

Sustainable tourism practices through the eyes of the tourist: a case study of a tour operator

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Abstract

This paper main aim is to find out the importance of sustainable tourism practices from a tourist point of view. The research study took place at Back-Roads Touring - a tour operator that specializes in small group touring for senior's travellers from Australia, New Zealand, USA and Canada. The study had four objectives, however the focus was to find out which tourism practices were the most important to the respondents during a Back-Roads tour and which tourism options the respondents identify as sustainable tourism options. An online questionnaire was used to answer the objectives of the study. In total 1322 clients received an online questionnaire out of which 182 filled in the survey. The results showed that the respondents valued the most 'small group touring' and 'having an experienced tour leader'. Furthermore, the respondents were not seeking for more sustainable tourism practices neither willing to donate money to local charities/non-profit organizations. This finding shows that the clients are content with a current model of a tour, are willing to return, however price and quality will play a key role in a future decision making. Moreover, one of the objectives of this study was to find out if the clients valued sustainable tourism certification. The results showed that the respondents were not aware of the sustainable tourism certification that the company obtained, however slightly over half of the respondents said that the knowledge of the certification had positively influenced them to travel again with the company.

Keywords: sustainable tourism practices; certification, tour operator, small group touring

1. Introduction

The research aims at exploring the importance of sustainable tourism practices in the distribution sector. It is done by identifying the most important sustainable tourism options during a tour according from a tourist point of view. The study intends to identify the factors that determine loyalty to enterprises in the tourism distribution sector, namely tour operators, considering sustainable practices and sustainable tourism certifications.

Sustainable development has been discussed widely by the politicians and academics over the past decade as a new mean of future development due to the challenges that the world started noticing recently (e.g. climate change, deforestation, environmental degradation at the world level). Tourism has played a big part in developing and generating economies (e.g. especially in the Mediterranean region, South East Asia, Caribbean region) in many countries around the world in the past fifty years, therefore there has been more attention shifted towards the sustainable tourism development. According to UNEP /WTO report (2005) sustainable tourism is the one that ensures economic, social and environmental sustainability of a destination.

There are plenty of reasons why tourism industry should focus on sustainability. First being the massive increase of tourist arrivals in comparison to an early XX century until now (from 1990 till

now the international tourists' arrivals almost tripled, from 435 million to 1,24 billion in 2016), and in addition to this, it is forecasted to grow steadily in the future. Indeed, the last UNWTO long-term forecasts estimates that international tourist arrivals are expected to reach 1.8 billion by the year 2030, considering the projected annual rate of growth of 3,3% (UNWTO, 2016). This all means that the tourism impact has grown and will continue growing, being mandatory to ensure that the positive impact takes bigger part than the negative.

Moreover, the tourism growth goes in parallel growth with the world's population and consumption habits. Global Footprint network (Fischer, 2014: 25) states that by 2050 we would need two and a half planets Earth to satisfy our demand if we do not change our habits. This is a very visual expression to state that the current consumption habits must follow the sustainability pathway and tourism is no exception to this.

Another important point to note is the apparent number of destinations (Table 1) that have been impacted negatively by the uncontrolled mass tourism, to the point where the damage is irreversible (Rodriguez et al., 2008; Ocean, I. & Reeve, S., 2012; Mayr, 2013). As a result, attention onto sustainable tourism has gained power as a model to save a destination and to secure a prosperous future.

Table 1 Examples of tourism destinations badly affected by tourism

Destination	Negative tourism impacts	Resource
Tenerife	Environmental degradation, excess in supply, social and security issues	Rodriguez, J.R.O., Parra-Lopez, E., Yanes-Estevez, V. (2008)
Maldives	The rubbish island with toxic and plastic waste which leaks into the ocean. The biggest number of rubbish arriving from the luxury hotel resorts.	'Oman to the Maldives' Indian Ocean with Simon Reeve (2012)
Galapagos	Invasive species, negative impact of cars (killing the birds), bigger than required tourists number, poverty in local community as such comes domestic violence and drug abuse, illegal fishing.	Kueffner S. (2013) Epler B. and Proano E. (2006)
Venice	Receives around 30 million tourists per year with a population of nearly 60,000 permanent residents which clearly exceeds its carrying capacity. It also is a UNESCO site which supposed to protect the area from negative impacts however the generating capital from tourism has transformed the city into the 'Disneyland park' where even the locals are skeptical of any possible solution and the government clearly gave up on major recovery actions	Mayr, (2013)

Source: Author

Another factor that influences tourism to adopt sustainability practices is the changing tastes, market trends and innovations from both supply and demand side. For example, Costa Rica is an inspirational success story with innovative at the times green leaves certification and focus on conservation of its main tourism product – nature (Haaland and Oystein, 2010).

The consumers are demanding more sustainable tourism products as Prud'homme et al (2013) research found out. According to this study, the customer satisfaction is positively influenced by hotels' adoption of sustainable development practices. In addition to this, sustainability is seen as a success factor as Chen et al (2011) discuss sustainable tourism as a competitive tourism strategy in order for a destination to grow and be prosperous.

