

# ASSESSING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF TOURISM PRODUCTS – AS SIMPLE AS IT GETS

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## ABSTRACT

The balance between the three dimensions of sustainability forms the basis for the successful development of a tourism region. The development of sustainable products is crucial for a destination in order to create true sustainable experiences for their guests. The research project aimed to determine the criteria for sustainable tourism and to develop a simple method for the sustainability assessment of tourism products. While most valuation methods require the presence and the analysis of a comprehensive data set, the assessment tool should enable the destination to analyse the sustainability of their products as easily as possible. Together with five Swiss tourism destinations an assessment tool was developed and tested. In a first step, the central sustainability criteria for tourism products were defined based on existing criteria sets. Then an inventory of all tourist products was created. Every single product was quantitatively assessed with regards to the sustainability criteria by the project manager of the destination management organisation (DMO). Their experiences were evaluated through qualitative interviews.

The sustainability assessment using the framework showed various challenges such as the dependence of the prior knowledge of the evaluator. The variety of the products also hampers a consistent assessment and a comparison between destinations. The strengths of such a simplified model are that it allows a comparison to changes of sustainability in the product portfolio over time. In addition, it promotes the internal discussion and awareness. Using the new framework during the development of new products helps to take all criteria into account. It also supports the connection with service providers and the communication of sustainability requirements.

The instrument tested represents a compromise that reduces complexity and enables the assessment of sustainability without the use of a comprehensive monitoring system – as simple as it gets.

*Keywords: assessment framework, destination, sustainability, tourism products.*

## 1 INTRODUCTION AND AIM

The concepts of sustainability and corporate social responsibility are becoming more and more important in tourism. In times of a worldwide increase in tourist demand, increasing pressure on social communities and environmental resources, and climatic change, a responsible approach to tourism's natural and cultural resources is of crucial importance.

The challenges for tourism are well-known. Since the United Nations Conference on environment and development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 a huge number of declarations and charters with the goal of a sustainable development in tourism have been signed.

In addition, awareness of tourism demand is growing. Fair and responsible travel is gaining importance and demand for sustainable tourism is increasing according to Wehrli *et al.* [1] and FUR [2].

But sustainability management systems become more important also at company level. Standards such as the ISO 14001 for environmental management now require that the

life-cycle perspective is taken into account, which means considering each stage of a product or service, from development to end-of-life. For tourism destinations, this means that sustainability must be anchored in the specific products and made tangible for guests.

If tourism products are to be sustainable, the current status of the portfolio including its strengths and weaknesses must be known. However, the use of existing measuring systems – such as the ecological footprint, carbon footprint or comprehensive monitoring systems [3–6] – is often too complex and too expensive.

According to Timur and Getz [7], DMOs act as central players have the greatest impact on other stakeholders regarding a destination's development. In the tourism industry, DMOs bear the strategic responsibility to coordinate the overall supply of tourism products and marketing activities [8, 9]. For a destination to gain a quick overview of the sustainability of its products, they must be analysed as simply as possible. The development of sustainable products plays a central role for a destination in order to make sustainability tangible and to create a true experience for the guest.

Therefore, this paper analyses the following central research questions:

1. What does sustainability mean with regard to tourism products?
2. How can the sustainability of tourism products be assessed as simply as possible?
3. What are the opportunities and challenges?

## 2 METHOD

There are different methods for evaluating and obtaining sustainability indicators [10]. Although there are various indicator systems, some have significant limitations when it comes to practical application [11]. Since there is no established theoretical framework to determine the most suitable aggregation procedure [12], an assessment framework is developed. It allows identification of the challenges destination managers face when trying to improve the sustainability of their tourism products [13]. The aim of this study is to investigate how the sustainability of tourism products can be analysed and improved in a simple way.

