

TOURISTS' INTENTIONS TO SUPPORT ENVIRONMENTAL INITIATIVES IN MOUNTAIN DESTINATIONS: THE CASE OF POIANA BRASOV, ROMANIA

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ABSTRACT. Considering the fact that international consumers are being increasingly ecologically conscious, the present study aims to capture tourists' intentions to support environmental initiatives in a Romanian mountain destination, namely Poiana Brasov. Using a quantitative research method, a total of 331 tourists have been interviewed in their accommodation location. The main variables of the research refer to the following issues: tourists' interest in supporting environmental initiatives in the visited destination, the type of environmental initiatives they would participate in, the profile of the environmentally friendly tourists in Poiana Brasov and tourists' interest in donating funds for conservation projects. The results of this study outline the necessity for a responsible management of both the destination and tourism services providers in Poiana Brasov, in order to meet tourists' interest to participate in environmental initiatives.

Key words: *environmental initiatives, mountain destination, environmentally-friendly tourists, profile*

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1. Introduction

Increasingly aware of the seriousness of environmental problems, customers are becoming more ecologically conscious and are seeking to purchase eco-friendly products and services, preferring firms that favour environmental practices (Laroche et al., 2001; Roberts, 1996). Environmental concern was defined by Dunlap and Jones (2002, p. 485) as 'the degree to which people are aware of problems regarding the environment and support efforts to solve them and/or indicate a willingness to contribute personally to their solution'. Other authors have defined environmental concern as an attitude towards a general or specific environmental issue (e.g. Fransson and Gärling, 1999). Several studies have examined the relationship between environmental concern and environmentally related behaviour (Hedlund, 2011).

Given the current trend in nature-based tourism and the popularity of mountain destinations for nature tourism, it is reasonable to assume that many mountain regions will experience a significant growth in both international and domestic tourism (Nepal, 2002). However, exposure from tourism can leave mountain communities vulnerable to severe environmental consequences, as has happened in many mountain destinations around the world. Thus, it is essential that mountain tourism be based on the principles of sustainability, which emphasize sound environmental practices, equity and long-term benefits for all stakeholders (Nepal, 2002).

As Kohler and Byers (1999) state, tourism affects mountains in many ways. Economically, tourist resorts in mountains directly depend on their customers. There are direct and indirect benefits to many sectors and communities inside and outside the resort areas. However, a considerable share of tourism revenue spreads to areas outside the mountains. In addition, tourist activities have biophysical impacts. For example, paths and ski runs may modify sensitive Alpine areas, tourists have known impacts along mountain trails, and wildlife may be disturbed (Schorner, 2011).

For true progress to be made towards more sustainable tourism in mountain destinations, tourists should themselves reflect sustainability concerns in their travel choice and behaviour. The tourism industry is much more likely to respond to an approach that is market driven. Tourists' environmental concern can motivate tourism industry members

in an attempt to make their operations more sustainable as there is an increasing competition in the tourism market and the consumer decision making process is influenced by a multitude of factors, including tourists' environmental orientation.

European stakeholders from different mountain destinations have initiated several activities in order to promote a sustainable tourism development for the conservation of the natural resources and the biodiversity in mountain areas (e.g. Davos, Nendaz – Switzerland, Cairngorm Mountain, Nevis Range – UK, Alta Badia – Italy, Les Aillons, Alpes d'Huez – France) while certain researchers have studied tourists' environmental attitudes and intentions in mountain resorts (Holden, 2000; Hudson and Ritchie, 2001; Brymer et al., 2009).

Romanian mountain destinations are characterized by the absence of an integrated destination management, the limited implication of destination management organizations (DMO) in environmentally responsible tourism development, mainly lacking interest in the study of tourist behaviour.

