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Sustainable Practices and Barriers: Tourism Entities' Perspectives

Introduction

Tourism is a complex and multifaceted industry that includes a variety of operating sectors such as transportation, accommodations, food service, attractions, entertainment, events, travel trade, tourism services and adventure and outdoor recreation. The tourism industry relies heavily on a variety of environmental features and factors such as abundant and unspoiled natural resources and outstanding recreational settings (Holden, 2008; Nicholls & Kang, 2012). Thus the success of these respective sectors can be heavily interdependent on their positive interaction with the natural and social environment. Yet, the presence of the tourism industry is known to have significant negative impacts on the quality of the environment and settings in the destinations (Dolnicar, Crouch, and Long 2008).

Many researchers acknowledge that the tourism industry is no longer able to ignore its adverse socio-cultural and environmental effects. The “sustainability” of the tourism industry has been gaining prevalence since the 1980s (Sirakaya, Ekinci & Kaya, 2008). Additionally, environmentally preferable travel continues to be a growing trend in the hospitality and tourism industry. A number of recent market research studies have indicated that leisure travelers are increasingly making travel decisions based on the availability of accommodations with practices that reduce their environmental impact (Tierney, Hunt, & Latkova, 2011). To satisfy this growing demand for greener accommodations and attractions, many businesses have taken strides to reduce their environmental footprint by implementing sustainable practices such as energy and water conservation and waste reduction. A prevalent area of research in sustainable practices has focused on accommodations and food services. Limited research to date has included the various entities of the tourism industry such as the differing attractions, tourism marketing services, and tourism-related government or non-profit agencies.

In order to achieve sustainable development at the community level, broad stakeholder support is essential (Choi and Sirakaya 2005). The extent to which members of a community have input and participate in the planning and development of their own tourism industry, can help shape the direction and degree of the economic, socio and environmental impacts of tourism development. Hence, understanding the extent to which tourism-related entities actively support sustainable tourism development is crucial for decision makers and other stakeholders. In addition, very few studies have attempted to examine the barriers that prevent a tourism business from adopting sustainable practices.

This current research attempts to fill this gap by: 1) investigating various tourism entities' (both private and public sectors) perceptions of the importance of sustainable practices to the long-term success of tourism businesses as well as the barriers of implementing common sustainable practices; 2) profiling and describing tourism partner groupings' using a factor-cluster approach; and 3) examining whether there are any differences between the clusters in terms of their demographic and other attitudinal attributes.

Methodology

Survey

Each year, the North Carolina Division of Tourism (Visit NC) conducts a survey of its industry partners to learn more about partner perspectives regarding geographic markets, audiences and programs of greatest value to tourism organizations across the state. Branding of communities, counties, and tourism destinations as responsible stewards of the natural and socio-cultural resources appears to be growing in importance to ensure a competitive tourism location. Starting from 2013, in partnership with East Carolina University's Center for Sustainability (CfS), Visit NC added a sustainability focused component to this survey asking the respondents' opinion on the importance of sustainable practices to the future success of the State's tourism industry as well as barriers they perceived to implementing these practices.

Notification about the survey is distributed through Visit NC's weekly e-newsletter, Newslink. This electronic publication is emailed weekly and includes information on tourism-related research, statewide

and international trends, media leads, updates on conferences and events, and more. By making the survey available online it allows Visit NC to efficiently reach and gather responses from the maximum number of industry partners statewide. Subscribers to Newslink were invited to complete the survey and the survey was designed to accept only one response per IP address. Three reminders were sent to potential respondents in addition to the original solicitation. A total of 163 respondents completed the survey in 2013 and 92 respondents completed the survey in 2014. For the purpose of this study, the data from 2013 and 2014 were combined and duplicated responses were removed.

Analysis

To examine tourism entities' opinions on the importance of sustainable practices to the future success of the State's tourism industry, the authors adopted 12 statements (Nicholls and Kang, 2012) using a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important). Principal component factor analysis followed by direct oblimin rotation was conducted to analyze the 12 sustainable practice statements to identify the underlying dimensions of these 12 items. Two factors were generated based on their loading values and Eigenvalues, and accounted for 62% of the variance. Table 1 shows the two factors: 1) green practices (9 items), and 2) culture-nature practices (3 items). Each factor name was based on the characteristics of its composing statements. An average scale was created for each of the two factors and used to group the respondents using two-step cluster analysis. Three clusters were revealed based on the similarity of perceptions of those dimensions.

