

Eco-Tourism – Managing the Change

Managing inevitable change has been one of the most difficult and challenging aspects of business since that earliest of tourists, Noah, set about releasing his passengers into a new land. Had this land been one of the Greek islands well known to the tourists of today he would have thought them to be beautiful and idyllic. Even forty years ago the shores and villages of the likes of Rhodes, Corfu and Ios were peaceful, tranquil places to visit. As a visitor you could sit on the harbour front drinking Greek coffee and struggle to understand the shop signs and local people who were keen to hear of your life 'abroad'. You would enjoy walking along the old donkey paths and be greeted by the farmers and welcomed into their houses for fresh baked bread and olives from their groves. You had probably spent days on a ship to get there but it was worth it to see these sights and experience a different way of life.

Forty years on, vast tracts of these islands have been ruined; they are now just tourist resorts in the sun. Massive hotels and apartment blocks abound. Airports, and rows of new tavernas selling British beer and German food now greet the visitors. The fields are bare and the fishing fleet practically non-existent as the families turn to servicing the demand of the tourists. No longer can you experience the 'real Greece' on these islands, which was the whole reason those first tourists, went there. How many times do you hear people say they try to keep ahead of the tourists and try to find an undeveloped place to visit? It is not the tourists that are to blame it is the planners, developers, councils, local governments and most of all the EU who invest vast amounts of finance into this so called 'development' on remote Greek islands. The local people, in their naivety, consider that greater resources will generate greater income.

You cannot expect the local people to live in a time warp just for the amusement of visiting tourists. It would be like digging up all the roads in England, taking out all the electricity and plumbing and expect everyone to walk or go on horseback. Although not a bad idea it would be unreasonable and not taking advantage of technology and resources available today. These developments have taken place over hundreds of years in England but on many Greek islands they are taking place overnight. Badly positioned unsightly electricity installations are strewn over beautiful villages. Unneeded roads are bulldozed through the countryside digging up areas of outstanding beauty and habitat for rare flowers and herbs. Unsightly unnecessary road signs in Greek and English are on every corner. Previously stunning landscapes are littered with building sites and blocks of ugly concrete pensions. The majority of this development is supposed to attract more visitors to the islands.

Short of a nuclear explosion there can be nothing more damaging to remote locations such as the Greek islands than sudden unplanned tourism development. The consequences to the physical environment may well destroy the very resource that attracted the tourist's attention in the first place. The rivers and coastlines become contaminated. The sea breeze carrying the aroma of herbs and flowers becomes polluted with exhaust emissions and aircraft fumes. The sounds of donkeys braying and the waves breaking on the beach are drowned out by beach discos and concrete mixers. Bright street lights block out the deep blue star sparkling Mediterranean night sky. There is congestion at the ports and in the villages that look more like London a week before Christmas rather than a remote Greek island. Road and hotel building causes soil erosion, damages vegetation and wildlife and destroys natural and ancient manmade features.

These islands have seen many changes in the last 50 years. The more remote and undeveloped ones have seen reductions in population by up to 50% some are now totally uninhabited. The population is ageing and the manpower is not available to work the fields or fish the seas in order to be self-sufficient. Indeed the few young people no longer need to scrape an existence from the land when aircraft and ships bring in fresh goods from the mainland daily. It is therefore logical and fitting that they should turn to tourism to generate income and support the local communities ensuring their continued existence. This change however has to be carefully planned, controlled, monitored and managed. In the majority of cases it is not. They are ruining the very resources they are working to preserve and will not realise it until it is too late. They look at the tourist incomes of the more well known destinations and seem to think that they can achieve the same, no matter how remote they are. These dreadful resorts have their place and are popular with the

mass tourism markets particularly young people looking for a wild time in the sun. There is now a greater demand for traditional and quiet destinations and the willingness to travel for a little longer to get there. The more remote islands, particularly those without airports, have a very short tourist season, some as little as six weeks. The way forward is not to increase capacity for this short period but to put strategies in place to lengthen the season and manage this growth through eco-tourism.

