

## A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE ON ECOTOURISM IN CRETE

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**Abstract:** Drawing upon the findings of an empirical study of ecotourism in Crete (Saatsakis, 2018), this industry focussed paper discusses and reflects upon the development of successful ecotourism for the Island and its well-being. Greece, including the island of Crete, is strongly committed to the implementation of the 2030 agenda for the sustainable development in balancing its economic growth, protection of the environment and social cohesion, so “no one is left behind”. The paper is supported with evidence from research of several years in Crete and from personal experience of the first author working in the Cretan tourism industry, both in the public and private sectors (Saatsakis, 2018).

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, Crete, Sustainability, Development, Challenges, Tourism planning

### Introduction

The paper is based on the researchers' experience and expertise on tourism sustainable development and policy. The Cretan ecotourism policy is influenced by values which reflect the protection of the scenic beauty of the island of Crete, its traditional way of life and culture. The policy aims to alleviate the detrimental impacts of mass tourism by diversifying and introducing alternative types of tourism.

This paper highlights the measures that are needed to be taken by all stakeholders involved in the tourism industry as articulated by prominent writers in the field (e.g., Buckley, 2009, 2012; Fennell, 2014; Hunter, 2007; Mason, 2015; Wearing & Neil, 2009) and recommended by the UN Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. The ecotourism market appears to be expanding at a faster rate than that for tourism generally, which itself is experiencing rapid growth (Saatsakis, 2018). Even though ecotourism expands rapidly, there are many threats to its sustainability and expansion. Ecotourism depends on pristine natural environments and authentic local cultures closely connected with them, and on the extent to which it is compatible with the conservation of its resource-base, its social acceptability and political feasibility (Anderson, Bakir & Wickens, 2014).

### Managing Ecotourism Development

A period of 10 years research suggests that the future of ecotourism development in Crete is dependent on the successful implementation of the following recommendations. These are also informed by past studies (e.g., Buckley, 2012; Fennell, 2014; Mason, 2015) and UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform for Greece (2018).

- Involving local people in the development and planning process
- Educating, training and awareness raising
- Encouraging small-scale development
- Controlling growth, conserving resources and using certification
- Working towards the elimination of seasonality pattern and dependency on tour operators

- Protecting the natural and cultural environments
- Successful marketing through research
- Managing funding

### ***Involving Local People in the Development and Planning Process***

The involvement of locals in the development process is imperative for the industry's sustainability. A destination, such as Crete, may have the necessary conditions for expansion of the industry but they will not be sufficient without local community's acceptability. As the literature shows, a tourism development would be supported when local people have access to the process and their perceived concerns are being considered. Anderson et al. (2015) from their work on tourism development in Connemara, Ireland, found that there was a need for locals' participation in tourism decision-making and a strong leadership to ensure a sustainable ecotourism development. The Cretan ecotourism development is supported by the industry, however, there was evidence of only limited involvement of the locals in decision-making (Saatsakis, 2018). This paper suggests concerted efforts should be made to ensure that the 'wants' of the local community and its future development are taken into account.

A systematic analysis of local opinions and perceptions can play a vital role in tourism policy formulation. Only through a continuous discussion with the local community concerning tourism costs and benefits, the desired future strategies of tourism development projects are likely to succeed (Saatsakis, 2018). All community members have to be assured that they will not be disadvantaged as a result of tourism development and that through collaboration and co-ordination, benefits will be enhanced for all and distributed more equally (Anderson et al., 2015). The involvement of the locals should be encouraged from the very beginning, by promoting public dialogue and by enabling them to participate in the processes of decision-making and profit-sharing (Diamantis, 2004; Saatsakis, 2018). This is only possible when ecotourism development planning takes into consideration the views, perceptions and preferences of the local inhabitants (Anderson et al., 2015).

The Cretan study shows that when people do not receive sufficient benefits from ecotourism, they are prone to develop a negative attitude towards ecotourism development and oppose the goals of environmental conservation that are closely linked to ecotourism. This might occur for example when indigenous people, whose survival depends heavily upon the use of natural resources, perceive tourism as a threat that deprives them of their livelihood, as it competes with them over land and resources (Saatsakis, 2018).

