

FACTORS DETERMINING THE WILLINGNESS TO PAY FOR A MORE SUSTAINABLE DESTINATION. THE CASE OF THE WESTERN COSTA DEL SOL

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Tourism activity has been for decades the most important driving force in the Spanish economy, positioning itself as one of the main drivers of economic development by contributing significantly to the balance of payments, the gross domestic product, and to job creation. However, this economic activity has caused many negative impacts on the territory, since part of the profits generated by the Spanish tourism during the last thirty years have been obtained at the expense of social and environmental balance, which has resulted in the degradation of the most fragile environmental resources, especially the coastal ones, to an alarming situation.

Aware of the need to reduce the negative impacts of tourism and to adopt measures that enable the recovery of the Spanish tourism activity (Vacas and Landeta, 2009), since the early 90's several initiatives have been developed in order to achieve the incorporation of the concept of sustainability into tourism policy –among which Plan Futures I (1992), Plan Futures II (1996), Comprehensive Plan for Quality in Spanish Tourism (PICTE) (2000), Spanish Tourism Plan Horizon 2020 (2007) and Plan Coastal Tourism XXI century (2011) highlight. As a representative example of this type of initiatives, the Restructuring Tourism Plan for the Western Costa del Sol, *Plan Qualifica*, was formulated from a strategic approach based, on paper, on the principles of sustainability, which was aimed at the comprehensive renovation of a sun and sand mature destination.

It seems evident that, if tourism is expected to become a tool for the sustainable development of the destination, a number of commitments by those stakeholders directly involved in its development are required. Thus, public authorities, host community, professional agents and, finally, tourists, must cooperate and make a common commitment to achieve its integrated management, according to sustainability criteria. It would be interesting that these values were adopted by the demand for a more sustainable destination to be achieved. In so doing, the demand would second the actions carried out from the supply side, at least in this new stage of planning in those destinations where a restructuring process have already started, such as the Western Costa del Sol.

Thus, the interest of this research focuses on the following specific objectives:

1. To analyse the profile of current tourists received by the Western Costa del Sol, as well as to identify and characterize the demand that is willing to pay for a sustainable tourism.
2. To identify the factors determining tourists' willingness to pay (WTP) to enjoy a more sustainable destination, in this case the Western Costa del Sol.

The results obtained in this research allowed for an analysis of the profile of the current tourists that the Western Costa del Sol receives. Likewise, together with this descriptive analysis, the variables explaining, or conditioning, tourists' willingness to pay (WTP) to enjoy a more sustainable destination, in this case the Western Costa del Sol, are analysed.

Most of the twelve variables analysed in the estimate (with the exception of gender) have proven to be significant, although in varying degrees, to explain the willingness to pay of tourists visiting this destination because of its more sustainable supply. This information is really useful for those who have to make decisions on destination management in terms of sustainability, since it makes it possible, as it was previously considered, to direct their policies towards the demand side, overcoming the current exclusive action from the perspective of the supply, which seems to be leading to poor results.

Only 23.8% of respondents seem to be willing to pay a higher amount to enjoy a destination that promotes sustainability. This fact is very significant. Not even a quarter of all respondents would be willing to pay more to enjoy a destination that is making a tremendous effort to re-qualify its supply and to position itself in the market as an area that focuses on sustainability as one of its main symbols of identity.

Therefore, it seems incongruous to promote the generation of a supply for which, a priori, there seems to be no demand. Thus, the solution to be proposed could be two-fold: either trying to change the behaviour patterns of current tourists, improving their knowledge about sustainability, their environmental awareness and, consequently, their solidarity with the destination to the point of increasing their willingness to pay and the maximum amount they are willing to pay; or repositioning in the market, looking for demand segments which do appreciate the sustainable tourism products that the Western Costa del Sol could offer after this process. In either case, strategic actions aimed at both supply and demand must be undertaken, being all elements of the tourism system with a capacity for action and decision-making included in such process.

It is very difficult to change learned behaviour patterns, but, for tourists' decision and choice to be responsible, it is required that they have relevant information available. However, having information about the sustainable behaviour of the destination at their disposal may be complicated since, in any case -due to the enormous complexity of real production processes- it is quite difficult to obtain such information, which in the end will depend on destinations' openness and credibility. In short, the destination must, first, offer products and services that are really based on the philosophy of sustainability, as this can help to increase its value as a unique destination, differentiated and responsible; and, finally, current and potential consumers must be informed about that change of attitude.

In fact, there are previous restructuring and market repositioning experiences, for instance, the restructuring project of the bay of Palma de Mayorca (Megaluf), by the Meliá

Hotels International hotel chain. It is aimed at regenerating one of the most degraded areas in this region where it owns eight establishments with over 5,000 beds –a third of all hotels in Magaluf. This project, which has successfully involved the Balearic Government, aims to reposition this destination in the market, eliminating its 30-40 euros a day all-inclusive plan, and opting for prices ranging from 280 to 350 euros per night for bed and breakfast in high season. In so doing, it tries to achieve a repositioning towards more affluent clients by improving the quality of its supply, i.e., by repositioning Magaluf as a tourism destination as a result of increasing the value of its supply, as well as its sustainability. This initiative, in turn, has taken as a model of change such emblematic destinations as Miami Beach, which also underwent a period of decline, negative image and saturation, despite having the highest RevPAR of USA, ahead of destinations such as New York or Hawaii. Tourism infrastructures were poor, its competitive advantage was weak compared to other similar destinations, and there was no destination brand. The solution was to initiate long-term tourism strategies of restructuring and repositioning, the so-called *Preservation and Development Plan (1980)*, constantly updated and reoriented since then.

It should be pointed out that the content of this article is part of a wider research whose results are still being analysed. Therefore, the possible future lines of research that arise from the results obtained are numerous. For that reason, future contributions will try to answer questions such as: to what extent do tourists know what a more sustainable product implies? Would it improve the quality of what they buy, the tourist experience, or does it only have to do with protecting the environment?, etc. In short, to what extent are tourists able to understand that it could imply paying more for a product that could benefit all stakeholders, and how much would they be willing to pay then?

