

Observing Tour Operators' Interest in Sustainability in Finland

ABSTRACT

The paper assesses how tour operators (TOs) address sustainability at the early stages of product development. TOs have potentially a large role in providing sustainable options for customers and therefore contribute to sustainable tourism. The research took place during TOs' familiarisation trip (FAM) to a new destination. Participant observation was used as it allowed researchers with a unique access to participate in the same programme as the TOs. Altogether 14 tourism establishments were visited and they all provided information about sustainability. The TOs' interest in sustainability was weak, which indicates that sustainability in the early stage is overpowered by other significant factors, e.g. type of product, suitability, seasonality and quality. However, further research in examining when sustainability becomes an issue for TOs would be beneficial for local stakeholders.

Keywords: sustainability, tour operators, observation, Finland, qualitative case studies, qualitative research, tourism

INTRODUCTION

Though the concept of sustainability has existed in tourism for decades, it has resumed its position as a core of many tourism activities due to the increasing global concerns of climate change and carbon footprint. Tour operators (TOs) have a large role in promoting sustainability and directing customers towards more sustainable destinations, services and products. They are substantial facilitators between contractors and customers and can thus influence sustainable development affecting both suppliers and demand (Zapata Campos et. al., 2018). As a result, their potential reach means that the responsibility of a single tour operator in maintaining sustainability in the foreground of a tourism customer chain, can be significant. However, understanding TOs perspective in relation to sustainability is under researched in comparison with research made among other tourism stakeholders, mainly tourists, businesses and destinations.

The research note focuses on examining tour operators' interests in sustainability in a new destination during their familiarization trip through a participant observation method. The aim of the research is

twofold. Firstly, the objective is to see whether the participating tour operators raise sustainability as a concern whilst spending several days in a new potential destination and visiting numerous tourism establishments. This enables us, at least to some extent, to understand the role of sustainability at the early stages of tour operators' decision-making and product development process. It may also enlighten us about any discrepancies between the objectives of the destination and TOs' interests. The article avoids taking a stand whether the destination and its products and services are essentially sustainable and focuses merely on the tour operators' interest in the matter. The relevance of the study is related to the strategic development of the destination itself: the destination is trying to promote sustainability in all their actions and become one of the leading sustainable destinations in the world. This means the inclusion of all stakeholders. Therefore, understanding the potential lack of or heightened interest in sustainability among the visiting tour operators and its role at the early stages of the product development, has the potential to either assist or hinder local sustainability efforts.

Secondly, the aim is to test if the observation method is suitable for assessing TOs' perspectives towards sustainability. (Participant) Observation has frequently been used in tourism studies, mostly with ethnographic design and often in terms of analysing and understanding tourist behaviour. For example, in the recent studies by Varnajot (2019) and Zhu et al. (2020) tourist behaviour was examined with the aims to understand motivations for border-crossing performances and stress and coping strategies. This approach has been less used with the research related to TOs. In short, the main research question can be summarised with the following: do the tour operators show any interest towards local sustainability efforts and is the chosen method successful and data-effective enough in acquiring such information?

SUSTAINABILITY, TOUR OPERATORS AND OBSERVATION

We have seen a fast growth of tourism during the past few decades (UNWTO, 2019), specifically prior-Covid-19, which creates an urgent need to act sustainably in all tourism operations. Tour operators can potentially have a great role in developing sustainability throughout the industry and even act as the agents of social change. In tourism, however, sustainability is largely inspected through a community- or destination-based research (Alfaro Navarro et al., 2020; Ceron/Dubois, 2003; Chen, 2017), business (Font et al., 2017; Moneva, et al., 2020) or tourist behaviour -related studies (Dolnicar et al., 2008; Juvan

et al., 2016) and to a lesser extent from the tour operators' perspective (see e.g. Buckley, 2012; Byrd, 2007; Jackson, 2007).

