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Applying the Concept of Integrated Quality Management in Romanian Coastal Tourism

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Summary – 1. Introduction: the Coastal Tourism and the Sustainability – 2. Quality in Tourism. Management Systems – 3. The Romanian Coastal Tourism and the Need for IQM Approach – 4. Conclusions

Abstract

Quality in tourism-related services, like in services in general, is basically about balancing customer perceptions and expectations. Successful service providers are able to meet and, whenever possible, exceed consumers' needs and wants.

For a tourist destination, IQM can be seen as a systematic quest for internal quality and external quality, i.e. economic improvement in the short term and local development in the long term. Internal quality is the value that tourists receive throughout the chain of experiences characterizing their visit from the initial information that they receive prior to departure to the 'after-sales' service. Internal quality has short-term aims. External quality means the development of sustainable tourism with a rational and renewable use of resources such as territory, energy, water, natural resources, the heritage etc., in order to prevent problems of congestion. The aim of external quality is one of long-term equilibrium.

The Romanian Coastal Tourism is having now a difficult time; the quality of tourism services is low, according the tourists and international tour-operators opinions. Considering the tourism potential and the big competition in this market, we will try to prove in this paper that the implementation of the IQM concept can improve the Romanian coastal tourism image.

Key words: Integrated Quality Management System (IQM), Tourism Destination, Coastal Tourism

1 – Introduction – The Coastal Tourism and the Sustainability

Coastal tourism and recreation are important parts of the largest and most rapidly growing activity in the world - international tourism. Travel and tourism is the world's largest industry. As reported by the World Tourism Organization, travel and tourism involved more than 842 million

people internationally and generated around \$700 billion in receipts in 2006. UNWTO's Tourism 2020 Vision forecasts that international arrivals are expected to reach nearly 1.6 billion by the year 2020. [14]

The mammoth global tourism industry is a "massive consumer of energy and resources", and is expected to continue to grow significantly in the future. This growth in world tourism is related to three main factors: increased personal incomes and leisure time, improvements in transportation systems, and greater public awareness of other areas of the world due to improved communications.

The challenge for tourism developers and operators is to develop the tourism industry in a way which conserves its natural resources and built heritage base and minimizes any negative environmental, ecological, social and cultural impact. Tourism will be ecologically sustainable if it [7]:

- does not use non-renewable resources faster than renewable substitutes can be found for them
- does not use renewable resources faster than they can be replenished
- minimizes operational energy consumption
- does not release pollutants faster than the biosphere can process them to a harmless state
- has no impact on biodiversity and ecological systems and processes
- maintains a full range of recreational, educational and cultural opportunities for the present generation and future generations
- benefits local communities and the region socially and economically
- does not affect the capacity of other sectors of the economy to achieve ecological sustainability.

At low levels and with careful design, tourism may be able to operate at a sustainable level. However, controlling the level and style of development over the long term presents challenges which, to this point, have not been successfully met. Because of its potentially high impact, tourism should be considered in the same manner as any other industry and should be subjected to the same environmental and social impact assessment processes during the planning stages.

A number of market forces also encourage tourism developers and operators to make their venture sustainable. These forces include [8]:

- increased consumer resistance to degraded environments
- evidence that sound environmental practices have long-term economic benefits
- financial rewards and concessions for 'good' environmental practices

- fines for 'bad' environmental practices
- the likelihood of media exposure for 'bad' practice developments
- the growing demand for sensitive and innovative designs for developments in fragile environments.

Coastal Tourism is based on a unique resource combination at the border of land and sea environments: sun, water, beaches, outstanding scenic views, rich biological diversity (birds, whales, corals etc), sea food and good transportation infrastructure. Based on these resources, various profitable services have been developed in many coastal destinations such as well maintained beaches, diving, boat-trips, bird watching tours, restaurants or medical facilities.

In the middle of the 20th century coastal tourism in Europe turned into mass tourism and became affordable for nearly everyone. Today, 63% of the European holiday makers prefer the coast (other main types of destinations are the mountains - 25%, cities - 25%, and the countryside - 23%) [13]. The coastal tourism sector in Europe is getting increasingly competitive, with tourists expecting more quality for the lowest possible price. Today's tourists expect more than sun, sea and sand, as was the case two decades ago. They demand a wide variety of associated leisure activities and experiences including sports, cuisine, culture and natural attractions. At the same time, local people in traditional tourist destinations are increasingly anxious to preserve their own identity, their environment and their natural, historic and cultural heritage from negative impacts.

