

## RECREATION OFFICERS AT RESORTS: AN EMERGING SPORT TOURISM PROFESSION?

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### Context

In recent years, entrepreneurs have increased the number of sport tours, developed sport-specific resort destinations and added sport facilities and programmes to resort settings as a basis for tourism. For some years, resort hotels and cruise ships offer help in overcoming barriers, a service known as *animation*. According to Pompl (1983), animation can be defined as “*a stimulus for the body, the mind and for the pursuit of social activities*”. Animation programmes should be based on methods of group dynamics and on voluntary participation through encouragement and motivation. Nevertheless, in didactic principles the norm for animation should be “fun instead of achievement”. Sessoms (1990) noted that occupations transforming themselves into professions develop special codes of ethics, create social organizations to ensure their perpetuation, and take on characteristics of self-governing, autonomous bodies, which then form criteria defining the profession. Hotel animation and animateurs grow more important because they support marketing goals as well as providing income, and this paper points out issues related to professionalization.

We reviewed literature and official papers to further define the occupation of animateur as it is known in Europe; although long known in the arts, the concept has not been treated in English language tourism literature; in French, animateur means a community development worker who is enabler, catalyst, friend, adviser, or activator, usually in the public sector. Animation officers work to develop the leadership capabilities of others.

Authors divide hotel animation into 7 areas: sports, hobbies, entertainment programmes, adventure experiences, excursions, relaxation for the mind, and social activities for the improving communication. Initiatives by operators to include animation in their services require major investments in sports facilities, playgrounds, training fields, athletic equipment and sports expertise (Glinia, Lytras & Maras, 2004). As for a job description, the main duties are concerned with organizing programmes offered in (usually commercial) clubs, hotels or holiday resorts.

Employers of animateurs are likely to be hoteliers or tour operators. Seasonally employed animateurs are provided with accommodation, and usually receive a fixed salary, rather than working on commission. Animation work is closely related to the animateur's personality, and talent and inclination are the main qualifications needed. For while rules of a game/sport or techniques of a hobby can be learned fairly readily, other generic skills basic to animation like the ability to make contact with others, to understand their feelings, or creative skills are only acquired through a long process.

In Greece, there is no official recognition of the animateur as a job in tourism, but case studies in Italy, Spain and France showed the animateur as a new hotel profession, though mainly remaining peripheral and seasonal (Gatti, Mereu and Tagliaferro 2000). Animation teams consist mostly of multi-national staff, and come from related professions (Pompl 1983). Recently in Greece, Glinia and Costa (2004) tracked more than 10 different vocational backgrounds and 14 different nationalities. Although the majority of animateurs in lower entrance positions were not professionals, almost every animation manager perceived him/herself as a professional. It seems that professional animation work is multidisciplinary, and animation managers should have a couple of years experience working in related fields to get professional accreditation, and also adequate language skills.

Like other jobs in leisure and recreation, animation has been unimportant for a long time, while a lack of interest by society and organizers has brought confusion regarding who is an animateur, while seasonality and mobility are barriers to acceptance and progress as a profession, yet the International Federation of Tourism Authors and Journalists identified more than 50,000 animateurs in France, Italy and Spain even in 1983. In 1996-99 the Leonardo da Vinci ANIMATEUR project was implemented

through cooperation by six European countries, with exchange of students, teaching staff and experts, and producing a European Animateur Passport was produced.

Many authors insist that hotel animation schools or institutions are needed, but there is only a few specific courses in Europe and none in Greece. However, hotel animation gives birth to a new tourism product, the “club holiday” or “sports holiday”. Professional, certificated animateurs could assure an improved sport tourism product, or at least avoid poor practices. But currently the economic paybacks of animation are not clearly demonstrated.

As a conclusion, animation has a long way to go along the occupational/professional continuum. Formal training courses and grading criteria must be established towards accreditation. Animateurs may remain an incomplete profession if they lack attention from the state and from tourism boards. In Greece, strategic planning for a qualification could be organized under the Sport Tourism Research Unit (RUGR) and/or the emerging European Association for Sport Tourism (EAST).

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