There are many ways in which tourism could incorporate sustainability; however it is important to note that 100% sustainability is hardly possible to achieve, still it is essential to aim to achieve as much as possible. One of the most important sustainability measurements report was published by UNEP and WTO (2005) and has extensively described the 5 instruments for sustainable tourism development (Table 2).

Table 2 Five instruments for sustainable tourism development

Name of the instrument	Tools
<i>Measurement</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limits of acceptance change • Carrying capacity
<i>Command and Control</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legislation, regulation, licensing • Land use planning • Development control (zoning)
<i>Economic</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taxes and charges • Financial incentives and agreements
<i>Voluntary</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidelines and codes of conduct • Reporting and auditing • Voluntary certification and voluntary contribution
<i>Supporting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Infrastructure provision and management • Capacity building • Marketing and information services

Source: UNWTO

This paper's aim is to contribute towards a better understanding of sustainable tourism, specifically in the distribution sector. The following section will touch on the critique and limitations of sustainable tourism as well as a profile of a sustainable tourist. Then a methodological section will describe the procedures adopted for this research, followed by the results and discussion sections. Finally, the conclusion will be given together with limitations and recommendations for future studies.

2.Literature Review

2.1. Sustainable tourism critique and limitations

Sustainable tourism gets a lot of critique both from the academic and the business world. This has to do a lot with its limitations and various interpretations over its description, as well as its ambitious aims. Sustainable tourism gained overall attention after the famous Rio Conference in 1992 which recognized the need for sustainable development. Yet, 20 years have passed and at the UN Rio + 20 conference the problems were pretty much the same. Kettunen (2012) criticizes the UN Rio+20 conference for the lack of conviction, commitments, implementations, concrete actions and timelines. This is an inherent problem of sustainable tourism, it is discussed a lot however there are not so many successful concrete actions done to strive for it, especially from those, who hold the higher positions such as politicians. Sharing this perspective, Budeanu (2007:499) mentions the ineffective 'existing initiatives are missing customers' attention, discouraging industry and governments to continue promoting sustainable tourism'.

In addition, the rapid growth in the tourism sector has made it highly competitive, making the development of more sustainable travel and tourism experiences a distinctive and value-added strategy (Schwartz et al., 2008). This is the major challenge facing the tourism distribution system (including tour operators, travel agencies, internet-based travel companies, etc.), creating and managing sustainable tourism trips, implying that the entire chain of direct suppliers (accommodation, transport, catering, recreation and tourist information) and the tourist destinations themselves are managed in order to be as sustainable as possible (Ho et al., 2002).

In this context, the Tour Operator Initiative (TOI, 2003: 8-9) has identified the main operating areas where Tour Operators can integrate sustainability practices, namely: 'internal management; product development and management (by planning tours and selecting holiday package components that minimise environmental, economic and social impacts); contracting with suppliers (by integrating sustainability principles into the selection criteria and service agreements of suppliers); customer relations (by providing customers with information on responsible behaviour and sustainability issues at the destinations); and relations with destinations (by supporting destination stakeholders' efforts to address sustainability issues and financially contributing to conservation and development projects).

Concerning the customer relations, an important issue comes from the tourists themselves who are not educated enough to support it. Yet, this is a quite complicated issue as on one hand they are not

educated enough, but on the other hand, they do not want to be educated further. Budeanu (2007) agrees by saying that the lack of tourist knowledge and ability to understand the consequences of their own behaviour are yet another fact which leads to unsustainable tourist behaviour. Likewise, Garavaglia et al (2012) research showed the lack of knowledge and understanding of the climate change impact in the mountainous area.

An interesting point is made by Wheeler in Butler's (2006) book which gives a critical review of the sustainability in a light of product life cycle stating that, in the end, tourists prefer superficially versus authenticity and stated versus actual, therefore the principles of sustainability are only part of the niche market rather than mass. Yet, Waever (2012) does not agree with this point and talks about the sustainable mass tourism and suggests that, it is an evolutionary rather than revolutionary process, which denies the idea of sustainable tourism being a niche market.

Still with regard to the tourists' behaviour, Beattie (2010:237) observes that there is a feeling of learned helplessness that surrounds the whole sustainability issues. Furthermore, he points out that 'the evolution has prepared us to survive now and here, not in century's time'. In addition to, in Ram et al (2014) it is suggested that tourists' search for happiness is the main cause for their unsustainable behaviour which is hard to combat.

Furthermore, there are views that sustainability is a utopian idea with inherent issues. For instance, Beattie (2010) reflects on his observations in underdeveloped countries that there is not so much of green conscious when you are so poor. This leads to another inherent problem - the westerners wish to force their viewpoint onto the undeveloped countries. Hanna (2013:46) makes an important statement that 'in our drive to preserve the natural environment we are attempting to freeze or fix biodiversity to what science currently deems as normal'. Also, she adds that 'this preservation of authenticity can be seen in terms of sustainable tourism applying pressure and thus power to keep cultures in particular way and removing the choice and agency of that culture, which reiterates the unequal power relations reminiscent within the colonial period'.

