Sustainable tourism: A view from guest houses in the Eden District Municipality

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Abstract

The tourism industry is growing rapidly and the loss of natural landscapes, local identities and traditional cultures; degradation of the environment are often listed as negative impacts associated with the tourism industry's development. The accommodation sector has been described as part of the industry, which activities cause negative impact on the environment, calling urgently for greater participation in sustainable tourism practices. Previous studies indicate that small medium tourism enterprises, often focus on business returns by employing unsustainable business practices. To minimise any negative impacts that may arise as the result of tourism activities, efforts are now geared towards alternative forms of tourism which most academic literatures describes as 'sustainable tourism (Tomasella, 2015). This article presents the results of an investigation into the sustainable business practices by guest houses in the Eden District Municipality (EDM). The research adopted a quantitative research approach where self-administered questionnaires where used to gather information from guest house owners, managers and locums. The questionnaire mainly assessed their views on the importance of the environment as a key resource base for the tourism industry together with the most commonly used or adopted sustainable business practices by their guest houses. The main findings show that the there is a general agreement that the environment is an important resource for the tourism industry and there is a widespread sustainable business practices adopted by these guest houses. The results have implications for future strategies attempting to promote sustainable practices within the accommodation sector of the tourism industry.

Keywords: Guesthouses, Sustainable business practices, Sustainable tourism development, sustainable tourism, sustainable principles, SMMEs

Introduction

During the last two decades, the environmental agenda for both public policy and private business has been dominated by the emergence of sustainable development (Counsell, 1998; Munton and Collins, 1998). In his study about sustainable development and structure plans in England and Wales: Operationalizing the themes and principles, Counsell (1998) found that whilst sustainable development has been widely accepted as a theoretical concept, the translation of this abstract idea into operational practice gives rise to problems, due both to a lack of understanding about what sustainable development means and moreover because it appears to mean different things to different people. The concept has its origins in the growing realisation of the finite nature of global natural resources, the rate of human exploitation of the

environment and the implications for future generations. The Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987: 43) defined 'sustainable development' as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. The concept has been placed further centre-stage following the Earth Summit in 1992 with the emergence of Agenda 21, which encouraged the formulation of locally-based and sector specific strategies for transferring sustainable development into practice. Tourism is one sector of the economy that has endorsed the notion of sustainability, at least in policy statements and within some initiatives (Godfrey, 1998). Examples of these initiatives includes environmental management best practices around rationalising the use of raw materials, including water and energy, reducing the volume of wastes and improving waste management, adopting a more ecological purchasing policy and improving logistics, improving the quality of the establishment's internal environment and making the staff aware of the importance of environmental issues. The same author went further to say that despite this, it has been noted that the application of sustainability will depend on the government's values and ideologies. This interest reflects a realisation that the viability of the industry is dependent on the quality of the resource base, whether in the natural, built or cultural environment. As with other sectors, the translation of theory into practice has been problematic as awareness, understanding, interpretation, interest and implementation within the sector have been highly variable.

Tourism-related industries present additional problems for the interpretation of sustainability because the sector is diverse in terms of type and size of businesses and the range of possible environmental impacts. The tourism product is a composite of services where the level of environmental impacts is difficult to monitor and regulate, especially if business performance and profitability might be affected. The aim of this article is to investigate the sustainable business practices as adopted by the guest houses in the Eden District Municipality (EDM). Focus is placed on the most commonly used or adopted sustainable business practices by these guesthouses using the results of a questionnaire survey of the guest houses. The results have implications for future strategies attempting to promote sustainable tourism.

Sustainable Tourism

In their study of sustainable tourism: a regional perspective, Berry and Ladkin (1997), revealed that despite a willingness on the part of small businesses to engage in sustainable activities those engaged in the tourism business have little understanding of the concept of sustainability. Possible reasons for this scenario could be confusion about the relevance of sustainability to business operations, the absence of active and coordinated support and the dominance of economic criteria in decision making in small businesses. Schaper and Carlsen (2004) further argued that small firms often find it challenging to recognize the benefits of implementing environmental initiatives into their business. They may not see the potential financial gains due to the cost savings from initiatives such as waste reduction, and do not see the advantages in marketing if their firm becomes more environmentally friendly. Since the owners cannot identify the benefits, they have difficulty justifying effort and cost to make their operations more environmentally friendly. The vague principles do not easily translate into workable practice.