The present study aims to capture tourists' expressed intentions to support environmental initiatives, focusing on one of the most famous Romanian mountain destinations - Poiana Brasov. Poiana Brasov is Romania's most complex winter sports resort as well as an important international tourist centre; it boasts 12 ski runs of various difficulty degrees (an Olympic run, three downhill and giant slalom runs, one special slalom run, two jumps, etc.), sports grounds (for tennis, mini-golf, handball, basketball), a lake, ropeway, rope chair, ski lift, indoor pools, saunas, medical gyms, discos, bars and restaurants etc. The accommodation offer is quite rich, in Poiana Brasov there are over 40 hotels, villas, and boarding houses. Tourists can go skiing, snowboarding, skating, ATV riding in winter and during summer they can ride, fly a motor glider, go bungee jumping or paragliding, climbing. There are also archery, shooting and paintball facilities. This resort is visited both by Romanian and foreign tourists (more than 15% of tourists are foreigners) especially for winter sports, leisure and business events (Brasov County Institute of Statistics, 2013).

Considering the role of tourists' environmental concern in the development of sustainable tourism in mountain destinations, our research aims to answer following issues:

Q1: Are tourists interested in environmental initiatives during their stay in Poiana Brasov?

Q2: To what type of environmental initiatives would tourists participate in?

Q3: What is the profile of the environmentally friendly tourists?

Q4: Are tourists interested in donating funds for conservation projects?

2. Review of literature

The study of behaviour with environmental consequences has a long tradition among social scientists. Besides the theoretical value of environmental studies, they are of significant practical value because they identify for organizations and policy makers which actions to take to increase the level of pro-environmental behaviour and consequently protect natural resources (Dolnicar and Grün, 2009). Moreover, the ecological sustainability of tourism has been researched extensively. The central aim of sustainable tourism research has been to identify how an economically viable tourism industry can be developed and maintained at a destination while minimizing adverse environmental impacts (the 'ecological footprint') and in so doing, preserve the destination's natural and cultural resources for both residents and future generations of tourists (Dolnicar et al., 2008).

Businesses wishing to adopt a more strategic approach to green business model innovation can begin this process by asking themselves the question, "What is the strategic goal of our business in relation to environmental sustainability?" (Wolcott and Lippitz, 2010). Other key questions they can address to enable quick progress on sustainable innovation, include (Wolcott and Lippitz, 2010):

- Which of our existing customers are looking for greener solutions?

- How does this green concept affect the way we interact with customers in any context, e.g. buying, delivery, support or service?

- Will we need to educate existing or new customers and develop new markets and customers in order to succeed?

One of the most important barriers to the development of sustainable tourism includes the lack of awareness and information of

tourists and the tourism industry of the harmful environmental impacts of tourism and tourism-related activities. This challenge is reflected in one of major gaps in current policies to promote sustainable tourism, which is that the demand/consumption side of tourism is not widely addressed in existing tourism policy (BIO Intelligence Service, 2012). In tourism research, it has been shown that tourists with a positive environmental attitude and an environmental awareness are more likely to engage in pro-environmental behaviours than tourists who are not pro-environmentally concerned (Luzar et al., 1998; Weaver and Lawton, 2002; Lee and Moscardo, 2005). Although it is possible to behave in a pro-environmental manner without being environmentally concerned, the above studies show that the link between values, attitudes, and behaviour exists in some sense, both in a general and in a tourism context (Hedlund, 2011).

Roberts (1996) indicated that consumer attitudes are significant predictors of ecologically conscious consumer behaviours. His findings revealed that environmentally conscious people are likely to engage in eco-friendly consumer behaviours, and individuals who believe their specific ecological activities can cause positive change are more likely to display green consumer behaviours. He also suggested that individual perception regarding the environmental resource problems can encourage more ecologically friendly consumer behaviours (Han et al., 2011).

Increasing numbers of customers who consider various environmental issues are starting to seek and buy eco-friendly products over alternatives, sometimes even paying more for such products (Laroche et al., 2001). Increasing numbers of tourists, being aware of the environmental hazards (e.g., emissions released into the air, water, and soil) and the wasting/harming of environmental resources caused by hotels (e.g., excessive consumption of non-durable goods, energy, and water), now look for accommodation that follows eco-friendly practices (APAT, 2002; Manaktola and Jauhari, 2007; Han et al., 2010). Green customers are willing to change their buying behaviours in a more ecologically favourable way (e.g., avoidance of disposable products) and behave in an environmentally friendly manner, thus sacrificing convenience, accepting lower levels of performance in eco-friendly products, and even paying extra for the products (Kalafatis et al., 1999; Laroche et al., 2001; Manaktola and Jauhari, 2007).