Though the image of the destination is nowadays less controlled by tour operators due to the internet, they are still largely in charge of the promotional activities and product-building (see Carey/Gountas, 1997). Managing package tourism with responsible principles may successfully contribute to the pursuit of sustainable development goals (Goffi et al., 2018) and thus greatly support the objectives of the destinations in reaching sustainability. Furthermore, selecting sustainable service-providers in destinations is an important opportunity to advance sustainable tourism. The research note focuses on product selection and development, which is a specific section of operations among TOs (see Khairat /Maher, 2012).

In this study, participant observation allows us to expand the understanding how the tour operators perceive and are interested in sustainability. The social situations in participant observation can be divided into two main issues: to participate in the activities and to observe the people engaging in the activities (Spradley, 2016). The observers can take a partial covert role during the exercise meaning that the insiders are not fully aware of the observers' roles (see Jorgensen, 1989). People usually behave differently when they are under observation, which can lead to a distortion of the social situation (Głąbiński, 2016). For this reason, the observers took a partial covert role during the study: though the group knew that two sustainability researchers were accompanying them during their trip and gave consent, the participants were not aware of themselves being the targets of observation.

Cole's (2005) discussion about the strengths and weaknesses of the method in relation to her 10-year long research highlight some issues that are covered in this research note as well: Observation as a research method is sometimes complemented with other methods, such as interviews or questionnaires. In this kind of data triangulation, the significance of observations can vary considerably (Reeves et al., 2008). Liu et al. (2020) and Zhu et al. (2020) utilized observation mostly as a secondary source of data that helped in understanding the issues brought out in the interviews. However, observation can act as a single method of estimating, for example, the impacts of tourists on the destination. The suitability and sufficiency of observation depend on several issues and needs to be considered thoroughly in each research setting.

The strength of the method lies in the fact it does not disturb the experience or the activity itself and it can uncover new behaviours and make discoveries as the situations are occurring. Of course, the

method is not without its challenges, which are related to the generalization of the results and the researcher's role in the data collection (Mackellar, 2013). Regardless of being involved with the study group, the researchers must maintain their primary role as a researcher and stay disconnected enough to collect and analyse data (Baker, 2006). The relationship, which is established between the observer and the participators, is one of the key components in the method. It is desirable that the observer takes multiple roles during the exercise to establish good rapport (Jorgensen, 1989: 21).

During the four-day stay, the researchers participated in all the same activities as the tour operators from dinners to programme activities and stayed in the same accommodation. In order to increase reliability, two observers were used (see Cotton et al., 2010). In addition, the observers followed a pre-set template that guided the data collection (e.g., who makes the initiative concerning sustainability, in which contexts sustainability is brought up) – thus, the method can be considered semi-structured observation (Schensul et al., 1999). Observation generates the context in which fieldworkers take on membership roles in surroundings they want to study (Angrosino/Rosenberg, 2011). The observers assumed numerous roles during the field research varying from guides and hosts to assistants and travel companions.

CASE STUDY SET-UP

All together eight TOs participated in the familiarization trip in the north-eastern part of Finland. As the group was small and to safeguard the anonymity of the observed, the region is not named more specifically. The group was a mix of European, Asian and Australian tour operators. The familiarisation trip took place in January 2020 during which 14 tourism establishments were visited. The establishments included the accommodation sector, programme activities and restaurant services. Most of the businesses were mixed offering either all the services or a selection of them.

The destination offers mainly nature-based activities and some cultural activities. The area is surrounded by several national parks and wilderness areas and includes a large ski resort, which all offer the background for most of the activities. Though winter season is considered the high-season, summers are increasingly popular. Winter activities include downhill and cross-country skiing, reindeer, husky and snowmobile safaris, snowshoeing, ice swimming, sauna experiences and northern lights tours. Summer

activities include mainly hiking but also river rafting, sauna experiences and increasingly mountain biking.

Though most of the tourists to the region still come from Finland, the portion of foreign tourists is rapidly growing and very dependent on the season (see Statistical Office of Finland, 2020). Most foreign tourists arrive via tour operators in winter, though individual tourists are an increasing segment.

