

## THE ROLE OF TOURISM IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

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*In recent years, sustainability has become a fundamental component of all planning processes, while, on the other hand, tourism is seldom seen as a key or priority sector in overall planning. In this article, diverse approaches to sustainable planning that include tourism are examined in order to provide a conceptual framework and some points of reference to contextualize the posterior analysis of a recent planning process undertaken in Catalonia, Spain. The discourse focuses on the proposals, the difficulties encountered in establishing objectives and indicators, leading finally to an evaluation of the suitability and foreseeable effectiveness of the measures approved.*

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### INTRODUCTION

This article briefly examines diverse approaches to sustainable planning that include tourism in order to provide a conceptual framework and some points of reference that contextualize the posterior analysis of a recent planning process undertaken in Catalonia, Spain, in which the authors of this article were engaged as “external tourism experts”. The final document was a multi-sector *Strategy for Sustainable Development in Catalonia* (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2010) which obviously included

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the tourism sector as one of the components. By tracing the process, the recommendations made with respect to tourism and the final outcome in the form of a strategy document, the authors intend to illustrate some of the difficulties incurred in planning towards more sustainable forms of tourism in the general context of sustainable development planning. Catalonia constitutes an excellent case to study, given the complexity of the region due to its key role in Spain's tourism sector combined with a varied and well developed economy based on both industry and agriculture in a rich natural environment.

In recent years it has almost invariably become general practice to incorporate the sustainable development paradigm in regional and sector planning in order to enrich its approach and procedures. To all effects, sustainability has become a fundamental component of all planning processes. This approach has been incorporated into tourism planning over the last two decades (Dutton & Hall, 1989; Inskip, 1991; Eber, 1992; WTO, 1993; Bramwell, Henry, Jackson, & Van Der Straaten, 1996; Berke & Manta-Conroy, 2000; Berke, 2002; Gunn & Var, 2002; WTO, 2004; Weaver, 2006; Hall, 2007; Tourism Sustainability Group, 2007; Ruhanen, 2008; Soteriou & Coccossis, 2010). In contrast, tourism is seldom seen as a key or priority sector in overall planning processes, in spite of its economic importance in many regions (Dredge & Moore, 1992; Connell, Page, & Bentley, 2009). Moreover, although sustainability appears as the underlying focus of planning, its meaning is seldom defined and not always clearly understood.

In consonance with the tourism sector's assumption of a key role in an increasing number of countries and regions, specific development plans have been drawn up worldwide, but tourism has also been incorporated into general planning strategies. Soteriou and Coccossis (2010) examined a wide range of strategic and sustainability planning experiences among European national tourism organizations (NTO). They identified a large number of dimensions that had been addressed in planning. Of these the most frequently encountered were (in descending order): respecting the carrying capacity of ecosystems; conservation and protection of the natural and socio-cultural heritage; minimizing negative economic, environmental, cultural and social impacts; addressing the needs of both current and future generations; adopting a long-term perspective; addressing equally economic, environmental and socio-cultural issues; environmental management systems and eco-labels. They also identified the tools most frequently used in tourism planning and these proved to be traditional strategic instruments, such as cost-benefit analyses and feasibility studies. Some useful sustainability tools had been

incorporated by about half the NTOs analyzed, including carrying capacity studies, forecasting and trend analysis, impact assessment studies and sustainability indicators. This study also revealed certain defects and aspects of tourism planning with room for enhancement: better communication, involvement and training of tourism partners in order to create a more supportive environment for effective operation that, in turn, could lead to improvement for the operationalization of sustainability in tourism; increased attention to the concept of social equity; greater importance attributed to local concerns and wider participation in recognition of the interdependences of tourism with other sectors.

Further challenges that handicap tourism planning were identified by Cooper, Ruhanen, & Craig-Smith (2004), consisting of: inadequate statistical reporting; and the complexity of a multi-sector industry and its fragmentation in multiple SMEs that make it difficult to coordinate knowledge management. Likewise, in Soteriou and Coccossis's (2010) analysis, various limiting factors in tourism planning were identified. First and foremost, the lack of statistical data, information, impact measurement and research in general were pinpointed, followed by pressures exerted through political influences or private sector demands. The almost universally recognized lack of statistical references constitutes a serious handicap in the establishment of indicators to evaluate impacts and the application of measures and hence monitor progress towards the goals established in any strategy.

