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Perception, understanding and initiatives with regard to sustainable development: A profile of Québec tourism organizations

Abstract

The concept of sustainable development is not new. However, its application in the field of tourism in Québec needs to be clarified. This way, this study is aimed at drawing the profile of Québec tourist organizations, at comparing the initiatives developed according to various perspectives (environmental, social and economic) and finally, to verify the coherence between the level of importance these organizations give to the concepts of sustainable development and the application of these within their environment. Generally, we can assert that a majority of initiatives connected to sustainable development of tourism are applied by tourist companies and organizations. It is thus possible to notice a growing desire on behalf of the organizations to get involved, through their initiatives and actions, for the sustainable development of the industry. However, the environmental and economic dimensions of these initiatives turn out to be the most recommended without knowing the socio-cultural dimension to which they are connected. As a matter of fact, Québec tourist organizations understand the importance of their actions without forgetting that a precision of the evolution of sustainable tourism over time would reveal the impact of the international symposium on the sustainable development with the tourist organizations.

Keywords:

sustainable tourism development; perceptions; sustainable development initiatives; sustainable development knowledge; tourism organizations; Québec, Canada

Introduction

Although several avenues are possible to define sustainable development, the one used most often comes from the report by the World Commission on the Environment and Development entitled: Our future (better known under the name of the Brundtland Report): "A development which meets the present needs without compromising the capacity of future generations to answer to their needs". In addition to this definition, the principle of sustainable development (Delisle, 2007) rests on three interdependent concepts which are the economic, environmental and social poles, to which are added the notions of equity and perpetuity. The notion of equity aims at assuring "a social justice between the generations and the appreciation of what is due to each" (Lequin,

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2004 in Delisle, 2007). Applying not only to the tourism industry, the notion of sustainable development thus requires a more precise definition.

By taking into account what precedes, the concept of sustainable development, being relatively new, it is not surprising to see that its application within the tourism industry is one of the most recent. Crouch and Ritchie (2003) counted about ten authors who approach the development of tourism with regard to the evaluation of its impact on the environment. These authors' works approach the question of the impacts of tourism with regard not only to the environmental dimension, but also according to those of the economic, culture and social order. Although many authors contributed to the understanding of sustainable tourism development, McKercher (1993, in Crouch & Ritchie, 2003) is, however, one of the first authors to identify the beliefs of tourism in a social and environmental perspective. Furthermore, he supports that the recognition of these beliefs can play a key role in the development of a policy relating to sustainable tourism.

Butler (1999 in McCool, 2001) supports the idea that sustainable tourism could simply mean that such development occurs to insure the survival of a destination in the long term. From this angle, destinations such as Niagara, Las Vegas and Disneyland could be considered as sustainable because they are capable of welcoming a high and regular number of tourists, and this, for several years, while maintaining its competitiveness.

In tourism context, the World Tourism Organization's definition maintains that sustainable tourism development consists of three main dimensions: environmental, economic and socio-cultural. In order to determine what exactly characterizes these dimensions, the following section identifies, for each of them, the various criteria to be respected in order to put into practice sustainable tourism.

From an environmental perspective, the dimensions which must be considered are: water, energy, wildlife (fauna), flora, nature areas, landscapes, waste, pollution, and education with regard to the environment (Rain Forest Alliance, 2007). Naturally, all these dimensions must be considered in order to meet the needs of current generations without compromising future needs.

From an economic point of view, this amounts to spreading out the effects to the largest number of people while improving the overall economic situation (Chapman, 2007). Furthermore, the American Rain Forest Alliance (2007) stipulates several criteria to be respected for sustainable management of the economy with regard to tourism. Included among the numerous criteria are: health and prevention, opportunity of a training program for the staff, encouragement of producers and local suppliers, and fair trade as well as accessibility.

As for the socio-cultural dimension, Chapman (2007) proposes principles which guide a sustainable tourism practice in the social and cultural standing. These principles

mention the distribution of profits to the largest number of people in the local community. Furthermore, respect for the traditions and for local communities intervenes directly in this distribution. In addition, the implications of local communities as well as increased awareness of suppliers and members of staff are not to be neglected.