To achieve this aim, a multistage process including the following steps was chosen:

1. Selection of destinations.
2. Definition of sustainability criteria for tourism products.
3. Development of an assessment tool.
4. Generating an inventory of the tourism products of the destination and assessment of the sustainability of the products.
5. Evaluation: Qualitative interviews with the responsible persons of the destinations.
6. Optimization of the tool and derivation of the challenges.

### 1. Selection of the destinations

To ensure a practical approach, the researchers worked together with five Swiss tourism destinations; Arosa, Engadin Scuol Samnaun Val Müstair, Interlaken, Lucerne and the UNESCO Biosphere Entlebuch. The main criterion for the selection of the destinations was a high relevance of the subject of sustainability in the destination. Other selection criteria were the different geographic locations and size of the destinations, as well as the level of development in terms of sustainability – and (of course) the interest to participate in the project.

## 2. Definition of sustainability criteria for tourism products

The criteria for sustainable tourism products were determined on the basis of a literature review on existing sustainability concepts and sets of criteria. Existing criteria concepts such as the Global Sustainable Tourism Criteria, the Global Reporting Initiative and others had been evaluated and discussed with the destinations. Finally, a set of 12 criteria had been chosen that represent the management of sustainability as well as the three sustainability dimensions economy, ecology and society and that are suitable for the specific case of tourism products.

## 3. Development of an assessment tool

The criteria served as the basis for the development of a tool that should enable destination managers to assess the sustainability of their tourism products without having to implement an extensive monitoring. The goal is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the product portfolio in the destination in regard to the sustainability aspects.

## 4. Generating an inventory of the tourism products of the destination and assessment of the sustainability of the products

The five destinations generated an inventory of their products and applied the tool for each of the products. Included were all products bookable for guests on a destination level. All the criteria were assessed for each product.

## 5. Evaluation: Qualitative interviews with the responsible persons of the destinations

In order to obtain systematic feedback and learn about the strengths and weaknesses of the tool, semi-structured qualitative interviews with the persons responsible in the destinations were conducted and analysed.

## 6. Optimization of the tool and derivation of the challenges

The feedback of the persons responsible for the destinations helped to further improve the assessment tool and allowed to derive and document the opportunities and challenges of the tool.

### 3 FINDINGS

The step-by-step procedure resulted in the following answers to the central research questions:

#### 1. **What does sustainability mean with regard to tourism products?**

There are a number of standards, certification schemes and labels, which try to make sustainability efforts measurable and comprehensible through the use of indicators. Based on existing systems and taking into account the specific characteristics of tourism products, 12 key sustainability criteria have been defined in the four areas of management, economy, society and environment.

#### Management

- Sustainability Management: Sustainability aspects are considered in a systematic way. The product is evaluated regularly, the effects are being measured and measures of improvements derived.
- Participation of stakeholders: There's an active exchange with all the stakeholders that are directly (product partners, guests) or indirectly (community, farmers, owners of secondary homes, etc.) involved. The different expectations and needs are considered when developing the product.

- Informing guests about sustainability: Guests are informed about sustainability aspects and encouraged to contribute. All employees are trained so they can competently inform guests.

#### Economy

- Strengthening of the regional economy: Wherever possible the product includes local and regional products and supports local service providers. Regional resources and attractions are promoted.
- Special customer benefits: The product provides attractive customer experiences. Because of the high quality, uniqueness, innovation content and/or the explicit reference to the region the product generates high customer benefit thereby increasing competitiveness.
- Economic efficiency: The cost of development and maintenance of the product is in a positive relation to the intended economic effects. The product generates added value (directly or indirectly) and/or increases the attractiveness for guests.

#### Society

- Consideration of specific guest needs: The product considers guests with specific needs (e.g. accessibility, family friendliness, senior friendliness, food intolerances, etc.). Appropriate information is transparently available.
- Working conditions for employees: The working conditions for employees are fair and attractive (e.g. equal pay, safety, health, education and training, work-life balance, promotion of diversity in terms of culture, age, gender, etc.).
- Promotion of local culture: The local culture is cultivated and promoted (e.g. customs, regional materials or architecture). The product contributes to the preservation and enhancement of the culture of the region. It is authentic and in line with the local culture. The exchange between visitors and locals is encouraged.

