

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN MAZATLAN, MEXICO: AN ANALYSIS OF THE CONDITIONS OF SUSTAINABILITY

Marianne Brito Rodríguez

Gemma Cànoves Valiente

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

mariannebrito88@gmail.com, gemma.canoves@uab.cat

1. INTRODUCTION

Mexico is a country with more than 11,000 kilometers of coastline, which has allowed the development of important coastal tourist destinations. At the moment this country is in the eighth place in the world by tourist arrivals, this activity represents 8.7% of the national GDP (Secretaría de Turismo, 2018). However, it is important to recognize that some of these tourist destinations have grown without control under a capitalist expansion logic, appropriating natural and cultural resources, and promoting the creation of a homogeneous and functional landscape (Palafox, Zizumbo, Arriaga and Monterroso, 2010). In recent years Mexico's government has included the sustainable development paradigm in touristic plans, programs and policies; despite this, in many cases at a discursive level the success of the activity is reduced to tourism growth rates. In view of this situation, Mexican coastal destinations must be subjected to evaluations of sustainability, detecting problems and thus advance towards a better management of tourism activity.

The aim of this article is to evaluate and analyze during the period 2007-2017, the different dimensions that are related to the tourist activity of Mazatlan, a traditional coastal tourist destination located in the northwest of Mexico, making use of objective and subjective indicators to assess the sustainability of tourism. Our hypothesis is that the practices related to tourism activity in this city are more characterized by a model of economic growth where the priority is the appropriation of profits, rather than one of sustainable development.

2. AREA OF STUDY AND METHOD

In Mexico there are two types of coastal tourist destinations: the traditional ones (cities that emerged with a different purpose rather than tourism and have been later adapted to the tourist conditions), and the Integrally Planned Centers (which were developed by the

State as part of a touristic strategy). Mazatlan is a traditional tourist destination located in northwestern Mexico, on the southern coast of the state of Sinaloa; due to its size and economic activity, it is the second most important municipality in the state of Sinaloa, as well as one of the most important ports in the Mexican Pacific. A compilation of indicators proposed by the UNWTO (2005), Sancho and García (2006) and Torres-Delgado and López (2014), is used for the study of this traditional tourist destination of sun and beach during 2007-2017, and for which five categories were identified: economic, social, cultural, environmental and governance.

Because this article is part of a broader research, here we present only a sample of the objective indicators selected according to their relevance to show an overview of the tourist destination. As well as the total of subjective indicators, which provide the perception of national tourists and local population; and that have been obtained from the application of questionnaires for a sample of 96 national tourists and 96 local residents, where they value aspects related to sustainability through a Likert scale. Based on the diagnosis of each dimension of sustainable development associated with Mazatlan's tourism activity, it is possible to identify the main problem areas and the greatest efforts that have been made to resolve them.

3. RESULTS

Economically, tourism is very important for Mazatlan, it contributes directly and indirectly with a 48% of the municipal GDP according to estimations made from Mendoza and Lizárraga (2014). Due to its percentage of hotel occupancy, it ranks sixth among the most important coastal destinations in the country, and in the period that covers 2007-2017, it grew 98% in tourist arrivals and 49% in tourism revenues. National tourism reflects the greatest contribution to total revenues, with 75% of them, and hotel occupancy remains at an average of 54% (DATATUR, 2018). This destination has an extensive network of land, air and sea routes. The opening of the Mazatlan-Durango Highway in 2013, which connects it with the states of the Northern Economic Corridor, has boosted the increase of tourists in recent years. It can be said that the economic indicators show an attractive panorama, which has placed tourism in the government's attention focus. Authorities try to position this destination in the international market, to attract a greater number of tourists and investments.

The perception of the national tourists on the economic sustainability is good, they consider the destination as a place that offers a pleasant tourist experience, which is physically and economically accessible and which they would recommend. However the tourist infrastructure and the quantity and quality of tourist services could be improved. On the other hand, for the local population, the main concern is the quality of tourist jobs, as well as the increase in prices of goods and services due to tourism activity. They consider that tourism can promote the region's development; however they perceive that this objective is not fulfilled because the jobs it generates tend to be precarious.

Social sustainability is closely related to resident's life quality and public services. The growing number of tourist arrivals in Mazatlan, combined with the increase in population, is increasingly demanding greater public services, which generates problems, for example

with water supply in certain areas or garbage collection. Other problems are the deficient sewer system, which usually collapses when it rains, causing floods in different areas of the city; and the poor public transport system and roads. In terms of employment, according to the Statistic and Geography National Institute (INEGI, 2010), more than 70% of the Economically Active Population of Mazatlan works in services and commerce. However, many of the jobs generated by the tourism sector are informal, and maintain precarious salaries. In Mazatlan, 28% of the total population lives in poverty and 38.7% have an income below the welfare line according to the National Council for the Development Policy Evaluation (CONEVAL, 2012). In terms of security, recent years have been characterized by an increase in violence to alarming levels. In 2017, 203 homicides were committed in Mazatlan, and in 2010 the highest number was reached with 388 (Semáforo Delictivo, 2017).

Tourists perceive to some extent the problem of deficiency in public services, mainly the sewer system problems. They consider Mazatlan's level of security as adequate, which allows inferring that tourists probably prefer to spend their time in recreational activities without entering into the city's dynamics. The best rated topic was human warmth and hospitality of local residents. On the other hand, local population observes low levels in terms of destination's social sustainability; they do not see many direct benefits of tourism. Residents consider tourism training as deficient, and that tourists often do not follow the rules of coexistence; safety is the matter of most concern.

