research should determine whether global warming knowledge and awareness have changed among tourism professionals, whether greenhouse gas compensation programs are more frequently suggested as climate protection measures and which of the projects offered by the compensation providers are mostly supported.

Expected Outcomes

Informed by the work of Lund-Durlacher et al. (2007), this study makes the case that tourism managers at the destination level fail to take significant actions against the threat of global warming

and advocate softer solutions instead. Reasons for their failure to respond to the issue could be hypothesized as follows:

Most managers underestimate environmental risks as they associate personal benefits of holidaying.

Most managers' lack of appropriate actions benefits from their denial in short-run economic terms.

Most managers make their judgments about global warming based on the weather, not the climate.

Most tourism professionals link environmental problems to local and visible problems such as waste rather than global long-term effects.

Global threats like the greenhouse effect are seen as abstract and beyond individuals' control.

Attitudes towards climate change are highly influenced by the respondents' political economy on the one hand and social psychology and culture on the other.

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