Results and Conclusion

The characteristics of each of the three clusters are shown in table 2. The first cluster (high sustainers) contained 45 tourism entities (39.8%) of the sample. The high sustainers ranked both green practices (mean = 4.5) and culture-nature practices (mean = 4.94) highly important. Cluster 2 (medium sustainers) contained 53 respondents (46.9% of the sample) who also strongly supported the culture-nature practices (mean = 4.45), but felt neutral about green practices (mean = 3.79). Cluster 3 (low sustainers) contained 15 tourism partners (13.3% of the sample) who indicated limited support for green practices (mean = 2.61) and felt neutral about culture-nature practices (mean = 3.76).

In order to profile the three clusters in terms of their demographic characteristics, cross-tabulation analysis was conducted. The High and Medium Sustainers group contained a higher percentage of accommodations than the Low Sustainers group. The Low Sustainers group contained a higher percentage of government/non-profit agencies than the other two groups. The three clusters contained similar percentage of attractions and tourism marketing services partners.

MANOVA tests were carried out to evaluate the differences of the respondents in the three clusters on barriers in implementing sustainable practices. The MANOVA tests revealed that the three clusters were statistically different from each other on two barrier statements: a) lack of support / advice from local government; and b) lack of training / information (table is not included due to page limit). High and Medium Sustainers groups felt much stronger about "lack of support / advice from local government" as a barrier than the Low Sustainers group. The High Sustainers group felt much stronger about "lack of training" as a barrier than the Low Sustainers group. The majority of the respondents agreed that lack of funding and the perceived low return on investment, as well as the complexity of implementation of sustainable practices, are the most significant barriers in implementing such practices.

Individual respondents to the survey, Visit NC staff, and the State's tourism industry, are all invested in maintaining the well-known brand of the North Carolina tourism product as being protected and presented in its most natural state. Tourists to North Carolina are increasingly expecting clean air and water, minimum visible waste, use of alternative energy sources, and a socially equitable work environment, when traveling to and through this state. The findings are helping to educate and guide tourism entities regarding their sustainable actions and affecting the thinking of state tourism officials regarding their role in advising these entities on how best to maintain and present their tourism product in a sustainable manner. An additional important use of these findings is to advise the administrative team of

NCGreenTravel, the State's recognition program for sustainable practices, on the criteria used and the progress being made, regarding sustainability within North Carolina's tourism industry. The results of the survey also assist the Division's advertising agency and public relation partners in their collaboration with Visit NC on future marketing initiatives.

Tables

Table 1 Principal Component Analysis

Dimension and Factored Items	Factor
Green Practices	
Offer alternative transportation	.521
Offer lodging that employs green practices	.862
Make locally and sustainably sourced food available	.516
Offer attractions that engage in green practices	.863
Be certified as a sustainable or green destination	.842
Takes active steps to reduce any negative environmental impact caused by tourism	.722
Make efforts to conserve energy	.819
Make efforts to conserve water	.822
Makes efforts to reduce waste and recycle	.799
Culture-Nature Practices	
Conserve natural and open spaces	.722
Offer a range of local culture and heritage to visitors	.848
Offer a range of local culture and heritage to visitors	.823

Table 2 Cluster means

Dimensions	High Sustainers	Medium Sustainers	Low Sustainers
Green practices	4.50	3.79	2.61
Culture-nature practices	4.94	4.45	3.79
Number of cases (n)	45 (39.8%)	53 (46.9%)	15 (13.3%)

Table 3 Comparison on types of tourism entities

Type of Tourism Entities	High Sustainers	Medium Sustainers	Low Sustainers
Accommodations	16 (36.4%)	23 (44.2%)	5 (33.3%)
Attractions	12 (27.3%)	14 (26.9%)	4 (26.7%)
Tourism marketing services	7 (15.9%)	7 (13.5%)	2 (13.3%)
Government / non-profit agencies	9 (20.5%)	8 (15.4%)	4 (26.7%)

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