

# A PROPOSAL FOR A SUSTAINABLE MODEL BASED UPON UNDERWATER TOURISM RESEARCH IN AYVALIK

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**ABSTRACT** - Underwater sports which has been improving and whose enthusiasts have been growing rapidly in recent years is an important component of alternative tourism. Underwater sports are the activities being done with the aims of witnessing the beauties, hunting, taking photos, the ecology and the archaeology of underwater analysing or finding out the human being's boundaries by improving the physical and psychological skills of men. The initial aim of this project is to increase the underwater flora and the fauna heritage of Ayvalık and to bring them in tourism. Ayvalık is on the west coast of Turkey. It is getting more and more famous with its underwater richness. Also, to form a new underwater sports centre in order to contribute to the improvement of the region. By providing visual attractiveness, the tourists related to underwater sports will pay attention to Ayvalık and underwater tourism will contribute much to the economy of the region. The aim of this project is to improve the underwater sports which is now a hobby than a sport. In Ayvalık Underwater World study, we dealt with 247 divers and 4 underwater sports club. In this study, we analysed the expectation, satisfaction, demographic and economic level of 247 divers about the services in the region. Interview technique has been used in the study on the 4 underwater sports clubs which are hosting divers. As a conclusion, a report has been prepared in which detailed information and proposals are presented by developing a sustainable marketing model concerned with the underwater sports for those who want to possess information, shareholders of the sector and make analyse about tourism.

**Key Words:** Tourism, Underwater Tourism, Ayvalık.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As is the case in many countries of the world, tourism is one of the largest and dynamic industries that support and even drive the country's economics in Turkey. With annual tourism revenues of approximately 22-23 billion USD, it is a fact that Turkey does not obtain an adequate share from the World tourism pie.

Underwater tourism is one of the most popular tourism activities of the recent years. It is rapidly developing around the world due to such characteristics as applicability in all seasons, supportiveness, and environmentally protective. The majority of about 25 million European people who are interested in the sport of diving spend their holidays in their home country. Certain tourism centres in various countries conduct activities focusing on diving tourism and obtain massive

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economic values as such. Centres in the Red Sea, Caribbean, Florida, Maldives Islands, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, and Mediterranean with climate, underwater flora, and fauna similar to those of Turkey have made significant investments in diving tourism and rendered this activity an engine of the tourism sector in their respective regions. The natural features and life of the underwater have been protected with care in these regions and supported with artificial reefs and wrecks to prepare marvellously beautiful environments for underwater sports enthusiasts.

With its cute bays of varying sizes as well as natural, historical, and cultural treasures, Ayvalık is one of the most beautiful holiday destinations of not only the Aegean Region but also the entire country. With its climate conditions, adequate tourism infrastructure, countless bays of unrivalled beauty, clear and clean waters, Ayvalık is ideally located to establish an underwater tourism centre. However, underwater tourism has not as developed as that in Malta or the Red Sea and it has not been possible to host diver-tourists at the desired rate until today.

## **2. CURRENT SITUATION**

Red corals that exist only off the shores of the city of Portofino, Italy and the Ayvalık sub-province of Balıkesir, Turkey appeal a lot to divers who are keen on getting to know the enchanting underwater world. We can state that local and foreign divers are increasingly getting more interested in the underwater riches of the sub-province. The most significant one of the underwater riches of Ayvalık is red corals. Red corals are in fact a type of underwater vegetation formed by beautiful animals called 'Gorgonia'. Many refer to these animals as "aquatic plants". These aquatic plants are in fact an animal species. Red corals have settled in Ayvalık in recent years thanks to the clearness, plankton rates, temperatures, and abundant currents of its waters. In Turkey, these corals live only in Ayvalık. We can argue that even in the Red Sea, which hosts many local and international divers every year, the same species of corals do not exist. Hosting these coral species, Ayvalık has become a competitor of the Red Sea today. The most significant underwater and nature magazines of Europe have featured Ayvalık and stated that it is a unique destination for macro photography focusing on underwater fauna and flora.

Comprising of excellent islands and isles and offering diving opportunities in its naturally protected areas all year round, Ayvalık maintains the visibility of its "underwater riches" any time. The sustainability of our research and extension of tourism activities from 2 to 3 months to 7 to 8 months a year was important. Therefore, underwater tourism in Ayvalık has constituted the main axis of our study.

