

Sustainability in Rural Tourism

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Ventures in rural areas face multiple constraints, in many circumstances worsened by their reduced size and their location in the national territory. Small ventures in this specific context face a reality in which entrepreneurs have to overcome various difficulties in managing and making their business competitive, such as the access to human resources and a diversified labor pool. A recent debate on “rural entrepreneurship” suggests that one of the best opportunities to develop rural areas is linked with rural tourism, since its principles are related to the creation of jobs and income in the rural space and can also help to increase the perception of value of endogenous resources and products. Rural tourism entrepreneurs try to be embedded in the rural space, thereby increasing their chances of success and sustainability of the business. At the same time, with this attitude of embeddedness, they can contribute more easily to the sustainability of the region and help in shaping and voicing the need and aspirations of the stakeholders of the (rural) destination, one of the advocated principles of rural tourism.

sustainability

rural tourism

communication

1. The Emphasis on Rural Tourism

In recent decades, “some rural areas and landscapes became focal points for the production and consumption of the ‘natural’” [1] (p. 403). In this context, rural tourism has particularly gained attention, principally due to the demand of the tourists which search for new values such as heritage, culture, and gastronomy [2], the problems—environmental and social—caused by “mass tourism” [3], and its potential contribution to tourism sustainability [4][5][6]. Indeed, it has been observed that it is one of the new alternative tourism choices, challenging the traditional and, in some contexts, fast growing sun, sea, and sun resorts which dominated post-Second World War tourism [7]. The seminal work of Lane [8] states that, in its pure form, rural tourism should be:

- located in rural areas;
- rural in scale—both in terms of buildings and settlements—and, therefore, usually small scale;
- functionally rural, that is, built upon the rural world’s special features of small-scale lodging, open space, contact with nature and the natural world, heritage, “traditional” societies, and “traditional” practices;
- traditional in character, growing sustainably and organically, connected with local communities and controlled by them for the long-term good of the area;

- of many different kinds, representing the complex pattern of the rural environment, economy, history, and location.

In this line, a variety of stakeholders involved, particularly tourists, public entities, rural communities, and farmers, agree on the need and urgency for developing this new form of tourism. In fact, firstly, due to standardized, polluted, congested, and artificial modern urban living conditions from which most tourists seek to get away [9], the recent literature emphasizes the new consumption values associated with rural areas in the field of leisure and tourism [3][10], wellness and health [7][11][12], food traditions, local produce, culture, social values [1], and authentic and personal relationships [13], often related to (other) societal trends valuing the nature, small scale, and uniqueness of the rural space.

Secondly, many national governments issued strategies and/or supportive policy documents to foster tourism in rural areas [7]. For instance, in Portugal, the Portuguese government, through various measures to promote rural tourism, seeks to diversify national tourism and to make known other areas, particularly those in the interior with tourist potential, while trying to reduce the seasonality of tourism activity. Many of these national programs derive from the European programs, as European structural funds greatly contributed to the development of tourism infrastructure in quantity as well as in quality and diversity [14].

Thirdly, in the context of the economic diversification principle underlying most proposals and rural programs, rural tourism has been observed as one pivotal activity, if not the “prescription” with which to achieve the socioeconomic revitalization of the less favored regions, mostly inland and mountainous [15], owing to its potential for employment and income creation and the synergies it is able to generate in other sectors of activity in the rural space [3][16][17]. It is precisely this potential to contribute to the rural economy which makes many farmers and rural tourism suppliers view rural tourism as a complement to their income.

2. The Sustainability of Rural Tourism

After the publication of the Brundtland Commissions' report *Our Common Future* in 1987 [18], the idea of sustainability won space in multiple dimensions, such as economic, social, and environmental. More recent approaches suggest another two dimensions: technological and political [19].