### ***Educating, Training and Awareness Raising***

Ongoing education and training on sustainable tourism is essential for its development. The provision of educational programmes helps to address the issues of sufficient capacity. Locals deserve to know about the impacts of tourism developments in their destination. Both local communities and tourists need to be educated about over-tourism and its impacts. In promoting sustainable tourism development, communities and tourists should be continually educated and trained about tourism and how to protect the environment (Anderson et al., 2015).

Authorities should have on-going educational workshops and training for the communities, tourists and public employees. Developing and adopting positive attitudes towards tourists, the local community will more likely to achieve a competitive advantage for Crete's tourism industry. However, local attitudes regarding any further development of the industry can change over time. For instance, over-tourism has been affecting negatively mainland Greece and many Greek islands (e.g., Santorini and Crete), resulting in diminishing support for the

industry (Anderson et al., 2015; Wickens, 1994). The way to achieve sustainable ecotourism development is through educational programmes, public meetings, workshops and advertising campaigns in the mass and social media, schools and various community organisations.

### ***Encouraging Small-Scale Development***

The concentration of tourists on the north side of Crete has some obvious advantages because infrastructural investments in this part of the island confines tourism problems, allowing greater use of existing infrastructure through economies of scale. In the existing developed resorts and urban areas of the island no new accommodation is required, as existing establishments already possess a supply well in excess of demand. As a result, any growth in the supply of accommodation may further reduce the occupancy rates and may have detrimental effects on the already saturated environment. Therefore, for existing resorts the focus of tourism policy should be on the best use of existing establishments, rather than building new ones (Saatsakis, 2018).

Ecotourism entrepreneurs should be encouraged by the Greek authorities through various incentives to improve the standards of the services, upgrade amenities and construct a range of facilities that would bring distinct benefits to the areas. Research from Crete shows that small enterprises have been neglected by the public sector (Saatsakis, 2018). Public investments should not only be directed to large enterprises but also to smaller ones, so long as they contribute to the enhancement of the ecotourism product. Furthermore, higher participation of local investors in development creates employment opportunities for locals and reduces leakages. The development of small-scale tourist facilities and tourism centers should be encouraged in the underdeveloped southern and inland areas of the island.

Local owners of small businesses can contribute significantly to economic growth because they supply smaller markets (such as niche tourism products), demand relatively small amounts of capital, use local resources and materials and do not require costly and urban infrastructure. Therefore, small-scale developments in Crete may appear in the form of ecotourist villages, incorporating small traditional hotels, restaurants, shops and various recreational, leisure and sport facilities, owned by local entrepreneurs under a shareholder scheme.

### ***Controlling Growth, Conserving Resources and Using Certification***

Ecotourism is not a panacea for environmental conservation, and on its own, it cannot lift local communities from poverty. Unless ecotourism is well planned and constantly monitored, it might even achieve the opposite results, namely placing even heavier pressure on the environment and exacerbating local inhabitants' poverty (Saatsakis, 2018). In contrast, if ecotourism is perceived as part of a general strategy for sustainable development, then it truly has the potential to contribute to the protection of natural environment and promote the socio-economic well-being of host communities (Saatsakis, 2018).

Crete has many areas of ecological and environmental sensitivity or natural beauty that are its major attractions. Since the attractiveness of these areas depends upon their ecological balance, it is of the utmost importance to ensure environmental conservation by special legislation. Although, all tourists have an impact on a destination, alternative tourists are considered as low-impact (Anderson et al., 2015). Therefore, in these areas, alternative forms of tourism, such as eco-tourism, trekking and bird watching should be promoted. No building or any other types of development that destroy the unspoiled environment should be allowed.

Sensitivity of local communities towards the preservation of the natural resources should be

ensured through public information campaigns and the introduction of environmental courses into the curricula of schools. A series of car parks, trails, guided walks and signs should be provided to encourage environmentally-friendly activities with control and regulation of visitor viewing and activities. Likewise, more incentives for environmental conservation, such as biological cleaning, water and marine parks should be supported by EU funding.

Any type of growth based on archaeological and cultural richness should be adjusted to their architectural, cultural and historical identity. Tourism should be developed and operated so as to promote conservation of archaeological sites and historical places of Crete. Priority should be given to their preservation and regulations should be applied to this end. Conversion of traditional or listed buildings into hotels or for any other type of touristic use, e.g. restaurants, museums, cultural centers and traditional workshops, could be allowed under the condition that preservation will be ensured. Since archaeological and historical sites are major attractions for tourists, admission fees can cover the cost of investments for their enhancement and preservation.