The translation of sustainable development ideas into tourism management has occurred in recognition of the sector's dependence on features of the environment for its continued viability. If the quality of the resource base is eroded in a destination by depletion, pollution or erosion, then it may lose its tourist appeal and potential with substantial implications for the local economy and society. The environmental impacts of tourism are not simply those related to degradation caused by the volume of visitors, but the resource implications resulting from

the operation of tourism-related businesses, such as transportation pressures and pollution, energy and water consumption, waste generation and purchasing strategies. The responsibility for protecting the resource base for tourism therefore rests with all tourism operators. However, the highly fragmented nature of the tourism industry, involving accommodation, transportation, destinations, attractions as well as the public sector, acts as a barrier to the common interpretation and widespread acceptance and adoption of the concept of sustainability. In the same study done by Berry and Ladkin (1997), they also identified a number of barriers to successful implementation of sustainable tourism practices, the most prominent being a mistrust of government policy, poor administration and unclear lines of communication. Businesses are operating in a market system which incorporates very few environmental protection mechanisms outside public sector intervention.

The scope of the term 'sustainable tourism' has therefore been diverse, ranging from principles that require a high level of responsibility for the environment, and therefore involve substantial adjustments to the operation of tourism-related businesses, to interpretations that are simply marketing ploys designed to attract new clientele (Berry and Ladkin, 1997). Indeed, it is felt by some researchers that sustainable tourism may represent a threat to the environment by being used as a guise to sell more holidays and open up new destinations rather than contribute to environmental conservation (Wheeller, 1992). In a study conducted by Cater (1995) concerning the environmental contradictions in sustainable tourism, he found that the concept of 'sustainable tourism' is not viable because most tourism activity places additional pressures on the environmental resources upon which it is based, compromising the present and future interest of tourists, host populations and tourism organisations. The resource demands of transporting visitors around the globe are such that, in a 'green' society, the industry would be banned or severely curtailed.

Beioley (1995) identifies four features required for tourism to be a truly sustainable sector. First, tourism must respect the economic well-being and social and cultural concerns of host communities. Consequently, tourism development in an area must involve consultation and participation as well as a degree of local control. Second, tourism must respect the character of the local environment and operate within its capability to regenerate itself. Third, tourism should reduce its impact on the wider global environment in terms of depletion of natural resources and pollution. Fourth, tourism should provide a meaningful and satisfying experience for the visitor. The translation of these high ideals into effective practical measures often remains clouded and confused, but have commonly been interpreted as schemes attempting to encourage energy efficient lighting and heating, water conservation, recycling and local purchasing. The benefits of sustainable tourism are not solely in terms of environmental gains. There can also be benefits for the business in terms of reductions in the cost-base through savings, enhanced reputations, greater appeal to more affluent customers, a favourable impression to investors, improved job satisfaction for staff an enjoyable experience for visitors and benefits for the local community (Swarbrooke, 1994).

The response of the tourism industry to the concept of sustainable development has been mixed. Within the accommodation sector, many of the larger businesses have introduced initiatives to promote the principles of sustainability. In 1993, the International Hotel and Environment Initiative, consisting of nine of the world's major hotel companies, produced a manual on how the environmental performance of hotels could be improved (Middleton and Hawkins, 1993). Many accommodation providers have also had to respond to global concerns associated with environmental issues. Some hotels have embraced the principles of sustainable development to mirror customer concerns with the energy consumed by their stay. For example, recycling, and re- using linen and towels, are minor measures that hotels have introduced. (Page, 2009, 287).

Tourist accommodation owned and operated by small, family businesses, which is the backbone of the sector, are often more difficult to regulate and influence because of limitations of scale and availability of time and expertise. According to global entrepreneurship monitor (GEM, 2012), South Africa's small family owned tourist accommodation in the tourism industry are characterised by SMEs and it is not unusual to find small businesses being run by the owner because they are survivalists as well (GEM, 2012: 43). Owner involvement is typical of entrepreneurial organisations found in SMEs. However, the length of time in business is important for local economic development of the region as reported by the GEM (2012: 45) with regard to failures of start-up SMEs. GEM reported that South Africa has a relatively high rate of start-up failures. Failure rates are obtained by determining the ratio of start-up firms to new firms, which in South Africa amounts to 2.4 to 1 compared to an average of 1.6 to 1 in developing countries (GEM, 2012: 45). A high failure rate among start-up firms would result in a low number of businesses being younger than four years old. Non-economic motives, such as a wish to 'get out of the rat race', family and personal reasons, and semi- or early retirement, are also usually more dominant in such businesses (Shaw *et al.*, 1987). The emphasis on personal rather than business objectives have, in the past, been indications that many small hotels are not run on a highly commercial basis. The dominance of such motivations might mean that the receptiveness of operators to initiatives attempting to encourage sustainability might be low. However, the very fact that some operators have dropped 'out of the rat race' and sought an 'alternative lifestyle' might make them more interested in environmental sustainability. The adoption of sustainable practices would then depend on levels of interest, expertise and supporting infrastructure.