## **3. PROBLEM ANALYSIS**

While analysing the underwater riches in Ayvalık, creation of the required environment for training and the technical and legal infrastructure of this environment should also be considered. The most important element in the

formation of these infrastructures is the high per person costs. Dissemination and continuity of this education as well as reduction of associated costs require contributions from and organization of municipalities, central governments, universities, and industry players. First of all, an analysis of common areas to focus on should be performed. In order to ensure the achievements brought about by the underwater riches of Ayvalık are made continuous, and based on the idea to promote creativity in vocational education, in other words, mobilization of existing resources, there is a requirement to systemize the following; training, promote as a profession and publicity activities.

Within this framework, Ayvalık differs from the other underwater tourism centres in the world in the following;

- The Red Sea and the Maldives Islands are the two centres that take the biggest share from world underwater tourism due to their richness in flora and fauna. The underwater flora and fauna variety of our region is weaker as compared with the other centres. What is more, it is constantly destructed and is not adequately protected due to such reasons as trawling, illegal and out of the season hunting, untreated water wastes originating from settlements in the region (1).

- In centres such as Malta and Florida, artificial reefs and wrecks built in order to enrich and maintain underwater flora and fauna enjoy great attraction from diving enthusiasts. Underwater formations that develop, embellish, and make attractive this sport are inadequate. Artificial formations do not exist at all.

- Many tourism destinations around the world are under the threat of sea pollution despite the visual attractiveness of the underwater. Despite the existence of certain negative factors, seawater in Ayvalık clean and clear.

- The climate conditions, air and water temperatures in the region enable four seasons performance of this sports branch. The fact that Malta, where underwater tourism takes place both in summer and winter, is in the same climatic belt proves that this type of tourism can take place all year round in our region as well. However, this opportunity has not been brought to life by popular mass tourism until today.

- The transportation and lodging infrastructure and tourism variety in Ayvalık has similar standards when compared with the other diving centres around the world. In terms of historical, natural, and cultural riches, on the other hand, Ayvalık has enviable beauties that resemble an open-air museum.

- The total number of divers served by the diving companies' active in Ayvalık is quite low. In addition, these companies are able to use their capacity efficiently only in the high tourism season (between May and October). The consciously created service capacities in the popular centres of the world are so higher than that of Ayvalık beyond comparison.

- Because it has not been possible to prepare a tourism development / master plan for

Ayvalık, planned contributions to regional policies focusing on general and underwater tourism are not being made available. However, as is the case in the examples of Egypt, Malta, and Cuba, underwater tourism is planned, supported,

and even implemented in the regional and country scales as a state and government policy in the popular diving destinations of the world.

It is possible to perform diving activities in the four separate diving schools in Ayvalik that serve diving enthusiasts throughout about ten months of the year. Foreign tourists led by Germans and followed by Dutch, French, and British tourists come to Ayvalik and its 23 islands and 60 diving points to get diving lessons and witness the underwater beauties of the city (2).

With its nature, history, and culture, Ayvalik is one of the emerging tourism destinations of Turkey. With a bed capacity of about 16.216 as of 2012, Ayvalik is out of the popular "mass tourism" and has excellent resources for "alternative tourism" activities required by the sustainable tourism understanding that is in peace with nature.

Developing rapidly and gaining more enthusiasts every day in the recent years, underwater diving sport is an important element of alternative tourism. Trainer and expert service staff, safe technical materials, a diving environment with clean and visually attractive flora and fauna constitute the required infrastructure for this activity (3).

The primary objective of this research is to enhance the underwater flora and fauna riches in Ayvalik diminishing due to various reasons. The method to be employed to achieve this aim is to form artificial reefs and wrecks at depths suitable for underwater diving just like in various countries of the world.

#### **4. METHOD (AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON DIVERS IN AYVALIK)**

The objective of this study is to develop underwater sports, which are turning into a common hobby rather than sports, and enhance variety in tourism. Turkey is surrounded by seas on three sides and colorizing the project with festivals, trainings, and tours to popularize the sea and particularly our underwater beauties will contribute to the development of tourism in the country.

In the study on the underwater world in Ayvalik, an academically significant sample (247 divers) has been worked on. In this study, the expectations and satisfaction levels about the products/services they experienced in the Ayvalik region as well as the demographical and economic characteristics of 247 holidaymakers who are keen on underwater sports have been examined. In the report prepared at the end of the research, a model of sustainable marketing for underwater sports has been drafted and detailed information and recommendations are provided for the utilization of those who would like to obtain general information on tourism as well as industry stakeholders and those who would like to conduct advanced level analyses on tourism.

