Sustainable tourism: an interpretative and management paradigm

S. Bimonte

Department of Economics and Statistics, University of Siena, Italy

Abstract

The paper proposes an economic reference framework to deal with the local sustainability issue in tourism. It addresses the question of whether sustainable tourism is a balance between the environment, economy and community issues or whether it is up to the community to decide where the balance should lie. These two different ways to look at the problem are stuck in two alternative reference paradigms: the liability as opposed to the property rules approach. The paper proposes an economic interpretation rooted in a property rights framework à la Coase. Its aim is to produce a theoretical framework to select the appropriate economic instruments to pursue sustainability in tourism. Therefore, the paper proposes a definition of sustainable tourism and a consistent management scheme to pursue it. Considering the peculiarity of the sector, it argues that to implement the appropriate policies for the sustainability in tourism, more than elsewhere, a simultaneous proper management of tourism demand and supply, and a set of instruments of a more non-technical than technical nature are required.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, management instruments, Coase theorem, communities’ participation, liability as opposed to the property rules approach.

1 Introduction

The difficult task that researchers have to cope with when selecting instruments to deal with the sustainability issue in tourism is twofold: the lack of a rigorous and unanimously accepted definition, confirmed by the number of definitions to be found in the literature (Hunter [45]; Butler [18]; Wheeler [71]; Muller [55]; Cater [22]; Stabler and Goodall [66]; Hunter [43]), and the lack of consideration of the tourism-specific agenda (Stabler et al. [65]; Robinson 2000; Butler 1993;
Hunter [42]; Wall [70]). This is unfortunate, because it becomes difficult to develop any effective policy device without a clear reference framework and deep insight into the concept (Holden [40]; Tisdell and Wen [68]). To quote Seneca’s famous metaphor “If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable”.

The quantitative prejudice, or, as stated by Faulkner and Ryan [30], the fact that those who have become involved in tourism research are “migrants” from other more established disciplines, has meant that the theory and techniques of other disciplines were uncritically proposed to pursue sustainability in tourism, overlooking the problems that its specificity may imply. This is also true for economics (for example, see handbooks in tourism economics). This does not mean that conventional analysis and instruments are not efficacious to deal with some general problems characterized by specific properties (waste production; water consumption; total number of tourists admitted; resource management regimes). The point this paper makes is that we have to cope with problems in tourism that one does not encounter or that present themselves in a different way in other fields. This is why a specific and more profound analysis is required.

This paper argues that although sustainable development and sustainable tourism may share some areas of mutual concern, the latter has its own specificities to be considered. These specificities need to be analyzed when selecting policies for sustainability in tourism. It questions the possibility of simply transposing the theoretical principles and policy options devised for sustainable development purposes into the arena of the sustainable tourism debate.

The paper will also make evident that the sustainability in tourism is a value-laden concept, where beliefs and values are locally and temporally defined (Robinson [59]; Manning [51]; Butler [19]; Wilbanks [72]), and an equilibrium between potentially competing and contrasting forces, interests, and subjective needs (Bimonte and Punzo [6, 7]), as evidenced also by the literature on stakeholder theory (for a review see Getz and Timur [33]). Being so, the paper will address the question posed by Hardy et al. [36, p. 491] “of whether sustainable tourism is a process whereby balances should be struck between the environment, economy and community issues or whether it is up to the community to decide where the balance should lie”. To answer such question and produce a theoretical framework to select the appropriate economic instruments to deal with sustainability in tourism, it proposes an economic interpretation rooted in a property rights framework à la Coase. One of the main limitations in sustainable tourism analysis is that most tourism research consists of case studies with no tourism theoretic reference framework (Hunter [45]).

Finally, and consistently, the paper argues that, to be pursued, the sustainability in tourism asks for a simultaneous proper management of tourism demand and supply. To the best of the author’s knowledge, the two sides have normally been considered and analyzed separately, whereas, in the author’s opinion, whatever its definition, the development of sustainable tourism necessitates a balance of supply and demand in terms of needs, expectations, quality, quantity and, finally, price (see Bimonte and Punzo [8]). To such an aim,
a clear definition of “property rules” is required, as well as a set of instruments of a more non-technical than technical nature, in the meaning of Hardin.