With regard to the current understanding of the different concepts of sustainable tourism development, it is important to mention that the multitude of existing definitions contributes to making them more difficult to understand. Moreover, to answer such problems, Butler (1999 in Crouch & Ritchie, 2003) leans mainly toward the concepts common to these various elements: tourists, local community, environment, equity, future generations, economic viability, resources, carrying capacity, ecosystems, and protection and development. To continue, Griffin et al. (1993 in Edgell, 2006) have, on their part, come up with five basic elements for the sustainable development of tourism. These elements are directly linked with the above-mentioned definition: a) conserve the actual resources for future generations; b) maintain the productivity of these resources; c) maintain the biodiversity and avoid irreversible environmental changes; d) ensure equity between generations and e) maintain and protect the region or nation's cultural and historical heritage.

The purpose of this study was to measure current Québec tourist companies' and organizations' knowledge and accomplishments with regard to sustainable tourism development and their evolution over the next three years. More precisely, the objectives were to:

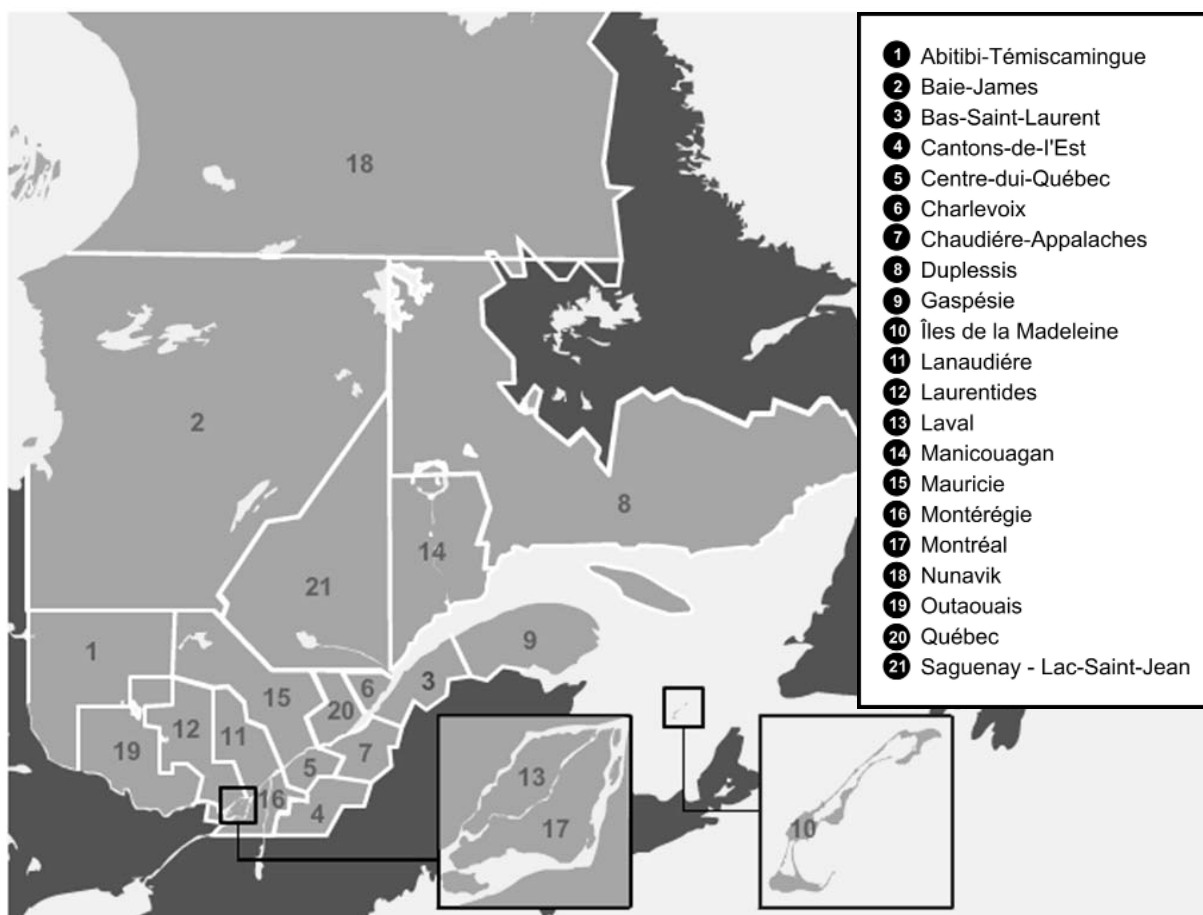
- verify the actual understanding and evolution of associated concepts of sustainable tourism development by tourist companies and organizations;
- identify perceptions as well as present and future accomplishments put in place by tourist organizations in order to encourage the development of sustainable tourism;
- establish a profile of tourism organizations.
- The study is divided into three main parts: actual understanding (and its evolution) of the different concepts of sustainable tourist development, the perceptions (level of importance) of each of the concepts and the actions performed according to these concepts.