There should be an environmental plan for the achievement of sustainable development in Crete. This plan should consider the saturated areas and each area's carrying capacity limits, as well as the consequences if these limits are exceeded. Much hope has been placed in the possibility of using the concept of carrying capacity to manage ecotourism. However, it is not a straightforward operational concept. Its application usually requires some evaluations to be made and often these are unavoidably subjective. Nevertheless, carrying capacity constraints are sometimes imposed. Once a carrying capacity is determined, it is necessary to adopt measures such as the imposition of entry fees or allocation of permits to ensure that it is not exceeded (Anderson, et al., 2014; Saatsakis, 2018).

There is a strong relationship between certification and ecotourism since the first is seen as a significant tool for setting standards for the second (Honey & Stewart, 2002). Certification is advocated as a means to distinguish genuine ecotourism products from 'green washed' products, which are labelled as ecotourism but do not meet required standards (Medina, 2005). Certification indicates high quality and environmentally and socially conscious products (Haaland & Aas, 2010). This should also be the case for ecotourism in Crete where the local government in cooperation with the tourism business and the host population must develop quality certifications assuring that products and services fulfil the high standards required by ecotourism principles.

Certification has attracted significant attention both within the academic community and the tourism industry and has generated general optimism with regard to its potential to help achieve sustainable development in the tourism sector (Fennel, 2002). In particular, certification is believed to have the potential to decrease the adverse environmental and social impacts of tourism. However, one of the most important limiting factors for the widespread success of certification programmes is their relatively poor uptake by the tourism industry worldwide, as is the case in Crete. Nevertheless, certification is strongly recommended for the whole ecotourism industry in Crete, including; hoteliers, tour operators, craft businesses, tavernas, and others.

### ***Working Towards the Elimination of Seasonality Pattern and Dependency on Tour Operators***

Seasonality is considered as a problem in Crete's tourism industry. Given the importance of the tourism industry to the island's economy, employment and income creation, efforts should be made to extend the tourism season. Cultural and alternative forms of tourism should be promoted. The island of Crete has rich environmental and cultural resources, and along with

the good weather (limited rainy days every year), these resources can help extend the tourism season. For example, trekking holidays in the numerous forest trails of the island could extend the tourism season and reduce the seasonality pattern of the sun-seeking type of tourists.

Furthermore, as seasonality depends on the availability of tourist attractions and services, these attractions and services should be created or made available off-season, making attractions and services available outside the main summer season. A significant opportunity for out-of-season tourism could be achieved in the island of Crete, where 'multi-season' attractions could be promoted through the organisation of cultural activities related to local communities. However, increased marketing activities are required from the authorities, such as promotional campaigns for off-peak seasons, lower off-peak prices, and business and sporting events. A major problem in Crete is the control of the tourism industry by foreign tour operators. To address and eventually eliminate this problem, Crete has to establish regular charter flights from the major tourist generating countries and directly sell eco-tourist packages to these tourists. This would help to reduce the leakage of money to foreign airlines and, to some extent, diminish the monopolistic powers of the large international tour operators (Saatsakis, 2018).

### ***Protecting the Natural and Cultural Environments***

Like many forms of tourism, ecotourism has been criticised for its negative impacts on the natural and cultural environments. Careful guidelines for planning and management of ecotourism in Crete should be provided in order to ensure that it is appropriately and effectively developed, and that it offers the local communities increased opportunities and benefits. Prior to the commencement with any ecotourism development, its main features and characteristics should be recognised by local communities, governments and businesses so that the claimed benefits of this development in terms of conserving the natural and cultural environment are achievable and not overstated. Alongside small-scale development and certification (explained above), ecotourism development planning should particularly incorporate the following features (see Anderson et al., 2015):

- Promotion of the natural and cultural environment among local population, concerned stakeholders and tourist groups
- Making the commitment to support environmental protection and conservation of resources a primary concern
- Focusing on interactive exchange of knowledge and experience between hosts and guests; and
- Providing high quality service to ensure tourists' satisfaction.

The above features should also be incorporated in the policy and planning of ecotourism development in Crete.