2 Tourism resources and sustainability

The debate on sustainable tourism has evolved (sometimes uncritically) from the wider debate on sustainable development (Mowforth and Munt [53]; Sharpley [61]; Bramwell et al. [13]; Hunter and Green [44]; Butler [16]; an analysis of its historical evolution is presented in Hardy et al. [36] and Murphy and Price [56]). The sustainability issue in tourism has often been analyzed and addressed within this same theoretical and methodological framework, the main concern being how to reconcile growth with the protection of the environment. This has brought some researchers to criticize the concept for its ecological and economic prejudice (Butler [20]; Farrell [29]; Cohen [24]; Hardy et al. [36]), and to argue that although sustainable development and sustainable tourism may share some areas of mutual concern, the latter has its own specificities to be considered (Butler [18, 20]; Bramwell and Lane [12]; Hunter [42]; Sharpley [61]).

The resources upon which tourism is based are of a built and/or natural type, material (tangible) and/or immaterial (intangible) (Healy [37]). They are also specific in kind, including local cultures, norms, traditions, landscapes, products – to use Briassoulis’ words, the place’s genius loci (unique character) (Briassoulis [14]). It follows that, in the specific field of tourism, much more than in other fields, man is an integral part of the environment and cannot be demoted to a simple nuisance factor. Residents are one of the key elements to improving the appeal of a tourism destination, because of their contribution to producing the resources and the so-called hospitality atmosphere (Simmons [63]; Smith [64]; see also the literature cited in Hardy et al. [36]). The host communities, where for community one intends the ecosystem (of which man is an integral part) and the relative baggage of matured norms that regulate the relationship between man and the environment, are themselves a locally defined and non-reproducible “tourism product”, and play a fundamental role in utilizing and “producing” nature.

This is why the communities are increasingly being viewed as a resource and as partners in sustainable tourism (Bramwell and Lane [11]), and why in the specific field of tourism the concept of “conservation” must evolve (and has, in fact, evolved) to identify the dynamic protection of biologic, cultural, ethnic, historic and productive diversities more than the sole conservation of biodiversity.

In this context, local communities are simultaneously the means and the end to sustainability in tourism: the means, because any policy for the protection of the environment that denies human participation in its broadest sense (intended as a sense of belonging and both as participation in the decision-making process and as access to information and the wealth produced) has a greater chance of failing (Hitchcock et al. [39]; Uphoff and Langholz [69]; Bramwell [10]; Liu [49]); the end, because of the definition of community we gave above.
Therefore, the fundamental criteria that sustainability in tourism has to fulfill is to preserve the natural and socio-cultural capital of the host community, simultaneously satisfying the subjective and economic needs of both residents and tourists (Bimonte and Punzo [9]; Bimonte and Punzo [6]; Getz and Timur [33]; Hardy et al. [36]; Ko [48]; Hunter [43]; Cater [21]; Farell [29]; Butler [17]). Socioeconomic, environmental and cultural aspects, as well as subjective and qualitative aspects, therefore intermingle holistically in tourism.

This brings to the fore some important aspects of sustainability in tourism. In fact, the preservation of local resources is an ineluctable question, not (or not only) for conservation reasons, but because they are the foundation on which tourism influx, and therefore the economic viability of tourism, rests (see the distinction between maintainable and sustainable tourism introduced by Hardy and Beeton [35]). Secondly, the tourists’ experience and, consequently, their willingness to pay (WTP) depend on the quality of such resources, most of which share the characteristics of “public goods” and/or “common pool resources” (CPRs). In both cases an externality problem may arise, due to conflict or congestion. These aspects are exacerbated by the fact that, in many cases, these resources are used simultaneously by both tourists and locals, often in different ways or for alternative purposes (for example, hunting vs watching). Indeed, tourism is the encounter of two heterogeneous communities, the local and the tourist communities (which could actually be more than two, as they are not monolithic bodies - see the analysis carried out in Bimonte and Punzo [6]), each having different needs, interests, and expectations with regard to tourism resources (Hardy et al. [36]; Williams [73]). A shared vision or common management regarding their use is therefore required to avoid intra and inter-communities turbulent competition (Bimonte and Punzo [8]; Getz and Timur [33]).

