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Exploring Responsible Tourism in Upper Myanmar

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ABSTRACT

The concept of “responsible tourism”, which has spread rapidly in recent years, evokes conscious tourist behavior so as to minimize negative impacts on destinations, from an environmental, economic and cultural point of view. While intuitively comprehensible, the concept is not easy to operationalize in empirical studies. Facing this difficulty, our contribution illustrates an attempt to operatively define the concept within the framework of the development of a sustainable destination plan for the Ancient Cities of Upper Myanmar (ACUM). The paper describes the index adopted to survey and measure responsible attitudes among tourists and the main results of the research.

Keywords: Responsible Tourism; Myanmar; Asia; Survey; Tourists

Il concetto di turismo responsabile, progressivamente affermatosi negli ultimi anni, richiama la consapevolezza del turista nel minimizzare l’impatto della propria presenza sulla destinazione turistica da un punto di vista ambientale, economico e culturale. Sebbene intuitivo, il concetto è tuttavia molto complesso e non facile da operativizzare in un contesto di ricerca empirica. Partendo da questa considerazione, il contributo illustra un tentativo di definizione operativa del concetto effettuato nell’ambito della costruzione del piano di sviluppo turistico sostenibile per le antiche città dell’Upper Myanmar (ACUM). Nel testo si descrive il metodo seguito per rilevare la dimensione “grado di responsabilità” nel contesto dell’indagine standardizzata sulla domanda turistica nell’area, e si commentano i principali risultati ottenuti.

Keywords: Turismo responsabile; Myanmar; Asia; Indagine sul campo; Turisti

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Introduction

The impact of mass tourism on the environmental, social and cultural characteristics of a destination has long been a matter of discussion in international debate and has triggered the search for alternative forms of tourism development.¹

A benchmark for orientation in this context is offered by sustainable development models, aimed at preventing mass tourism from destroying environmental, social and cultural resources and from levelling out local (regional) specificities. This issue is particularly relevant for structurally fragile destinations such as those in developing countries. For them, tourism development represents an enticing opportunity, as well as an insidious threat.

This is the case of Myanmar. Following the decision to open the country up internationally, a decision made by the government as of 2011, Myanmar has seen an extremely rapid and intense development of tourism, more than quadrupling the number of arrivals between 2012 and 2015. In 2015 it reached the figure of 4,681,020 international arrivals, increasing the share it absorbed out of all arrivals in the ASEAN² group from 1.2% to 3.0%. However, from a material point of view, namely as regards infrastructure and organization, the country does not appear to be well-equipped for the management of this development process. Therefore, there is the risk of a rapid deterioration of resources, with possible destabilizing effects at the economic, social and cultural levels – as has been the case in some areas of neighboring countries such as Thailand and Indonesia (Adams, 1990; Hitchcock & al., 2010; GHF, 2012). The risk is especially high for the country's main destinations, like the sensitive Ancient Cities of Upper Myanmar (ACUM).

Faced with this scenario, the Florence University LaGeS/Laboratory for Social Geography decided to develop a *Sustainable Destination Plan* for the ACUM district,³ so as to promote the development of the tourist sector and to meet the population's legitimate expectations for economic growth, while preventing the deterioration of the cultural and landscape heritage, and extending the economic benefits of development in a sustainable and equitable way (Loda & al., 2016).

1. Defining the concepts

The sustainable development models were defined at an institutional level over 25 years ago, through the concept of sustainable tourism, conceived of as “development (to meet) the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future.” (WCST, 1995). At first, the principle of sustainability concentrated on the topic of the environment; then it was extended to include the goals of respect for and protection of cultural and social resources, economic equity, namely maximization of the economic consequence on the local population, which is allotted a central role in the development process. Recently, the idea of sustainability has been further expanded to include a subjective dimension, that is, the stance which the visitor subjectively adopts towards the tourist destination,

defined in terms of responsibility (Davolio & Meriani, 2011).

While the concept of sustainable tourism is used above all to characterize the supply side of tourism (public policies, tourist concerns, etc.), responsible tourism applies to the demand side (tourists, tour operators) (ibidem). In reality, nevertheless, the responsibility dimension can also be taken as a benchmark for orienting supply policies. In fact responsibility expresses the set of individual behaviors and concrete choices by means of which visitors take advantage of the opportunities provided by the tourism system. Choices and behaviors are determined in part by the specific characteristics of the host location, and in part by the cultural inclinations of the individual people that orient how they adapt to the context. Together, these choices and behaviors determine the scale and the nature of the impact which the presence of tourism has on the destination; in other words, they make it possible to measure the degree of responsibility with which visitors relate to the location. The higher their awareness of the possible negative implications of tourism development, and the greater the tendency to translate this awareness into actual choices, the higher one can rate the degree of responsibility.