##### **4.1. The Objective of the Study**

The main variables that the study has attempted to measure are demographic variables of divers, financial and technical details of the vessels used, and expectations about underwater sports. As such, demographical characteristics

of divers and expectations and projections for the future have been tried to be achieved by creating an integrated structure. Within this framework, a total of 247 divers were surveyed and interviewed between 15 June - 15 September 2011. Survey methodology; the surveys were conducted on divers in Ayvalık. Data collected via questionnaire forms were analysed utilizing statistical analysis methods (SPSS 15.0).

When the sample is taken into consideration, this study is significant in that it has outreached 247 divers. The questionnaire form prepared to measure the demographical characteristics of divers, technical and financial issues related to the vessels, and expectations related to underwater tourism has been examined with multi-variable analysis methods in the study. It is envisaged that the data and information to be obtained from the research will contribute to sustainable development of the tourism sector in Turkey countrywide and particularly in Ayvalık and to future strategic decisions on increasing the competitive edge of the destination and underwater fauna and flora planning.

#### **4.2. The Scope of the Study**

The main objective of this study is to identify expectations, satisfaction levels, and complaints of the divers who come to Ayvalık for diving and develop a solution strategy. In order to develop destination-focused, multifunctional tourism, it needs to be sustainable. Therefore, competitive edge formulation should focus on creating brand-name tourism regions rather than providing cheap products. Such a requirement also applies to Ayvalık, which is increasingly becoming a more important region for diving tourism in Turkey.

Certainly, superficially profiling the divers that come to Ayvalık for diving is not the mere objective of the study. A dependable measurement tool that investigates the expectations of the divers that come for diving, their satisfaction level regarding the touristic products and services, their opinion and thoughts on the underwater world and a holistic approach towards the profiles of the divers that come to the region with diving-related purposes has been utilized in the study. The scope of the study is the divers that visited the Ayvalık region between 15 June - 15 September 2011 for diving. These months have been basically selected as they constitute the high season for Ayvalık.

#### **4.3. The Method of the Study**

##### **4.3.1. The Universe and Sample of the Study**

The universe of the study consists of the divers that visited Ayvalık between 15 June - 15 September 2011 for diving-related purposes. More than 4 thousand visitors came to Ayvalık for underwater diving purposes as of 2009. Based on this data, a survey study has been conducted with a number of subjects (252) that is slightly higher than 200, which is about 5 percent of this figure, and a sample was identified accordingly. The number of the collected questionnaires (252) is strong enough to represent the study universe.

Five out of the 252 divers questionnaire forms were excluded although we had requested them to fill in the forms carefully. Therefore, the number of the divers questionnaires was updated as 247.

#### **4.3.2. Data Collection Tool**

Surveying method was preferred as the data collection tool. The questionnaire applied on divers consists of two parts. The first section of the survey inquires about the demographic characteristics of the divers that come to Ayvalık for diving purposes and the second one asks about the vessels and the related technical and financial aspects of the services given. National and international literatures have been scanned first in the formation of the measurement tool. Afterwards, the questionnaire form was prepared and academics that are specialists in the related field and sector representatives were asked to review the form. In addition, the dependability of the scales used were tested.

### **5. RESULTS**

#### **5.1. Group 1 questions (Demographic Variables)**

**Question -1-Educational Levels of Divers:** The distribution of the divers that participated in the survey shows that undergraduates take the lead with a rate of 65%. They are followed by graduates with a rate of 25%. Such a high level of education is positive in terms of developing and popularizing underwater sports.

**Question-2- Professions of Divers:** The first place is taken by the self-employed with a rate of 23% and they are followed by teachers and scholars with 16% and by healthcare professionals with 15% in terms of occupational groups.

**Question 3: Age Groups of Divers:** The distribution of divers in age groups shows that 33% is in the 30-39 age group and 30% is in the 40-49 age group. The low rate in the above 50 age group may be attributed to the fact that underwater sports require strong and healthy body structure.

**Question 4: Provinces Divers Reside in:** An examination of the distribution in districts of the divers that come to Ayvalık shows that those reside in İstanbul take the lead with a rate of 47 percent. This is followed by Bursa with 17 % and Ankara with 10 percent. The low number of the divers that come from closer regions indicate that transportation facilities and the distance is not important. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that divers that come for underwater sports come from the same regions as the local tourists.