### ***Successful Marketing Through Research***

Research shows that a number of visitors to Crete are interested in ecotourism activities (Saatsakis, 2018). Local tourism operators offer day trips to the designated protected areas; however, they are not aware of the impacts of such activities. Local tour operators need to be better informed and their activities should reflect the values of those tourists who demand authentic ecotourism experiences. The Cretan study makes the following recommendations to the local industry. Local educational institutions should develop and run educational and

knowledge transfer programmes for the local ecotourism entrepreneurs. For instance, through workshops or tailored courses which clearly explain the complexity of reconciling the demand of ecotourists with the need of protecting the environment, both the natural and cultural environment. Local academic experts should be able to furnish the industry with the knowledge and experience of the detrimental impacts of unchecked tourism activities. The programmes should focus particularly on the interpretation of what is ecotourism, its environmental management, planning and designing ecotourism activities. Furthermore, market research on ecotourists' perceptions, preferences, values and motivation should guide the design of ecotourism products and go a long way to protect the designated areas (Avgeli, Wickens, and Saatsakis, 2006). It is important to make the recommendation of conducting research on what visitors to Crete would like to experience, the type of accommodation they would like for their stay, their motivations and perceptions and knowledge of the natural and cultural specificities of the Cretan island. Such findings would certainly assist the promotion and sustainable development of genuine ecotourism products.

### ***Managing Funding***

In the past, funding was almost exclusively managed by government. Such funding often runs into deficit. Also, the objectives of tourism policy are subject to change with different political administrations. Crete not being an exception, depends largely on governmental support in terms of funding, assessment and recognition. This industry focused paper recommends the establishment of a non-profit organisation that is responsible for overseeing the protection and conservation of the designated zones. The work of this organisation should ultimately benefit the local community by effectively managing additional funding generated by tourism activities, such as, purchasing local handicraft and food, including; olives, honey, oregano, feta cheese. This organisation should be supported by local government and EU funding. Furthermore, existing European funding should support training, environmental education, and providing guidance to new ecotourism businesses.

### ***Concluding Reflections***

The rapid and intense tourism development that happened in Crete over the past years was often without a concrete plan of public infrastructure and was not conducted by proper planning and management policies. Lack of planning and management, together with the ineffectiveness of the enforcement mechanisms have generated a series of problems in the Cretan tourism sector. In particular, transportation, telecommunication systems, police and health services, water supply and sewage systems are inefficient and unable to support tourism demand during the summer months, when tourism concentration reaches its peak. In recognising the increasing tourism demand, the authorities have planned the development of a new airport in Crete in Kasteli area in order to replace the old one that cannot cope with the peak tourist arrivals. Although, this airport was promised many years ago by five different governments, it is still not developed, being postponed with different pretexts and detrimental consequences for Cretan tourism.

Lack of a clear governmental strategy regarding tourism development is one of the main obstacles in the process of developing a competitive ecotourism product in Crete. This is mostly due to the fact that tourism has been often used in the past, and unfortunately in the present, by various governments as a way for accomplishing their political goals. Lack of political commitment has led to the adoption of highly variable tourism measures and regulations that changed with new political leadership, resulting in general confusion and ineffective tourism policies. Tourism policies adopted in Crete affected by political interests, lobbying and short-term profitability, largely drove the haphazard development in the past decades and failed to

establish a long-term vision for sustainable tourism development. In addition, the mass tourism development in Crete creates a growing pressure for building new constructions that are intended for use as hotels, restaurants and other tourism facilities that often ignore the existing land-use and urban planning regulations and tend to expand in an anarchic way, thus creating a mixed and overcrowded built environment.

Moreover, the dependency on mass tourism development produced extensive degradation of the natural and cultural environment, aggravated by the high seasonality of the tourism demand as well as the spatial overconcentration in certain areas. The north side of Crete is overdeveloped while the south side is completely underdeveloped with considerable negative effects on the local economy. Currently, the Cretan ecotourism industry has shied away from undertaking voluntary initiatives, and the improvement of its environmental performance still relies heavily on governmental control. Many hotels tend to implement some kind of environmental-friendly practices, such as, the use of energy-saving light bulbs or appliances, because of their direct financial payoff. Likewise, the use of water-saving devices has increased significantly in the accommodation sector in Greece. Nevertheless, the number of hotels that have put in place an integrated strategy for improving their environmental performance as a whole is still very limited, with the exception of few large hotel chains. Consequently, the development of ecotourism like all other forms of tourism requires careful planning and continuous monitoring, as suggested in this paper, in order to achieve the sought outcomes.

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