## **ANTECEDENTS AND METHODOLOGY APPLIED IN THE CATALONIAN STRATEGY**

As is well known, Catalonia is a key national and international tourism destination and tourism is undoubtedly a strategic sector in the region's present -and presumably also future- economy. Its importance is widely recognized not only among economic and political stakeholders, but also the general public. One would therefore expect its future sustainable development to be considered a priority issue in the framework of general regional policy. Understandably, the Catalan government's Strategic Plan for Tourism 2005-2010 (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2006) pinpointed sustainability as one of the key leitmotifs. It also commissioned a report on European experiences in sustainable tourism applicable in Catalonia in 2007 (Sabaté, 2007). The more recent Strategy for Sustainable Development in Catalonia (EDSCAT) document, drawn up between 2008 and 2010 (and approved by the Catalan government on 31st August 2010) is a wider ranging strategy, intended to

guide development within sustainability parameters in the north-eastern region of Spain until the year 2026 (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2010).

The process, carried out under the direction and coordination of the Department for the Environment, was divided into two phases (Llurdés, Priestley, & Romagosa, 2009). The first consisted of individual sector analyses and diagnosis by independent “experts”, corresponding to three groups: the main economic sectors -agriculture and forestry, industry, trade, tourism-; territorial elements -urban growth, transport and mobility, natural areas-; and public services -water, energy, waste. All the reports followed a unified methodology: each diagnosis included an analysis of the main impacts; the identification of a number of objectives and challenges to be addressed; the related strategic objectives to be achieved; and a list of tools and actions to be applied. The impacts were grouped under four main headings: territorial, environmental, climatic and socio-economic variables. Indicators related to these impacts and challenges were also pinpointed, in order to make it possible to monitor progress in the achievement of objectives. The result is the formulation of a preliminary list of proposals that would increase sustainability, a comprehensive proposal that combines the main findings of the various specialised reports (Llurdés, Priestley, & Romagosa, 2009). Uniformity was sought in order to facilitate the drawing up of a coherent and well coordinated strategy as the end product of the second phase. The first phase also included a process of public participation in which the corresponding stakeholders were invited to offer their opinions and attend a presentation session in which the experts’ proposals were discussed and revised, together with consultations with the various government departments and sectorial organisations and organisms.

The second phase of drawing up the Strategy was much more complex, as the ultimate objective was to bring together all the sectorial proposals within the wider framework of a common, applicable development strategy. Hence, consensus was sought among the different experts and the strategy directors in the selection of a number (finally 40) of broad-based challenges or objectives as an “umbrella” for the more specific sector objectives. Each sector then identified its priority objectives within this list and proceeded to draw up individual fact sheets for each priority challenge, depicting three scenarios for future development: the projection of current trends, legislative or policy limits as defined at present (if such existed), and limits considered to conform to sustainability objectives (obviously the stated goal of the strategy). A further requirement was the indication of specific actions that could achieve these objectives, together with equally specific, measurable

indicators to monitor progress in the future that constituted an essential component of the final document. The methodology applied certainly conforms to standard practice in the formulation of strategies.

Coccosis (1996) suggested four possible interpretations for tourism in the context of sustainable development: from a tourism sector point of view, stressing economic sustainability; from the perspective of ecological sustainability; focusing on the long-term competitiveness of a destination; and tourism seen as part of a development strategy in the overall physical and human environment. Taking this into account, it could be said that the first phase of the strategy incorporates the first three perspectives -economic and ecological sustainability and long-term destination competitiveness-, while the second phase is approached from Coccosis's fourth perspective -tourism seen as part of a development strategy in the overall physical and human environment.

