

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN TIMES OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

As a result of the pandemic and implicitly the travel restrictions imposed to limit the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, several tourist trends have been identified, including preference for domestic tourism, travel packages with more flexible cancellation policies, features for safety and health, and finally the desire to travel sustainably and create a positive impact on local communities. In this context, the paper aims to analyse the need and opportunity of sustainable tourism development in times of Covid-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *sustainable tourism, COVID-19 pandemic, climate change*

JEL classification: *L83, Q54*

1. Introduction

Globally, there is a growing concern to look at major changes in the environment, such as global warming and climate change, pollution, depletion of natural resources and the destruction of biodiversity (Bennett, 2019).

The increasing of climate change is reducing the quality of life, and negatively affecting all areas of activity (IPCC, 2014), including the tourism and travel industry.

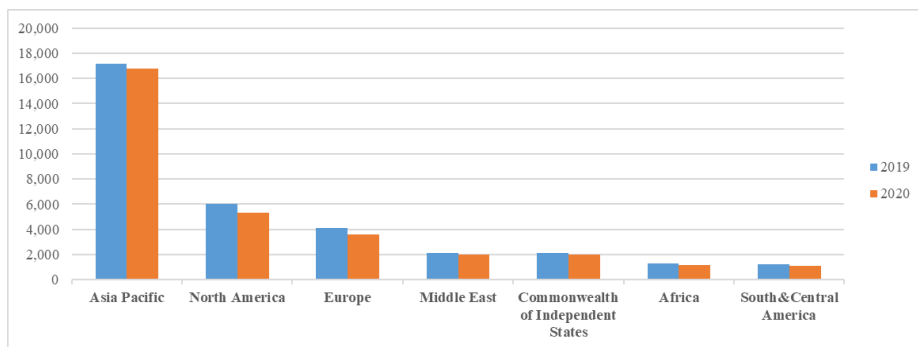
The global Covid-19 pandemic has significantly affected the travel and tourism industry, registering a decrease of 42% of the global revenue in 2020 compared to the previous year.

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Under these conditions, to respond to the effects of climate change but also to the COVID 19 pandemic, behavioral change becomes opportune (Engler et.al, 2021; Ben Youssef, 2021). Therefore, in 2020 there was a reduction in carbon emissions but also a change in consumer preferences, who became concerned about environmental issues and sustainable holiday choices.

Therefore, the figure below shows the change in carbon dioxide emissions worldwide, by region, compared to 2019.

Figure 1: Change in carbon dioxide emissions worldwide, by region, compared to 2019 (in million metric tons of carbon dioxide)



Source: www.statista.com

Analysing the data contained in the figure above, we notice that the most polluting region was Asia-Pacific, which in 2020 recorded more than the total emissions of all other regions, namely 16.75 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions.

Restrictions imposed by the global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 have affected all major economic sectors, leading to significant reductions in global carbon emissions.

Thus, in 2020, North America and Europe, ranked second and third, in terms of pollution, recorded a 12% decrease in emissions compared to the previous year, while Asia Pacific decreased its dioxide emissions carbon by only 2.5%.

The effects of climate change on the tourism industry, as well as the way in which tourism influences climate change, have been the subject of numerous specialized studies (Gössling and Hall, 2006; Scott et.al, 2012;

Dubois et.al, 2016).

Tourism contributes significantly to carbon emissions, worldwide hotel industry accounts for about 1% of carbon emissions and contributes significantly to the degradation of the environment. Furthermore, the share of carbon dioxide emissions by tourism-related transport is 5%.

In this context, the largest reduction in carbon emissions, because of the restrictions imposed to limit the SARS-CoV-2 virus, was recorded in air transport, respectively a decrease of almost half, in 2020, reaching the level recorded in 1999.

Caring for the environment is a growing concern of tourists, and their choice to travel sustainably has increased because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sustainable tourism involves in its practice the superior capitalization of the natural and cultural resources of the local communities and the influence of traveler's behavior towards sustainable practices, such as waste reduction, reduction of water and energy consumption, use of public transport, accommodation in eco-friendly units. In this context it becomes appropriate assessing sustainable tourism in Covid-19 context. To achieve this objective, the methodology consists of the descriptive data analysis of various studies and reports developed by Booking and Statista.

2. Assessing sustainable tourism in Covid-19 context

2.1. Literature review

The COVID-19 crisis has had a strong impact on the tourism industry, diminishing the contribution of tourism to GDP and leading to the loss of millions of jobs, but also to the manifestation of the opportunity to reshape this sector, making it more sustainable.

Sustainable tourism was originally mentioned in the Report Brundtland (1987), which stated that for optimal functioning, a balance between economic, social, and environmental aspects is necessary.

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), sustainable tourism meets the current needs of tourists and the tourism industry and, at the same time, ensures the protection of the environment and supports the growth of opportunities for the future.

The dimensions of sustainable development are:

- economic sustainability, namely the generation of prosperity at different levels of society and the implementation of cost-effectiveness in all economic activities. Essentially, it is about the

viability of businesses and activities, as well as their ability to operate in the long term.