Sustainable tourism and the Province of Québec

According to the Ministry of Tourism, the tourism industry in Québec is among the most important economic factors and is ranked sixth with regard to exports, representing 2.8% of the GDP (gross domestic product). Generating annually not less than 133,500 direct full-time, part-time or seasonal jobs and about 48,000 other indirect jobs, it should not be surprising that tourism is the way of the future for the province. Although the Montreal and Québec City areas represent the two major parts of the tourism industry, it is, nevertheless, important to consider that about 60% of jobs connected to the latter are in other regions. Since tourism is present in all regions of Québec, it goes without saying that it is a source of large-scale economic, social and

cultural wealth. For many regions, the tourism industry turns out to be an important lever for economic development in assuring the growth and diversification of this environment. In the coming years, it is considered that Québec will experience an encouraging tourism period which will have positive repercussions on the increase of direct and indirect profits connected to the industry (Ministry of Tourism, 2005). These positive effects will take place mainly through the intervention of the tourism organizations. More precisely, there are presently 30,079 organizations offering services associated with the diverse tourism sectors in Québec, and in the various tourist regions of Québec (Figure 1).

Figure 1
TOURIST REGIONS OF QUÉBEC



Source: Québec Vacances, 2009

The number of tourism organizations is very difficult to determine and the number may vary depending on how these organizations are defined. However, based on data and information provided by Revenue Canada, a profile of tourism organizations can be developed. Therefore, all 30,079 organizations previously mentioned thus see themselves as having a direct or indirect link with the tourism industry without being able to determine the exact proportions. According to the latest statistics (Statistics Canada, 2007), 24.6% of the 30,079 organizations are linked to accommodations, 49% to

catering, 3.2% to travel preparation and reservations, 6.8% to transportation, 15.5% for cultural activities, sport and leisure activities and 2.6% in other, more technical sectors. The group of said organizations welcomed approximately 25 802 000 tourists and 40 772 000 excursionnistes during 2009 from Québec, other Canadian provinces, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Germany and, finally, from Japan (Ministry of Tourism, 2008). This data demonstrates the scale and importance of the tourism industry for Québec. By taking into account this data, it is possible to see how various communities are affected by the various impacts of tourism industry (environmental, social and economic).

The province of Québec enumerates its interventions in sustainable development (through the intervention of the previous dimensions) in its Québec's tourism policy. Being centered on the importance of developing sustainable tourism, it tries to express an ambitious vision to what Québec tourism could become. Such a policy is centered on self-fulfillment, as well as on the perpetuity of the industry. To carry out the necessary efforts, the policy is centered on partnership and dialogue between the participants involved. To develop sustainable tourism in Québec, three objectives were set by the Ministry of Tourism: economic, environmental and socio-cultural character. This vision is put forth by means of seven fields of intervention, all connected to a determining success factor associated to the tourist environment. Despite the fact that the idea of sustainable development is fairly new, the Québec government was not afraid to act as the leader by choosing to wholly integrate this concept into its policy. Most types of tourism are associated with the basic principles of sustainable development (ecotourism, equitable tourism, social tourism, responsible tourism, etc.). In order to develop such practices, several public and private organizations did not hesitate to set up charters, with codes of ethics or certification labels.

Research methodology

This study was conducted using a web-based questionnaire which was distributed by e-mail to tourism companies and organizations. The tourism organizations that are members of the « Association Touristique Régionale (ATR) » were surveyed. There was no sampling frame for this study since web-based surveys are cost-effective and all the member tourist organizations were surveyed. The survey was administered with the help of the Ministry of Tourism. They requested that members of the ATR complete the questionnaire. In total, approximately 30,000 web questionnaires were sent out to tourism companies and organizations. Almost 1,651 questionnaires were completed, which was a response rate that exceeded the initial objective and is representative of the tourism organisations in the province of Québec. The completed questionnaires were automatically entered into a .txt file and the data was transferred into SPSS software for analysis and interpretation of the results.