#### Environment

- Conscious use of energy: There's a conscious use of energy (e.g. energy consumption, efficiency, green power) as well as measures to save energy and to avoid CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.
- Environmentally friendly mobility: There are offers for environmentally friendly mobility that are communicated actively (e.g. guest information, pick-up service). There are incentives for the guests. In the best case, the product includes only environmentally friendly means of transport.
- Protection of nature, landscape and environmental resources: There's a responsible use of nature, landscape and other environmental resources (e.g. low land consumption, biodiversity). Conservation, restoration and enhancement of the natural and cultural landscape are supported directly or indirectly. The construction of facilities (signalling, panels, infrastructure, etc.) takes into account the natural, scenic and architectural environment. There are measures for the reduction of noise pollution, water protection and conservation and for the prevention, reduction, separation and recycling and disposal of waste.

## 2. How Can the Sustainability of Tourism Products Be Assessed as Simply as Possible?

To help destinations assess the suitability of the single product without too much effort, an assessment framework based on the defined criteria was developed (cf. Table 1).

Table 1: Sustainability assessment framework for tourism products.

	Sustainability Criteria	Not at all							Very Much Not Relevant	Measures and Further Remarks
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Management	Sustainability management									
	Participation of stakeholders									
	Informing guests about sustainability									
Economy	Strengthening of the regional economy									
	Special customer benefits									
	Economic efficiency									
Society	Consideration of specific guest needs									
	Working conditions for employees									
	Promotion of local culture									
Environment	Conscious use of energy									
	Environmentally friendly mobility									
	Protection of nature, landscape and environmental resources									
Average sustainability assessment of the product										

Source: Authors

To what extent have the following criteria been taken into account? What measures have been implemented?

Each product – whether mass or niche product [14] – was analysed with regard to the criteria; the degree of fulfilment of every single criterion was estimated on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much).

The mean values for each of the sustainability criteria reveal strengths and weaknesses and thus potential in the various areas of sustainability, and allow comparisons with respect to changes over time.

To keep it simple and to enable the evaluation of all products with the same grid the individual aspects have not been weighted, although weights can have a significant effect on the rankings and subsequent policymaking [15].

### 3 What are the Opportunities and Challenges?

The evaluation of the sustainability assessment of tourism products in destinations can be used to determine the various opportunities and challenges. Such assessment frameworks can

be judged according to their applicability, usefulness and reproducibility [16, 17]. A further differentiation can be made with regard to aspects such as comparability, systematic approach, level of knowledge and type and variety of products. Table 2 shows the main findings.

Table 2: Opportunities and challenges.

	<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
Applicability	The simple framework allows an easy overview without the need for extensive data collection by the service providers.	The assessment of the sustainability still requires good comprehension of sustainability and a minimum knowledge of the products analysed.
Usefulness	The assessment framework has been judged to be a helpful and pragmatic solution by the destinations. It provides an overview of the sustainability of the product portfolio and a basis for further development of products.	Despite the simplicity of the assessment framework the assessment process is still complex and time-consuming. It is not suitable for the labelling of tourism products.
Reproducibility	The framework standardizes the approach and is considered to be a useful tool for the promotion and concretization of the internal discussion. According to the destinations a careful assessment leads to a high reliability.	The assessment is based on subjective evaluation. It does not allow an exact assessment nor a quantitative analysis. The people in charge of the assessment exert a strong influence.
Comparability	The assessment framework allows an internal comparison of different products as well as an intertemporal monitoring overtime (cf. Fig. 1).	Objective comparability with other destinations is virtually impossible. Comparability depends on external conditions and on the person responsible for the assessment.
Systematic approach	The framework facilitates orientation and helps the destination to consider all the sustainability aspects.	The framework only assesses the measures implemented, but not their implications. Often little is known about the effects, since the necessary data is missing.
Level of knowledge	Where there are knowledge gaps, the tool helps to contact service providers and to sensitize them. It can serve as a basis for communication within the destination.	The sustainability assessment depends on the experience and the level of knowledge of the person in charge with regard to the single aspects of the tourism product as well as to the measures implemented by other service providers.