On this same issue, Ram et al (2013) talk about the current tourist mobility matters that are unsustainable, especially if we are looking at the growing demand for tourism in general. Further, Fischer (2014:8) in his book about sustainable tourism focuses a lot on carbon footprint and questions if some business deserve eco label 'if they involve elements that heavily contribute to environmental degradation'. Also, he adds that ecotourism will fail to become a hard-core sustainable due to the cost of getting there (CO₂ emission).

There is also a confusion in the industry over which term (wherever sustainable, green, eco, ethic, responsible, etc.) a business should use, which leads to the manipulation of the term. For example, at the World Tourism Market (2015) seminar it was discussed that the word 'green' is preferred by clients as it is easier to comprehend opposed to the term 'sustainable'. This was followed by the explanation on how to communicate a message about green practices without leaving a client feeling guilty if they do not follow the instructions for green procedures. It is interesting to note that the industry does not want to educate their clients by using a correct term and explaining the value of being a sustainable tourist.

2.2. General characteristics of a "sustainable tourist"

The perspective of the tourist regarding sustainability practices is of central importance for this study, meaning that a brief analysis of the concept of "sustainable tourist" becomes mandatory. Generally, this sort of tourist is a person who consistently seeks sustainable tourism experiences. This idea is supported by Hanna (2013) who says that cultivation of yourself as an ethical subject is a sustainable tourist and reintroduces this term which has its roots from the Ancient Greek philosophy. The term basically means to give meaning to the things that you do and make conscious choices and always reflect on how things went. The critical reflection and education are seen as pillars for sustainable tourism promotion. Whereas, Lopez-Sanchez (2015) introduces a term of sustainable intelligence as a way to indicate a sustainable tourist. His research showed that the pro sustainable tourists were older, having the highest earnings in comparison to others, stayed in 3-4 star hotels and were willing to pay more for sustainable tourism. Yet, this is quite a stereotypical description assuming that sustainable tourism is higher end market tourism.

A problem that is usually noticed regarding sustainable tourism is that people verbally support it, however do not act on it, so called behaviour-attitude gap. According to Beattie (2010:28) an

attitude 'is an internal state of mind affected by what we do which affects our behaviour towards the world around us' and attitudes are activated outside of our conscious attention. Following Beattie (2010), we have an inner drive to keep all our attitudes, beliefs and behaviours in harmony avoiding dissonance. This is a common problem once talking about sustainable tourism and tourists as tourists tend to explicitly agree with the idea of sustainable tourism, but they fail to act once needed. Juvan & Dolnicar (2014) study investigates tourists who behave environmentally friendly at home but during holidays engage in activities that damage the environment. The study concludes that tourists experience a cognitive dissonance of environmental sustainability of tourism and they come up with a lot of explanations to justify their negative behaviour during vacations.

Apart from the dissonance, the issue has a lot to do with resistance, a wish to act opposing of what one is expected to. Interestingly in Hanna's (2013:249) research it was found that the researched sustainable tourists did not purchase the products that were explicitly marketed as ethical, but they 'defined their holidays as sustainable or responsible and offered accounts that resisted dominant understanding of being ethical'. Miller et al (2010) research conducted in England found out that there is a lack of tourism impact awareness among the tourists. Also, that there is a resistance to change their behaviour into more sustainable, as the respondents felt they had a right to have holidays but did not feel that they had any responsibilities. Sense of disempowerment was also registered wanting more action from governing level.

Furthermore, Bondeanu (2007:505) talks about 'conflicts between motivations for tourist choices and environmental ones have the potential to hinder sustainable tourist behaviour'. Weaver (2012:1031) goes further and states that most of 'consumers are superficial environmentalist who are concerned but reluctant to participate in personally inconvenient actions'.

Lastly, Doran & Larsen (2013) research supports the fact that tourists hold an overly positive view of themselves about sustainability means they tend to express a desirable viewpoint accepted by the society. Chate (2005) and Dodds et al (2009) are two of many other researchers whose research focuses on tourists' willingness to pay more for sustainable products, however it does not convert into an action. Which could be explained that tourists want to appear better than they are in social circumstances, however once it comes to the action they fail to do it because it does not match their implicit attitudes which are found in unconscious mind. Thus, as Fischer (2014) acknowledges that the wanted change in sustainable tourism only will occur once tourists will change their attitudes and behaviour.

However, as the industry tries to define and offer what it can to the so called sustainable tourist it lacks its attention to the very core of sustainable tourism -sustainable tourists and their insight into the sustainable tourism. Lopez-Sanchez (2015) agrees that tourists play a lead role in achieving sustainable tourism and that there is lack of studies that discuss awareness and valuation of sustainability by the tourists. Likewise, Weeden (2014) acknowledges the gap of responsible tourist behaviour studies in tourism. This is also supported by Ruhanen et al (2015) who overviewed the past papers on sustainable tourism and also share the opinion on that there has been a little research done about the tourists' behaviour.