Furthermore, the web-based survey process assured confidentiality since no names were associated to any of the questionnaires. The human ethics committee of the "Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières" issued an ethics certificate for this study and monitored this aspect of the study.

With regard to the elaboration of the questionnaire, it was developed jointly with the Québec Ministry of Tourism. The development of the latter was based, among other things, on the literature associated to sustainable tourism development and the above-mentioned dimensions of sustainable tourism and from the Québec Ministry of Tourism policy. This tool allowed collection of diverse information from the target market linked to the subject of the study. The questionnaire was composed of close-ended and multiple choice questions that were easily comprehensible. Furthermore, these questions were distributed throughout three different sections: understanding of the concepts associated to sustainable tourism development, accomplishments put into place by tourism companies and organizations to favour the development of sustainable tourism development and the target market's profile (companies and organizations). The elaboration and on-line publishing of the questionnaire were done with the help of "Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières" (UQTR) and "Banque informatisée de Questions" (BIQ software).

Research results

RESPONDENTS

This section presents the principal characteristics of the respondents. Twenty-four percent (24.4%) of surveyed organizations come from the Québec region, while organizations from the region of Montreal and the Lower St-Lawrence, for their part, were far behind, with 11.1 and 9.5% respectively of the total number of respondents. No tourist company working in the region of Eeyou Isttchee took part in the study and less than 1% came from the Îles-de-la-Madeleine and Nunavik. As for the distribution of organizations by business activity, a little more than one third (35.9%) came from the accommodation sector. A very small proportion of organizations who participated in the study came from the transportation sector with a low 1.9% of the respondents.

A majority of the respondents from the accommodation sector work within two business sectors: hotel establishments and bed and breakfasts, with 36.5 and 27.1% respectively of the total number of respondents. The distribution of organizations according to priority of one or several categories of products of their organization highlights that the largest proportion of respondents (15.4%) indicated that none of the categories of tourism products suggested is applied to their company. Cultural tourism as well as festivals and events follow closely with a proportion of 14.7 and 11.2% respectively. The tourist product which has the lowest proportion (1.4%) is Native American tourism. A majority of organizations (53.6%) have been in business for more than fifteen years, while 15.7% of organizations have been in business less than five years.

KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS

The purpose of this section is to try and understand the level of comprehension that Québec tourism organizations have towards sustainable development. Consequently, perception and knowledge of sustainable development are measured in order to get the tourism organizations' comprehension of sustainable development.

Table 1 identifies that a majority of all organizations (66%) mentioned the ease of reconciling sustainable development dimensions. The proportion of respondents somewhat in disagreement and totally in disagreement with regard to this assertion is very low since it only concerns 7% of organizations. The application of sustainable development within tourism organizations is made more difficult, while the majority of respondents (51%), this time, were in agreement with the statement.

Table 1
LEVEL OF AGREEMENT OF TOURISM ORGANIZATIONS WITH THE FOLLOWING DIMENSIONS OR STATEMENTS

Dimension or Statements	N	%				Aver.	Std
		Agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Disagree		
Ease of reconciling sustainable development dimensions	1,651	65.0	27.0	5.0	2.0	3.56	0.70
Application of sustainable development of tourism within organizations dedicated to tourism	1,626	39.0	51.0	9.0	1.0	3.28	0.66

By referring to Table 2, it is possible to note that in ten out of eleven cases, more than 50% of respondents confirmed that the proposed concepts were very important while at the same time linked to sustainable tourism development. The only statement which does not follow this trend (46.6%) is connected to the principle of the pollutant-payer, while 13.7 % considers the latter as "rather important". Overall, we notice that, considering all the principles mentioned in this section, the number of organizations having preferred the choice of "not very important" is still the same, 2% or less, and this, for all assertions.