The Mediterranean region is the world's leading tourist destination [4]. In less than 20 years, the number of tourists who visit the Mediterranean is expected to increase from 220 million to 350 million (expected in 2020). 84% of the tourists come from Europe, mostly from northern and western countries. Germany is the largest market followed by the United Kingdom, France and the Netherlands. Almost 80% of the Mediterranean tourists choose Spain, France, Italy or Greece (WTO, 2003). One third of global income by tourism receipts is received by the Mediterranean. Over the last three years, 2/3 of this income returned to the hands of less than 10 tour operators from northern Europe (WTO, 2003).

Currently, mass tourism is one of the main causes for ecological losses in the region. Some locations, which were once pristine, are now beyond repair. [13] Sustainable development of coastal tourism is dependent on:

1. good coastal management practices (particularly regarding proper siting of tourism infrastructure and the provision of public access);
2. clean water and air, and healthy coastal ecosystems;
3. maintaining a safe and secure recreational environment through the management of coastal

hazards (such as erosion, storms, floods), and the provision of adequate levels of safety for boaters, swimmers, and other water users;

4. beach restoration efforts that maintain the recreational and amenity values of beaches; and,
5. sound policies for wildlife and habitat protection.

Clean water and healthy coastal ecosystems are essential to the maintenance of coastal tourism and recreation. Foreign tourists and the recreating domestic public stop going to areas where the waters are polluted, beaches are closed, or fish are tainted. [9]

It is not only ethical to consider the fragility of a given environment and the concerns and needs of local communities; it also often makes simple economic sense. Tourism, probably more readily than many other forms of development, can readily accept environmental, social and economic responsibility because such responsibility is vital to its survival and growth.

Like most economic activities, tourism uses up materials and resources and also creates waste products which have to be disposed of into the land, the air or the water, often creating pollution [11]. As economic activity grows and expands, the readily available materials and resources get used up and the environment deteriorates as a result of the pollution.

So it is important to look after the environmental attractions that created the need for a tourism development in the first place, and on whose continued attractiveness the development depends for its survival.

Nowhere is this more important than in the fragile and dynamic coastal zone.

It is also important to consider the social dimension of any development. Experience has shown that developments that do not involve consultation with local communities and special interest groups often result in costly and time-consuming litigation.

2 – Quality in Tourism. Management systems

Quality in tourism-related services, like in services in general, is basically about balancing customer perceptions and expectations. Successful service providers are able to meet and, whenever possible, exceed consumers' needs and wants. This way, it is possible to provide memorable experiences to visitors. In delivering services, due to certain specific characteristics of services (e.g., intangibility, simultaneity, variability and perisability), the human element, in particular the 'face-to-face' interaction with the customer, plays a fundamental role. [5]

Coastal tourism is considered to be one of the fastest growing areas of present-day tourism with its central attributes of sand, sea and sun.

In order to create safe, stable and attractive coastal environments with clean waters and healthy coastal habitats, it is necessary to develop well-managed sustainable coastal tourism. *Integrated Coastal Zone Management* is the best available approach for achieving this aim. [1]

With the adverse environmental effects of tourism gaining increasing publicity, demand from consumers for products that respect sustainable tourism is also increasing (ethical consumerism). In practice many argue that tourists as consumers have failed to exert the fundamental pressure necessary to ensure significant change [3]. A survey carried out by MORI (Market Opinion Research International) concluded that consumers do not see tourism as a major cause of environmental harm, although there is evidence of increasing environmentally conscious behavior. For example, detailed political, economic and social ethical arguments have been highlighted in the UK-based voluntary organization Tourism Concern [13].

An other concept used in coastal zone management is *Tourism Carrying Capacity* (TCC), defined as «...the level of human activity an area can accommodate without the area deteriorating, the resident community being adversely affected or the quality of visitors experience declining» [2]. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) proposes the following definition of the carrying capacity: «*The maximum number of people that may visit a tourist destination at the same time, without causing destruction of the physical, economic, socio-cultural environment and an unacceptable decrease in the quality of visitors' satisfaction.* » [10].