Research into the environmental awareness, action and performance of the tourist accommodation sector have produced predictable results. Stabler and Goodall's (1997) study of the hospitality sector on Guernsey amply demonstrated the disposition of businesses to sustainable tourism. Hoteliers possessed a general knowledge of environmental problems but had limited or no understanding of tourism-environmental interactions. Only about 18% of the respondents were aware of, and could explain, 'sustainable tourism'. Of the one-fifth who claimed knowledge of environmental auditing, less than half actually understood its use. About one-third had introduced sustainable practices since 1990, although these activities were relatively low-key and conventional, being dominated by paper, tin and bottle recycling (33%), low energy lighting and heating (28%), using diesel/lead free vehicles (27%) and introducing double glazing (24%). The reasons given for inaction pointed to a high degree of complacency amongst the businesses, with satisfactory current environmental performance (19%), low priority to environmental matters within their business (16%) and potential increased costs (14%) acting as disincentives.

Brown's (1994) survey of 106 managers from large and medium-sized hotel groups in the United Kingdom indicated that the main reason for introducing environmental initiatives was on the basis of cost-savings rather than the benefits for the environment. Indeed, care of the environment was not as important as health and safety, quality, cost or customer care in the decision to introduce such changes. The introduction of environmental initiatives was often hindered by controls and procedures operated by head office. Other research has indicated that many large hotel groups believe some 'sustainable' practices, such as water and energy conservation, to be in conflict with the principle of luxury accommodation and might adversely affect the enjoyment of a guest's stay (Forsyth, 1995).

Berry and Ladkin's (1997) study of the perception and implementation of sustainable tourism by tourism enterprises in East Sussex, derived from focus group research, revealed a slightly different perspective on the issue. As with previous research, respondents could provide no clear definition of the concept of sustainable tourism, and were consequently very wary of those who sought to encourage adoption of theoretical concepts with no practical definition.

Nevertheless, the groups were receptive to new ideas and were able to identify workable practices that they felt would contribute to local sustainability, namely the alleviation of traffic congestion through public transport initiatives; directing visitors to resilient destinations by effective marketing; encouraging local purchasing and environmental education; and by energy conservation. Whether all suggestions were thoroughly thought through is open to question, especially as one suggestion to alleviate traffic congestion was to undertake road improvements. The main obstacles to developing and implementing sustainable tourism were the perceived extra costs and the mistrust of local government. However, Stipnuk (2002) argued that waste management systems should be implemented at a very early stage of hotel development.

The four "r" system of reducing, reusing, recycling and recovering has gained increasing attention over the past decade (Webster, 2000; Stipanuk, 2002). Minimizing waste starts in the procurement department, ensuring that only products with a minimal packaging are acquired (Stipanuk, 2002) with small simple changes in working processes. Many supplies can be reused, for example in a hotel bathroom: shampoo containers should be made out of glass and get refilled, replacing the small plastic bottles that end up in the garbage bin at home. Baker (2005) maintains that costs can be greatly reduced by waste reduction and replacing conventional waste disposal activities with practices aiming for reuse, disassembly, recycling and composting.

Despite the growing international recognition of the importance of environmental sustainability across many economic sectors, the main issue remains the translation of the concept into effective workable and practical strategies. In tourism, the range of tourism businesses, the diversity of environmental impacts and the essentially commercial nature of the business have resulted in various interpretations of the term as well as many real and perceived barriers to its adoption. The main barriers identified in previous research appear to be a lack of understanding and awareness of environmental issues related to tourism, the fear of extra costs, and scepticism by small business owners of what is perceived to be an impractical and overly theoretical concept.

A Case Study

Each tourism region possesses unique characteristics regarding the role, importance, activity and the types of tourism accommodation available in the region. This study was based and concentrated on the region known as the Eden District Municipality (EDM). The EDM is located along the south-eastern coast of the Western Cape Province in South Africa. It stretches roughly for 350 kilometres along the Indian Ocean, from the Bloukrans River in the east, to Wits and at the Breede river mouth in the west (see Figure 1). The Eden district municipality covers the Kannaland, Mossel Bay, George, Oudtshoorn, Plettenberg Bay, Hessequa and Knysna local municipalities (EDM, 2011). The district municipalities administer and govern the district, which includes more than one local municipality. The purpose of district municipalities and local municipalities is to share the responsibility for local government in their areas, as well as to ensure that all communities, particularly disadvantaged communities, have equal access to resources and services (EDM, 2011). This idea is of particular importance with reference to some local municipalities who do not have the capacity (finances, facilities, staff or knowledge) to provide services to their communities. It also helps to cut the costs of running a municipality by sharing resources with others. Therefore this study was only limited to selected guest houses in the Eden district region.

