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Sustainability and resilience of coastal tourist destinations: notes from the smart destinations approach

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ARTICLE SECTION

Sustainability and resilience of coastal tourist destinations: notes from the smart destinations approach

Abstract: With the crisis caused by COVID-19, the concept of resilience has gained importance in the tourism sector, one of the most affected. This pause has provoked a change of model based on sustainability where the model of Smart Tourism Destinations (STD) appear as the main beneficiaries of this crisis since they manage to overcome the objective of growth and have a planning and management approach contributing to the sustainability of the tourism sector. This paper aims through the analysis of indicators to characterize the relationship between sustainability and resilience, to analyze the contribution of the STD model to sustainability and its implications for becoming more resilient, as well as to identify limitations and identify new possibilities to make destinations more resilient. Evolving towards smarter destinations requires more attention than simple indicators and the interrelation of different dimensions: environmental, socio-cultural,... that together with the incorporation of the SDG 2030, will lead us towards a more integrated and sustainable model.

Key words: sustainability, Smart Tourism Destination (STD), resilience, tourism model, smart cities, planning.

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IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

1. El concepto de resiliencia está cobrando una relevancia creciente, reforzada por la crisis de la Covid-19.
2. La crisis desencadenada por la Covid-19 es una oportunidad para construir un nuevo modelo basado en la sostenibilidad y superar el objetivo centrado en el crecimiento.
3. Se advierte una progresiva consolidación de los destinos turísticos inteligentes (DTI) como enfoque de la planificación y gestión.
4. El modelo DTI de la Comunitat Valenciana está contribuyendo a la sostenibilidad con implicaciones en la resiliencia de los destinos.

1. The concept of resilience is gaining relevance, reinforced by the Covid-19 crisis.
2. The crisis triggered by the Covid-19 crisis is an opportunity to build a new model based on sustainability and overcome the growth-focused objective.
3. There is a progressive consolidation of intelligent tourism destinations (STD) as an approach to planning and management.
4. The STD model of the Valencian Community is contributing to the sustainability with implications in the resilience of the destinations.

1. El concepte de resiliència està cobrant una importància creixent, reforçada per la crisi de la Covid-19.
2. La crisi desencadenada per la Covid-19 és una nova oportunitat per a construir un nou model basat en la sostenibilitat i superar l'objectiu centrat en el creixement.
3. S'adverteix una progressiva consolidació dels destins turístics intel·ligents (DTI) com a enfocament de la planificació i gestió.
4. El model DTI en la Comunitat Valenciana està contribuint a la sostenibilitat amb implicacions en la resiliència dels destins.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT¹

Introduction

Within the framework of the debate on sustainable tourism development, the concept of resilience is increasing in relevance and has been further reinforced by the Covid-19 crisis. The pandemic has revealed the vulnerability of tourism to the restriction of movement and has led to an unprecedented crisis. The proposals for the recovery of the tourism activity on the whole include, as an objective, the shaping of more sustainable and resilient tourist destinations. Therefore, the challenge consists in reactivating tourism and reinforcing the sustainability and resilience of destinations based on tourism planning and management. This challenge coincides with the gradual consolidation of the Smart Tourist Destinations (STDs) in Spain as a planning and management model.

This article analyses the relationships between sustainability and resilience in coastal destinations, from the perspective of smart destination management within the current complex scenario.

Objectives and methodology

The principal objectives of this study are:

- To characterise the relationship between sustainability and resilience in coastal destinations notably affected by the Covid-19 crisis.
- To analyse the contribution of the STD model of the Comunitat Valenciana (Regional government of Valencia) to sustainability and its implications for the resilience of the destinations.
- To identify limitations and propose new lines of research for the transition towards more resilient destinations.

The methodology used consists, on the one hand, in analysing the scientific production on the relationships between sustainability and resilience and, specifically, that focused on coastal tourist destinations. On the other hand, it studies the indicator system of the STD Network of the Comunitat Valenciana, a fundamental pillar of the STD programme coordinated by the Instituto Valenciano de Tecnologías Turísticas (INVAT.TUR).

The analysis of the indicator system, from the point of view of sustainability and resilience, studies the structure and its indicators as well as the results obtained from the self-diagnostic process of a group of 10 coastal towns. Although it is a small sample, it includes the majority of the coastal towns that have a significant volume of accommodation supply and those tourist destinations with a more advanced STD project.

Debate: Towards sustainable and resilient destinations

The crisis situation has aroused interest in conducting a necessary debate on the exhaustion of the global tourism model based on growth (Fletcher, 2011), with proposals of concepts such as tourism degrowth, the stationary state or prosperity without growth, as alternatives contemplated within the post-growth movement (Navarro et al., 2020). The crisis triggered by Covid-19 also constitutes an opportunity to rethink tourism and

¹ Traducción exclusiva de los autores / Authors' exclusive translation.

construct a new model based on sustainability, moving away from the objective focused on growth, placing greater importance on social, environmental and cultural policies and to real well-being (Palomo et al., 2020).