In the past few years, *The Blue Flag Program* has become a very important instrument in coastal zone management, according to sustainability concept. Blue Flag is an exclusive eco-label awarded to over 3200 beaches and marinas in 36 countries across Europe, South Africa, Morocco, New Zealand, Canada and the Caribbean.

The Blue Flag Program is owned and run by the independent non-profit organization *Foundation for Environmental Education* (FEE). The Blue Flag works towards sustainable development at beaches/marinas through strict criteria dealing with water quality, environmental education and information, environmental management, and safety and other services. The Blue Flag Program includes environmental education and information for the public, decision makers and tourism operators. [15]

Quality tourism can contribute to sustainable development of coastal areas by improving the competitiveness of businesses, meeting social needs and preserving the cultural and natural environment.

To be simultaneously successful in all these different areas at the level of tourist destinations requires a global approach, focused on tourist satisfaction and based on the principles of sustainable development, which is described in this publication as *integrated quality management* (IQM).

Although IQM is a relatively new approach, a certain number of coastal tourist destinations are making real efforts in this direction. They have defined strategies with the key partners, are implementing good practice and are constantly developing monitoring and evaluation tools for adjusting that approach according to its economic, social and environmental impact. [6]

Total quality management systems are already part and parcel of the approaches that tourist service providers (tour operators, travel agents, hotels, restaurants, etc.) are developing. As far as tourists are concerned, however, the satisfaction derived from staying at a destination does not just depend on their experience of tourist services, but also on more general factors such as hospitality, safety and security, sanitation and salubrity, traffic and visitor management. A large number of factors have an impact on tourists' perception of a destination, on their level of satisfaction and therefore on their willingness to return to the destination or to recommend it to potential visitors. The success of a destination in terms of tourist satisfaction is therefore shaped by a number of interdependent components. This underscores the need for strategic and integrated planning of tourist destinations, and for specific tools and techniques through which IQM can be put into practice in the destination.

IQM should simultaneously take into account and have a favorable impact on the activities of tourism professionals, tourists, the local population and the environment (i.e. the destination's natural, cultural and man-made assets). The integrated quality management strategies implemented in destinations must have the requirements of tourists as one of their major considerations.

In this way, the tourist destination is described by two independent elements: its internal reality, i.e. a given space that is internally coherent (a set of actors working together) and makes its own decisions; and its external reality, based on its image and perception by the outside world, i.e. its meaning for the tourist. Also, for a tourist destination, IQM can be seen as a systematic quest for internal quality and external quality.

Many sustainability issues are particularly apparent on the coast, owing to the continued high demand for coastal tourism and extreme seasonality. In future it will be important to consider tourism development issues and opportunities relating to inland areas linked to the coast. This can relate to the Integrated Coastal Zone Management process. It can also help to spread and alleviate tourism pressure. Various opportunities arise from tourists looking for more active forms of tourism. Market and product differentiation can be used to diversify the coastal product and market. The effect of climate change, although important for all areas, may be most acutely felt in coastal areas, with specific implications for the pattern of demand, the location of new development and pressure on natural resources. [12]

3 – The Romanian Coastal Tourism and the Need for IQM Approach

The Romanian Black Sea Coast is well known for its fine soft sand and safe gently sloping beaches. The water of the Black Sea has a low salinity in comparison with other inland seas (only 17%). There is a virtual absence of tides and currents, indeed on most days during the summer the sea is calm.

The medium latitude and the low altitude are favorable to a dry climate and determine a long season, lasting from May to October.

The eastern exposure of the coast provides for spectacular sunrises and maximum luminosity, amounting to over 14 hours a day at the height of summer.

Mamaia is particularly suitable for families because of its safe 8 km beach, fringed by wild pear trees and renowned for its fine soft sand.

Mamaia Beach has the highest concentration of tourism activities and has been experiencing severe erosion (The coastline retreated to 59 m, between 1966 and 1998 and 88900 sq m of the beach surface eroded) [13].

If the erosion process continues and no proper action to protect the beaches is taken, there is a potential risk for the beach and the resort to be damaged in case of an eventual strong storm in the future. The same problems can be met in all Romanian sea-side resorts.

The Romanian Coastal Tourism is having now a difficult time; the quality of tourism services is low, according the tourists and international tour-operators opinions.

In the recent years, some important tour-operators have cancelled their contracts with Romanian hotels from the sea-side because of the lack of services and environment quality.