Figure 1: Eden District Municipality map, South Africa (EDM, 2011)

The EDM was chosen for the focus of this study for a number of reasons. First, the district has an established tourism industry with a range of tourist accommodations which is mainly dominated by guest houses. Much of the stock dates back to the nineteenth century, when the location's agreeable climate and coastal location made EDM, marketed as Garden Route and Klein Karoo a popular destination. The provision of tourist accommodation in the region is developed to cater for visitors arriving in the Western Cape Province and those *en-route* to other provinces within South Africa. There are an estimated 250 guesthouses in the EDM today, with the vast majority being small, privately run businesses. Thus, the provision of tourist accommodation plays a significant role in the local economy.

The second justification for focusing on the accommodation sector in EDM is that the district municipality has developed an economic growth strategy where tourism features as the main economic sector to drive economic growth in the region. The main aims of the strategy is to use tourism as a strategy for local economic development (LED). These objectives, however, have evolved as the tourism industry in the region has expanded and progressed, and the district municipality aims to play a vital role in the future development of the industry, including the protection of the district's environmental resource base for tourism.

Methodology

The study adopted a quantitative research methodology using a questionnaire which was targeted to guest house owners, managers and locums. The questionnaire obtained information relating to the importance of the environment to the tourism industry, the adoption of sustainable practices and the characteristics of the respondents (position of the person completing the questionnaire, owner's involvement in running the business, number of years of business existence, and type of business. The sampling strategy was based on the 'EDM database' which detailed accommodation units registered with the EDM Local Economic Development and Tourism Department. Initially, the guesthouses listed were contacted by an email in order to ascertain their willingness to take part in the survey.

Of the 250 guest houses listed in the EDM database, 128 (51.2%) agreed to participate. The survey took place over the period 15 June to 18 July 2014. This period proved to be advantageous because it was low season and guest house managers, owners and locums could afford the time to answer questions.

Results

This section provides the findings of the study and gives a general picture of the current practices by guest houses in EDM with regard to sustainable business practices.

Demographic information of the respondents

This section provides the demographical information of those who completed the questionnaire.

Table 1: Position of the person completing the questionnaire

	Frequency	Percent
Owner	85	66.4
Manager	39	30.5
Locum	4	3.1
Total	128	100

The majority of the questionnaires were completed by the guest house owners with 66.4%, followed by managers accounting for 30.5% with only 3.1% being the locums. Since many guest houses fall under the definition of small and medium enterprises (SME's), it is not unusual to find small businesses being run by the owner. Owner involvement is typical of entrepreneurial organisations found in SME's. This is supported by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) (2012: 40) which states that many SME's are either managed by the owner or by the appointed manager.

Table 2: Owners' involvement in the running of the business

	Frequency	Percent
Full-time	100	78.1
Part-time	28	21.9
Total	128	100

The results shows that of the owners, more than three quarters were involved full-time in the business whilst less than a quarter were involved on a part-time basis. Once again, since the industry is characterised by SMEs, it is not unusual to find small businesses being run by the owner because they are survivalists as well (GEM, 2012: 43). Owner involvement is typical of entrepreneurial organisations found in SMEs.

Table 3: Number of years of business's existence

	Frequency	Percent
More than 10 years	61	47.7
6 - <10 years	41	32.0
4 - <6 years	14	10.9
1 - <4 years	12	9.4
Total	128	100

Majority of the guest houses have been in business for more than 10 years followed by those who have been in existence for between six and 10 years. The least number of years of existence in business is for guest houses that have been in existence one and four years. The length of time in business is important for local economic development of the region as reported by the GEM (2012: 45) with regard to failures of start-up SMEs. GEM reported that South Africa has a relatively high rate of start-up failures. Failure rates are obtained by determining the ratio of start-up firms to new firms, which in South Africa amounts to 2.4 to 1 compared to an average of 1.6 to 1 in developing countries (GEM, 2012: 45). A high failure rate among start-up firms would result in a low number of businesses being younger than four years old.

The results of this study demonstrate that most of the guest houses in the Eden district region have passed the stage where many SMEs fail (four years) as many of them have existed for ten years and more as shown in table 4 below.

