TOURISMOS: AN INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF TOURISM
Volume 13, Number 1, pp. 76-81
UDC: 338.48+640(050)

OBLIQUITY IN TOURISM ECONOMICS: SMART AND SUSTAINABLE TOURIST DESTINATIONS

José Francisco Perles-Ribes
Department of Applied Economic Analysis, University of Alicante

Ana Belén Ramón-Rodríguez
Department of Applied Economic Analysis, University of Alicante

Obliquity describes the process of achieving complex objectives indirectly. The recent emergence of the concept and paradigm of intelligent or smart tourist destinations has given rise to a proliferation, often driven by publicly and privately financed technologically-based companies, of initiatives to convert many tourism destinations into smart tourism destinations (STDs). In theory, the concept of the smart tourist destination includes different levels of action in the environmental, social and technological fields, directed at enhancing the satisfaction and experience of tourists. However, in many practical applications of the concept only the latter level is addressed and the other dimensions are neglected. This article argues that the STDs represent the first real opportunity to make the concept of sustainable tourism operational. This argument is based on the fact that for the first time, the intensive use of technology involved in implementing an STD will enable the continuous measurement of aspects related to sustainability which, until now, in the absence of this technology, were difficult or impossible to measure, and therefore, manage.

Keywords: *Obliquity, Smart tourist destinations; Sustainable Tourism; Technology.*

INTRODUCTION

According with Kay (2011:3), obliquity "describes the process of achieving complex objectives indirectly". The recent emergence of the concept and paradigm of smart tourist destinations has given rise to a proliferation, often driven by publicly and privately financed technologically-based companies, of initiatives to convert many tourism destinations into smart tourism destinations (STDs). In theory, the concept of the smart tourist destination includes different levels of action in the environmental, social and technological fields, directed at enhancing the satisfaction and experience of tourists. However, in many practical applications of the concept only the latter level is addressed and the other dimensions are neglected.

This note argues that the STDs represent the first real opportunity to make the concept of sustainable tourism operational, doing it in an obliquity manner. Specifically, in the case mass tourism destinations. Focusing solely on the practice of implementing technology to improve the satisfaction and experience of tourists means renouncing important advantages that a full application of the concept would generate. This argument is based on the fact that for the first time, the intensive use of technology involved in implementing an STD will enable the continuous measurement of aspects related to sustainability which, until now, in the absence of this technology, were difficult or impossible to measure, and therefore, manage.

THE INHERENT FLEXIBILITY OF TOURIST DESTINATIONS

Tourist destinations are flexible and dynamic entities. On a territorial level, the delimitation of destinations – national, regional, local, etc. – has given rise to different entities with different management problems and needs. With respect to time, destinations

are alive, they evolve and their life cycles develop in unison with the tastes and needs of the tourists who visit them and the values and decisions of their residents and managers (Butler, 1980). Massification and the stretched carrying capacity in some of these destinations is currently giving rise to tourism demand management strategies which include intelligent destinations oriented towards sustainability as a clear response to these issues.

When applying intelligence to tourist destinations their dynamic and flexible nature must be respected. Therefore, in is unadvisable to adopt standardised solutions proposed by consultants and technologically-based companies, which for the sake of their own interests, propose the indiscriminate application to all types of destination.

THE SMART TOURIST DESTINATION

The many aspects of the STD include sustainability. Without sustainability, a destination cannot be conceptualised as an STD. In addition to sustainability, other elements encompassed by the STD are technology – connectivity and sensorisation, the intelligent information system and innovation – and the governance of the destination (Agencia Valenciana de Turismo, 2015).

The concept is therefore ambitious: if it has not been possible, to date, to attain this sought-after sustainability, it would seem complicated to implement an even wider framework, namely intelligence, in which sustainability is simply one of its elements. However, this vision is simplistic as it does not take into account the potential interactions that the intensive use of technology can have in the formula.

In this context, the opportunities arising from aspects such as sensorisation or big data, with the monitoring and measurement of all types of tourist behaviour and subsystems of the destination (water, waste, urban mobility management etc.), can contribute to determining the real benefits and costs of each tourism development

model. The profitability of these models and their influence on the decisions about which of them is likely to be favoured by the policy-makers can be established.

THE SUSTAINABLE TOURIST DESTINATION IN PRACTICE: THE CASE OF SPAIN

Spain is one of the countries where the concept of the smart tourist destination is taking off. Thanks to institutions such as Segittur, there are many destinations throughout the country which have embraced the concept and have initiated projects so that they may become STDs (Segittur, 2015).

However, by simply consulting the Platform for Government Contracts (the website which provides information about Spain's public procurement), or by simply googling the terms "solicitation document" and "intelligent (the word used in Spanish for this kind of destinations) tourist destination", we can appreciate the indiscriminate nature with which many actions are being implemented.

In many cases, actions are focused on creating tourist websites which bring together all of the information of a destination in one platform in order to facilitate visitors' search tasks and to promote the intensive use of social media in order to disseminate this information. In more advanced cases, actions consist in making free public Wi-Fi available to tourists. Little more has been done.

Although these actions, valued by tourists, constitute a first step towards applying technology to improve the tourist experience, particularly in those destinations that are starting from scratch, they are far-removed from the action required to shape real intelligence in destination management – not to mention that some of these destinations are usually, due to the low incidence or specialisation in tourism, those that have fewer sustainability problems.

On the other hand, consolidated destinations, where considerable problems of sustainability prevail, already have the basic tools and

require other comprehensive destination management tools which, going beyond the interface and services provided to the tourist, enable a real measurement of the tourism impact and the territorial management. The effective operation of these platforms in many cases depends on the collaboration and sharing of information by the stakeholders of the destination.

However, at least in the case of Spain, it can be observed that this advanced application of the smart tourism concept often clashes with the current reality of companies and institutions in the destinations. A reluctance to share information and doubts with respect to the returns to be gained from the intensive investment in technology in tourism businesses and destinations represent a limitation for the technologies inherent in the STD to be used to their maximum potential. In this case, there is a risk of facing a true "technological paradox" in which increasingly more sophisticated destinations with technological tools continue to work essentially under the same unsustainable principles prior to this implementation

CONCLUSIONS

In contrast to other types of technology such as military technology, the concept of the STD represents one of the most commendable applications of technology, as its purpose is the enjoyment and well-being of human beings. This note argues that the application of the STD concept represents the first real opportunity to make operational what, to date, has been a mere desideratum; sustainability in tourist destinations. This is done in an oblique way, due to the general failure of the direct approach to this problem. The consequences of climate change and their impact on tourism undoubtedly reinforce the need to apply sustainability measures to STDs.

However, if these measures are not applied correctly, in other words, they do not respect the necessary flexibility and dynamism of

each of the destinations in question – the principles of intelligence, the concept of STD runs the risk of becoming undermined and, as is the current case of sustainability, will be relegated to a rhetorical use or, in the best of cases, used as a marketing element with which to differentiate tourism destinations, which are essentially the same.

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