Furthermore, when considering large consolidated destinations, specialised for many decades in the tourism activity, substantial changes cannot be made in the short and medium term with respect to product diversification if we take into account the amount of inertias generated by the functional specialisation of these spaces.

However, together with financial bailout policies and investments as part of reactivation plans and programmes, that is, maintaining the supply of the traditional model through financial instruments in order to guarantee employment (Velasco, 2020), as part of the recovery measures, it is necessary to implement public control mechanisms. In addition, tourism promotion needs to be more focused on proximity with a more long-term perspective and social tourism policies should be aimed at establishing a social and solidarity-based economy (Macià et al., 2020). Similarly, Velasco (2020) indicates the opportunity of the crisis to improve the sustainability of the model, the circular economy and the SDG 2030.

However, public policies in the field of tourism continue to focus on growth and competitiveness (Velasco, 2020). Therefore, there is a risk that the economic urgencies derived from the crisis, also in the short term, lead to actions aimed at reactivating the growth model. In short, these measures aim to recover the tourism inertias that existed at the beginning of the crisis (Mantecón, 2020), in many cases based on the instrumentation of tourism by the real estate sector, as opposed to the option of shaping tourism development strategies based on social and environmental sustainability as alternatives (López Palomeque et al., 2021).

The crisis has led the Spanish government to implement a plan that systematises support measures in order to address the challenge of recovering while also considering sustainability and digitalisation as key aspects. The objective is to decisively strengthen tourism based on criteria such as the quality, accessibility and sustainability of the destinations, products and services through actions based on upgrading supply, renovation, planning and sustainability.

On a regional scale, the case of the Comunitat Valenciana can constitute an example. Its Strategic Tourism Plan 2020/2025 (Invat.tur, Secretaría Autonómica de Turismo, 2020) in its strategic lines and programmes (governance, human capital, the articulation of the territory, marketing...), includes tourism safety and resilience in two areas: safe destination and crisis management; and recovering after Covid and stimulating the resilience of companies and destinations.

On a local level, Benidorm is a paradigmatic example of the response to Covid-19 of a mass tourism destination with an emphasis on the hotel supply. From the very beginning of the crisis, the entire business fabric together with the municipal authorities designed and executed a plan beginning with the closure of the town to tourists, followed by a lockdown period and then the implementation of phases to reactivate tourism, sending a clear message to its target markets that it is a safe destination.

One particularly significant area of study, due to the size of the supply installed and the economic, social and territorial effect, is that of the so-called tourist-residential destinations. Although the impact of the crisis caused by Covid-19 have been relativised by the frequenting of visitors who own houses and apartments, we can also open up the debate on the future of these destinations. In this case, the concept of the proposed line of

study is evolving from a tourist-residential destination towards an urban entity. This could be facilitated by the demobilisation of workers, which is a phenomenon that has already been taking place and which, in the new context, is inducing a new mobility on a global scale (Rosa, 2013). This line had previously been indicated as one of the scenarios for mature destinations (Rovira-Soto, 2008), based on the reconversion of urban areas.

Therefore, it can be argued that the future of these tourist-residential destinations resides in their reconversion from real estate economies into economies of residentiality (Aledo et al., 2020). This requires a common and solidarity-based effort in order to prevent the crisis from reinforcing inequality and social vulnerabilities.

Conclusions

The challenge of evolving towards more sustainable and resilient coastal destinations through the smart approach has both possibilities and limitations. The systemic STD model gives a central role to sustainability, integrated into the strategic-relational environment, and enables the development of synergies between sustainability and intelligence. However, the specific indicators simplify the environmental dimension of sustainability and ignore the socio-cultural dimension. The comprehensive perspective of sustainability requires broader and more complex information systems which should incorporate the SDOs of the 2030 Agenda and specific resilience indicators. On an instrumental level they should develop the potential of the new technologies.

The indicators analysed show interesting advances in aspects of the governance of the destinations. However, in line with the results of other studies (González-Reverté, 2019; Gomis-López and González-Reverté, 2020; Ivars et al., 2018), the solutions applied have a sectoral bias and correspond to a weak kind of sustainability that does not question the pre-existing urban-tourism models. So, for example, the management of climate change represents a clear deficit that affects both the sustainability and resilience of destinations and which should be resolved urgently.

With respect to sustainability as a balance between the environmental, economic and socio-cultural dimensions, a fundamental theory which is difficult to acknowledge in practice, resilience accommodates imbalances as an inherent aspect of the evolution of socio-ecological systems and seeks ways to manage them (Pizzo, 2015). This approach opens a new debate on the evolution of tourist destinations.