OBSERVED INTEREST IN SUSTAINABILITY

Regarding sustainability, the term was mentioned by the tourism entrepreneurs directly or indirectly during all the visits providing a potential platform for further discussions. The topics covered all the four pillars of sustainability (economic, ecological, social and cultural) varying from the waste management and local ownership and food to the carbon footprint, silence, local cultural traditions and social programmes established by local tourism businesses. Some businesses were very keen on conveying their sustainability initiatives however, these generated no further questions or interest from the participants. None of the participants raised any questions concerning sustainability during the business visits. Only in one establishment one person went to see the small recycling centre by their own initiative.

In order to acquire such information, which is located outside the formal visits to tourism establishments, the changing roles of the researchers were useful. Acting as assistant guides, photographers and accepting coffee invitations in between the visits, allowed discussions outside the more formal setting. During these discussions outside the visits, the issue of animal welfare was raised. The comments prompted both the positive and negative impressions of the animal programme activities. The cultural traditions of reindeer husbandry raised some further interest. However, this was not specifically related to the concern about the sustainability of the cultural programme, but more about exoticism. Also, the presenter's (the tourism entrepreneur's) exceptional story telling skills potentially influenced and prompted these further questions and dialogue.

Furthermore, climate change was discussed outside the context of the destination at a general level with one participant during an informal setting. This discussion was more related to their personal living conditions in their home country. The participants were informed that two researchers were specialising

in tourism and climate change making it an easy opportunity to ask further questions, but this resulted in no additional dialogue except the one mentioned above.

During the observation, it was also important for the researchers to let the circumstances be as undisturbed as possible and not push their agenda. Therefore, the researchers never initiated discussions about sustainability, but allowed the visit to run on its own course. In this way, it was more accurate to detect the true level of concern in sustainability.

Most questions and issues addressed by the participants were related to the accessibility of the products and activities, seasons and adjustability for diverse customer groups. The topic that received extra interest and raised the most heated discussion during the FAM took place in relation to the authenticity of the experience. A programme, that took place in the nature and was based on silence and relaxation, was interrupted by another, rather noisy group. Most of the participants were disappointed and gave feedback about the negative experience. Even one additional group can make the experience too crowded and not promote and convey the essence of Finnish nature: the silence.

Concerning the method, observation proved a promising, yet demanding method. FAM trips are extremely busy and tight-scheduled occasions, where the settings constantly change. Additionally, the interaction between the participants, tourism entrepreneurs and local contact people is vivid and lively. Also, unexpected modifications in the programme seem to be a rule rather than an exception. The researchers were well-prepared for these kinds of sudden changes, both having some previous experience in FAMs.

When the days continue for 12-14 hours, the success in data collection is dependent on several observers. Having multiple observers also allows splitting up according to the behaviour of the observed group. This could be the case, for example, when the group scatters for any reason. In addition, several observers in the field simultaneously enable the exchange of ideas between the researchers and commenting on the raw data at the very early stage of data processing. During the observation period, the researchers followed a pre-set template to guide the observation and shared their findings in the evenings after data collection. However, as the template mostly focused on assessing the discussions concerning sustainability, it had to be partly abandoned when the TOs showed no interest on the matter. Modifications to the template were easier to make, when two researchers were able to have constant dialogue about the progress.

DISCUSSION

The article has combined things in a novel way: understanding sustainability at the early stages of the TOs product-building process and using observation as a method of acquiring the information. There is some evidence that tour operators, which focus on nature and cultural tourism, are highly engaged in sustainability (see Goffi et al., 2018). However, the study shows that those TOs that demonstrate interest in nature-based tourism do not necessarily do so. Though, the sampling size is small, it is noteworthy, that there was no grand interest towards sustainability among the participants except for the minor comments of animal welfare, even though there were multiple opportunities to do so. This somewhat aligns with Jackson's (2007) study, where he concludes that TOs lack the willingness to adopt ecotourism principles, if they interfere with business operations – sustainability is an issue that should not mix with business too much.

