

(SP) SPORT IN THE RESTRUCTURING OF THE TOURISM POLICY IN CRETE: PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR ROLE AND PERSPECTIVES

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Introduction

Crete has become the most important destination within the Hellenic space, with a tourism performance significantly more successful than any other national resort or region. Within alternative forms of tourism development, sports tourism is considered to be one of the most applicable mechanisms for greener tourism growth through a restructured planning scheme. The investigation into the potential for sports tourism development in Crete has highlighted a number of key areas which will be influential in determining the extent, nature and timescale through which sports tourism programmes may be established, within the broader repositioning of the Greek tourism product. These influential areas include: central policy making, European policy guidelines, local reforms and private sector initiatives, all of which are deemed to be factors interacting in a catalytic way for the establishment of this type of development (GNT0, 2000). A further requirement in the current context is that such programmes must be established through a sustainable development perspective engaging an environmental consciousness in planning and local authority consensus in decision making.

Methods

Seeking to sample a typical mass tourism area, Crete was selected because of its international tourism significance. In the course of this study, the nature and potential of sports tourism development in Crete, and the actors' perceptions of the factors influencing the development and position of sports tourism in the tourism industry, determined the principal focus of the examination. A combination of semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis were employed, at all levels of the policy hierarchy to enhance validity, through the process of 'triangulation'.

Starting at the 'widest' local government level, in terms of spatial responsibility, within the Periphery Authorities (Periphery of East Crete & Periphery of West Crete), the heads of the Departments of Social and Economic Development, responsible for tourism planning, were interviewed in both Peripheries of Crete. Additionally, representatives of the local Greek National Tourism Organisation (GNT0), the main body responsible for applying central government policies and partially initiating tourism development locally, were thoroughly interviewed. The private sector at the local level was represented by the Presidents of Hotel Owners of every Prefecture in Crete.

Results

It was repeatedly emphasised in interviews that the new suggested development objectives of rejuvenating the local tourism profile through sports tourism, encompass the agreement of national as well as local government, and therefore promises a high degree of social sustainability. The documents and the representatives of the periphery underline the importance of co-ordinating the programme with the national policy goals. These coincide

towards promoting special tourism forms as a tool of rejuvenating the tourism product offer.

State subsidises part of the costs of some developments in order to encourage private investment in particular regions. The initiatives provided by the government (aiming at the upgrading of tourism superstructure and the creation of special tourism facilities) were welcomed by the private investors in Crete as a step towards the right developmental direction. However, the suggested forms, enjoying the incentives of this legislation, belong to a group of proposed investments with significant production costs, which make commercial investors 'indifferent' and rather skeptical.

Discussion

The local tourism industry, mainly based on small-size businesses, is not in the position to invest alone in such costly sporting facilities, but the cumulative development of facilities, satisfying visitors and local clientele, can prove beneficial for the operation of both large and small companies. The pressures exerted by private sector bodies to protect existing businesses and employment in the traditional areas, make the process of public planning for future and diversifying development a difficult task (Collins and Jackson, 1998).

Despite the diverse arguments which have been reviewed on the potential for new diversified tourism products, particularly sports-related, special interest developments which are the main focus here, the weight of opinion appears to be shifting substantially to one which favours investment in new products that will help Crete remain competitive in the tourism market. While there will inevitably be significant debate, the development of sports-oriented facilities to upgrade the product offer, appear more likely to be initiated (in some cases continued) in and around areas of existing tourist concentration. Within a prematurely ageing built environment of the Northern Coast, the design and implementation of new facilities' improvement is undeniably a survival strategy.

References

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