In fact, the absence of a universally shared definition that can constitute a framework to define actions makes the concept of sustainability to acquire the guise of a social convention, i.e. a body of objectives and principles on which maximum consensus must be achieved: an agreement among stakeholders to define shared rules. As a consequence, sustainability in tourism is both an equilibrium between contrasting needs and interests, where needs and interests, together with their bearers, are defined locally, and a balance between scientific principles, cultural traditions and institutional practices. Since scientific principles are uncertain, traditions, resources and institutions vary spatially and historically, and the perceived impact of many actions is subjective rather than objective and influenced by the prevailing social norms, it becomes clear that sustainability in tourism is a relative and evolving concept. *The morality of an act is [always] a function of the state of the system at the time it is performed* (Hardin [34, p. 117]).

This means that the problems to be faced, the way they are perceived and the shared principles of sustainability to be conformed to are completely different in the case of sensitive communities (such as, for example, the communities of the Amazon) from those that we encounter in the case of a city rich in art, a crowded seaside resort or a nature reserve situated in a populated and/or economically
developed region (Shaw and Williams [62]). There is factual evidence of how rural environments, urban centers and industrial centers, as well as societies in different phases of the developmental process, face environmental and social problems of a very dissimilar nature (Ahmed [1]) and may perceive them in very different ways (Gee and Fayos-Sola [31]; Hernandez et al. [38]).

3 Sustainability in tourism: liability vs. property rules approach

In consideration of the above analysis, it is now possible to address the question posed by Hardy et al. [36, p. 491] “of whether sustainable tourism is a process whereby balances should be struck between the environment, economy and community issues or whether it is up to the community to decide where the balance should lie”. The two implicit paradigms evoked by this question are stuck in two different reference frameworks: the liability as opposed to the property rules approach (for a thorough analysis of these aspects see any handbook of environmental economics, such as Tietenberg [67]). This is not only a philosophical debate that requires resolution of the potentially conflicting concepts of an empowered community versus “balanced” decisions being made for the “greater good” (Hardy et al. [36, p. 491]), but also a question of efficiency and efficacy.

The prerequisite for the first paradigm to be applied is a transcendent and unanimously accepted definition of sustainability, or at least an externally imposed decision. Unfortunately, the former does not exist and the latter, if not shared, could provoke conflicts and reactions (between local planners, residents, tourists). In the property rules case the court has to specify the initial allocation of the entitlement, meaning that it decides which right is preeminent. Once this has been done, it merely has to prevent its violation. The injunction is removed only if and when the party entitled to the right consents to some degree of violation (Coase [23]) or to totally or partly transfer its entitlement to others. As it is easy to understand, in the absence of a clear initial allocation of the entitlement, it is de facto allocated to the party that can seize it more easily. There is factual evidence of such cases in developing as well as developed countries, where tourism development can be thrust upon marginalized cultural groups or upon subcomponents of group of residents without their consent (Robinson [59]).

According to what it has been said so far, we argue that sustainability in tourism is better addressed within a framework of property rules, where entitlement is allocated to the local community. In this view, it is a local community’s prerogative to define norms and rules, at least with respect to some specific resources, i.e. to decide where the balance should lie between the environment (in its broadest sense), economy and community issues. Without a full understanding of the perception of tourism that those who live in, use and manage the resources have, there is a risk that sustainable tourism will not occur (Hardy and Beeton [35]). “There is an inescapable valuation problem involved in deciding what to choose if and when it turns out that some parts of tradition
cannot be maintained along with economic or social changes that may be needed for other reasons. It is a choice that the people involved have to face and assess” (Sen [60, p. 37]).

Once we accept this principle, feasible sustainability in tourism becomes the outcome of a human decision (a social contract) delimited by a spatial-temporal scale and aimed at selecting specific characteristics of the material and immaterial system to be preserved (Williams [73]) and the modalities of intervening on the causes of undesired changes (Manning [51]). Thus, the priority is to identify the environmental, cultural, and historic resources that one can and wishes to render enjoyable to the public, and their relative modalities of sharing and use. To such an end, an agreement is required regarding which resources to share and open up to the “interference” of tourism (front stage regions), in what form and under what conditions, and which resources, instead, should be set aside as inalienable spheres of life for the local communities (backstage regions) (see MacCallen [50]). According to the previous analysis, tourism is sustainable when it adapts to the locally defined set of norms (in the broadest sense of the term) or to norms defined elsewhere, to the extent that the latter do not clash with the former.