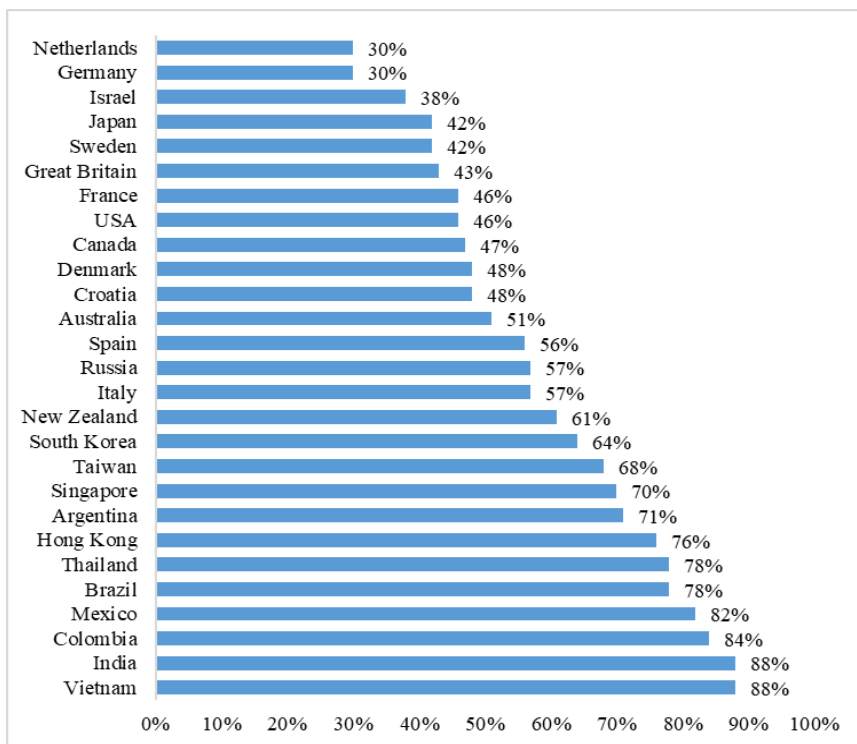
- social sustainability, which promotes respect for human rights and equal opportunities for members of society; implies a fair distribution of benefits in order to alleviate poverty. Emphasis is placed on local communities, on maintaining and strengthening living systems, recognizing, and respecting different cultures, and avoiding any form of exploitation.
- environmental sustainability, which means conserving and managing resources, especially those that are not renewable. Action is needed to minimize air, land and water pollution, as well as to conserve biodiversity and natural heritage.

2.2. Methodology

In the current socio-economic context, sustainable tourism not only creates the opportunity to revitalize the industry in a more resilient way but is a form of tourism increasingly demanded by tourists, thus certain studies (Sustainable Travel Report, 2021) indicate that more than half of tourists (53%) want to make sustainable choices in the future. At the same time, almost half of the tourists (49%) admit that the Covid-19 pandemic made them make positive changes in their daily life, the main concerns in this regard being: recycling, using environmentally friendly modes of transport, reducing food waste, avoiding single-use plastic.

Worldwide, the measures imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, has made tourist want to travel more sustainably in the future (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Tourists who have stated that pandemic has made them want to travel more sustainably in the future

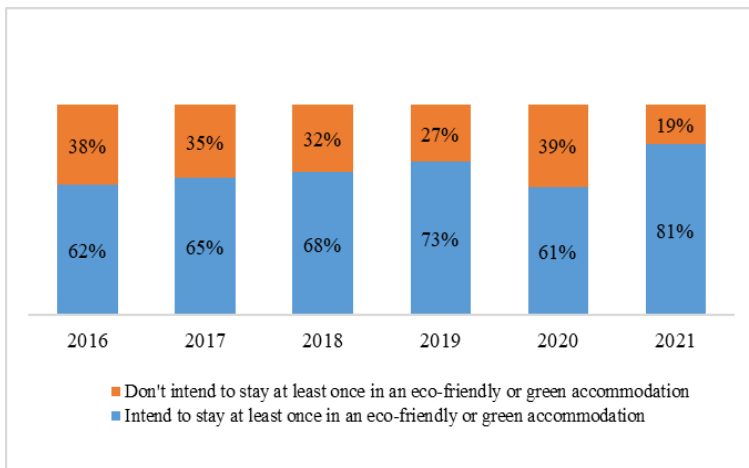


Source: Sustainable Travel Report 2021 – Booking.com

As shown in the figure above, 88% of tourists in Vietnam and India want to travel sustainably in the future, closely followed by tourists from Colombia (84%) and Mexico (82%), while only 30% of tourists in Germany and the Netherlands aim to make eco-friendly choices during their holidays.

Furthermore, according to Statista, in 2021, 81% of travellers stayed at least once in an eco-friendly or green accommodation up from 62% in 2016, as can be seen from Figure 3.