The three aspects of tourist capacity that should be considered are the *Physical*, the *Environmental* and the *Ecological* capacities¹. The physical capacity should be limited to control the other two. If increased it should be done without detriment to the environment. There are many examples of islands where new concrete blocks have been built alongside delightful but ruined houses, which could easily have been renovated. New tavernas have been built when existing ones could have been improved or extended. Roads have been built to places of interest when with a little effort visitors could visit them on foot and appreciate the countryside on the way. The environmental capacity is therefore the maximum number of tourists an area can accommodate without a decline in the general perceived attraction of that area. For some reason the Greek planners have great difficulty in assessing this restriction until it is too late. They will build horrendous jungles and only when it is too late will they admit that it is pretty awful, Corfu being a prime example. They appreciate the beauty of their islands and are proud of their countryside but seem unable to grasp the fact that further unplanned development will jeopardise their tourist income not enhance it. Ecological capacity is the maximum number of visitors an area can take before ecological decline takes place. In the latter case taking appropriate measures can increase numbers. In a rather bizarre way this is in fact one area that is given some thought to by the authorities in Greece. Some popular footpaths are preserved and particularly archaeological ruins have controlled access. However the efforts in this area are completely negated by acres of countryside being calved up for another pointless road just a kilometre away.

Measurement of the impact of tourism on the environment is difficult but on the Greek islands there are plenty of examples of how far planners can go before it becomes detrimental. Attempts should be made to minimise the costs of tourism development to the physical environment. Only the absolute minimum amount of new development should take place. Grants should only be made when a detailed study of the effects of any expansion is considered and ample funds proven to be in place for completion. Building and signposting should be minimal and 'environmentally sensitive'. Consideration should be given to renovation and extension before new works are approved.

From where I sit, halfway up a mountain on the remote Aegean island of Amorgos I see ten ruined houses on the edge of a village across a gorge. Down on the coast just 20 minutes walk away I see the equivalent number of relatively new concrete boxes. I see a half finished road and two or three half finished buildings. I know of an incomplete hotel that has stood for over twenty years now, looking like a multi storey car park. This island has reached its environmental capacity but we know of planning permission for more roads, more hotels and more pensions. Despite appeals to the local councils and government and letters to newspapers, generating massive local support, permission for expansion continues to be granted and the EU continue to fund these ill-advised projects. We were honoured to have our views and opinion debated by the local council but the final decision was for increased tourist capacity and more roads. This island like many others is at its tourist optimum, it is outstandingly beautiful, a new road ensures better links between the few villages and there are just the right number of tavernas and pensions to give visitors a choice. We now have mains electricity and piped water in most villages to ensure islanders and visitors alike a greater degree of comfort. Tourist income has paid for microwave technology allowing to do away with the old and unsightly telephone poles and wires across the island. We now have a refuse disposal service precluding the traditional system of using the nearest gorge. Some of our footpaths through the mountains are now maintained making easier access to remote areas of beauty and interest. Conservation and the preservation of natural areas have emerged as important spill over benefits of tourism. The protection of the very resources that visitors come to enjoy enhances and perpetuates tourism by maintaining its very foundation.

¹ Holloway, 1985; Lavery, 1987

Marketing strategies and eco-tourism programmes should be developed to promote the environment and encourage increased tourism in the low season. The demand for activity holidays is increasing as people turn their backs on the standard beach based holiday and search for something to stimulate their minds as well as relax their bodies. As we do on Amorgos similar unspoilt islands should concentrate on promoting their resources to botanists, photographers, artists, ornithologists, walkers and historians. These groups would want to visit a quiet island out of season and perhaps when the weather is a little cooler. On Amorgos there are about 750 rooms available for visitors, the majority are only used for 6 weeks. There are 22 other weeks in the year when visitors can enjoy the wonderful climate and scenery. This leaves unused assets of 115,500 room nights; an unused room is the ultimate perishable resource. To offset this loss in the high season would require another 2,750 rooms resulting in yet another ruined island but this seems to be the way the planners want to go, encouraged and funded by the EU with 'development' grants. This is gross misuse of EU funds and requires action at the very highest of levels.

There are 3,000 islands of Greece of which only 170 are inhabited. A mere handful of these are genuinely unspoilt yet are still capable of supporting a reasonable and financially viable level of tourism. With an aging population the trend is away from the noisy crowded tourist centres to these quieter resorts. With tourism composing of more than 20% of Greece's export income surely they must realise that protection, not exploitation, of their valuable resources is 'development'. They are in danger of ruining their islands totally and going back 50 years whilst next-door, Turkey has learnt from their mistakes and realises that eco-tourism is the only way forward for their relatively new tourism business.

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