The risk in adhering to such a paradigm is that it may produce outcomes that do not conform to exogenous expectations, including the outright rejection of any tourism development or the adhesion to norms that conflict with the “general” definition of sustainability. Moreover, as sustainability is an equilibrium between competing aspects, it follows that in reality, like any trade-off decisions taken on a day to day basis, it will almost certainly produce priorities which emerge to skew the destination area based tourism/environment system in favor of certain aspects (Hunter [43, p. 859]).

4 Technical instruments for sustainable tourism

The unsustainable use of resources is normally felt to be a consequence of market failure and, as such, it is supposed that the simple application of traditional economic analysis and instruments would cure it. Much of resource and environmental economics is about devising instruments and policies to promote a more efficient (sustainable) use of the environment (see, among the others, Dwyer et al. [25]; Tietenberg [67]; Perman et al. [57]).

Moreover, the paradigm of growth has accustomed us to reasoning in terms of technical solutions, the main goal being more efficient production processes to reconcile growth with the conservation of resources (intensity of use) (for a critical assessment see Bimonte [2]). The same economic bet has been almost uncritically transposed into the arena of tourism debate, where the dilemma is how to maximize the presence of tourists while having to simultaneously fulfill subjective needs and reduce the consumption of resources (natural, esthetic, cultural).

Accordingly, the sustainability issues in tourism have been faced using technical instruments, largely within a framework of liability rule and demand management. To such an end, efforts have mainly been focused on sanctions,
economic incentives (taxes or subsidies), management regimes, technological innovations, in order to reduce consumption of energy and resources, as well as legal prohibitions, as far as banning tourism in order to safeguard local culture (see, for example, Dwyer et al. [25]; Stabler et al. [65]; Holden [40]; Bramwell [10]).

Though useful and welcome in general, these technical armamentaria fall short of some specific themes that need to be dealt with in sustainable tourism. Among other themes are: the right of local communities to decide independently on the development path they wish to follow; the relevance of subjective as opposed to objective aspects, such as the determination of how many changes to cultural, social and environmental conditions are acceptable given the development objectives of a destination, rather than the determination of objective limits defined exogenously (McCool and Lime [52]; Bimonte and Punzo [9]); the importance of the qualitative dimension of many aspects, which forces us to create visitor management techniques capable of selecting or deselecting the “right” tourists and controlling and influencing their behavior, rather than answering the question of how many are too many.

In fact, in many cases in tourism impacts need to be analyzed in terms of qualitative rather than quantitative changes, and the “impacting” sources are neither always well-defined nor uniform (the physical impact of a ton of CO₂ is the same irrespective of its source whereas the impact of tourists depends on the typology of tourist – see Bimonte and Faralla [5]; Bimonte [4]). Moreover, in the majority of cases, one has to deal with non-point source polluters. It follows that the same source may or may not cause (actual or perceived) degradation problems, depending on its qualitative and quantitative behavior and the structural characteristics of tourism resources, including the local and personal perception of problems (Kearsley et al. 1998). In these cases, rather than reducing the number of sources (for example tourists), one has to select and separate sources according to their behavioral patterns or modify their behavior or perception of the problems (for example through an education or information campaign or behavioral codes of conduct). This could be a long-lasting and costly process because it entails a modification of reference values, because it requires a huge amount of (hidden) information to be gathered, and because non-point source forms of pollution demand a widespread and enforceable territorial control (just think of what is occurring in the forest in the Philippines, notwithstanding the ban).

Traditional instruments are not capable of achieving such an aim. Still, they perpetuate the bias of the tragedy of the commons (Williams [73]). They ignore contextual factors, such as history and culture, and overemphasize liability rules and property regimes as a tool to reduce the number of visits, to the exclusion of other factors (Brown and Harris [15]). Besides the above, traditional solutions also pose problems of equity (exclusion based on census, in the cases of prices/taxes) and/or efficient allocation of resources (numeric quota systems). In the case of quotas, it also violates the principle of methodological individualism so dear to the mainstream economic approach.
Although within the same framework, some attention has recently been devoted to community consensus because of: its ability to reduce costs associated with conflicts arising as a consequence of poor or not shared management or development schemes (Getz and Timur [33]; Yuksel et al. [74]); its superior efficacy, as it has become evident that consensus makes an action more likely to occur; the relevance that the concept of perception takes on, given the subjective nature of many of the aspects of sustainability in tourism (Ap 1992); it minimizes the negative impacts on local communities (Keogh [47]). However, although it grants some deeper insights into the issue, this approach fails to deal with the problem in its entirety and produce a sound understanding and proper management of tourism demand, which is still dealt with in terms of on-site management.