Producers, governments and consumers share the responsibility for solving environmental problems. The Flash Eurobarometer “Europeans’ attitudes towards the issue of sustainable consumption and production” (European Commission, 2009) was conducted in order to examine EU citizens’ knowledge and levels of concern about sustainable consumption and production. European citizens’ opinions concerning environmental impacts of consumption and the possible solutions for a sustainable development are quite varied in different countries of the EU. When asked which actions have the greatest impact on solving environmental problems, the largest proportion of EU citizens (30%) selected minimizing waste and recycling. Approximately a fifth (21%) of interviewees mentioned buying products produced by eco-friendly methods and a similar proportion (19%) selected buying energy-efficient home appliances as actions that could have the most impact. Only 15% of interviewees answered that adopting sustainable modes of transport and travelling less frequently are the most important actions to solve environmental problems and 11% mentioned making efforts to use less water as the action with the greatest impact. In that sense, similar studies are needed in different locations and for different types of consumers, and this study reports the findings/results of a survey conducted among mountain tourists in Romania.

3. Material and method

In order to find responses to the above mentioned questions we have conducted a survey in Poiana Brasov. The questionnaire used for data collection contains more than 60 variables concerning various behaviours, attitudes and intentions of tourists who visited this destination. From these ones, several variables were used for the assessment of tourists’ intentions to support some environmental initiatives in Poiana Brasov. As we did not find similar studies in the literature, the variables used in our questionnaire are based mainly on the nominal scale aiming at finding responses to the research questions mentioned above. These variables were put in relationship with the population’s demographics in order to find a profile of the environmentally-friendly tourists.

Tourists were approached in their accommodation location based on a random selection and asked to fill the questionnaire. Thus, a

number of ten accommodation units were selected from the list of legally recorded companies. From each of these accommodation units tourists have been selected using the systematic sampling method with a sampling interval of 5 persons. The main weakness of our sample consists in the impossibility to assure a veritable sample framework, which is a common issue in tourism research. Our efforts have focused on covering a quite large period of time and different seasons in order to obtain a good representativeness of the sample in spite of the mentioned weak point.

The final sample size obtained after data collection and questionnaire validation was of 331 tourists. Data was analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 16.0 and several statistical methods have been used: descriptive analysis, cross tabs, Homogeneity Analysis (HOMALS). Firstly, the analyses have been focused on the assessment of tourists' expressed intentions to support some environmental initiatives in Poiana Brasov. Secondly, we have identified the main categories of environmental initiatives in which tourists would get involved in. Further, a profile of the tourists interested in environmental initiatives has been computed taking into account the visit purpose and tourist's gender and age. The same characteristics have been used to obtain a profile of tourists who expressed the intention to donate money for conservation projects in the visited destination.

4. Results and discussions

Tourists' interest to participate in environmental initiatives

The analysed sample counted 331 tourists with the following demographic and travel characteristics: females (42.3%) and males (57.7%). The distribution according to the respondents' age is: 16 to 24 years old (13.9%), 25 to 34 years old (38.1%), 35 to 44 years old (31.7%), 45 to 54 years old (13.3%), over 54 years (3%). Most of them are married (47.7%) or single (25.4%), living in partnership (22.4%) and others (4.5%). From the total number of respondents, 15.7% were foreign tourists while the rest were Romanians. The main purpose of visit was leisure (80.1%), followed by business (14.8%) and visit friends or relatives (5.1%).