## **DRAWING UP THE STRATEGY: THE TOURISM REPORT IN PHASE I**

Spain emerged as a tourism destination in the late 1950s when the economies of the main European countries had begun to recover from World War II, Spain's ostracism in its aftermath was receding and the sun, sand, sea paradigm was blossoming. Spain's Mediterranean fringe and island archipelagos constituted ideal destinations. The sector grew very rapidly over the following three decades (1960–1990) –before the application of sustainability principles-, largely without control and totally devoid of planning, as the country's priority was the acquisition of foreign exchange for much needed industrial and urban development (Priestley and Llordés, 2007). It is now undoubtedly one of the world's top tourism destinations, placed 4th in international arrivals and 2nd in income (UNWTO, 2013) and, within Spain, Catalonia is placed first in supply (3 million beds of which 531,000 are commercially exploited), international arrivals (25%) and income (19.5%) (Instituto de Estudios Turísticos 2009a). In domestic tourism, Catalonia is the second destination with 22.4 million visits (14.5% of the total), confirming the importance of the region in global terms (Instituto de Estudios Turísticos, 2009b).

The main characteristics of tourism in Catalonia can be summed up as follows: tourism forms part of the region's economic structure and has served a vertebrate role in the territory; demand, largely based on the sun, sand and sea product, is highly seasonal and supply is concentrated on the coast and principally in a number of large scale resorts in Costa Brava and

Costa Daurada (Roses, Lloret de Mar, Calella, Salou, for example) (Observatori de Turisme de Catalunya, 2010a); the source of demand is diverse (both national -more concentrated on the Costa Brava, Costa Daurada and in the Pyrenees- and international -more concentrated in Barcelona and on the Costa Brava-) (Observatori de Turisme de Catalunya, 2010b); both the private and public sectors participate actively; it is a very mature but dynamic destination where signs of changes can be distinguished in recent years. The wide variety of landscapes have made it possible to develop other traditional types of tourism, such as winter sports (in the Pyrenees) and urban / cultural tourism (Barcelona, Tarragona, Girona, for example), together with more innovative forms, including rural and gastronomic tourism. This is not only in response to demand, but also a result of the creation of new products and supply -especially inland- where tourism is seen as an opportunity able to contribute to the economic and social sustainability of many rural areas (López, 2009).

The authors based their report on available data and publications, together with their accumulated experience as researchers in many projects related to tourism in Catalonia. As a result of the early expansion of large scale tourism in Catalonia, the sector is faced with two different sets of challenges: the correction of deep-rooted defects in many of the consolidated resorts and the implantation of sustainable practices in currently developing destinations. In order to achieve the relative overall sustainability of mature destinations, a balance must be found between the somewhat limited carrying capacity of many natural resources and the operative viability of certain consolidated infrastructures and services that generate employment (Priestley & Mundet, 1998; Priestley, 2007). It is in the light of these considerations that this analysis was undertaken bearing in mind the inherent difficulties of the reconversion of such destinations, a process that is already being addressed by many municipalities through product diversification and destination quality improvements (Donaire & Mundet, 2001).

One of the principal problems that have to be addressed is the impact of large resorts in coastal areas. However, it is the huge number of second homes that generates greatest impact, due not only to their volume, but also to the predominantly low density construction, their dispersion and preference for attractive locations. Moreover, they are notably less sustainable in social and economic terms than commercial forms of tourism, as the occupancy rate is very low, many being occupied for only a few weeks in the year. An additional aspect closely related to tourism sustainability is the temporal and spatial pattern of demand. Foreign

demand focuses on the coast (in summer) and in Barcelona (throughout the year), while the pattern of domestic tourism, especially that of the Catalan population, shows a trend towards the diffusion of demand inland (Observatori de Turisme de Catalunya, 2010b). Hence, in spite of trends towards product and territorial diversification, the reduction of seasonality is still a key challenge, as in some cases it prejudices the economic viability of certain enterprises and, in general, it has highly negative impacts on the employment structure, creating a large number of seasonal jobs.