To the best of the author’s knowledge, no-one has explored the issue in terms of static and dynamic efficiency, i.e. consensus as an efficient tool for seeking sustainability. This is exactly the point we want to develop here.

5 Management schemes for sustainability in tourism

From the previous arguments the proposition n. 1 consistently follows.

**Proposition 1**: If tourism is sustainable when it adapts to the locally defined set of norms (in the broadest sense of the term) or to norms defined elsewhere, to the extent that the latter do not clash with the former, then what is needed is a simultaneous proper management of tourism demand and supply.

Given our definition of sustainable tourism, the definition of shared rules that participation should aim for, and the consequent adjustment of the supply side to these rules become effective tools in developing sustainable tourism. In fact, the provision of tourist facilities and services that conform to such norms may contribute to stimulating and selecting coherent tourist demand. For this to happen, host community has to bind itself to shared rules, a kind of Ulysses pact, avoiding to surrender to “the tourist siren’s song”. This aspect has also been dealt with in a game theory setting (Bimonte [3]; Bimonte and Punzo [8])

As an example, one may quote the case of the Amish and the case of the Palio of Siena. In both cases, sustainability refers to cultural rather than environmental aspects. Although different, both cases are examples of how a community may rely on the economic benefits of tourism while rejecting outside influence and preventing tourists from invading their private lifestyle, in the case of the Amish, and their public cultural event, in the case of the Palio of Siena. In both cases, tourists are welcome only if they conform to local shared norms.

Besides addressing qualitative and subjective aspects, and skipping the problems of equity and efficiency posed by traditional instruments, management of the supply side would also avoid the entitlement problem and the violation of the principle of methodological individualism. Restructuring and adaptation of the supply side to the body of shared norms would, in fact, generate a process of auto-selection of tourists and activities, i.e. a system in which the supply would
spontaneously create its own demand, a kind of “qualitative Law of Say”. A person who wishes to eat meat would never enter a vegetarian restaurant.

Summing up, sustainability requires preservation of the natural and socio-cultural capital of the host community, simultaneously satisfying the subjective as well as the economic needs of both residents and tourists. However, since tourism is the encounter of two (or more) communities, and since sustainability in our model is a locally defined social contract, sustainability requires adaptation of the demand side to the locally defined norms. Therefore norms that are truly shared by the host community contribute to organizing a supply side that is coherent with such norms and to selecting a demand that is locally sustainable. This aspect is also interesting in light of the possible feedback that a tourism experience can generate. In fact, the socioeconomic models highlight the existence of a feedback relationship between preferences and economic fact (Etzioni [28]). In this relationship, if preferences determine the choice (economic fact), these preferences in turn evolve since they are influenced by the choice, due to the experience associated with the economic choice (endogenous preferences). The tourist experience may therefore generate a sort of a virtuous circle (Mowforth and Munt 2003; Eagles [26]), becoming a de facto moment of growth and learning, and something that reinforces the ability to enjoy things, augmenting the satisfaction of individuals. This may be seen as the equivalent of an increase in productivity, a way to escape the growth dilemma in the tourism case. In fact, a lower level of use of resources (intensity of use) produces the same amount of utility.

In order to achieve these results, however, a courageous choice in fundamental policies is required, together with a significant cultural and organizational leap. Technical tools may help at the very beginning, but they have to aim to generate a modification in the reference values, this being the ultimate objective (see House [41]). For this very reason, any process of definition of the rules must be shared as widely as possible. Shared norms are more easily and quickly accepted; norms that have matured and are communal have a profound influence on some important characteristics of society, since they often have a coercive power that is stronger than law. Among other things, sharing causes norms to become part of the collective conscience as they mature, effectively turning them into social norms and thus introducing a reputation effect in behavioral patterns (Espinoza, n.d. [27]; Uphohh and Langholz [69]). In some bars and pubs in the south of Italy in the 70s, it was quite normal to see “no spitting” notices, which were posted for hygienic reasons, and the owner of the bar had to check that no spitting was done. Nowadays, no-one would spit and no control is required, even without a notice. The administrative rule caused the norm and the norm introduced a widespread crosscheck because of the reputation effect.

