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Sustainable tourism development in Neringa region

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Abstract

Tourism industry is one of the most important parts of the service sector. However, the expansion of tourism industry might also harm the environment. Therefore, the development of sustainable tourism is getting crucial in such environmentally sensitive places as Neringa region in Lithuania which is also protected by UNESCO. The qualitative research was carried out with tourism experts in Neringa region to determine current situation and possibilities of sustainable tourism development in Neringa region.

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1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the most important aspects for the development of service sector and today is indeed an activity of considerable global economic importance. However, the problem analyzed in this paper is that tourism industry especially in Lithuania now demands more meaningful involvement and more responsible and sustainable tourism practices. It is very important to develop the tourism sector, because there are a lot of beautiful touristic places and attractions, which are authentic and worth to visit in Lithuania. The object of this research is Neringa region located in Curonian spit, with its spectacular UNESCO-inscribed scenery and which is the elite seaside resort of Lithuania. It is very important to maintain this unique area, that future generations would have the opportunity to visit it. Therefore, the aim of this research is to determine the current situation and to find out the stage of sustainable tourism development process in Neringa region.

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Over the past 20 years tourism has become a major part of the discourse in sustainable development. There are many tourism types, which are divided by tourists travel goals, for example: business tourism, eco-tourism, health tourism, nature or history tourism, rural tourism, conference tourism, cultural tourism and others, however, sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices, are applied to all types of tourism and to all kinds of tourist areas (Darnaus vystymo iniciatyvos, 2010). Some of these tourism types like eco-tourism were the origin of sustainable tourism (Reiter, 2011) which finally developed to a global, more holistic approach (Sharpley and Telfer, 2002). Key elements of tourism sustainability include meeting the needs of both visitors and host communities and protecting and enhancing the tourism attraction for the future as a part of a national economic resource, as one of the opinion is that the concept of sustainable tourism emerged from recognition of the negative impacts of mass tourism (Swarbrooke, 1999).

According to Hall (2008) sustainable tourism policies need to be integrated with wider economic, social and environmental policy considerations within an overall sustainable development framework. This integration is long and complicated process, but later it can bring the advantage to tourism destination by maximizing the economic, social and cultural environments benefit, like for example Costa Rica did during 12 years period (Kahle-Piasecki, 2013). The relationship between tourists, host communities, businesses, attractions, and environment is complex, interactive, and symbiotic (Edgell, 2006), but the involvement of stakeholders in development and promotion of sustainable tourism is crucial (Vesna et al, 2012). According to Fragozo Neves (2007) it is important for every tourist and tourism providers to know sustainable tourism principles and follow them, because it helps to save authentic tourism destinations for future generations. Sustainable tourism development may require some changes in existing policies and practices depending on each location. Therefore, local participation and control is the key to the success of sustainable tourism development because sustainable tourism, properly managed, will add to the quality of life of the residents, visitors, and tourism employees alike (Edgell, 2006).

In Lithuania the concept of sustainable tourism is quite new and the principles of sustainable tourism development were applied only few years ago. However, green thinking and sustainable tourism principles are being introduced to the tourism sector of Lithuania. Furthermore, in European context it can be seen that Lithuania has retained its traditional landscapes, biological diversity and cultural history because protected areas have been established. Lithuania has four beautiful resorts, five national parks and 30 regional parks that include possibilities for tourism activities that can be characterized as sustainable tourism. The sustainability of the areas is mainly maintained through protection and restrictions, and development of sustainable tourism infrastructure. Also, Lithuania has an active countryside tourism association, which promotes rural tourism that is considered to be a form of sustainable tourism. Moreover, the Blue Flag Programme is applied to the Lithuanian beaches and marinas (Lithuanian Tourism Statistics, 2008). However, according to Grundey (2008) the development of sustainable tourism is not competitive enough in Lithuania. It is necessary to discuss the issues of region individuality, control of cultural identity and the most important is to avoid losing unique Lithuanian landscape and exclusion from other regions.