Table 2
LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE GIVEN BY TOURIST ORGANIZATIONS REGARDING DIVERSE CONCEPTS RELATED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM

Dimension	N	%				Aver.	Std
		Very import	Important	Somewhat important	Not importan		
Biodiversity conservation	1,499	67.8	27.8	4.1	0.2	3.63	0.57
Respect for the capacity of support of ecosystems	1,506	69.7	26.4	3.7	0.1	3.66	0.55
Responsible consumption	1,507	56.9	33.7	8.8	0.7	3.47	0.68
Consideration of main pollutant	1,501	46.6	37.5	13.7	2.1	3.29	0.78
Ensure the company's long-term economic viability	1,507	66.3	28.8	4.4	0.5	3.61	0.60
Creation of jobs and the generation of economic fallout	1,509	89.2	31.3	8.6	0.9	3.49	0.69

APPLICATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

Sustainable tourism development initiatives connected to social development

Among all the statements regarding social character initiatives proposed to organizations, Table 3 illustrates that a strong proportion of respondents do not apply sustain-

nable development initiatives within their company with regard to social development. This is the case, among others, when organizations were asked if they offer suppliers (54.2%) and staff (43.1%) any information regarding sustainable development. With regard to the setting-up of informational activities and raising suppliers' awareness and advertising, the percentages are respectively 46.7 and 43.5%. This proportion becomes even more important when we look at the last two statements; between 23.2% and 24.3% of the total number of organizations mentioned that these steps were not applied within their company, even though a large proportion of them do not use sustainable development initiatives of a social character. There is a global trend with regard to all statements since organizations are in the process of applying certain initiatives (proportionally situated between 12.7% and 27.2%). Social character initiatives most widely implemented within organizations who responded turned out to be the ones connected to the setting-up of information activities and raising staff awareness (37.1%) and that of the promotion of sustainable development initiatives with their customers (30.8%).

Table 3

LEVEL OF IMPORTANCE GIVEN BY ORGANIZATIONS REGARDING THE STEPS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM RELATING TO SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Degree of application	N	%				Aver.	Std
		In use	In process	Not applied	Does not apply		
Broadcasting of information regarding sustainable development (customers)	1,266	20.5	22.0	41.7	15.7	2.47	0.99
Broadcasting of information regarding sustainable development (suppliers)	1,263	7.2	12.7	54.2	25.9	2.01	0.82
Broadcasting of information regarding sustainable development (employees)	1,263	15.7	18.8	43.1	22.4	2.28	0.98
Publicity regarding initiatives taken regarding sustainable development	1,265	30.8	27.2	28.2	13.8	2.75	1.04
Publicity for suppliers regarding initiatives taken for sustainable development	1,265	13.4	18.7	43.5	24.3	2.21	0.96
Publicity for employees regarding initiatives taken for sustainable development	1,267	26.0	23.6	29.7	20.8	2.55	1.09
Setting-up of information activities and raising awareness of suppliers	1,267	11.8	18.3	46.7	23.2	2.19	0.92
Setting-up of information activities and raising awareness of employees	1,284	37.1	25.0	20.6	17.3	2.82	1.11
Implant an in-company program	1,284	26.8	18.8	28.6	25.9	2.46	1.14

Sustainable tourism development initiatives connected to economic development

Among the initiatives connected to economic development presented in Table 4, a strong proportion (8 out of 11 have percentages higher than 50%) of organizations indicated applying sustainable tourism development initiatives centered on economic development. Most of the cases are associated to the following principles: to encourage local suppliers (74%), to favor partnerships with suppliers (67.3%) and to favor

the use of products coming from local producers (67%). Although all the economic initiatives are widely applied, the idea of introducing products of fair trade is less applied with a relatively lower proportion than all other statements (24.5%). On the other hand, few organizations mentioned that they did not apply sustainable tourism development initiatives centered on the economic aspect (between 6.7% and 16.3%). Only the notion of introducing fair trade products distinguishes itself once again with 36.7% of the answers. However, although these initiatives are not applied in all areas, the efforts are being made to initiate them, and this, in a proportion of 12.5% to 25.

Table 4

DEGREE OF APPLICATION BY ORGANIZATIONS OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES RELATING TO THE ECONOMY

Degree of application	N	%				Aver.	Std
		In use	In process	Not applied	Does not apply		
Create relationships with local partners	1,331	48.7	19.2	15.3	16.8	3.00	1.15
Encourage the use of local products	1,334	67.0	17.9	6.7	8.4	3.44	0.94
Consolidate and create new local jobs	1,336	57.6	19.5	7.7	15.1	3.20	1.10
Favor the economic viability of the regions	1,337	72.0	14.8	4.6	8.7	3.50	0.93
Encourage partnerships with suppliers	1,335	67.3	15.7	7.9	9.0	3.41	0.97
Implication of local residents and consideration of their opinion	1,372	44.2	20.5	16.3	19.1	2.90	1.17
Accessibility of products and services to specific clientele	1,374	57.9	18.6	9.8	13.7	3.21	1.09
Conserve authenticity of local communities	1,352	48.4	18.6	11.8	21.3	2.94	1.20
Introduce fair trade products	1,376	24.5	25.0	36.7	13.8	2.60	1.00
Encourage local suppliers	1,380	74.0	12.0	7.0	7.0	3.55	0.88

