

Safeguarding rural tourism experience. Do different quality norms exist?

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Abstract — Despite the growing body of research on rural tourism in Greece none is focused on managing quality experience. Towards this direction visitors' norms can be of great importance and a rather useful tool in order to safeguard the overall experience in rural settings and help everyday managers of rural tourism as well as practitioners and policy makers. Whereas developed in sociology and social psychology, norms have been used as an organizing concept in outdoor recreation research and management. In this paper we try to use this concept of visitors' norms in order to determine what rural tourism should offer for a unique experience. Self administered questionnaires were distributed randomly across seven well known rural tourism destinations of rural Greece. Day trippers were excluded and sample size was set at 339 rural tourists, according to estimations of the proportion of rural tourists to the overall number of visitors at each destination. Personal interview was used and statistical analysis gave answers to a multiple set of research questions.

Index Terms — management, quality, norms, rural tourism.

1 INTRODUCTION

Rural environments have a long history of being used for recreation and their beautiful landscapes are becoming increasingly more attractive as a place of escape in a stressful and urbanized world [1]. Many aspects of rural tourism have been elaborated for several years in an extensive body of literature related to definitions, relationship between tourism and agriculture, benefits and problems, influences on rural community development and economic restructuring of rural areas [2].

Nevertheless, there are still many questions unanswered; especially when considering quality issues. According to Reichel et al. [3] quality is acknowledged as an important

factor for rural tourism development. Local traditions must be kept in rural tourism sites but "*no bugs in the bed*" [4].

In Greece, the lack of a national policy for rural tourism and especially for quality management led providers and managers in shaping rural tourism services according to their personal experiences and definitions of quality. This practise did not differentiate rural tourism from mass tourism patterns and therefore failed to satisfy customers and consequently led to business failure [5].

The review of the literature shows that the individual elements making up a strategy on quality must be founded on a thorough understanding of the customer [6]. Visitors can give us an insight on what is presumable in rural tourism, in contrast with mass tourism. In other words, their norms can be the guiding principle for any quality management action. The later is the main purpose of this study, in which the concept of norms is used in order to determine what rural tourism should offer for safeguarding a quality experience.

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2 RURAL TOURISM IN GREECE

Rural tourism in Greece is originated by national and EU initiatives in the late 80ies. Up till now a great number of rural tourism businesses is scattered all over Greece, offering a variety of services. One can find rural tourism accommodation by the simple type of "rooms to let", small hotels, big hotels etc. Operators can be either locals or foreigners; not necessarily occupied in agriculture. Farm experience or other leisure activities are sometimes incorporated into the product offered but not necessarily [7].

Great issues under consideration which make management decisions even difficult are the problems of poor statistical bases for total number of rural tourism enterprises and overnight stays as well as the predominantly domestic character and the great level of ambiguity in the operator's attitude towards their guests [5].

Quality has been acknowledged as a vital attribute towards the development of rural tourism but there is still no common understanding of what quality should be and how to achieve it. When it comes to rural tourism Williams [9] argues that its nature raises a number of issues relating to experiencing quality and service delivery.

3 QUALITY AND NORMS

Quality is an elusive and abstract concept, especially when applied to a service context is usually intangible and ambiguous [8]. Rural tourism can include remote locations, a large number of relatively unorganized small businesses, resource constraints and often a lack of management skills as well as the heterogeneity of consumer preferences adding to a further complexity of quality delivery [9]. In fact providers, managers and decision-makers involved in rural tourism are trying to "*balance on the same time between the values of the past and the demands of the present; between the expectations of city dwellers and the reality of the countryside*" [10].

According to Balestrieri [11] the most important concept of quality in rural tourism refers to comfort of the accommodation, beauty of the landscape, closeness to cultural and architectural sites, appropriateness of building restoration, furniture adoption and closeness to rural life. Others [12] believe that quality is mainly focused on the simplicity and authenticity of rural people. Fleischer and Pizam [13] include the operator's attitude towards guests.

But what about different perceptions of visitors towards rural tourism quality experience? Do all attractions and services are important to all rural tourists? Do visitors have different quality norms?

Contemporary literature has answered similar questions using the theory of norms for a number of other leisure activities (boating, hiking) and different settings (national parks, rivers, lakes, protected areas, etc). [14]. Primarily developed in the field of sociology and social psychology, norms have attracted considerable attention as an organising concept in outdoor recreation research and management [15]. Visitor's norms have been used to study an expanding range of outdoor and wilderness management attributes including crowding, ecological impacts and management practices [16].

In this study norms are used to evaluate the importance of a set of potential attractions in rural tourism for delivering a quality experience.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Study area and sampling

A focused group discussion by ten experts determined a set of potential attractions for quality rural tourism experience: V_1 =landscape, V_2 =local people, V_3 =cultural heritage, V_4 =gastronomy, V_5 =outdoor activities, V_6 =verbal and customs culture, V_7 = architectural and historical heritage V_8 = accommodation,

V_9 =authenticity, V_{10} =basic infrastructure.

Data was gathered as part of a survey administered in seven well known rural tourism destinations in Greece. Due to the lack of official data for the actual number of rural tourism bed spaces or tourist flows in the study area, sample size was set according to estimations of the proportion of rural tourists to the overall number of visitors at each destination [17].