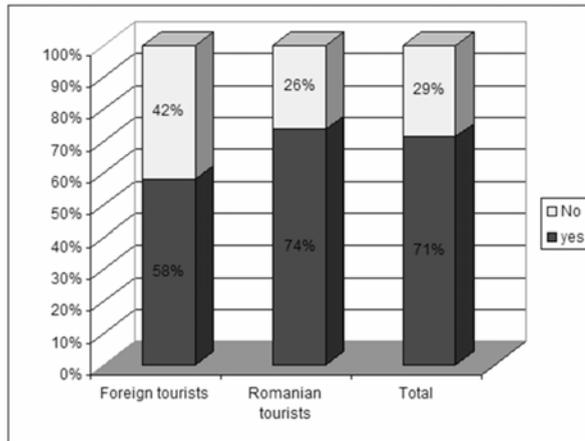


Figure 1. Tourists' interest to participate in environmental initiatives during their stay in Poiana Brasov

According to the research results, a high percentage of the respondents were interested to participate in environmental initiatives **(Q1)** during their stay in Poiana Brasov (71%). Comparing the nationality of the respondents (see Figure 1) it is found that the percentage of Romanian tourists interested to participate in various environmentally friendly projects (74%) is significantly higher than the percentage of foreign tourists (58%).

Individuals differ in their concern for the environment. To explain this variation, the earliest research focused on such personal socio-economic characteristics as age, education, income and residential location (Wong & Wan, 2011). Empirical studies have generally found that those who are female, younger, better educated, have a higher income and live in a city tend to be more concerned about the quality of the environment than others (Hunter *et al.*, 2004).

Tourists' choice of environmental initiatives they would participate in

The results presented in Figure 2 reveal that a high percentage of tourists willing to participate in environmental initiatives (65%) are interested in selective waste collection **(Q2)**. These responses confirm the results of The Flash Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2009), as citizens in almost all EU Member States were most likely to mention "Minimizing waste and recycling" as the actions having the greatest impact

on solving environmental problems (EU 27 – 30%, Romania – 33%). The Germans were shown to be particularly aware of saving water and energy, recycling waste and using biodegradable cleaning products (Robinet and Giannelloni, 2007).

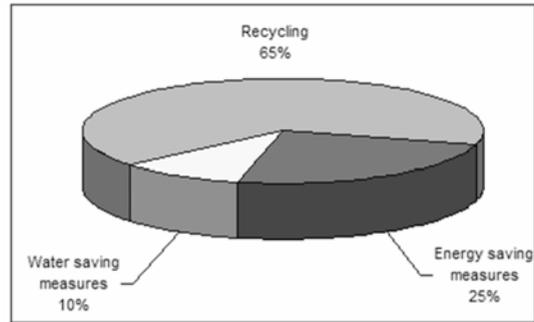


Figure 2. Tourists' choice of environmental initiatives they would participate in

However, a low percentage of tourists are interested in water (10%) and energy (25%) saving measures (**Q2**). This result is also in line with The Flash Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2009) as respondents in almost all of the countries surveyed were the least likely to select "making efforts to use less water" as having the greatest impact on solving environmental problems. (EU-11%, Romania – 5%).

The above information is important for both hotel managers and the destination management organisation in Poiana Brasov.

The profile of the environmentally friendly tourists

Further on, we have computed cross tabulations between the intention to participate in environmental initiatives and the respondents' demographic and travel characteristics. A profile of the environmentally friendly tourists (**Q3**) is computed in Table1: most of them are females (74%), Romanians (74%), visiting friends or relatives (88%) and young, with an age between 16 and 24 years (89%) and they have a high level of education.

These results are in line with previous studies related to demographic characteristics which showed that customers' buying behaviours and expressed intentions varied as a function of those demographic characteristics (i.e., gender, age, education, and income) and suggested that environmentally conscious customers are more

likely to be female, younger, more educated, and earn more money than average (Han et al., 2011).

In a hotel context, Han et al. (2009) identified that gender has a significant moderating role in customer's eco-friendly decision-making processes. Women tend to be more environmentally conscious and more frequently form environmentally friendly consumption intentions (Banerjee and McKeage, 1994; McIntyre et al., 1993). Certain researchers (Evanschitzky and Wunderlich, 2006; Gilly and Zeithaml, 1985) have also indicated that ecological customers who frequently make green purchasing decisions are more likely to be younger. Younger people with better information processing capacities tend to search for new and alternative information.

Table 1.