Figure 3: Distribution of global travelers intending to stay at least once in an eco-friendly or green accommodation when looking at the year ahead from 2016 to 2021



Source: www.statista.com

Therefore, the crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic imposes as a first step in relaunching tourism the orientation towards sustainable development, thus being able to fall back strategically in order to create added value to the stakeholders.

2.3. Results and discussions

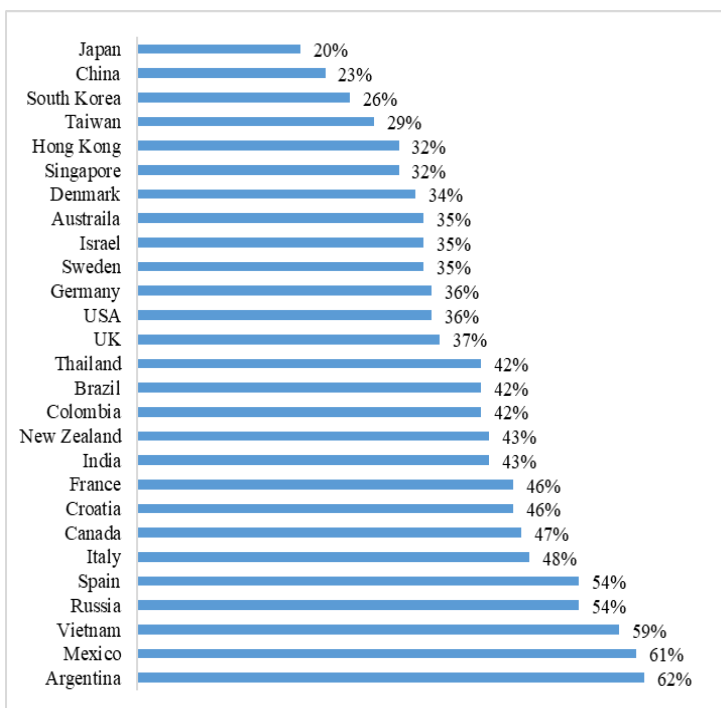
The effects of the pandemic have increased the awareness of tourists about their impact on the natural environment, so that: 91% of tourists from Croatia, Thailand, Brazil; 90% of Argentina and 89% of Italy are intending to reduce general waste while on future trips. However, tourists from other countries have also shown interest in this aspect, so a total of 84% of tourists plan to reduce waste consumption. To these are added other practices that indicate the desire of tourists to have a sustainable behaviour in their next vacation, namely: reduction of energy consumption (83%) and water consumption (76%), walking or cycling whenever possible (79%).

In the current socio-economic context, in which the spread of the SARS-COV-2 virus has affected all economic sectors and implicitly the tourism industry, sustainable tourism is not only necessary but also opportune

for the relaunch of tourism in a way able to meet current travel preferences and requirements.

Thus, along with increasing the commitment to sustainability, the Covid-19 pandemic has led tourists to want to contribute to the socio-economic development of local communities, therefore many travellers have chosen to buy from small, independent stores (seen Figure 4):

Figure 4: Tourist who shopped at small, independent stores during their trips over the past 12 months to support the local economy



Source: Sustainable Travel Report 2021 – Booking.com

Analysing the data contained in the figure above, we notice an increased interest among the tourist from Argentina (62%), Mexico (61%) and Vietnam (59%), to support the local economy during their trips over the past 12 months. At the opposite pole are tourists from Japan (20%) and China

(23%), who contributed to a lesser extent to local economic development when they travelled.

The development of sustainable tourism is not only necessary in order to meet the new preferences of consumers, but also opportune as it provides many benefits for local communities, including income that can be invested for improving health services; promotion of investments towards renewable energy; support of sustainable agriculture; reduced inequity; contribution to the preservation of natural and cultural assets, thus providing resources for future generation.

3. Conclusions

Globally, phenomena such as ozone depletion, air pollution, groundwater and surface water, global warming, have the consequence of reducing the quality of life.

The restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic has affected tourism industry to an unprecedented extent, changing the behaviour of travellers. Thus, based on studies released by Statista and Booking, the demand for nature and outdoor activities is expected to increase in the coming years, with a rise in sustainable tourism, and a clear change in the behaviour of travellers towards eco-friendly choices during their holidays, such as the desire: to buy locally, to use environmentally friendly models of transport, to choose eco-friendly accommodations, to reduce the energy and water consumption, to visit less known places and to contribute to the socio-economic development of local communities

Tourists' preferences for sustainable tourism will be maintained in the near future, as the Covid-19 pandemic has meant an even better awareness of phenomena such as global warming – with the highest temperatures recorded in 2020 despite the reduction of carbon – and a paved way for tourism towards new, more sustainable development opportunities.

Therefore, sustainability will play a central role in the post-pandemic recovery of the tourism and travel industry, whether it is managing the overall impact of the tourism industry on the natural environment or creating long-term value for stakeholders.

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