Cultural heritage is an important element for the sustainable development of tourism. Having a restored historical center, and with a considerable amount of cultural events, makes Mazatlan different from other sun and beach tourist destinations. The National Institute of Anthropology and History appointed the historical center of this city in 2001 as "Historic Patrimony of the Nation". As for the physical and cultural separation between tourists and residents, this is not as deep as in other Mexican sun and beach tourist destinations, since Mazatlan does not have many "resorts" with all-inclusive modality, so visitors really get to know different areas of the city and consume from local or national tourist companies. As for the local population, they freely enjoy tourist areas, and also the natural and cultural heritage. However, it must also be recognized that there are marginalized areas in the city, and that investments in public works and infrastructure improvement are usually made in tourist areas, without addressing other problems in the city, such as basic services in the peripheral areas, which causes a greater gap between tourists and residents. National tourists prefer to carry out activities traditionally linked to sun and beach, rather than to culture; and taking into account that Mazatlan can offer more diversified experiences based on its cultural heritage; cultural tourism can be considered an area of opportunity. For their part, residents considered that tourism contributes moderately to the conservation of cultural spaces, and to a greater extent to the promotion of cultural activities, in addition to the fact that their accessibility to tourist sites is not restricted.

Nature and the quality of its landscapes represent most of the time the main tourist attraction, especially in the case of coastal tourist destinations. However, in Mazatlan, little interest has been shown in conserving nature and creating mechanisms for its protection. This destination was largely built on estuaries and lagoons, filling them for urbanization; and the constructions on the beach were allowed without control. These actions have serious effects today. At the environmental level, valuable ecosystems and biodiversity have been

lost, and at the urban level the natural capacity for receiving rainwater in these aquatic systems has been lost. In addition, a problem of erosion on beaches has been occurring in certain seasons when there are strong waves that are part of the phenomenon known as “swell”, and that affects the same buildings that did not respect the first dune. Climate change is a factor that increases the risks of weather phenomena that can affect infrastructure and tourism in particular. When there is no adequate territorial planning, these risks increase to a great extent. It would be believed that with this, environmental controls for the construction of urban and tourist infrastructure in vulnerable areas would have to be much stricter, however wetlands continue to be filled for urbanization and constructions on the beach continue to be allowed. Other environmental problems are the lack of capacity of the sewage treatment plant, discharges of uncontrolled sewage, the lack of a landfill according to the law, the lack of waste recycling processes, the contamination of soil and beaches, etc.

Tourists perceive a medium level of environmental sustainability; they consider that there is not enough care for water, the cleanliness of the city and beaches could be improved, and the protection of natural resources is not enough. In spite of this, it is observed that the national tourism does not notice the magnitude of the environmental problems of the city. Unlike tourists, residents maintain a high concern for pollution and degradation of natural resources, as well as for the relationship that tourism may have in this, especially due to the saturation of natural spaces caused by this activity.

Governance refers to a complex and innovative system of relationships, an alternative model where new actors participate in the political sphere, thus overcoming the limitations that are related to traditional government management (Farinós, 2008). In Mazatlan, it is considered that the public administration has failed in some of its basic functions such as: planning, management and transparency in the development of public projects and works; territorial planning and urban development; application of the environmental normative; and creation of Committees for beaches regulation, which have lacked continuity. And although in recent time, some spaces have been created where different actors can participate, it is important to recognize that the journey to achieve greater participation is a long one. The lack of a specialized organization that can manage sustainable tourism at a local level denotes a gap between the objectives that have been drawn from the federal level in relation to the sustainable development of tourism. These objectives do not materialize in actions at the local level, for which reason it is considered that the plans and programs that promote tourism’s sustainability are maintained at a merely discursive level. The local population considers that the main weakness in the governance of the city and the tourist destination is reflected in the deficiencies of public services.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The tourist activity that has been developing in Mexican tourist destinations, responds to a large extent to the interests of a capitalist model that seeks profit’s accumulation above all. This vision, called by Leff (2004) an economic rationality, has driven the relationships, processes and activities by which societies are governed. Given the need to implement practices that promote people’s well-being, life quality, a dignified environment and the environment’s protection; it is extremely important to transfer the objectives of

a sustainable development to the tourist activity. Based on the analysis carried out, it is possible to confirm the hypothesis that Mazatlan's tourism development model has been characterized more by an economic vision than by a sustainable one. Although the economic indicators have been favorable in recent years, these are not reflected directly in social and environmental benefits for the community and the environment. This situation is repeated in other Mexican coastal destinations, because in general the current model uses natural resources in such a way that they are considered inexhaustible, and does not generate adequate conditions for the local population to have a better quality of life. Thus, the relationship between nature, society and tourist activity is affected by a series of tensions that are usually covered by discourses of economic growth.

Although Mazatlan is not a destination with significant social or cultural segregation, it is very important to improve the quality of public services and infrastructure to serve both residents and tourists. It is necessary to question the search for investments of large hotel chains with "all inclusive" modality, weighing the benefits against the damages that these could trigger. In order to conserve the environment, it is very important to have adequate legal frameworks that correspond to the interests of the local population and their right to a healthy natural environment; to the extent that natural resources and landscapes are preserved, tourism will also enjoy them, ensuring pleasant experiences, and taking into account that any decrease in environmental or urban quality affects the sensitivity of the tourist to decide on a destination or another.

On the other hand, local management is essential to achieve a sustainable tourism model. In the process of converting any destination into a sustainable one, it is necessary to have an organization that is capable of articulating all the agents involved at the local level, leading to efficient governance and an open management. Finally, based on the results presented in the article, we consider that a periodic monitoring with indicators is essential to know the advances or setbacks that Mazatlan or similar tourist destinations may have. These diagnoses could constitute the beginning of the transition from discourse towards the implementation of sustainability in Mexican coastal destinations.