Environment as a key resource base for the tourism industry

This section provides views of the respondents in relation to how they view the environment as a key resource base to the tourism industry.

Table 4: Environment as a key resource base for the tourism industry

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	92	71.9
Agree	28	21.9
Neutral	7	5.5
Strongly disagree	1	0.8
Total	128	100

The results in table 4 indicate that there was a general agreement that the environment is a key resource base for the tourism industry with the majority of respondents in strong agreement with the statement. If the strongly agreed and agreed are combined, it makes the total of those in agreement with the statement more than a third of respondents in support of the statement that the environment is a key resource base for the tourism industry. Interestingly, no respondents disagreed with the statement. This outcome is similar to that of Stabler & Goodall (1997) who indicated that the environment is a key resource base for tourism and that there is a general awareness of the role it plays in the accommodation sector. This was further supported by Page (2009: 287) who stated that "Many accommodation providers have also had to respond to global concerns associated with environmental issues. Some hotels have embraced the principles of sustainable development to mirror customer

concerns with the energy consumed by their stay". For example, recycling, and re-using linen and towels, are minor measures that hotels have introduced. Increasing environmental awareness among travellers is a positive contribution towards accommodation sustainability.

Adoption of sustainable practices by the guest houses in EDM

The respondents were asked to choose between various sustainable practices commonly used or adopted by businesses in the accommodation sector which they are currently using. Respondents were allowed to choose more than one practice as they may be using more than one practice at a time and the results are shown in table 5.

Table 5: Sustainable practices adopted/implemented by the accommodation sector

		Responses		Percent of cases
		N	Percent	
	Reducing energy consumption	115	13.2%	89.8%
	Buying from local suppliers	122	14.0%	95.3%
	Alternative supplies to electricity, e.g. gas or solar	104	12.0%	81.3%
	Using low energy light bulbs	116	13.3%	90.6%
	Encouraging the use of public transport	57	6.6%	44.5%
	Buying recycled products	56	6.4%	43.8%
	Buying recycled glass	49	5.6%	38.3%
	Buying organic produce	70	8.1%	54.7%
	Monitoring waste production	96	11.0%	75.0%
	Eliminating the use of disposable packaging	84	9.7%	65.6%
Total		869	100.0%	678.9%

The results in table 5 show that the present level of adoption of sustainable practices within the sample population was relatively modest. Buying from local suppliers was the most widely integrated activity. Other popular 'sustainable' practices adopted/implemented by the guest houses included in the sample were reduction of energy consumption (89.8%; 115 guest houses), using low energy light bulbs (90.6%; 116 guest houses), alternative supplies to electricity (81.3%; 104 guest houses), monitoring waste production (75%; 96 guest houses), eliminating the use of disposable packaging (65.6%; 84 guest houses) and buying organic produce (54.7%; 70 guest houses). The least popular activities were encouraging the use of public transport (44.5%; 57 guest houses), buying recycled products (43.8%; 56 guest houses) and recycling glass (38.3%; 49 guest houses). Many of these activities would appear to be established priorities and practices that do not necessarily involve owners in active and innovative environmental work. Indeed, purchasing from local suppliers does not necessarily mean that the goods are derived from the local area. These findings are supported by Webster (2000), (Stipanuk, 2002) and Baker (2005) who all agreed that energy saving initiatives is important for the future sustainability of guest houses and accommodation providers in general. Baker (2005) went on to state that the majority of waste will be created throughout the operational life of the accommodation provider. As such, waste management systems should be implemented at a very early stage of accommodation establishment development.

Conclusion

In recent times, sustainable tourism has become an increasingly popular field of research because sustainable tourism is considered to involve a harmonious and balanced relationship with the environment. It is an approach which involves working for the long-term viability and quality of both natural and human resources. It is positive approach intended to reduce the tensions created by the complex interactions between the tourism industry, visitors, the environment and the communities. This survey has indicated that there is an understanding of the importance of the environment to the tourism industry. The level of adoption of sustainable practices within the sample population was also relatively modest, being dominated by activities that might be established priorities, such as energy conservation.

The results showed that guest houses were implementing a variety of sustainable practices and thus a positive trend could be possible through more support and information. A better communication of public sector initiatives and more awareness raising for guests is necessary for the future development of sustainable business practices. At the end, for guest houses, there are the economic advantages and benefits of adopting sustainable tourism practices in their business, as they can reduce costs and increase revenues by implementing those practices. The adoption of sustainable tourism practices will improve the competitiveness and sustainability of a tourism destination.

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