Furthermore, Kang and Moscardo (2006) emphasize that little attention has been paid on whether or not eco-tourists actually behave in a responsible way. Similarly, Caruana et al (2014) acknowledge the gap in the research about responsible tourism accounts from tourists' perspectives. They also suggest that the concept of responsible tourism is not coherent, stable or conclusive, because the tourists acknowledge responsible tourism in different ways which sometimes could be even contradictory to the main principles of the concept. This is indeed a very interesting point which questions the whole sustainability idea.

On the contrary, Dodds et al (2009) researched tourists' willingness to pay a tax that supports sustainable practices on the islands and found out that most of the tourists are prone to pay the tax as they saw the importance of sustainable practices on the islands (especially clean beaches). Yes, a clean beach is a very visual and important aspect of the tourists' experience on the island, as a result their willingness to pay a tax that would ensure clean beaches was eminent.

3. Methodologies

3.1. Research setting and data collection

The research took place at a tour operator called Back-Roads Touring (based in London). The company specializes in small group touring around Europe and Morocco along the back roads (Table 3). The big focus is on selecting small scale boutique hotels with a local character, providing local food experiences as well as having an experienced tour leader. The tours are aimed at elderly Australians, New Zealanders, Americans and Canadians.

Table 3 Key aspects of a Back-Roads Tour

<i>Travel in a mini-coach avoiding the highways and going along the back roads where the big coaches could not enter.</i>
<i>Small groups (up to 18 passengers) Note: On barge tours there is a maximum of 22 passengers as it is the full capacity of a barge</i>
<i>Charming accommodation, trying to avoid big chain hotels, rather choosing 3-4 star small scale boutique hotels with a local character</i>
<i>Authentic local experiences</i>
<i>Culinary experiences</i>
<i>Leisurely paced (not driving for longer than 4-5 hours per day, starting at around 9am and ending at around 5pm)</i>

Source: Back-Roads Touring website

A quantitative method was chosen for this research as it provided a way to collect a large amount of data that was needed to answer the 4 objectives (Table 4) of this research. Following this, a questionnaire was chosen as an instrument in obtaining the wanted data.

Table 4 Research objectives

1. *Which tourism practices are identified as more important by tourists during Back-Roads tour?*
2. *Which tourism practices do tourists identify as sustainable tourism options?*
3. *Which tourism practices will be most important in choosing to travel again with Back-Roads Touring and which are the least?*
4. *Do tourists value sustainable tourism certification?*

Source: Author

A digital questionnaire was applied, due to its inherent characteristics, namely being quick, useful for reaching a vast amount of people and the results could be tracked live. Google Forms platform was used to create the questionnaire and track results. A meeting was arranged to discuss the research with the Global Marketing Manager and we were allowed to email 2015 clients through the enterprise's database. The Google Forms questionnaire link was incorporated into the Back-Roads email together with the link of the newly released 2017 brochure link. The respondents had to click on the link which automatically redirected them to the Google Forms questionnaire.

The questionnaire included 12 questions divided into four sections. The first section intended to obtain information on the respondents' profile. The 2nd section was related to the most and the least important tourism practices on a Back-Roads. As for the 3rd section, it empowered the respondents to show their understanding of the sustainable tourism practices within the Back-Roads tour/s they had experienced. The last section was dedicated to understanding the future travel options of the respondents.

3.2. Population and sample

A convenience sample was used in this research. It is a non-probability process that enables a researcher to collect data from respondents who are easily accessible. The respondents were clients who travelled on at least one tour with Back Roads Touring in 2015. A pilot test was carried out with 272 clients, from which we collected 40 responses and there was no need to introduce any changes on the final version of the questionnaire. The final questionnaire was sent to 1050 clients on the July,

2016 and we manage to collect 182 complete/valid questionnaires, which represents 14% of the population.

4. Results

4.1. Results

In total 182 valid responses were collected. 79 respondents, which represent 43% of the total, provided their email addresses and were interested in receiving the results of this study. Question one was to find out the gender of the respondents. There were 118 responses from the females who represent 64.8% of the total and 64 responses were from males (35.2% of the total). As for age, 168 of the respondents (92,3%) had more than 55 years old (54.4% of the respondents fell into the age group of 66-75 years old, 30.2% on the age group of 56-65 years old and 7.7% had more than 75 years old). Most of the respondents (68.1%) came from Australia, followed by New Zealanders (12.1%), then by from the USA (11%), Canada (7.7%) and only 1.1% were from Europe. As far as education level, most of the respondents (46.2%) had a Bachelor degree, followed by the high school education (37.9%), then by Master degree (12.6%) and 3.3% who had obtained a PhD diploma. Except for 2 respondents, who did not answer Question 6, all the others said they were already retired.

When asked about which tour the clients had travelled on with the company, it is important to note that some of the clients went on multiple tours. The majority of the respondents went on a tour that visited England representing 83 respondents (34%), then it was followed by Italy that was chosen by 45 respondents (18.8%) and France – 40 (16.7%).