Nowadays Neringa resort is one of the most prestigious resorts in Lithuania, with well-developed business and cultural educational tourism, rational use of natural resources and a wide selection of tourism services for Lithuanian and foreign tourists. More than 800 thousands guests visit it every year. Neringa municipality has prepared a strategic development plan for 2014-2020 years, which states that tourism development in Neringa is oriented to ecological and cognitive tourism, active recreational tourism development, cultural tourism and other complex tourism types. Although term “sustainable tourism” was not mentioned in strategic plan, but the main principles of the sustainable tourism concept were introduced. However, there is no particular information what should be done in order to develop sustainable tourism in Neringa. If the main principles of sustainable tourism development and the right politics in Neringa are not applied, tourism might have a negative impact to the destination and damage the environment (Kahle-Piasecki, 2013). To conclude, Curonian spit is very sensitive and vulnerable place, so in order to maintain this unique resort it is important to use sustainable tourism development principles and improve the whole sphere of tourism in Neringa.

2. Method

To determine what is the current situation of Neringa sustainable, qualitative research was conducted during October and November of 2013 using structured interview method. 11 clear and easy to understand open-ended interview questions were prepared, which could help to achieve the research goal. They were introduced to different tourism organizations representatives and allowed the informants to answer without presented or implied choices. The questions were based on the review of analyzed literature. Therefore, these interview questions were specially prepared to clear up the tourism expert's opinion about current situation of sustainable tourism in Neringa, to clarify the problems of sustainable tourism development and also to find out the suggestions for future growth process.

This research targeted 12 tourism experts from different tourism organizations in Neringa. All chosen informants agreed to participate face-to-face in the research, which aim is to find out sustainable tourism situation in Neringa. Majority of informants (9) were females and only 3 of them were males. Also, it was found that most of the informants are not new in the tourism field and 6 of them are working there more than 10 years. They have a lot of experience and know enough about Neringa region and its tourism sphere.

3. Results

To the question "What is your vision for the tourism development in Neringa?" informants presented different answers. Majority of informants stated that it is very important to develop nature and eco-tourism and also to preserve Curonian spit unique landscape, because it is the main tourist's attraction. It is very significant to use efficient available resources, because there are all necessary conditions and it could help to achieve maximum results in the sustainable tourism sphere. As well as, three of tourism experts suggested developing health tourism, because Neringa has all kinds of healing resources - mineral water, therapeutic mud, the seaside air, greenery and water bodies.

Furthermore, the question about understanding of sustainable tourism concept revealed that all tourism experts understand this concept and know the positive aspects of sustainable tourism development.

To the question "Do you think it is important to develop sustainable tourism in Neringa?" everyone answered positively. Few of the research participants stated that it is necessary to develop sustainable tourism in this area, because it could help to balance and maximize the use of all spheres and get a maximum benefit. As well as, there was an opinion that sustainable tourism in Neringa could attract more tourists and it would be possible to get a financial benefit for local people. And few of informants said that without sustainable tourism development Neringa could be damaged and could lose its uniqueness and beauty.

Next interview question was designed to clarify tourism experts' opinion about the level of attention to sustainable tourism development in Neringa and three kinds of answers were received. First opinion revealed that people do not know enough about sustainable tourism or understand it in different ways, so first of all community should be informed about it. Other informants think that it is not enough attention paid for sustainable tourism development in Neringa municipality strategic development plan for 2014-2020 years and there is not enough funding from the municipality. Whereas, others said that only Curonian spit National park is concentrated on the sustainable tourism development process. So, it can be concluded that there is little attention paid to sustainable tourism development in Neringa, but still not enough.

In this interview was the question about local community and visitors' knowledge of sustainable tourism and only three of tourism experts said that local people and tourist have enough information about sustainable tourism. They motivated that coming tourists are polite, do not litter and respect the local community, traditions and culture. As well as, local people are trying to protect nature and cultural heritage and they also respect tourists who are coming from all over the world. Other three of research participants think that people know about sustainable tourism, but not enough. And they suggest spreading the information about sustainable tourism for local community or making some educational programs for them. Other 6 participants think there are different kinds of people and only some of them understand sustainable tourism concept, but others do not know about it and do not comply with the principles of sustainable tourism development. So, it is seen that there are different kind of opinions, but

majority of informants think that people do not know enough about sustainable tourism, so there should be made some educational seminars or conferences for people.