339 self-administered questionnaires were distributed randomly in rural tourism lodgings. Visitors were asked to evaluate the importance of the above attractions in order to safeguard that rural tourism feels like rural tourism experience!

4.2 Statistical analysis

Categorical Principal Component Analysis (CatPCA) was used to identify important quality norms. It takes into consideration non-linear relationships, most commonly found in sociological researches [18]. By reducing the dimensionality of the data to a smaller set of uncorrelated components helps interpret a few components rather than a large number of variables.

The results of the CatPCA were further analysed and used in Two Step Cluster Analysis; which handles successfully categorical and continuous variables [7], in order to provide answer to the other research question of identifying market segments with different quality norms.

5 STUDY RESULTS

5.1 Basic Quality Norms in Rural Tourism

The results of CatPCA show that the algorithm stopped after 30 iterations reaching the convergence test value (0.00001) excluding observations with extreme values. The final correlation matrix (Table 1) for the transformed variables suggests, with very few exceptions, relatively high figures for the correlation coefficient. A three dimension solution

TABLE 1
CORRELATION MATRIX TRANSFORMED VARIABLES

Variables	V_1	V_2	V_3	V_4	V_5	V_6	V_7	V_8	V_9	V_{10}
V_1	1.000									
V_2	.153**	1.000								
V_3	.194**	.361**	1.000							
V_4	.148	.105	.104	1.000						
V_5	.111*	-.055	.095	.157**	1.000					
V_6	.149**	.218**	.392**	.163**	.137*	1.000				
V_7	.186**	.149**	.431**	.147**	.019	.328**	1.000			
V_8	.176**	.022	-.039	.289**	.058	.045	.244**	1.000		
V_9	.080	.211**	.175**	.134*	-.010	.150**	.235**	.284**	1.000	
V_{10}	.094	.047	-.033	.204**	.063	-.039	.093	.495**	.349**	1.000
Dimension	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Eigenvalue	2.482	1.653	1.150	.894	.863	.805	.638	.601	.506	.407

Statistical important at * $a=0.05$ and ** $a=0.01$

(with eigenvalues greater than 1) was found useful to the model maximizing also the Variance (52.85%). The large value of the total Cronbach's Alpha (0.901) indicate a reliable model.

Similar loadings along the dimensions indicate a similarity between those variables with respect to that dimension Table 2). Large loadings (above .500) in each dimension indicate that the variable is associated heavily with that dimension.

The first dimension (Q1) separates, with relatively large positive scores the variables "architectural and historical heritage" "cultural heritage" "authenticity" and "verbal and customs". The second dimension (Q2) separates clearly "basic infrastructure" and "accommodation" since those variables are the two clumps with very high positive scores. The third dimension (Q3) separates only the variable-attraction "outdoor activities". The results indicate that three different set of attractions are important for safeguarding a quality rural tourism experience.

5.2 Segmenting rural tourists with different quality norms

Using the three dimensions as continues variables and a set of other ten categorical vari-

TABLE 2
COMPONENT LOADINGS

Variables	Dimensions		
	1	2	3
V ₁	.440	-.048	.266
V ₂	.460	-.331	-.355
V ₃	.587	-.564	-.053
V ₄	.473	.237	.362
V ₅	.197	.014	.781
V ₆	.540	-.442	.155
V ₇	.642	-.207	-.086
V ₈	.517	.634	.006
V ₉	.558	.248	-.404
V ₁₀	.433	.682	-.124

In italics and bold large loadings (above 0.500) indicating which variable is associated heavily with which dimension.

ables of basic demographic and other characteristics of the visitors the results of the Two Step Cluster Analysis gave us a three cluster solution. Of the 339 total cases, 4 were excluded from the analysis due to missing values, leaving 325 to distribute. 190 were assigned to the first cluster, 96 to the second and 39 to the third.

According to the “by variable” importance, produced by the analysis, analysis from the centroids, standard deviations and mean values as well as frequencies we can describe the profile of the three segments.

The dominant segment is that of visitors with quality norms towards the unique rural experience, male, between 36-55 years old, working in private sector, higher annual net incomes and travelling with family. Second

segment is indifferent to quality norms and are mostly urban youngsters, between 19-35 years old, travelling with a companion, attracted to isolated destinations. Finally, the third segment is visitors with norms for a quality leisure experience in rural tourism, are between 19-35, of higher educational level, still university students, come from all over Greece and travel with friends.

6 CONCLUSION

Visitors have a different perception of what rural tourism must feel like. The aggregation of the important attractions into three separate dimensions set also three different quality norms. Study findings suggest that there is the first one for which delivering quality has to do with localities, rurality and authenticity in the rural tourism experience. This norm is the one that clearly separates rural tourism from mass tourism due to the fact that is based on the special features of the destination and not on an homogenised tourism product. Another norm that exists is the one referring to tangible aspects of quality, most commonly found to all forms of tourism. Finally there is the norm of quality delivering through the opportunity to take part in activities and extreme sports offering a very different athletic experience.

As far as the market segmentation is concerned, it seems that the dominant market segment is of visitors who think highly of the local identity in rural tourism and safeguarding their quality experience means that special interest must be placed upon characteristics of the rural tourism destination, incorporated into the tourism product. Locality and rurality come along with families and heavy spenders.

What remains to be studied is the minimum and maximum acceptable conditions in rural tourism experience. More research on measurable quality standards that will further help everyday management, is also needed.

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