Meanwhile, new factors have appeared to complicate the scenario: a worldwide economic crisis and the acceleration of climate change. Tourism has always shown resilience in the face of crisis, but, even so, increasing international competition makes it absolutely essential to apply sustainability criteria in all future developments. The main risks as a result of climate change are: a rise in sea level which would undoubtedly affect the infrastructures associated with coastal tourism; an increase in temperatures, which could affect the seasonality of activities and hence demand (with a move towards spring and autumn), the viability of winter sports tourism, and water and energy consumption in general (Esteban, López, & Aguiló, 2005; Saurí & Llurdés, 2010). Hence, planning for the future is fundamental in guaranteeing the sustainability of the “tourism environment” and of the economy and eventually will require actions that affect the land, infrastructures and the configuration of products.

On the basis of detailed analysis, a long list of specific impacts and challenges was drawn up, constituting a schematic but comprehensive diagnosis of the situation and indicating multiple proposals for ensuring the future viability of tourism in Catalonia, while respecting sustainability parameters. The proposals include many measures aimed at: the intensification of planning instruments for key destinations where viability is at risk (mass coastal and ski resorts) and for the management of natural protected areas; incentivising measures towards the creation and expansion of tourism products that favour diversification and reduce seasonal concentration of demand; encouraging the use of collective tourist lodging (rather than private properties); the more widespread application of sustainable management practices (water and energy saving, waste reduction and waste recycling) including environmental certification systems; upgrading employment by increasing training and incentivising the creation of permanent jobs.

This could appear to be a wish list of good practices for any destination, but the proposals included numerous specific actions to be taken and called on the public administrations to assume greater

leadership in both the design and promotion of integrated products through the coordination of all the stakeholders throughout the region and to provide assistance and grants to implement some measures. These would include, for example: the obtainment of environmental certification systems, for both environmental management systems (ISO 14000 or EMAS) and environmental quality branding (Catalan Eco-label or European Ecologic Label); the introduction of renewable energy sources beyond the existing obligatory regulations (Technical Building Code). The proposals coincide with current legislation and policy, but go several steps further by indicating many specific measures that could be applied, by requesting renewed vigour, more intensive action, greater public leadership and more incentives for private sector participation.

## **PHASE II: TOURISM IN THE OVERALL MULTI-SECTOR STRATEGY**

As already indicated, the second phase of drawing up the Strategy was much more complex, due to the fact that the elements chosen had to fit into this wider picture; there was considerable divergence on some of the key objectives, especially the specific sector-related priorities. Finally, aspects related to the natural and rural environment (protected areas, agriculture) and transverse objectives (improvements in the use and management of water, energy and waste) took preference over specific sector-related priorities. In addition, the evaluation of the importance of each challenge for each sector –an additional component of the process– is not by any means a mathematical exercise and thus depended on subjective assessments. Hence, of the 40 challenges identified for the different sectors (industry, construction and regional planning, agriculture, commerce, tourism, energy, transport and mobility, home and administration), only 16 could be classified as of “very high” or “high incidence in tourism” (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2010) and these did not by any means include all the challenges that had been pinpointed as of great importance for the tourism sector. In this way, the wide range of proposals for the sector put forward in the first phase were reduced to relatively few priority objectives; obviously, in this wider and multi-sector context, tourism had lost protagonism (Table 1).

Moreover, the challenges had to be accompanied by equally specific, quantifiable indicators to monitor progress, for which a requisite was obviously the existence of reliable data over a period of time in the past and the possibility of collecting it in the future. This requisite had negative consequences for the role of tourism, as the tourism proposals

could not always comply with this condition. In fact, the difficulty of identifying valid indicators for monitoring progress in achieving sustainability in the tourism sector is a problem also identified elsewhere (Orams, 1995; Berry & Ladkin, 1997; Swarbrooke, 1999; Ruhanen, 2008). Hence some challenges that were considered important by the authors had to be discarded and others –the majority- evaluated with indicators that can constitute no more than a partial measurement.

As noted, the following step was the drawing up of individual fact sheets for each priority challenge that, therefore, constituted simple guidelines for implementation. A comparison between the interim and final documents reveals the clear differences between the ambitious challenges, objectives and measures outlined in the first phase tourism report and the tourism-related contents of the general strategy drawn up in the second phase.