As for the top 5 reasons (question 8 in the questionnaire) why the clients went on the tour from the choice of 15 options (Table 5), results show (Figure 1) that the most popular was small group touring which was chosen by almost everyone and it represented 93.4% of the total. The second most chosen answer was having an experienced tour leader which was chosen by 68.1%, followed by all-inclusive package which ticked by 62.1% and travelling in a mini coach which represented 59.9%.

Table 5 -15 choices that were used in questions 8 and 9

15 Options	Relations with sustainability
1. All inclusive package	Fisher's (2014) money flow (the number of items that is included and the amount of money that goes to a destination)
2. Price	Fisher's (2014) money flow (the amount of money from the tour price that is left at a destination)
3. Specialist tour operator	Fisher's (2014) educational efforts (for example, battlefield tours)
4. Back - Roads' Touring reputation	UNEP/UNWTO (2005) Voluntary instruments (Silver Green award)
5. Having an experienced tour leader	Fisher's (2014) educational efforts (for example, battlefield tours)
6. Tour leader's performance	Fisher's (2014) educational efforts (experienced tour leaders who have a deep knowledge of a destination, especially in battlefield tours)
7. Local food experience	Support local economy and the local community Eurico (2016)
8. Visiting small/ local business	Support local economy and the local community Eurico (2016)
9. Travelling in a mini-coach	Fisher's (2014) journey from/to destination (travel by a small coach on a tour)
10. Learning about the visited destination's present challenges and issues	Fisher's (2014) educational efforts (visiting local business and hearing the challenges they face in order to survive)
11. Donating money to local charities that support conservation/ social projects in the area	Fisher's (2014) support of protection activities (entrance fee to visit a castle/palace/church includes a contribution to conservation) Customers ecological footprint (Customers should be encouraged to reduce their ecological footprint, for example, by offering the possibility to pay for the compensation of CO2 emissions produced or donating money to environmental/

	conservation projects) Eurico (2016)
12. Small group touring	Engage customers - Offer customized services for the needs of the customer (including seniors, clients with special needs, etc.) Eurico (2016)
13. Meeting and making connections with locals	Fisher's (2014) impact on the socio-cultural structure at the destination (visiting local business and meeting people that work there, buying their products and making connections)
14. Recycle / re-use practices	UNEP/WTO (2005) Voluntary instruments (codes of conduct at a protected area like national park)
15. Other	Not applicable

Source: Author

When asked to identify from the 15 options (Table 5) which they considered to be sustainable tourism options (question 9 in the questionnaire), the most popular (Figure 1) was small group touring which was chosen by 71.4% of the respondents, followed by local food experiences (58.2%), having an experienced tour leader (56.6%), visiting small/local business (55.5%), learning about visited destinations present challenges and issues (53.3%) and travelling in a mini coach (52.2%). Graph in Figure 1 compares the results from questions 8 and 9.