Next question helped to find out the opinion of informants about what kind of positive effect has a sustainable tourism development in Neringa resort. Tourism organizations representatives mentioned several aspects. All tourism experts agreed that sustainable tourism development has a positive effect on Neringa and identified several different aspects. Three of research participants mentioned that sustainable tourism development would protect Curonian spit natural environment, nature, cultural heritage and this area traditions. Also there were informants who said that it would be positive impact for resort name and it could become popular not only in Lithuania, but all over the world. Tourism organizations members also mentioned financial benefit for Neringa and local community. Furthermore, there was an opinion that sustainable tourism could provide a possibility to develop more entertainments in Neringa. As well as, informants think that it would be good for city and off-season development. So, everyone agreed that sustainable tourism development has a positive effect, but it should be developed more actively.

One more question was produced on purpose to find out how tourism organizations and its members in Neringa promote sustainable tourism development. Mostly informants contribute to sustainable tourism development by informing people. Few of tourism organizations are introducing tourists with Curonian spit National park visitation rules, because nature is very fragile, so it is very important to protect it. Some of research participants are guides and during the excursions they encourage people to save the cultural heritage and not to pollute the environment. As well as, one of the hotels started to use ecological cleaning measures which are good example for other accommodation service providers. So in summary it could be said that tourism organizations contribute to sustainable tourism development in Neringa and encourage other local people and tourists to do the same.

To the question „Do you collaborate with other representatives of tourism organizations in Neringa by developing the sustainable tourism and motivate minimizing the impact on the environment and local culture?“ tourism experts presented different answers, because they are working in different kind of tourism institutions. Tourism information center mostly collaborate with Curonian spit national park direction and Neringa municipality by sharing main information and organizing some events and attractions for tourists and local people. As well as, local tourism organizations representatives in Neringa collaborate and communicate with each other and with Tourism information center in purpose to spread the information and attract tourists to Neringa resort. Overall, it could be stated that Neringa tourism experts collaborate in purpose to achieve maximum positive results in tourism sphere and meet the needs of tourists and local community.

Moreover, the tourism experts were asked if they orientate to national or international context, when they are promoting sustainable tourism in Curonian spit. However, only a few of Neringa tourism organizations members mentioned that they orient to national or international context and try to find examples of sustainable tourism development practices that might be applied in Neringa region.

Finally, tourism experts were asked to give some recommendations for sustainable tourism development in Neringa. Tourism experts gave a lot of different suggestions how to improve sustainable tourism in Neringa. According to informants there should be more efficient use of available resources because Neringa has all needed conditions and natural resources for sustainable tourism development. Also, according research participants there should be more attractions, entertainments and activities in nature (creation of natural routes), because it is one of the most important conditions for sustainable tourism. As well as, it is very important to develop tourism infrastructure, build new objects (like the therapy, SPA, health center) and customize environment for disabled people. All these things could attract more tourists and make Neringa resort more popular all over the year. Furthermore, it is significant to pay more attention to waste sorting, because at the moment only minority of people sorts wastes. As well as, two of tourism experts mentioned that there should be introduction to sustainable tourism and educational seminars about it for local people, because only then would be intensified sustainable tourism development in Neringa. Therefore, public education including environmental education and promotion of environment friendly lifestyles are one of the priority tasks of sustainable development process.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion it can be stated that Neringa resort is at the primary stage of sustainable tourism development, because only recently sustainable tourism principles were introduced although Neringa always had all the necessary conditions and environment for sustainable tourism development. Research analysis showed that Neringa region without sustainable tourism development could lose its uniqueness and beauty. That's why all tourism experts try to work together on purpose to protect the natural environment and unique landscape and they encourage other local people and tourists to do the same. As well as research analysis helped to find out that in the future sustainable tourism in Neringa region have all the conditions and possibilities to be intensified.

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