The characteristics of respondents who intend to participate in environmental initiatives

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Intention to participate in environmental initiatives</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	70%	30%
Female	74%	26%
<i>Age</i>		
16-24 years	89%	11%
25-34 years	66%	34%
35-44 years	73%	27%
45-54 years	65%	35%
55-64 years	75%	25%
<i>Education</i>		
Below high school	56%	44%
High school	70%	30%
College/Degree	75%	25%
Postgraduate and beyond	77%	23%
<i>The main purpose of the visit</i>		
Leisure	71%	29%
Business	69%	31%
Visit friends-relatives	88%	12%
<i>Country of residence</i>		
Romanian tourists	74%	26%
Foreign tourists	58%	42%

Tourists' expressed intentions to donate money for conservation projects

There appears to be a slight incoherence between government perceptions of consumer demand as a driver for green innovation in tourism, and the industry perception, that customers are generally reluctant to pay a premium for more environmentally friendly products or services (OECD, 2012).

The analysis of collected data has provided us with information concerning respondents' expressed intentions to donate money for credible conservation projects in the visited destination **(Q4)**. According to the data presented in Table 2, 51.1% of the respondents have expressed their interest in donating money, 22.8% are not disposed for such donations and 26.1% are undecided. Further on we have investigated the relationship between tourists' environmental awareness and their expressed support for environmental projects in the studied tourism destination (Table 2).

Table 2.

Crosstabulation between tourists' environmental awareness and their expressed intention to donate money for credible conservation projects
(% within the tourists' interest concerning the tourism impact on the environment)

	Tourists' intention to donate money for credible conservation projects			Total
	Yes	No	I don't know	
Tourists' interest concerning the impact of tourism activities on the environment		83,3%	16,7%	100,0%
1-Very low				
2,00	28,2%	48,7%	23,1%	100,0%
3,00	44,4%	18,5%	37,0%	100,0%
4,00	64,0%	14,0%	21,9%	100,0%
5-Very high	57,8%	18,1%	24,1%	100,0%
Total	51,1%	22,8%	26,1%	100,0%

The majority of tourists with the lowest interest concerning the impact of tourism activities on the environment (83.3%) would not donate money for conservation purposes. More than half of the respondents with a neutral and high interest in environmental issues would donate money for credible conservation projects in the visited destination.

This result confirms previous studies which highlighted the positive relationship between environmental concern in tourism

choices and willingness to accept economic sacrifices to protect the environment (Hedlund, 2011) as well as the positive relationship between environmental concern and pro-environmental buying behaviour (Schlegelmilch et al., 1996; Kim and Choi, 2005; Hedlund, 2011).

Aiming to find some characteristics of the people that want to donate money for credible conservation projects in Poiana Brasov, we have used a multivariate research method: the Homogeneity Analysis or HOMALS.

Using the homogeneity analysis between the main tourists' characteristics we have found interesting conclusions concerning the profile of the environmentally friendly tourists visiting Poiana Brasov.