For tourism to be sustainable, it needs to protect local culture, improve social and individual wellbeing, and preserve the environment [19][20]. Sustainable tourism “is dynamic in the sense that it is constantly being constructed and reconstructed by different stakeholders” [21] (p. 177). Tölkes [22] (p. 10) claims that “the tourism industry has begun to increase its sustainability engagement, mainly by developing a more sustainable product range”. Consequently, tourism and its integration into the rural product can be very much part of developing employment opportunities, increasing local prosperity, conservation, and maintenance of the environment, celebrating cultural assets and generally ensuring a greater spread in terms of who can benefit (economically, socially, and culturally). Indeed, the seminal work of Lane [6] draws attention to the fact that sustainability in rural tourism cannot be successfully based only on a narrow pro-nature conservation purpose. According to Lane [6], it should sustain landscape and habitats, but also:

- sustain the rural culture and character of local communities;
- sustain the rural economy;
- sustain the local tourism industry which should be viable in the long term—and in turn mean the promotion of successful and satisfying holiday experiences;
- develop sufficient understanding, leadership and vision amongst the decision makers in the rural space in order to work towards a balanced and diversified rural economy.

Although much has been said about this concept of rural tourism sustainability, over the past thirty years, its principles remain. For instance, Martinez, Martín, Fernández and Mogorrón-Guerrero [23] (p. 167), based on a literature review, state that “there are multiple advantages that tourism has as a sustainable development strategy”: it is more respectful to the environment than other alternatives, conservationism is more present in this activity, it is able to improve social structures and facilities, and it diversifies the local economy so that it is viable in the long-term. Additionally, other positive effects associated with development, setting up new businesses, establishment of contact between isolated communities and other people, and resettlement should not be overlooked. However, if this is true, rural tourism may be also associated with potentially negative effects, mostly derived from sociocultural [24][25][26] and economic effects [24][26]. For instance, Roberts and Hall [26] argue that the development of rural tourism is also associated with the creation of income and employment inequalities among local residents, since one of the major beneficiaries of rural tourism is the owners [15] and not the local population in general. From a social–cultural point of view, the development of rural tourism can lead to the manufacture or distortion of local culture for commodification and staged authenticity [26].

3. Communication in Rural Tourism—A Path towards Sustainability

Tourism has an important role in the support of rural economies, environments, and societies and rural tourism can be a key tool in creating and maintaining a more sustainable countryside [6].

If we consider that we live in a world dominated by technology and the internet and that these tools are changing the way the world interacts and communicates [27], it is not surprising that there has been an explosion of different ways to communicate the product/experience of tourism. Indeed, it is widely accepted that the internet can serve as an effective marketing tool in tourism [28]. It is a valuable tool for both suppliers and consumers for promotion and communication and online purchasing [29]. Since the 1990s, tourism businesses have undertaken different voluntary activities to show their commitment to sustainable tourism, such as adopting codes of conduct, obtaining eco-labels, or implementing environmental management systems [30].

Some of the main purposes of sustainability communication are to make consumers aware of the availability of sustainable travel products, to inform consumers of how these offerings meet their needs and comply with

sustainability criteria, and, ultimately, to stimulate pro-sustainable purchases [22] (p. 10). Besides this perspective focused on products, sustainability communication aims to increase transparency about a company's sustainability engagement, encouraging an interactive dialogue between companies and stakeholders about the company's activities [31].

Due to increased consumer awareness, the sustainability practices of tourism accommodations are developing [32] and, for this reason, an effective website is vital for a lodging unit to strengthen its customer relationships and gain a larger market segment [29][33].

Font, Elgammal and Lamond [34] state that businesses use their websites, and other forms of communication, to sensitize and persuade their target to change their behavior. This form of communication is particularly important for businesses located in regions with symptoms of any kind of economic poverty and for businesses distant from markets, such as the rural tourism lodgings located in interior rural areas [3]. The wealth and income generated in rural environments can be increased by improving strategically planned activities that enable rural tourism units to communicate them in an appropriate manner. In this context, the web page of the lodging is fundamental, and sometimes is the only way which the rural lodging can undertake strategies to communicate the rural product/experience [35][36].

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