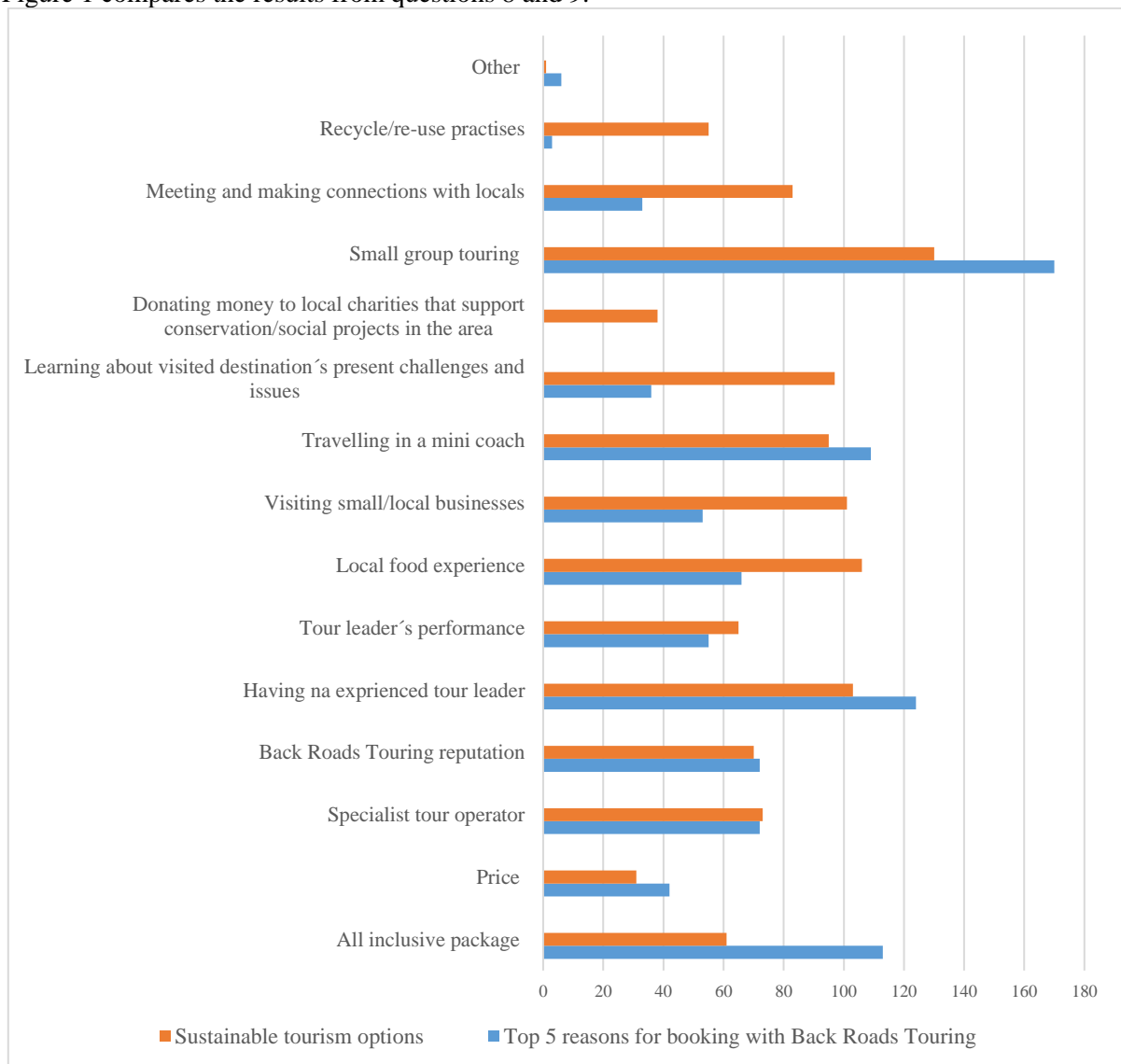


Figure 1- Comparing the results from questions 8 and 9

Source: Author

Finally, respondents were asked about the intended future travel options and the importance of the represented 15 items (Figure 1) in travelling again with same company. For this question, we used a Likert scale with 5 levels of importance (1 – Not important at all; 2 – Not important; 3 – Indifferent; 4 – Important; 5 – Extremely important).

Figure 2 contains the items identified as more important (considering the responses to both options «important» and «extremely important»), namely: *Service quality* (98.9%), *Finding out about the local traditions and customs* (90.1%), *Leisurely paced nature tour* (87.9%) and the *Package price* (86.8%). In contrast, the three options related with learning something new were pointed out as the least important (*Photo expedition*, with 12.8%, *Cooking classes* with 18.4% and *Language classes* with 18.9%). The items that are intuitively more related to sustainability like *Part of the money paid to BRT is used to support Conservation programmes/actions* or [...] *to support local charities and non-profit organizations*, *Opportunity to buy local products* and *Package that includes certified environmentally friendly services* were moderately considered important items.

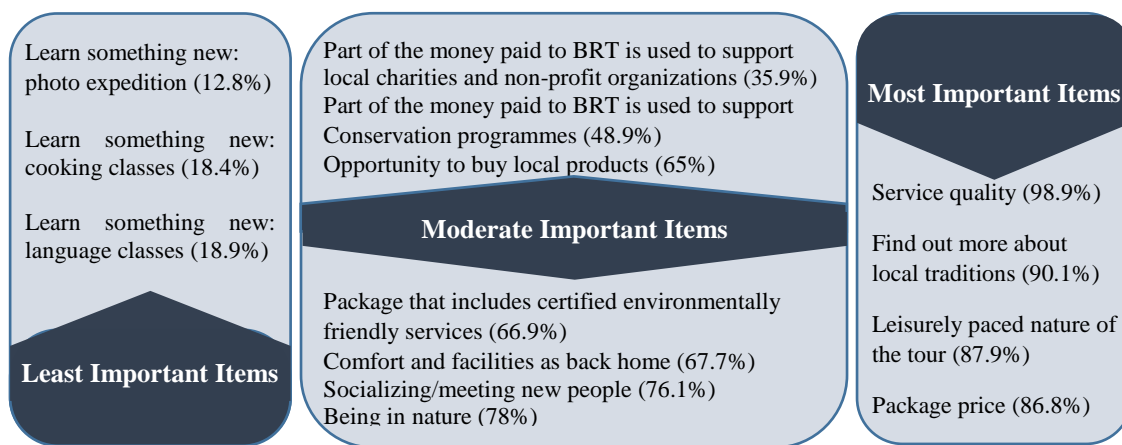


Figure 2- Main results schematization of the question 10

Source: Author

Question 11 asked the respondents if they knew that Back Roads Touring had earned a Silver Green Tourism rating and the majority (85.2%) did not know that. Question 12 asked if knowing that Back Roads Touring has earned this rating influence respondents' decision to travel again with the company in the future. The results were close to equal where 92 said yes it will influence their decision to travel again with the company and 90 saying it would not.