**Question 5: Annual Income levels of Divers;** The annual income distributions of divers show that the commonest income level is the group with an income of TL 31,000 - 40,000 with a rate of 33%, which is followed by the TL 41,000 - 50,000 income group with a rate of 20 percent.

## **5.2. Group 2 questions (Technical and Personal Questions about Diving)**

**Question 6:** Diving Durations of Divers: When the distribution of divers in terms of their background in diving, 27% have stated that they have been doing these sports for 4 to 6 years and 26% for 1 to 3 years. That the rate of those who checked the "Just started" choice is 19% is promising for the future of the demand to underwater sports.

**Question 7:** Topics Divers would like to be trained in: When the distribution of which trainings are most desired by the divers in the underwater stage trainings is examined, it is understood that 58% of the divers would like to receive all the trainings. This is followed by Search and Direction Finding training with a rate of 12 percent.

**Question 8:** Intermediaries That Enable Divers's Access to Sporting Activities in Ayvalık: When the divers are examined in terms of their distribution per the intermediaries that enable them access the sporting activities in Ayvalık, it is seen that 41% of the divers that come to the region come via diving schools. This is followed those who come by their own means and university diving clubs.

## **6 .SUSTAINABILITY OF UNDERWATER TOURISM IN AYVALIK**

Globalization has increased the importance of technology in today's tourism movements and use of the internet and information sharing is reflected in the tourist profile, which lead to a demand created by conscious tourism consumers with high levels of culture and expectations. Globalization also accelerated along with culture and information sharing between communities in parallel with the developments in tourism and the challenges faced by the tourism industry has attained a global nature rather than being local problems (4). Natural, historic and cultural resources that form the basis of tourism are now accepted as the common heritage of the world and the rapidly growing environmental problems caused by this sector are considered the problem of all nations (5). Companies marketing touristic products as well as consumers pay utmost attention to the principle of sustainability within this framework and they get accustomed to new marketing trends (6).

Tourism is a lot more revenue-generating sector for the poor and developing countries compared with other sectors (7). However, tourism products are directly linked with climatic and environmental factors. For this reason, the concept of sustainability in tourism has now gained a vital importance and has been accepted as a fact that should be taken into consideration in all activities (8).

Within this framework, sustainable tourism is defined as an approach model in which the environment is protected and not harmed and cultural unity, ecological processes, biological diversity, and vital systems are maintained. With a broader expression it can be defined as an economic development model in which all the resources are utilized in a way to ensure that economic, social, and cultural requirements of the community in the visited destination as well as tourists are met

and also the resources are transferred to future generations without being damaged to the extent possible (9). The first step in the realization of sustainable tourism is the identification of the carrying capacity of tourism regions. This indicates the number of tourists that can be hosted without compromising the quality of the service that tourists receive and without damaging the natural, historical, and cultural environment. With such characteristics, sustainable tourism requires a planning that is quite different from mass tourism. In other words, marketing should be sustainable and convince consumers. Rules underlying sustainability pose a threat against marketing discipline and our established social and economic systems (10). Langerak (1998) summarizes this threat as environmental awareness of product sellers and sensitivity of consumers (11).

Developing rapidly and gaining more enthusiasts every day, underwater sports are an important element of sustainable tourism. Underwater sports are activities performed under the water with such purposes as seeing the underwater beauties, underwater hunting, underwater photographing, examining underwater ecology or archaeology or developing physical and psychological capabilities to explore the limits of the human being.

With its cute bays and isles of varying sizes as well as natural, historical, and cultural treasures, Ayvalık is one of the most beautiful holiday destinations of not only the Aegean Region but also the entire country of Turkey. With its climate conditions, adequate tourism infrastructure, countless bays of unrivalled beauty, clear and clean waters, Ayvalık is ideally located to establish an underwater tourism centre.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

