

# **TRADITIONAL DESTINATIONS' POLICY ENVIRONMENT TOWARDS A SPORT TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF CRETE**

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## **Aim of abstract**

The island of Crete has been a typical mass tourism destination for decades that faces the strategic dilemma of shifting its offer towards alternative tourism forms. Whether this differentiation strategy has been effectively appreciated by all involved parts of the local policy environment remains the main focus of the present study. The aim of the research is the examination of the reactions expressed within the local tourism 'policy community' (Houlihan, 2003) regarding a potential sport tourism development at the island of Crete as part of a rejuvenation strategy.

## **Theoretical background**

Sport tourism has been one of the most applicable proposals to face the no longer profitable product of mass tourism heavily established in the area of the Mediterranean (Weed and Bull, 2000). This proposal which dominated the relevant literature derived from the recognition that the traditional tourism industry's modus operandi led to unsustainable developments (Weed and Bull, 2004). In the case of the Crete imbalanced governmental incentives to raise commercial initiatives and a rapidly increased tourism operation in the last four decades led to an unsustainable tourism activity. Policy inconsistencies along with increased tour operator control over the local offer, led the Greek tourism product into a stagnated developmental phase in need for policy reconsideration (Tsartas and Lagos, 2004).

## **Methodology, research design and data analysis**

Qualitative research is engaged in the present study due to its capacity to retrieve meanings deriving from the relevant actors' influential relation to the research subject and core theme. In the destination of Crete all relevant bodies to tourism policy, development and operation were examined through representatives who have direct involvement to the central policy making, local government or lead collective commercial tourism interests, thus securing validity through complete participation. Official semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen representatives supported by policy documents' analysis, thus enhancing validity of the research output further. Content analysis was enabled to achieve knowledge through complicated statements and diverse developmental aspects.

## **Results, discussion and implications**

Despite the appreciation widely expressed by the participants towards the capabilities of sport tourism, moving the development forward and finally rejuvenating the present offer in the island of Crete seems problematic. A substantial number of interviewees criticised the government of unresponsive regulation and incentives while failing to secure future tourism operation through sustainable practices. Scepticism was expressed by the local industry, focusing mainly on short term profits, about the demand for alternative tourism products like sport tourism in a 'sea and sun' well established destination. A considerable number of tourism enterprises' representatives declared their appreciation of the sport tourism sustainable character which however clashes with the realisation that the new development will have to be initiated within the existing overdeveloped tourism infrastructure and operation. Consequently, the local environment as mapped through the interviews is characterised by local government's urge for policy control and inclusion, maintained industry infrastructure operation and central policy making ineffectiveness of producing applicable sport tourism subsidies. The observed distance between the tourism central authorities, the local government and the tourism enterprises present a typical case of inefficient tourism policy setting in need for policy networks forming and a common developmental consensus. Overambitious literature on the ability of sport tourism to affect the unsustainable model of mass tourism seems to conflict with the results of the present study at the hesitating tourism destination of Crete which hopefully produces a case of generalizable value to other relevant destinations.

## **References**

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