4.2 Results' discussion

Considering the obtained results, it became clear that the majority of the respondents came from Australia and New Zealand, they were retired and mostly females. Most of the clients had Bachelor and High School education, thus their main professions were mainly in middle range positions of the social science and humanities domain. This information could be interpreted as representing a middle-class traveller rather than a high end one. However, it is important to note a fact that the majority of clients came from wealthy countries (Australia, New Zealand, USA, and Canada) where life standards are much higher than in most of the countries in Europe.

When considering the research objective number 1 (Table 4), which aimed to identify tourism practices that were considered the most important on a Back-Roads tour, 93.4% of the respondents chose a 'small group touring', which is in fact a paramount factor about the company. This could be explained due to the fact that the company is marketed and known for only small group tours. Furthermore, it makes sense that this concept of small group touring attracts senior clients, as during their lifetime they most likely have gone on numerous big coach tours and experienced the negative sides (too many people on a tour, thus no personalized service is offered, standard itineraries where only big amount of people could be taken, thus no flexibility, visiting only highlights and not trying to

understand deeper a place visited because of time limit) of that type of travelling. Finally, the senior clients have more time and disposable income as opposed to the younger generation.

Travelling in a mini-coach received over 50% responses, which is basically the consequence of small group touring, as the group is small a mini-coach is used. The other item that was selected by more than half of the respondents, was 'having an experienced tour leader', which is again another important aspect of a Back-Roads' tour. This choice shows that the clients are looking for a more complete experience, as most likely they have already been to some of the destinations, but they would like to come back and get to know a destination more in depth. 'All inclusive package' was another option that was chosen by more than 50% of the respondents. This choice again supports the idea that the clients are looking for 'no hustle experience' where they do not have to actively search for/ look for information, but rather relax and enjoy the experience as everything is included. Furthermore, this choice could be explained by the age of the clients, as they were all seniors and it is natural that they are looking for conform of having everything included.

Objective 2 (Table 4) was to find out which tourism practices were identified by the respondents as sustainable tourism options. Results have somehow proved that sustainable tourism is interpreted differently by many clients and could have a different meaning to different people. Yet it is interesting to mention that the most popular response (71.4%) was once more 'small group touring'. After again it was followed by 'having an experienced tour leader' and 'travelling in a mini-coach', that were chosen by over half of the respondents.

On the other hand, there were other options that appeared very significantly such as 'Local food experiences' and 'visiting small/local businesses', which were chosen by over 50% of the respondents. Both of those options are directly linked with the key aspects of a Back-Roads Tour and represent the sustainable tourism concept (visiting small and local business and experiencing the local cuisine).

'Meeting and making connections with locals' was chosen by over 45%, which showed that the respondents felt that this option was representing a sustainable tourism option. Indeed sustainable tourism encourages the connection between the tourists and local community in order to foster a mutual understanding and respect. Yet, it is very interesting to note that recycle and re-use practices, which was the other option were only chosen by over 30% of the respondents. Recycling is a paramount factor in sustainable tourism, thus the fact that the majority did not select that option is quite intriguing.

Furthermore, an option of donating money to local charities only collected 20% of the responses. This might be due to the fact that the clients are visiting quite developed European countries and they are not exposed to the extreme poverty and environment degradation (e.g. Africa), thus they may think that the support is not needed as the countries are developed enough and the tourism automatically contributes to conservation/social projects.

Objective 3 (Table 4), asked respondents which tourism practices will be most important in choosing to travel again with Back-Roads Touring and which – the least. Almost everybody (98.8%) chose 'service quality' as the aspect that would influence them the most to travel again with Back-Roads Touring. This could be translated as the clients already went on a Back-Roads tour and enjoyed the experience and quality that it had, thus if they were to return and take another tour, they would expect the same quality standards or even higher. Also, the company emphasizes its offered unique and local experiences and the clients experienced that during the tour, thus they are looking for the same experience.

The least important tourism practices were 3 that collected over 40% (a sum of 'not interested at all' and 'not interested') and over 30% who marked them as 'indifferent'. The three aspects were from the section 'learning something'. Photography workshop was the least important one, followed by a cooking class and language course. This is an interesting finding as the food and local cuisine is one of the key aspects of a Back-Roads' tour and it was marked as a sustainable tourism option by the respondents. However, this could be interpreted as that clients are interested in visiting local farms and tasting their products, but they are not so interested in a cooking class. The language course may not be of their interest, because the majority are coming from the English-speaking countries and most likely they do not speak a foreign language and see it as a massive challenge. What is more, as tour is quite short, and the clients may not come back again to the destination, thus they do not see the value in learning something that is quite complicated and could not be used daily.

Support for environmental/heritage conservation projects were seen as more favourable as oppose to charities/non-profit organizations. This could be interpreted as that the respondents see the value in environmental/heritage conservation projects and there is a possibility that the value, if marketed correctly, could grow.