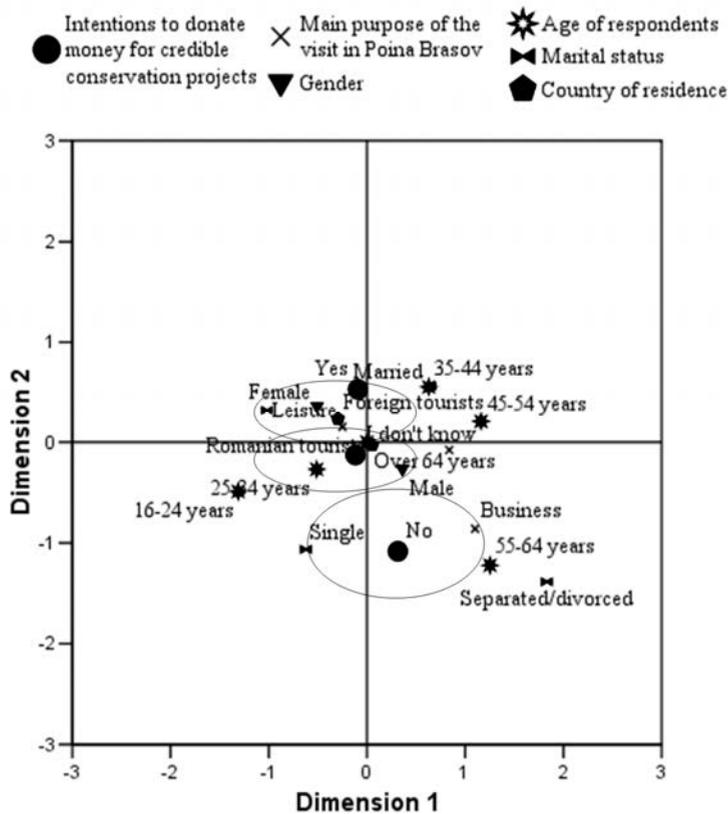


Figure 3. Homogeneity analysis between respondents' expressed intentions to donate money for conservation projects and tourists' characteristics

Tourists interested to donate money for conservation purposes are mainly females, persons aged between 35 and 44 years, foreign

tourists, travelling for leisure purposes. Undecided tourists are mainly Romanian tourists, males, aged between 25 and 34, travelling for leisure purposes or to visit friends or relatives. Tourists who are not interested in donating money for conservation purposes are businessmen, aged between 55 and 64 years.

5. Conclusions

The fact that 71% of the interviewed subjects are interested to participate in environmental initiatives during their stay in Poiana Brasov should motivate hotel managers in Poiana Brasov to start such initiatives which can make their activity more efficient, minimize expenses (energy and water saving measures, recycling) and attract new clients or keep the existing ones. The local DMO could also prepare an eco-guide aimed at providing detailed information concerning energy-saving measures and different environmental tools to accommodation managers, while promoting these environmental initiatives among tourists especially using brochures, leaflets and information panels.

As almost half of interviewees have shown their interest to donate money for conservation purposes in the visited destination, the local DMO should identify credible projects in partnership with ecological NGOs, but also facilitate and monitor the use of these financial contributions, while promoting the results. The implementation of environmental initiatives should be promoted by both the local DMO and tourism providers as a key competitive advantage and benchmarking tool for a better positioning of Poiana Brasov on the national and international market.

The results of the present study can be useful to both the local DMO in Poiana Brasov and tourism service providers in their attempt to implement environmental initiatives for a sustainable tourism development. However, our research does not include an evaluation of this type of initiatives and it has not captured tourists' actual participation. Thus, future studies should be initiated in order to identify the practical implications of tourists' expressed intentions to participate in environmental initiatives in Poiana Brasov.

At the same time, tourists' expressed intentions cannot guarantee their actual participation in environmentally-friendly initiatives. Despite optimistic views generated by studies of tourist preferences, previous researches indicate that while 70–80% of tourists state their high

concerns for eco-social components of holidays, only about 10% convert this concern to purchasing decisions (Chafe, 2005; Budeanu, 2007) and, in reality, the majority are reluctant to change their own behavior in support of sustainability goals (Budeanu, 2007; Grankvist, 2002; Yan et al., 2006).

One reason for the differences between stated environmental attitudes and actual behaviour may be the social desirability bias (Leggett et al., 2003), which entice people to answer positively to questions related to concerns about sensitive subjects such as environmental protection (Chung and Monroe, 2003). Furthermore, asking tourists about their behaviour in hypothetical situations may trigger positive answers that give a good impression but are less truthful (Trudgill, 1990; Dickinson and Dickinson, 2006), which reduces the reliability of results.

Although this study provides interesting information for both destination managers and tourism service providers in Poiana Brasov, it has a series of limitations. First, tourists' environmental concern and expressed ecological intentions do not necessarily transpose in tourists' behaviour. Although responses are anonymous there is also the possibility that subjects formulate social desirable answers instead of their own opinions. Secondly, this study does not take into consideration tourists' pro-environmental behaviour at home, which can influence their behaviour during their holiday. Despite these limits, our study can be a useful tool for both accommodation managers as well as destination management organizations.

As the type of environmental initiatives mentioned by the respondents are in line with the results of the Flash Eurobarometer, future studies should be focused on tourists' environmentally-friendly behaviour in mountain destinations and their choice of tourism providers which have implemented recycling, water and energy saving measures.

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