	<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>Challenges</b>
Type and variety of products	The same framework can be applied to all types of products. An outstanding product of any kind achieves high scores for all criteria.	Type and variety of products have to be considered. A consistent assessment is difficult when there are many different products. Depending on the type of product not all of the criteria are of same importance.

Source: Authors

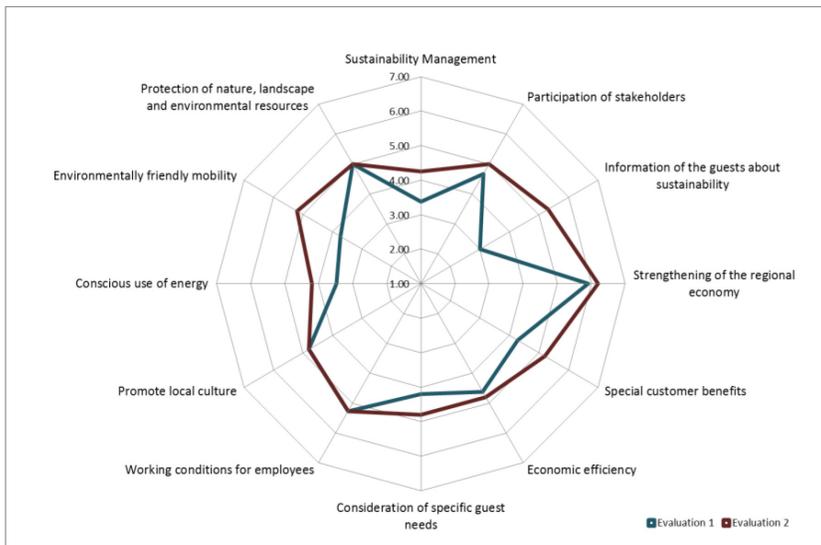


Figure 1: Assessment of tourism products in a destination (average).

#### 4 CONCLUSION

There is no universally accepted method for measuring tourism sustainability. Nor is there a consensus on how to construct and apply such a method [11]. While the developed assessment framework cannot keep up with comprehensive quantitative systems with respect to significance, it allows a simple sustainability assessment of tourism products. The instrument is especially useful for an overall view of the sustainability of the product portfolio, to get to know its strengths and weaknesses and to monitor changes. The assessment serves the destinations as a basis for strategic considerations with regard to the development of new sustainable products. The reduction of the complexity simplifies applicability, but at the same time means a loss of information compared to more comprehensive instruments.

The instrument represents a compromise which leads to restrictions in objectivity and comparability. Tourism products are known to be particularly complex because they often involve several service providers. With a standardized tool this variety of different products in a destination can only partly be represented.

To increase the reliability of the assessment, it is advisable to perform and/or to validate the assessment in a group. In addition, the process of evaluation must be communicated

transparently and the criteria and the procedure must be disclosed. The validity of the instrument also depends on the previous knowledge of the person in charge and on their level of information about the products. If internal exchange and dialogue with stakeholders are encouraged, the instrument can be used as a basis for discussion and can help to anchor the concept of sustainability.

‘Models are servants, not masters’ [18]. Although systematic frameworks can provide useful information for understanding the sustainability of a tourism product, the information cannot be used as an absolute solution. There are a number of issues in the destination which cannot be explained by a standardized instrument [13].

Balancing the need of maximum validity and maximum usefulness the instrument tested represents a compromise that reduces complexity and enables the assessment of sustainability without the use of a comprehensive monitoring system – as simple as it gets.

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