It is well known the fact that European consumers are aware of the environment impact that can be caused by tourism, but also they expect a high environmental quality in their destinations, prefer eco-labeled accommodation services, and look for certified products.

For example, German tourists were asked, in 2002, the following question: When thinking about your next holiday, which of the following environmental factors is most important for you?

The answers were as follows [13]:

- 64.5 %: Clean beaches and water
- 59.1 %: No rubbish in the resort or in the surrounding area
- 50.0 %: No urbanization of rural areas
- 45.8 %: Good nature protection in the holiday destination

- 51.0 %: No noise pollution from traffic or discothèques
- 35.1 %: Little traffic and good public transport in the destination
- 29.0 %: Possibility of reaching the destination easily by bus or train
- 41.8 %: Environmentally-friendly accommodation
- 18.7 %: Finding environmentally-friendly accommodation in tour operators or travel agents' catalogues
- 14.2 %: Easy access to information on offers with verified environmental-friendly accommodation (eco-labels).

As we can see, the most important factors for tourists are not-accomplished in Romanian coastal destinations: water and beaches are not always clean, rubbish is a big problem, nature protection still a dream, noise pollution of discothèques is more criticized, infrastructure is not perfect and the traffic can be insupportable.

It is hard to find a unique solution for all those problems. However, it should be absolutely essential to follow these points:

- First, an *Integrated Quality Management* of the beaches. This implies the reorganization of the whole territory and even of its periphery, in a way that the natural areas can benefit from that process and provide a concentration of tourism in a specific area. It is also necessary for sustainable development that the incorporation of the costs of environmental services and damages (and their repairs) falls directly into the prices of the goods, services or activities which cause them. Beaches have an economic and an environmental value and they help to protect the coast against coastal erosion, so a greater investment is needed.
- Second, a *better dissemination of the existing information* should be achieved. For that purpose, a better coordination of the existing governmental bodies that deal with coastal management is necessary. Also, the information should be accessible to everyone. Concerning the latter aspect, scientific journalism has to be protected and favoured, as well as seminars where all the agents related with the coast can exchange their opinions, results or methodologies.
- Third, an *improvement of the environmental education* is essential for a sustainable development of the Romanian coast.

There is no recipe for the successful introduction of a quality plan in a coastal tourist destination.

A sustainable quality improvement will be more likely, however, if a number of basic conditions are satisfied. Generally speaking, integrated quality management is a repetitive and participatory process.

Particularly in coastal destinations, this process involves an integrated management policy, i.e. a policy that concerns everyone involved in the basic services and products supplied to tourists, which are the source of attraction for the visitor, as well as in secondary services, which are an important part of the overall tourist experience.

The quality of visitor care, and therefore the *human factor*, is one of the keys to the success of a coastal tourist destination. Visitors will usually remember the quality of their contacts with people at the destination, and tell others about it. Training programmes will be drawn up with assistance from employers in the tourism industry; they have to understand that in the end, it is the quality of the services offered to customers which determines whether or not a destination is successful, and that this quality has to be supported by a strategy of continuous training of personnel.

The Romanian National Authority for Tourism (or the new Ministry for Small and Medium-Sized Comp., Trade, Tourism & Liberal Professions) plans for 2007 a Program for Tourist Service Quality Increase, based upon a new approach of tourist sector development, using the IQM principles [16]. This program is designed to accomplish the EU exigences in the sustainable development domain, to increase the competitiveness and attractiveness of the Romanian tourist destinations.

4 – Conclusions

The long-standing popularity of coastal tourism, the development of mass tourism and the structural fragility of coastal landscapes all mean that coastal destinations are becoming increasingly aware of the need to develop sustainable tourism. In our country, coastal tourism is an important market segment and needs to be rehabilitated and reorganized. This means that the IQM approach is necessary for Romanian coastal tourist destinations and it implies:

- a genuine plan, backed by a leader capable of rallying and influencing all the partners in the destination in question;
- a strategy and policies (human resources, natural resources, quality of life, cultural heritage, etc.) drawn up and placed on a formal footing by the partners involved, under the supervision of the lead authority;
- the implementation of measures by the various public and private providers of the different tourist services;
- the approach regularly measured, using a set of indicators, by the partners involved and the lead authority in order to survey the satisfaction of the various target groups, integration into the community and the conservation of resources from the point of view of sustainable development.

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