

THE SUSTAINABLE REGENERATION OF LAGGING REGIONS THROUGH SPORT-RELATED TOURISM FORMS: DEVELOPMENTAL CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL FOR TOURISM ENTERPRISES AT THE REGION OF THRACE, GREECE

Ourania Vrontdou, University of Peloponnese, Sparta, Greece, ovrontdou@uop.gr

Athanasios Kriemadis, University of Peloponnese, Sparta, Greece

INTRODUCTION

Subsidies for new private investment have proved to be largely ineffective for the 1990's (GNTO, 2000), failing to gain the interest of enterprises to invest in tourism projects in the region of Thrace, Greece. During this period a total of seven new developments were recorded in the region, out of the total of 182 in the whole of Northern Greece. Seeking a comprehensive insight into the sustainable development of new forms of tourism across underdeveloped regions and the potential for further sports-oriented tourism development, this research engaged a case study of the under-developed tourism area of Thrace in Northern Greece thus contributing to further understanding of the potential of sports tourism in different developmental contexts (Vrontdou and Kriemadis, 2006).

Based on Houlihan's (1991) view of 'Policy Community' being one that "takes the span and intensity of issue interest/control as being defining characteristics" the present study examines, as the theoretical paradigm suggests, the "policy actors with a direct interest in the policy or implementation field", concentrating on those who own or manage tourism enterprises in the relevant industry. Empirical work in this case study location is characterised by an in-depth review of private sector relating to tourism and, where relevant, to environmental and developmental policy in the context of sustainably developing the local lagging environment. In the course of this study, the nature and potential of sports tourism development in Thrace, and the private sector actors' perceptions of the factors influencing the development and position of sports tourism in the tourism industry, being a crucial member of this tourism policy community, determined the principal focus of the examination. Identifying this potential key role for sport tourism within both tourism product establishment and regional sustainable development in Thrace, the following analysis aims to present both the promising and obstructing factors to its establishment and practice, as identified from the empirical research.

METHODOLOGY

Seeking the capacity to identify the existing scope and further potential of new tourism forms, like sports tourism, within underdeveloped tourism regions the research strategy identified the need for detailed research across the sample area of Thrace. For the collection of data in this study primary semi-structured interviews were used to extract key actors' perceptions on development and policy making, the factors that influence activity or inactivity, problematic or promising issues concerning sports tourism development etc. Within the local 'policy community', the sample representation engaged thirty five (35) officially contacted semi-structured interviews focusing on the private sector consisting of the Heads, General Secretaries and Members of collective tourism bodies in Thrace specifically, the Association of Tour Agents, President of Industrial Enterprises and Association of Hotel Owners. Detailed examination of the interviews ultimately led to the development of a systematic classification scheme made up of a set of thematic categories, according to the studied areas, within which there were additional sub-sections. Information that fed these categories came from a coding process for every response or point made in the interviews. A classification code, describing the content of the answer, was developed for all the main themes, and thus a highly structured approach was taken to the qualitative analysis. For the purposes of this study, the triangulation

of data, as well as of method, was used to enhance the credibility of strategies used and the data produced, engaging the qualitative analysis of a series of unpublished documents declaring the policy and action intentions.

RESULTS

It became obvious from the interviews with the representatives of the existing tourism sector in Thrace (e.g. Association of Tour Agents, President of Industrial Enterprises, Association of Hotel Owners), that investments would be more favorably directed towards already developed parts of neighboring or southern regions, than the virgin tourism environment of Thrace. This however, contradicts and to some extent leads to a questioning of central public thinking, which aims to diffuse tourism to areas with what are currently relatively low demand levels, and therefore to spread economic development more widely and sustainably. The lack of tourism infrastructure and superstructure that policy inefficiency has produced, is suggested as the crucial obstacle to tourism growth in the area, which is unable to sustain or attract a number of visitors larger than the random inflow of independent travellers, nor is it likely to attract the commercial entrepreneurs and tour operators who can generate facilities and visitors for a developing tourism sector for the area. In terms of both observational analysis and from interviews, it seems evident that the distance of the region from areas of established private sector centres, proves to be significantly influential to the attraction of commercial investors in tourism.

Despite the positive attitudes towards the reinforced power of local government and the establishment of the Tourism Prefecture Committees, local businesses argue that regional and local authorities are presently unable to undertake new tourism development, especially that of a distinct 'special' sport tourism product, such as sports tourism facilities, due to the lack of managerial and marketing skills, as well as the lack of knowledge of changing tourism trends. Representatives of tourism enterprises in Thrace also noted that this inexperience in matters of tourism development refers not only to the local public administration mechanism, but also to local businesses, the scale of which does not allow for sophisticated managerial processes to evolve.

CONCLUSIONS

Sport tourism, seen by both the public and private sector in Greece as synonymous to a 'soft' active tourism form, bears the ability to create a 'quality' product offer for the region and bring in an attractive, if narrow market segment (Standeven and De Knop, 1999). However, new tourism development will have to be initiated by both the public and private sector.

There was a mutual agreement over developing a distinct product in order to avoid the mainstream demand image of the traditional destinations and therefore to target different new market segments. The 'sustainable' thinking carried by private developers of the area is associated primarily with the need to invest in a tourism structure that can cope positively with changing tourism fashions in the years to come. Ecological and economic sustainability concerns rose from the interviewees of the private sector, appearing highly environmentally conscious in seeking the development of 'green' tourism operations and a lasting benefit for the area. It is clearly important for the public sector to show evidence of interest and positive investments in tourism infrastructure, before entrepreneurs emerge to operate in this sector and develop sport tourism forms further. Preferences are evident for to what they term a 'specialised tourism clientele', not necessarily in terms of economic status, but mainly in 'green' profile characteristics and behaviour. What is necessary though is sufficient development, and subsequently marketing, to interest niche market tour operators in attracting foreign adventurous active tourists to this new destination area.

REFERENCES

Greek National Tourism Organisation (GNTO), 2000, Tourism Statistics in Greece, Athens.

Houlihan, B. 1991, *The Government and Politics of Sport*, Routledge, London.

Standeven, J. and De Knop, P. 1999, *Sport Tourism*, Human Kinetics, USA.

Vrondou, O. and Kriemadis, A. 2006, *Sport in the Restructuring of the Tourism Policy in Crete: Public and Private Sector Role and Perspectives*, 14th EASM Congress, 7 – 10 September 2006, Nicosia.