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ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploratory investigation to access the value a stakeholder group places on the different dimensions of sustainable tourism. Most definitions of sustainable tourism include three dimensions: economic, social and environmental. This study used on an online survey to determine if members of the Southeast Tourism Society understood that sustainable tourism included all three dimensions, and if they valued those three dimensions differently. Results and conclusions will be presented at the conference.

Keywords: *stakeholders, sustainable tourism, tourism professionals, value, understanding*

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability became a major topic when in 1987 when the World Commission on the Environment and Development (WCED) published Our Common Future, also known as the Brundtland Report. The WCED defined sustainable development as a form of development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, p. 43). The Brundtland Report "placed the concept of sustainable development center stage and promoted it as a vehicle for deliverance (Murphy, 1994)."

Since then the term "sustainability" has become a hot topic in many industries including the tourism industry. For many industries, including tourism, sustainable development represented a paradigm shift. Many (i.e. Gunn & Var 2002; Hardy and Beeton, 2001; UNWTO, 2004), have attempted to define or describe sustainable tourism, so that sustainable concepts could be integrated into tourism development. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has developed on of the most comprehensive descriptions of sustainable tourism. Byrd, Cárdenas, and Greenwood (2008) identified six main principles in the UNWTO's description; "(1) High level of tourist satisfaction, (2) Make optimal use of environmental resources, (3) Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, (4) Provide socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders, (5) Constant monitoring of impacts, and (6) Informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership (p. 193)."

One of the basic principles identified for sustainable tourism was informed participation of all relevant stakeholders. A stakeholder is defined as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by" tourism in a community (Feeeman 1984, p 46). It is important to note that the

participation called for here involves more than simply asking individuals what they want and then providing it. Connell (1997) explained that "it is not enough to consult beneficiaries and then to act on their behalf, however benign one's intentions. Nor is it usually enough to engage people in the a development process if the conceptual orientation and the language of that process do not relate to their experience, and if they lack the tools to access their needs effectively and to know what options are available to them to bring about constructive change (p. 250)."

Informed community participation is a multi-dimensional process of educational empowerment by all stakeholders (Tosun, 2000). This idea and need of informed stakeholder participation has been echoed by others in the tourism literature (i.e. Byrd, Cárdenas, & Greenwood, 2008; Hardy and Beeton, 2001; Simmons, 1994). The idea is that before stakeholders can fully participate in sustainable tourism, they need to understand basic concepts and ideas. All stakeholders need to have a common level of understanding and understanding about tourism and the community.

Most experts agree that sustainable tourism development can be divided into three dimensions commonly called the triple bottom line; environmental, economic, and social (Elkington, 1998; Hitchcock & Willard, 2006; Swarbrooke, 2000; Wirtenberg, Russell, & Lipsky, 2009). For sustainable tourism to be successful it must be understood and acknowledged that all three aspects are interdependent (Hitchcock & Willard, 2006; Swarbrooke, 2000). Hitchcock and Willard (2006) stated that, "When we don't understand these interdependencies we often make poor decisions (p. 9)." Many (i.e. Elkington, 1998; Hitchcock & Willard, 2006; Muller, 1994; Wirtenberg, Russell, & Lipsky, 2009) have emphasized the importance of optimizing all three; ecological, economic, and social elements of sustainable development. This goes against the idea that for success in one area another area must suffer. Others such as Hunter (1997) disagree with the balance idea and argue that a range of sustainable tourism approaches exists. Hunter states that sustainable tourism:

> …need not (indeed should not) imply that these often competing aspects are somehow to be balanced. In reality, trade-off decisions taken on a day to day basis will almost certainly produce priorities which emerge to skew the destination area based tourism environment system in favor or certain aspects. (p. 859)

Studies (i.e. Getz & Timur, 2005; Simmons, 1994) have shown that most community stakeholders have limited understanding about tourism and tourism development. It is important to understand how stakeholders understand the concept of sustainable tourism not only because the success of a tourism development plan is often based on the support of the stakeholders in the community, but also stakeholder participation is one of the key principles to sustainable development. Because sustainability encompasses the balancing of multiple factors/dimensions it is necessary to identify what value stakeholders place on each factor.

No matter the point of view most scholars agree that sustainable tourism can be thought to have three dimensions (economic, social, environment). Yet, do stakeholders value each dimension equally? Very little research has been conducted to determine if stakeholders understand the importance of each of the dimension differently. These differences could provide some insight into why there is a disconnect between the theoretical principle of sustainable tourism and the actual implementation of sustainable tourism.

The purpose of this research is to conduct an exploratory study to access the value a stakeholder group places on the different dimensions of sustainable tourism. One stakeholder group that has often been neglected in the tourism literature is the tourism professional. Tourism

professionals come from multiple disciplines, a variety of backgrounds, and differing education levels. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that tourism professional have a common understanding or value of sustainable tourism. On the contrary, evidence shows that there may be differing levels of sustainable tourism understanding among tourism professionals.

METHODOLOGY

In the fall of 2009 an online questionnaire was sent to tourism professional who were members of the Southeastern Tourism Society (STS). STS was established in 1983 as a non-profit organization to promote tourism through the Southeast region of the United States. At the time of the study the region included 12 states with a membership over 1,000 individuals representing different tourism organizations including hotels, CVB's parks, attractions and colleges/universities. The focus of STS is to provide continue education, marketing, networking and legislative advocacy, and consumer outreach.

An initial email was sent to all STS members asking them to participate in the study with a link to a Survey Monkey. Two reminder emails were sent and a total of 118 usable questionnaires were completed. The questionnaire was composed of 11 questions which included value, attitude/perception and socio-demographic questions. The questions were developing based on previous research on stakeholder, and sustainable development. In addition, questions were derived based on key constructs taught in sustainable tourism courses. Data was input in SPSS 17. Analysis included frequencies, Chi-Square, and ANOVA.

A majority of respondents were female (70%) and almost all of the participants were White – not or Hispanic origin (95%). The mean age was 47, ranging from 22 to 77 years old. Respondents worked in the tourism/hospitality industry an average of 14 years. Over eighty percent had a college degree or higher, yet only 27% had a degree in tourism/hospitality. Most participants indicated that they participated in the tourism planning or development process for a community (84%).

RESULTS AND CONCLUSION

Results and conclusions are still being developed and will be presented at the conference.

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