

The Challenge Of Tourism Carrying Capacity Assessment

The carrying capacity of a tourist destination. The case of a coastal Italian city

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1. Introduction

In the last decades the world tourist flows rapidly grew and travel and tourism has become one of the world's highest priority industries and employers. According to UNWTO world tourism barometer (2010), in 2008 international tourist arrivals reached 919 million (880 million in 2009, a cause of the international recession), with a growth of about 72% since 1995. Italy, which accounts 43 millions of tourist arrivals in 2009 (UNWTO, 2010), is one of the most preferred destinations; thus, tourist is one of the most important Italian industries.

Tourism gives also an important contribution to the regional and local economic development, but it causes also negative impacts mainly on the environment and social context. In particular, the uncontrolled development of the tourist activities and the intensive land exploitation can cause a rapid degradation and reduction of the environmental, cultural and social resources, with negative effects also on the tourism development till the possible decline of the tourist destination and, more generally, of the economic activity of the area. As a consequence, the relevance of this phenomenon and the simultaneous spreading of the sustainable development concept have pushed towards the identification of a more sustainable process of planning, development and management of the tourist activities. Thus, the tourism carrying capacity (TCC) approach has been developed and has become a real challenge for both planners and managers. In economics terms, the public intervention is needed because the tourist attractions are assets which cannot be reproduced and they should be treated as public goods where market mechanisms do not show their normal allocative functions. Tourism carrying capacity represents a problem of allocation of scarce resources, e.g. protected natural or historical areas, to recreational opportunities that are density dependent (McCool and Lime, 2000).

The TCC assessment differs according to the different type of destinations: coastal areas, islands, protected areas, rural areas, mountain resorts and historical settlements. The present paper focuses on a coastal destination, which is normally associated with mass tourism, large scale construction and infrastructure, intensive land development and extensive urbanisation

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