**Table 1** Priority challenges for tourism and corresponding indicators

<b>General challenge / objective</b>		<b>Indicator (related to tourism)</b>
<b>1</b>	Minimise built-up surface and promote efficient land use	% of total land surface built up
<b>4</b>	Promote integrated management of areas with specific characteristics (coasts, high mountain areas, etc.)	Nº of environmentally certified beaches / Nº of second homes
<b>8</b>	Introduce eco-efficiency and landscape integration criteria and measures in construction	% of environmentally certified tourism accommodation establishments
<b>9</b>	Guarantee conservation of species, habitat and geological heritage, while increasing knowledge about them	Area of protected natural areas
<b>11</b>	Upgrade socio-environmental services and the protective and productive functions of the natural and agro-forest systems	Nº of visitors to each protected natural area
<b>12</b>	Integrate natural heritage conservation objectives in sector policy, especially in rural areas	% of protected natural areas with Specific Protection and Management Plans
<b>13</b>	Complete the system of protected natural areas, guaranteeing their sustainable management	% of protected natural areas with Specific Protection and Management Plans

<b>14</b>	Significantly increase the quota of sustainable mobility of both people and merchandise	% of sustainable trips (i.e. using public transport) for leisure purposes
<b>24</b>	Ensure the availability of water resources, especially in inland basins	Annual water consumption
<b>25</b>	Reduce water consumption through increased efficiency	Annual water consumption
<b>27</b>	Reduce waste production and encourage recycling	Total volume of waste produced by the tourism sector
<b>28</b>	Increase selective waste collection the enhancement of materials, reduce waste requiring final disposal, in accordance the objectives of sector Plans	% of selective waste collection in the tourist sector
<b>34</b>	Promote agricultural production, manufacturing and service provision based on sustainability criteria	% of environmentally certified tourism accommodation establishments
<b>37</b>	Introduce tools / measures that guarantee the diversification and future viability of economic activity according to sustainability criteria	Degree of non-seasonality in tourism sector
<b>38</b>	Increase employment in added-value activities that, in addition, produce products and offer services that are more energy efficient, use fewer materials and contaminate less	% of permanent jobs (over total n <sup>o</sup> ) in tourism sector
<b>40</b>	Draw up and implement strategies to adapt to climatic change	% of environmentally certified tourism accommodation establishments

## DISCUSSION

At the outset, it must be recognized and accepted that, given that the construction of tourism infrastructure has already left a considerable imprint, thus damaging the landscape and, by and large, causing irreversible impact, expansion can be slowed down and the quality of the “tourism environment” upgraded, but, to be realistic, major changes cannot be contemplated. Contradictory as it may seem in a quest for sustainability, mass tourism cannot and should not be abandoned in Catalonia, as a significant drop in visitor numbers would generate highly negative effects on the economic sustainability of tourism. Moreover, the concentration of supply and demand in a limited number of large scale

destinations can in many respects be more sustainable in environmental terms than spreading impacts throughout a region (as argued in the conceptual framework). Besides, at present, no other economic sector capable of compensating a hypothetical drastic reduction of tourist arrivals can be identified.

The large scale infrastructures are oriented towards four major products -sun, sand and sea; winter sports; urban; and cultural tourism- on which the sector relies heavily and these should retain their predominating role, as they have certain competitive advantages. However, they are threatened by their own excessive success and the first two by the effects of climate change. Hence, the key strategic objectives to guarantee their continued success and relative sustainability can be summed up as: restructuring towards higher quality destinations and infrastructures; monitoring of and adjustments to the possible effects of climate change; diversification towards more specialized niche products that will attract a wider range of client types, additional added value and less concentrated demand in terms of season and location. All this requires impact control, regional planning and management, improved training, incentives for local administrations and private companies, and innovative initiatives and promotion methods.