The last objective was to find out if tourist value sustainable tourism certification. Over 85% of the respondents were not aware that Back-Roads Touring has been awarded a Silver Green Tourism rating, even though a company has a full website page dedicated to sustainable practices that also talks about the Green Silver certification. One of questions in the questionnaire aimed to understand if knowing of this award could influence their decision to travel with Back-Roads Touring. The results were quite divided, 90 said no and 92 – yes. This is an interesting result, which indicates the division between the clients and requires a deeper analyses in order to understand the results. Yet, it is important to note that half of the respondents did see the value in the certification, which means that it is important fact that the company has a sustainable tourism certification.

5. Conclusion, limitations and recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The research study aimed to understand tourists' perception of sustainable tourism practices. For this we have considered the case of Back-Roads Touring clients, a medium sized tour operator offering small group tours in Europe and Morocco, with a clear emphasis on small group touring of the beaten track and seeking more authentic experiences echoes sustainable tourism practices.

Sustainable tourism is indeed emerging from the last couple decades especially as the understanding of negative (and sometimes irreversible) tourism impacts become more apparent at the destinations loved by tourists. Also, trends and innovations shape the new ways of travelling and looking for something that is it still yet not explored. Although, the sustainable tourism promises everlasting benefits (environmental, economic, and social) of tourism, it is rather hard to implement it in reality. First of all, this has to do a lot with the confusion of a term and it various interpretations that quite often businesses use. Secondly, the tourist themselves who tend to agree with the benefits of sustainable tourism verbally, however fail to act once needed. In order to respond to the objectives of the study, an online questionnaire of 12 questions using Google Forms was created. A convenient sampling was chosen and in total 1322 Back-Roads clients (who went on a tour in 2015) were contacted by an email asking to fill out the questionnaire. In total 182 valid responses were received and were analysed using a descriptive analysis.

The findings for the objective 1 (which tourism practices are identified as more important by tourists during a tour) showed that the most important aspect of a Back-Roads tour were small group touring, followed by an experienced tour leader and travelling in a mini-coach. And objective 2 (which tourism practices do tourists identify as sustainable tourism options) responses were similar, saying that both small group touring and having an experienced guide were sustainable tourism practices. However, local food experiences, visiting small/local business and meeting locals had also received a significant amount of responses, showing that these aspects are important. The result for objective 3 (which tourism practices will be the most important in choosing to travel again with the same company and which are the least) showed that in future if a client were to take another Back-Roads tour, the biggest influencers were service quality, finding out about local traditions and customs, leisurely paced nature of the tour and tour price. And finally, the results for the last objective (do tourists value sustainable tourism certification) which tried to evaluate the importance of a sustainable tourism certification, proved that most of the clients were not aware of the certificate that a company had, however over half of the respondents felt that it would influence positively their decision to travel again with the company.

It is important to point out, that sustainable tourism practices such as recycling, donating money to support conservation projects or charities, have not received a lot of positive results, this could be due to the fact that the majority of the clients were from the middle class.

To sum up the research findings, it could be said that the Back-Roads tour clients are not actively seeking for more sustainable tourism options, as they are content (the comments section support this too) with the company's model of a tour which without a doubt, has some sustainable tourism influences. However, it is important to emphasize the fact that the majority of the clients are

middle class senior travellers who seek for quality and stress-free travel experiences and are not willing to change or adapt their behaviours in order to become more sustainable tourists.

5.2. The limitations of the research

Without a doubt, it is important to note that the research was carried out contacting the clients from 2015, which obviously affects the number of respondents received, as they are requested to reflect on a trip that they took a year ago. Therefore, this provides the biggest barrier in reaching a high percentage of the responses. Secondly, the senior respondents are usually more conscious on filling out online surveys, as they are afraid of scams and this research is no exemption.

Furthermore, this research is focused on senior travellers, which means that the proposed approach may not be suited for a much younger client (for example, students). As well, it is important to acknowledge the fact that the online surveys do not provide a function that enables respondents to participate twice in the research (e.g. a respondent may have multiple email accounts allowing him or her to participate in a research multiple times and there is no way to enable this).

5.3 Recommendations

It would be interesting to use an on-site questionnaire that is given out when a tour ends and see if the results differ, as the tour experience would be very fresh and it would be interesting to see if respondents reflect on it differently. What is more, an important component of sustainable tourism - environmental sustainability was not so much emphasized in this research, thus it would very beneficial to find out the viewpoints of this.

Furthermore, some managerial implications for the enterprise itself, Back-Roads Touring, can be drawn from the obtained results so that it may improve to a higher standard the sustainability aspects of their tours (for example, use hybrid or electrical vehicles that try to reduce their emission). Yet, it important to be cautious not to drastically introduce change, but rather do it slowly and make sure that it is carefully planned, as the respondents showed that they are not ready for any radical changes. Also, it is important to notice that the results also indicate that those innovations (regarding sustainability), if directly related to the quality of service have higher probabilities of being welcomed by the clients. An option here could be to initiate working with the certified (preferably sustainable tourism certifications) suppliers (accommodation, restaurants, attractions, vehicle suppliers) and increase the number of them gradually over the years.

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