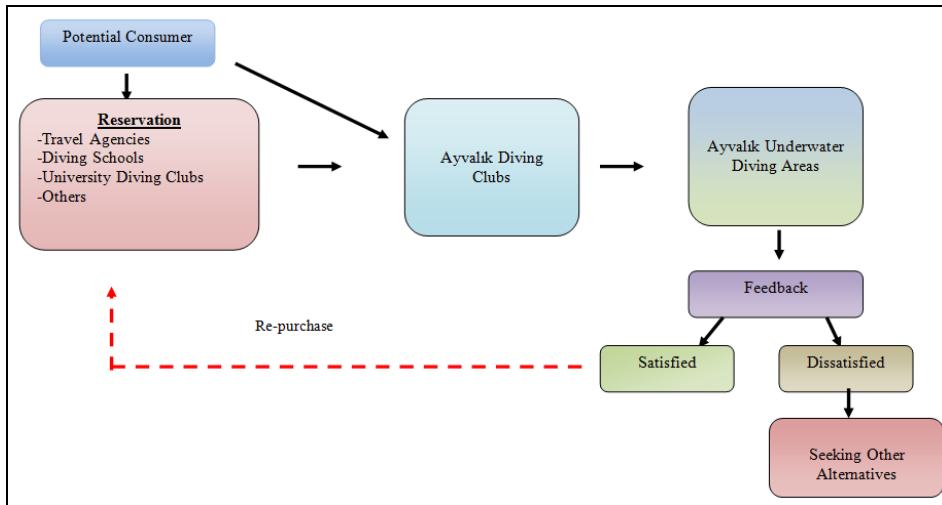
According to the estimates of the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), Turkey will be the most rapidly developing country in the tourism sector with an annual growth rate of up to 10.2% throughout the next decade. An understanding of tourism that respects both natural values and cultural ones can play a very significant role in this development.

It may sometimes be observed that certain travel agencies and tour operators that particularly market "green products" may feature destinations that are worthless indeed in terms of natural environment as "clean, untouched environments" in their catalogues or brochures. These are attempts to totally misguide the consumer (tourist). Regardless of the type of tourism, sustainable tourism requires the protection of environmental values as a fundamental element of tourism, implementation of tourism activities in responsibility towards the environment, and implementation of efforts to ensure economic development of tourism as well as protection of environmental values in coordination.

Although Ayvalık is rich in underwater values, lack of diving centres that would showcase these riches adequately and insufficient publicity leads to a failure in the creation of the expected demand for this product group. Our research



showed that there are two diving centres that are active in this field in Ayvalık. We can argue that these centres are noteworthy with regards to sufficient technical equipment and special design of the vessel they use in diving cruises.



**Fig. 1. A Model Proposal for Sustainable Underwater Tourism**

The most important characteristic of underwater fauna of Ayvalık is red corals. We can argue that even in the Red Sea, which hosts many local and international divers every year, the same species of corals do not exist. This international attention has accelerated our efforts to publicize these corals to the circles interested in the underwater world. Hosting these coral species, Ayvalık has become a competitor of the Red Sea today. The most significant underwater and nature magazines of Europe have featured Ayvalık and stated that it is a unique destination for macro photography focusing on underwater fauna and flora.

Protection of the historical setting and bringing it back to life in line with the requirements of cultural life, improving the existing building assets, projects to obtain planned and environmentally-friendly new building structures as well as publicity activities are gaining importance. Therefore, information regarding the underwater world in Ayvalık should be highlighted in publicity efforts.

The district of Ayvalık has the largest urban conservation area in Turkey and it should be governed with an effort to enhance its characteristics as a city that does not destroy the nature, is respectful to the environment and the heritage, and is participatory. The competitive options of Ayvalık, which has 1517 registered buildings in the sub-province centre and 317 registered buildings on the Cunda Island, should individually be identified and its such features as the natural beauties of the region, it's being a green city, olives and olive oil culture, historical buildings, and that it is a city with plenty of oxygen should be promoted. In addition, publicity activities should also cover the underwater riches of red corals and amphorae. More coordinated work should be performed in order to promote the sport of surfing in the district, and an action plan should be established in

contact with all the actors in the sector. The number of the points of attraction in the district should be increased and cultural values (such as cuisine, clothes, and lifestyle) should be presented to the attention of tourists. Spearfishing should positively be banned at the tourist spots where diving is performed. These zones should be identified by the diving schools in the region and hunters should perform hunting oriented diving activities in line with the related rules and out of these areas.

In addition, diving schools are required to establish certain standards on diving fees without delay. Within this framework, each diving school should definitely have a diving plan. Diving schools should provide briefings and debriefings at the end of each diving session and deal with each diver individually. Care should be attached to not violating the rules and standards established by the diving school during the diving.

Finally, ways of informing the market, in other words divers, about the underwater beauties of Turkey should be sought and to this end, the country and the region should be publicized in the magazines and journals on the underwater world.

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