6 Participation as an instrument to pursue sustainability

The above discussion clearly indicates that a “simple” scientific or technically derived approach to regulating economic and social life in order to fulfill criteria
of sustainability cannot apply. Moreover, the relativity of the sustainability issue means that technical instruments themselves are not univocally determined, opening the floor to possible conflict between authority and community. Conflicts are more likely to occur the more an action or behavior is profitable and even legal, but not acceptable according to prevailing social and cultural norms and the more difficult control is (Bimonte and Punzo [6]; Uphoff and Langholz [69]). Because of that, the proposition n. 2 follows.

**Proposition 2:** Since sustainability in tourism is a community based concept, and since communities, in the above meaning, are always the result of culture and institutions, sustainability evolves with norms and may be better addressed by modifying communities’ reference values, that is by using mainly non-technical rather technical instruments.

There is a growing consensus that an understanding of communities is needed and non-technical policies have to be developed, with the aim of defining a correct sustainability policy scheme. According to Hardin, “a technical solution may be defined as one that requires a change only in the techniques of the natural sciences, demanding little or nothing in the way of change in human values or ideas of morality” (Hardin [34, p. 112]). Coherently, a non-technical solution occurs only when it generates changes in human values or beliefs (House [41]).

As stated before, if it is impossible to improve the efficiency of processes through technological innovation, greater efficiency may only be achieved through an modification of preferences that would produce the same result as an increase in productivity (its *dual*): as it produces a different capacity for enjoyment, the variation of preferences would bring about a greater degree of satisfaction from the good – the tourist experience – itself and the outcome would be a greater willingness to pay. The utility of an individual can increase through a greater consumption of goods or through greater enjoyment deriving from the same amount of goods. Essentially, if the usefulness of wealth lies in the things that it allows us to do, the substantive freedom it helps us to achieve (Sen [60, p. 14]), then the capacity and the possibility to enjoy available resources are themselves forms of wealth. *The true output of economic processes is not a physical flow, but the enjoyment of life* (Georgescu-Roegen [32]).

Policies should, therefore, aim to develop tools of participation capable of increasing the capacity to enjoy things (capabilities improvement). In *The New Eloisa*, Rousseau maintains that tastes specialize through the same tools as wisdom. Painters have a deep feeling for beauty: when looking at a landscape, they feel emotions that other people are hampered from feeling. Butler argues that educating all concerned with tourism […] is still the best key to developing more sustainable tourism, and that in the long term it is probably the only solution that is likely to be broadly successful (Butler [17]).

The consequence of the argument developed here is that, in pursuing sustainability as a social fact, a precise definition of sustainable tourism is less important than the process that aims to achieve it. In such a context, participation
is relevant to create consensus on some defined objectives, but it is much more important as a process to trigger an evolution in norms to which the tourism system then conforms. Wherever possible, sharing becomes the tool for the general acceptance of norms that in turn permits the development of a crosscheck on resources, which is the only course to pursue for sustainability in the long run. Sharing introduces reputation effects and triggers evolution in norms. To such an end, participation has to be interpreted in a broad sense. It envisages a clear allocation of the entitlement to the local community, in all its component parts, which means the active involvement of locals in the planning and development of tourism. But, more than “simple” participation in the decision-making process and in the definition of appropriate policies, it requires wider social participation, meaning participation in the *identification process* (choices), access to information, and participation in the *allocation of the wealth* produced (equitable development): a wider meaning than envisaged by the *local Agendas 21* and some researchers (see Pretty and Hine [58]). Only in this way can individuals develop a deeper sense of belonging, which facilitates the acceptance of decisions and simultaneously increases the probabilities of success. An inclusive process of development, in fact, prevents conflicts and aids the change in the preferences of individuals that is necessary in order to modify lifestyles and choices, i.e. to shift social preferences away from private toward public goods.

Development must, therefore, be transformed into a process of expansion of the real liberties enjoyed by human beings, that is, into the amplification of capabilities and an enhancement of enabling conditions. Freedoms are not only the primary ends of development; they are among its principal means (Sen [60, p. 10]). It is more and more evident that shared rules, improvement in the conditions of poverty and better distribution of income and of *entitlements* all represent necessary conditions for the achievement of sustainability.

