Chapter 15

Understanding Sustainable Tourism:
As a Discourse Constructed by Stakeholders in Context of Their Destinations

Chandresh Singh
Centre for Tourism Studies Jaipur, India

ABSTRACT

The concept of 'Sustainable tourism' is still an evolving one and the scholars theorizing the concept and institutions trying to adopt it as a policy framework are having different set of meanings attached to this often quoted term. In last few decades issue of sustainability in various forms has also emerged as an important one within the domain of tourism planning and operations. The Growth of tourism along with its many benefits was also accountable for various adverse impacts on destinations and to minimize these impacts has become a matter of great concern worldwide. Efforts in this direction have encouraged industry experts and policy makers to promote 'Sustainable tourism'. The stakeholders in varying degree are sensitive to these dangers and seek to protect tourist destinations and to protect tourism, which is forecasted to grow in future and is currently is world's largest and fastest growing industries. The constant growth of tourism is predicted to have severe impacts on biological diversity, indigenous cultures, environment which provide the base to facilitate tourism.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Does the sustainable tourism have any universally agreed definition?
2. How stakeholders at their destination conceptualize Sustainable Tourism?
3. Which dimensions of sustainable tourism are prioritized by Stakeholders within strategic areas envisaged within 'Sustainable Tourism' and how they integrate as a discourse?

METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Apart from review of relevant literature available on related topics, some of the stakeholders from different clusters of tourism industry in India and abroad were consulted through in-depth interviews and surveys. The segments included Tour Operators, Hotels, Transport operators, Tour Guides, Tourist board, Tourism Educators, NGOs and stakeholders engaged in production of leisure, tourism and recreation related products and services at selected destinations. The respondents preferred an informal conversation in most of the cases and same was followed as a course of action. According to UNEP (2011) there are following seven strategic areas within sustainable tourism framework. (As indicated in the figure below)

In field research all above areas were discussed to understand stakeholder's opinion. Major stakeholder groups were treated as different 'focus groups' and an elicitation survey was conducted for the preliminary information from them. Each focus group consisted of 3-5 representatives from major segments of Industry. The awareness level of stakeholders about these strategic areas was analyzed. As these areas have different connotations for different group of stakeholders. For instance issue of 'water' in context of sustainability has different implications for a Tour Operator then a Resort/Hotel company. Former may not be directly involved in water related issues in business, but later have a direct and closer association with the issue. Tourism experience is delivered by complex combination of suppliers located at different locations. Some are in contact with tourists and many others work in background. Above enlisted stakeholders individually or collectively don't represent entire supply chain working behind production of final tourism products. In order to overcome these limitations views of other stakeholders at destinations like residents, Tourism educators, NGOs, vendors selling local handicrafts and people engaged in up keeping tourism infrastructure were also incorporated within the scope of this research work. Tourism at a destination has above characteristics and consequently the issue of sustainability also envisages all of this complexity. This research examined views of different focus groups of tourism industry at few destinations through representative samples. For instance Major segments like Accommodation were be represented by hotels, resorts of different categories e.g. Budget, and luxury, special interest etc in different budget categories to get a wider representation of different levels of this sector. The respondents were interviewed to get views on all the major strategic areas envisaged in sustainable tourism framework.

Figure 1. Sustainable tourism: Core strategic areas mentioned by UNEP
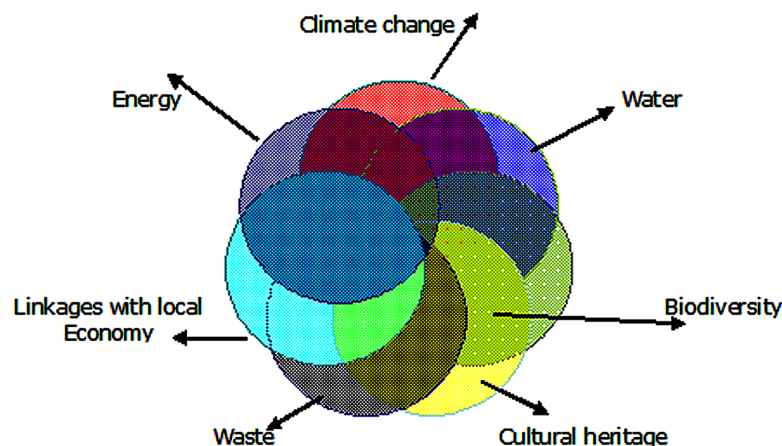
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