There is also some evidence that smaller TOs are more involved in sustainability than larger TO. This may be since often the socioeconomic initiatives and environmental practices do not necessarily require massive investments unlike what may be required from larger companies. This can be due to a more philosophical approach, which smaller TOs often have (Goffi et al. 2018). The participating TOs in this study were a mix of small and medium sized tour operators suggesting some interest in sustainability issues, however failing to do so.

In terms of the method and its suitability, the results are twofold. The method itself was found to have potential. It allowed two researchers an obstacle-free access to the TOs product-building process and this is where the value of the method rests. Having access to this part of tourism product-building was found to be unique. Such an exclusive point of view always requires a facilitator, a person who organises the access for the researchers. In this case, the facilitator was part of the destination management. Though a great deal of prior work was done before, perhaps even more background investigation concerning the visiting TOs could have been beneficial. In addition, a brief regrouping in the middle of the day among the researchers could have been valuable to make short assessments. Possibly, the results could have been verified through a short questionnaire or an interview at the end of the trip to see if the observations were correct. However, in this study, the aim was to test observation as a single method.

The observation generated three lines of thought. Firstly, the lack of interest sustainability may have been simply affected due to general fatigue. All the participants had been in Finland already for several days attending numerous professional events. It would have been interesting to follow another group to see if the results were different. Secondly, it may well be that sustainability issues will be addressed later in the product-building process. However, as all tourism establishments that were visited brought forward sustainability issues and therefore provided a platform for further discussions, it is surprising that it resulted in no further questions in such an easy context. This brings us to the third point, which makes us to conclude that sustainability is not among TOs top concerns, while getting to know the products initially. Other attributes seem to override the initial interests in the product. These are, based on the observations, the seasonality and the type of product (including the price and adjustability), suitability of the product to TOs target customers and quality. This does not mean that the TOs lack interest in sustainability, it merely indicates that it is not their main and first concern in this part of the product development. This is supported by Khairat/Maher, (2012) who conclude that the main motivation for TOs sustainability efforts is to build the positive public image rather than to reduce environmental impacts, which only ranked fourth. Also, the familiarizing trips are only one element of the product development. Therefore, running into conclusions based on only one perspective would be too hasty; the whole product development process requires further scrutinization

As such, it would be very beneficial for the industry to find out at which point the TOs start to think about sustainability. In terms of assessing TOs' desire to put forward the sustainability agenda in their final products requires further research. For example, in this case having follow-up questions six months later to see if sustainability has reached the product development agenda would provide important information. This would allow tourism entrepreneurs to raise their sustainability issues again at the right time and perhaps with more effect. Of course, it can be argued that the TOs have already shown interest towards sustainability as they have chosen a destination, which aims to excel in that. However, research shows that the sustainability efforts made by the destinations do not affect customers' choice. It is the individual products (e.g. programme services and accommodation) that make a difference, when customers think about sustainability (Hedlund, 2013).

Nonetheless, in our view, it remains an important part of the process to keep sustainability issues at the forefront, when TOs visit tourism establishments. It may be that in due time, also the TOs will begin to understand, what is important for the destination. This could potentially minimise discrepancies between the efforts made by the destination to become sustainable and TOs' other interests. What

remains important for destinations, is that a more careful choice over the future TOs operating in the area may be needed, if the destination is determined to succeed in sustainability and the TOs do not include sustainability higher in their agendas.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper has provided a brief outlook on tour operators' concerns about sustainability in initial product development. The importance of the paper lies in the fact that the destination is trying to become a significant sustainable tourism destination and the tour operators have a powerful role in conveying and implementing that message. The paper examined the TOs interest in sustainability issues during the four-day visit to the area. The sustainability issues didn't raise wide-ranging concern, nor did it prompt vast dialogues in this initial stage of product-building.

In addition, a new method was tested to see, if it yields additional understanding about the matter. Though, the method provided potential and a unique view to TOs product-building process, its effectiveness in this context was limited. The field work indicated that other matters were a priority to the TOs during the initial product development. Therefore, it would be recommended to conduct further research on in which part of the process sustainability becomes an important issue for TOs. This would provide an opportunity for destinations and entrepreneurs to push their sustainability agenda forward again at the right time of the product-building process.

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