Some ecotourism projects created in less-developed countries confirm the previous statements. There are examples whereby indigenous peoples change from the status of simple providers of cultural experiences for tourists, to having an ownership and management role in tourism (for a review see Zeppel [75] quoted in Robinson [59]). The participation (in the sense defined here) of local communities provokes a modification in individuals’ preferences and a development of an esthetic sense with respect to their natural and cultural assets. The esthetic power of an object (a very important element for the sustainability of tourism) is not inherent to the object itself; attributing esthetic value to objects or artifacts is considered to be a social act. The signified of the material signifier is a reflection of the subjective perception (Mukařovský [54]). The latter very much concerns the psychological as well as the material sphere and is influenced by prevailing social norms that render the value of an act independent of subjective will, a fact of the so-called collective conscience. The perception of any resource does not therefore rely on its physical properties, but on a range of social, economic, technological and psychological factors. Resources *are* not, they *become* (Zimmerman [76], quoted in Liu [49, p. 465]). This confirms the need to recover the social dimension of many decisions.
7 Conclusion

The paper has addressed the point that the sustainable tourism debate is underestimating the specific characteristics that this sector possesses and that make it worthwhile to debate sustainability in tourism separately. It also neglects both the qualitative and subjective dimension of many phenomena in tourism and the cultural context within which they operate. The paper therefore highlights the inadequacy of the traditional armamentaria that the theory has developed to deal with the issue of sustainability in tourism. It asserts that, while they may certainly play a useful role in dealing with certain types of problems (mainly of quantitative or measurable types), they are inadequate when socio-cultural and qualitative aspects are at stake. It suggests using non-technical instruments in order to cope with the specificity of the issues in the case of tourism. A supply-side management scheme is then provided with the aim of avoiding some of the problems posed by the traditional tools and fulfilling the criteria of sustainability once it is seen as an equilibrium between contrasting subjective needs and economic interests (where needs and interests, together with their bearers, are defined locally), and as a balance between scientific principles, cultural traditions and institutional practices.

The paper prompts a holistic and integrated analysis of the problem and, with the aim of rendering the concept of sustainability operational and providing a reference theory for sustainability in tourism, it delivers a tool to be used in pursuing the concept. This paper is based on the idea that local sustainability is, in its very essence, a community-based concept, where by community we mean the ecosystem (of which man is an integral part) and the entire collection of norms that constitute its collective conscience. As such, it is ultimately a relative and value-laden concept. Accordingly, it has been asserted that sustainability could not be effectively addressed without a simultaneous noetic analysis of its nature and the involvement of the local community in the development process intended to increase the enabling conditions and capabilities of its members.

The very nature of sustainability in tourism is such that, together with technical, it calls for non-technical instruments in order to be pursued. Feasible sustainability is always the outcome of an agreement aimed at defining shared rules, i.e. a social convention. Like any social convention, it is a cultural phenomenon, which are much more long lasting and difficult to modify. Scientific or technically derived approaches by themselves might help but they would not solve the problem. Simultaneous “management of supply” and a targeted “management of demand” are therefore required. This implies that the host community has to define shared rules, to which it has to conforms (a kind of Ulysse pact) and to which the guest community has to adapt. An auto-selection process would then follow more easily.

This paper maintains that a modification of the collective conscience and the community’s perception is required in order to address the sustainability issue. To such aim, development must be of an inclusive type, as freedoms, in the meaning of Sen, are not only the primary ends of development but are among its principal means. They allow the production of the equivalent of a technological
innovation, which improves the capacity of enjoyment of individuals on the one hand, and may transform the environment into a social fact - a shared value - on the other hand.

As maintained by Benedetto Croce, an Italian philosopher, any policy for the protection of scenic beauty must begin from the assumption that the landscape constitutes the material and visual representation of one’s own country, just as much as language, culture and history do. Only through the creation of a strong bond of identification between man and the landscape can one (re)generate that sense of belonging, which is the only thing capable of reinforcing the bond with one’s own territory and culture and developing a social control over its resources. The protection of environmental resources becomes efficacious only when the environment becomes a shared value or a social fact. Beyond this there is only a perverse sort of game between “cops” and “robbers”, which inexorably produces ephemeral “winners” and “losers”.

References


[58] Pretty, J. and Hine, R. (1999), Participatory appraisal for community assessment: principles and methods, Centre for Environment and Society, University of Essex, UK


[74] Yuksel, F., Bramwell, B. and Yuksel, A. (1999), Stakeholder interviews and tourism planning at Pamukkale, Turkey, Tourism Management, 20 (3) 351–60