The types of tourism that have been expanding in recent years (rural, nature and ecotourism, adventure and active tourism and golf) could be developed further, especially as they have certain advantages over the more traditional forms. For example, they do not inherit mass structures and practices, so suitable sustainable strategies can be developed; their location is less concentrated, so the benefits can be distributed better; they can be adapted better to the effects of climate change. Product specific strategic plans should be drawn up, covering the entire territory, followed by a revision of existing regulations and policies. In the case of rural and nature tourism, good management of protected natural areas is especially important. With reference to adventure tourism, it must continue to focus on environmentally unaggressive forms (as already guaranteed, for example, by the prohibition of four wheel drive cars in natural protected areas). Another key question in the case of adventure and active tourism is the commercialisation of the product. Golf tourism is not universally recognised as a sustainable product. Hence, in planning for the expansion of golf tourism, it is essential to design a competitive product that differs from that offered in other regions, while applying the 2003 Environmental Management Plan in order to contribute towards its environmental sustainability, while its economic sustainability has been amply proven (Priestley, 2012).

Certain needs common to all products have also been identified:

- The coordination of all stakeholders and administrative bodies involved, in order to guarantee the homogeneous application of strategies and initiatives throughout the region and a full understanding on the part of entrepreneurs, local populations and political authorities of the competitive advantages of the measures.
- The drawing up of routes, connections and links, not only for each product throughout the region, but also for multi-based products in particular areas.
- Improved identification of roads, routes, accommodation units and activities through clear and uniform signposting and labelling.
- Upgrading of skills and professional training of all employees and personnel at all educational levels.
- The design and application of promotion and commercialisation structures of Catalonia as an integrated unit for the entire range of tourism products.
- Monitoring of all regulations and recommendations related to sustainability at regional level (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2006), national level (Secretaría de Estado de Turismo y Comercio, 2007) and international level as well (European Commission, 2003 and 2007; Tourism Sustainability Group, 2007).

The underlying, overall objectives are therefore to reorient mass tourism, but not eliminate it, while developing more innovative forms on more sustainable parameters. The challenge is awesome and the measures needed are numerous and varied, but the future, not only of tourism in Catalonia is at stake, but also a significant proportion of the region's economy and its sustainable development. To sum up, it could be said that the keys to the future sustainability of tourism in Catalonia emerge as territorial and tourism planning, followed up with adequate management, in order to integrate -rather than fragment- supply and attractions. To this end, thematic products, such as cultural, hiking or cycling routes are extremely important. Finally, quality is also an essential factor, understood as environmental quality, product quality and good service, which can be sought through certification and training, although Sabaté's (2007) analysis of European initiatives concluded that, while the various certification systems are a powerful tool, the proliferation of different systems tends to confuse the general public.

Nevertheless, the final document of the Strategy did not incorporate by any means all of these recommendations, although the sector reports were annexed. There is certainly a considerable difference between the challenges, objectives and proposals for action outlined in the first phase and the contents of the strategy that was finally drawn up. The quest for transversal objectives, consensus on priorities (among which environmental elements assumed protagonism) and the cross-sector applicability of instruments obviously reduced the importance of individual sectors. It would, however, appear somewhat contradictory that, in spite of the significant contribution of tourism to the GNP, this sector was clearly relegated to a secondary role. This is partly explained by the "inter-sectorial" nature of tourism, partly by the sector's need for global rather than purely environmental measures and also partly by the statistical gaps that would make the monitoring of progress -based on quantifiable indicators- impossible in some cases and only partially viable in others (through the use of certification systems as indicators of quality or of the degree of success in the application of sustainable practices). Hence, while the final document constitutes a programme for working towards overall sustainability, its effectiveness in achieving such goals for tourism risks being limited, unless the authorities take into account the numerous recommendations outlined in the sector report. As a result, it is essential to complement this strategy with sector-specific plans incorporating the recommendations in the first phase report.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The previously explained Catalan strategy initiative should constitute an important contribution for increasing the region's general sustainability. It is certainly a clearly structured plan, developed step by step, from diagnosis, through the phase of definition of strategic challenges to that of specific objectives, to be achieved by means of concrete tools and measures, the success of which will be gauged by indicators. Consensus was sought among the various government departments and private sector stakeholders but, even so, given its ambitious nature, considerable determination and good management will be required in its implementation. Its effectiveness is therefore somewhat unforeseeable. On the other hand, the strategy is by no means sufficient to render tourism development significantly more sustainable.