Sustainable tourism development initiatives connected to the environment

As shown in Table 5, the application of initiatives connected to the environment is present in a relatively important proportion of organizations. The recycling of residual materials as well as the pulp and paper industry, are both at the top of the list of initiatives that are applied the most by organizations, with 71.7%, 70.1% respectively. Although the proportion of respondents applying sustainable tourism development initiatives connected to the environment is relatively important, once again, there is the trend in other organizations to undertake these procedures (total of respondents between 14.6% and 27.5%). We also notice that the statement "does not apply" is a very small proportion of organizations, as in seven cases out of eight the average is between 25% and 9.4%.

Table 5

**DEGREE OF APPLICATION BY ORGANIZATIONS OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM
DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES CONNECTED TO THE ENVIRONMENT**

Degree of application	N	%				Aver.	Std
		In use	In process	Not applied	Does not apply		
Water conservation	1,406	47.3	21.6	21.8	9.4	3.07	1.03
Use of energy-saving light bulbs	1,407	45.6	22.0	23.9	8.5	3.05	1.02
No wastage of paper	1,412	70.1	20.0	7.4	2.5	3.58	0.74
Encourage purchase of sustainable material instead of disposable	1,404	52.8	27.5	14.2	5.5	3.28	0.9
Encourage the use of biodegradable cleaning products	1,405	40.8	27.0	24.2	8.0	3	0.99
Encourage the use of public transport or non-polluting transport	1,410	27.4	14.9	33.2	24.5	2.45	1.13
Avoid unnecessary packaging	1,408	46.0	20.4	16.1	17.5	2.95	1.15
Recycle residual materials	1,412	71.7	14.6	6.8	6.9	3.51	0.89

Discussion and conclusion

This study's goal was aimed at attaining three precise objectives: to verify the current understanding of the concepts associated to sustainable tourism development by tourism companies and organizations; to identify current achievements of the latter; and finally, to draw up a profile of respondents. The results obtained by surveying Québec tourism organizations bring to light certain relevant factors to be considered to facilitate sustainable tourism development in Québec. Generally, it can be asserted that many initiatives connected to sustainable tourism development are applied by tourism companies and organizations. In cases where the latter are not applied, it was noticed that a certain number of companies and organizations tend to change their habits to apply these concepts. It may be noted that organizations have a growing interest to get involved in the sustainable development of the industry, by means of their initiatives and actions.

However, in spite of the fact that a majority of respondents say they are in complete or rather in agreement to reconcile the sustainable development dimensions (92%), they seem to neglect the socio-cultural dimension and tend to focus more on applying more economic or environmental actions. Sustainable development is not only synonymous with financial perpetuity or conservation of the resources from an environmental perspective; it also involves a notion of respect for cultural and social authenticity. This trend expresses itself, among others, while a strong proportion of organizations do not apply the socio-cultural initiatives and actions, or who answered they are not able to apply such initiatives in their organization.

Globally, a correlation was noted between the importance that companies and organizations give to the concepts associated to the various sustainable development dimensions, and the application of these concepts within their environment. Although they are conscious of the importance of their involvement, efforts are still needed, mainly when it is a question of responsible consumption in an environmental perspective

(natural resources) and social (fair purchase), through the conservation of natural and cultural heritages. Such actions are also very important when it is a question of introducing preventive initiatives in a sustainable tourism development perspective.

Following the International Symposium on Sustainable Tourism Development, which took place March 17-19, 2009 at the Congress Center in Québec City, it would be interesting to estimate the evolution of the perceptions and achievements with regard to sustainable tourism development which took place following this event. In order to evaluate such evolution, there will be a study of the impact of such an event on actions and perceptions. Furthermore, this evaluation over time will allow us to change and to progress in the area of sustainable tourism development.

Overall, this study of tourist organizations in Québec dealt with a relatively new concept, the development of sustainable tourism development. Although such a concept turns out to be practiced mainly for its environmental and economic dimension, its social aspect is also reflected since fewer initiatives are being used. A second study would allow us to verify the evolution of the different initiatives.

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