

Reasons to move towards sustainable tourism in Spain

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The dynamism shown by the Spanish tourism sector in recent years has been so remarkable that up until 2017 we have broken records in international tourist arrivals. Tourism has positioned itself as one of the main engines of Spanish economy and, however, in a few months we have gone on to talk about a stop or, even, deceleration.

Among the causes of this change is the notable reactivation of tourism in some competing Mediterranean countries, mainly Egypt and Tunisia; the weakness in the growth of the main emitting countries and of domestic demand in our country.

Objective: more income

The solution is to maximise revenues from tourism, parking amenities based almost exclusively on the (growing) number of tourists. And precisely the income from tourism had a better performance than the arrivals of international tourists during the first half of 2018. Perhaps the time has come to change certain dynamics and to establish appropriate strategies for the sustainable development of tourism in our country. And, in addition, what is called “Spanish tourist model” is giving worrying symptoms of exhaustion.

The case of Barcelona sounded alarm bells for months. For the first time, neighbours organised themselves in platforms claiming their “right” to the city, to their neighbourhood, to be able to live without the saturation imposed by mass tourism in public spaces. Collaborative platforms, especially those that have allowed converting housing into tourist apartments contributed to the discomfort (and rejection) by causing significant increases in rents and, consequently, the expulsion of the weakest from the city centres, but also from less central neighbourhoods where tourists en up arriving.

And finally we must highlight the protest / complaint of the cleaning women for their work situation: many hours of work for a very low salary. This implies that there are business models with high returns at the cost of precariously certain jobs in a country where tourism is a major sector. Bad symptom if we want this sector to reach the majority in its benefits.

What does sustainable tourism mean?

We are again talking about the sustainability of the model, to open the debate and action towards what kind of tourism activity we want. But let us be honest: we still do not have very clear what

sustainable tourism development means, regardless of whether the activity is sustained in the long term.

There are other dimensions of sustainability that have been left aside and that is where the current debate must be focused, starting with a very important issue: measurement. In addition to the usual statistics (international arrivals, income, tourism employment...) we need to start measuring sustainability, even though it is still a concept that is not very operational and diffuse from an academic perspective.

It is, in short, to move forward to have a clearer picture of where this activity is impacting and where to act to maintain it in the long term, where tourism is failing in quality and where we can be stronger in a future with greater competition – mainly – in the Mediterranean.

A good system of indicators would allow a more adequate management of the impacts. In this line, the UNWTO manifested itself in the meeting held in Manila in 2017.

Good ideas, but few

There are valuable but atomised and isolated initiatives, also in the field of certifications. A leading country in tourism such as Spain should lead innovative proposals in this direction and take action in the measurement, monitoring and evaluation of sustainable tourism. The impact of this change in the tourism market will be positive if you know how to take advantage of the opportunities. And in this context, debate and consensus are key. Therefore, we cannot forget to advance in the tourism governance. That is, the review of the tourism model from the sustainability perspective cannot leave aside the participation of agents. It is the fourth dimension of sustainability: politics.

One of the themes that we repeat to tourism students is that this activity generates positive and negative impacts. Tourism policy is responsible for maximising the former and minimising the latter. But it must do so considering the responsibility that represents a sector that consumes resources of great value (landscaping, social, cultural...), which are “privatised” to achieve employment and income. On the other hand, climate change requires imminent action if we want to stop in time.

If, indeed, the objective is that future generations can meet their needs, we must consider actions that allow us to improve the model to maintain such an important activity for the economy as tourism.