In general terms, it could be said that this initiative falls within the range of strategic planning processes that have appeared over the last two decades, as outlined in the introduction. It is also clearly illustrative of the

fact observed by various authors (Dredge & Moore, 1992, Connell, Page, & Bentley, 2009) that tourism is not considered a priority sector in overall planning processes, even where it is a key economic sector. Two factors have been pinpointed as the main reasons for this: tourism's inter-sectorial and fragmented nature that weakens its "lobbying" capacity; and a widely encountered trend to focus on purely environmental issues and factors (water and energy consumption, residues, atmospheric contamination, etc.). Hence few stakeholders are waving the tourism banner sufficiently vigorously.

One would, however, suppose that in the case of sustainable strategy design dedicated exclusively to tourism, the results would be very different. But in this case, it has been seen that the difficulties lie largely at the implementation stage. Several years ago Butler (1999) and UNWTO (WTO, 2006 and 2007) already pointed out that, in the case of mature destinations (such as the coast of Catalonia), the accent must be placed on improvement in relative terms in a quest for "more sustainable" tourism -or "less unsustainable" tourism-, if planners are to be truly realistic about the viable objectives. Other handicaps identified elsewhere were the lack of statistical data that would permit the establishment of standards for indicators and accurate monitoring of progress and certainly the authors encountered huge problems in this respect in the Catalan case. In fact, European and other international initiatives are largely limited to policy documents and multiple certification systems, with the consequent overreliance on the latter in strategies, as they really only serve as partial indicators of quality or of the application of sustainable practices. However, these are the main indicators available and hence, in spite of their serious limitations, were almost the only ones that could be proposed in the Catalan strategy. In fact, the lack of valid statistics to facilitate the monitoring process has also been identified by Soteriou and Coccossis (2010) in other countries, so Catalonia is not an exception in this respect.

Bearing the difficulties in mind, a comprehensive approach, focusing on the "big picture", would be more suitable in the case of planning, as Soteriou and Roberts (1998) and Calingo (1989) proposed some years ago, because this would lead to the development of more effective strategies than a formalized process that might inhibit creative thinking. Certainly, the tightly structured process followed in this case has limited the foreseeable effectiveness of the final proposals for the tourism sector. Moreover, most of the authors analysed initially stressed the need to address planning from the perspective of the overall sustainability of tourism development rather than the sustainability of individual elements or components which usually focused on the environment. Although this

is a key issue, long-term perspectives for the industry in general are also fundamental and, in the case of mature destinations, frequently take priority over an environment that has already suffered significant modifications. In fact the overall sustainability of tourism depends on a combination of environmental, economic and social factors (Swarbrooke, 1999) that are difficult to balance. Likewise, it depends on territorial and product integration to a much greater extent than on single, quantifiable actions, as proposed in the strategy.

Many strategic planning tools are available, but virtually all of them require prior studies, the existence of data over long periods of time or the possibility of collecting it in the future. They include topics such as: carrying capacity; environmental impact assessment; coastal zone management; and life cycle, risk and cost-benefit analysis. Data available is usually insufficient or incomplete, causing difficulties not only for the establishment of indicators but also for carrying out analyses. In this sense, as Dodds and Butler (2010: 48) state, “the problem with achieving sustainability lies in implementation rather than definition”. Moreover, time, as Lew (2010) points out, is yet another barrier, given that the implementation of proposals or measures over a lengthy time-span risk being ignored or abandoned, unless accompanied by firm, constant political endeavour and determination to implant them, as most stakeholders limit their vision to short-term perspectives.

The decision-making process in the drawing up of the Catalan strategy demonstrated the difficulties involved in making connections between sustainable issues in different industries and activities, thus forming a potential barrier to sustainable development. It would therefore appear that strategic tourism planning could be addressed best through specific sectorial plans, and that these should set broad-based, general objectives, in a quest for long-term, overall sustainable development. This does not imply that the monitoring of specific components through quantifiable indicators should be eliminated, but that these should be combined with a quest for more general sustainability “improvement trends” that cannot be measured exactly.

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