If compared with the structure of the tourism supply, this fact also makes it possible to discuss the visitors' potential degree of responsibility, in other words how responsible their actions would be if the tourism supply were structured in a suitable way. With a view to a sustainable destination plan, it is vital to identify the segments of demand that are most geared towards responsibility and to outline their motives, so as to organize the supply in such a way as to develop the responsibility potential to the fullest. This approach to responsible tourism is at the centre of this paper.

Although there is now widespread recognition of the importance of subjective responsibility in achieving sustainable approaches to tourism development, this variable has rarely become the subject of empirical investigations on tourism demand. On one hand, the best-known and most complete set of indicators drawn up to measure the sustainability of a destination and direct its development policies (European Commission, 2013; UNESCO, 2010) does not contain any references to the subjective dimension of tourist responsibility, that is, with regard to opinions and behaviors. On the other, the now vast amount of publicity explicitly referring to responsible tourism is more descriptive than analytical (Canestrini, 2001; Maeran, 2009; Sambri & Pegan, 2007), and prevalently adopts an ethical or philanthropic perspective, merely illustrating responsible behaviors. What is more, the (rare) empirical surveys are in the end similar to analyses on the socio-economic impact of the presence of tourists on the destination (Tearfund, 2000; Goodwin & Francis, 2003; Chafe, 2005) or analyses of tourist satisfaction (Casarin, 2005).

To help to fill this gap, it has been attempted to empirically analyze the dimension of responsibility within the preparation of the aforementioned Sustainable Destination Plan for the ACUM district. The survey on responsibility – part of wider research aimed at building the cognitive framework prior to outlining the plan – was conducted by inserting the topic of responsibility in a standardized questionnaire aimed at gathering a wider range of information. The questionnaire was administered in 2015 to a random sample of 1,395 inbound tourists. The survey was performed in the periods of 20 August - 10 September 2015 (rainy season) and 29 November - 22 December 2015 (dry season) in order to assess the potential effect of climatic-environmental conditions on

the tourists' answers. The questionnaire was administered in seven languages: English, Italian, German, French, Spanish, Chinese and Thai, theoretically covering 83% of international tourism in the area. The sample differs from the composition of Burmese tourist demand by provenance seen in official statistics on international tourism because of the greater significance of the European component compared to those from other Asian countries. Since it is known that the Asian component in Mandalay are almost all Chinese and Thai citizens who come for business purposes or visits to relatives and friends, or for whom the tourism program is only an accessory component to the main reasons for the trip, it is considered that our sample captures better the presence of foreigners in the city for typically tourist purposes. Furthermore, in order to approximate the sample to random conditions which, as is known, can never fully be achieved in the field of tourism studies, we created a sample of more than 1,000 cases and we introduced some sampling quotas based on seasonality (high/low season), provenience, kind of hotel (number of stars) and length of stay (Piccolo, 1998); moreover 49.5% of the tourists were interviewed directly at their hotel (selected in advance, at random), and 50.5% were contacted at typical visitor sites (Mandalay Hill and Royal Palace).

2. Operationalizing the concept of “responsible tourism”

Twelve specific questions were used to operationalize the dimension of responsibility, and included in the standardized questionnaire administered to analyze the international tourism profile in the ACUM area.

The questions were specifically aimed at measuring the degree to which interviewees subscribed to forms of sustainable and responsible tourism, both as regards their ideal inclinations and in terms of the practical organization of their trip.

The questions were formulated with reference to the six fundamental dimensions which, according to the literature on this subject, fall within the concept:⁴

- 1) Information on travel logistics and organization
- 2) Knowledge of local customs
- 3) Respect for the natural and cultural heritage
- 4) Interaction with local people
- 5) Consumption of local products
- 6) An open and curious approach to the host context

The frequency distribution of the interviewees' answers provides an overall picture for each of the aspects dealt with. They can be summed up as follows:

- 1) Information: most tourists find out information before their departure.
- 2) Knowledge of local customs: knowledge of local customs is fairly high, in particular of customs linked to religion. Knowledge of local customs was measured by means of questions based on the Do's and Don'ts handbook distributed by the MOHT and offered in the form of reading copies in many

- Burmese hotel rooms (MOHT, 2012).
- 3) Respect for natural and cultural heritage: half of tourists show a conceptual inclination towards respect, however the figure decreases to $\frac{1}{4}$ if we consider behavior indicators. As indicators of conceptual adherence, we used the answers to two pairs of opposing items (forced choice): “(it) will be a source of progress and wellbeing”, versus “(it) is an opportunity, but it involves risks” and “the tourist must have complete freedom of movement in the country”, versus “out of respect, some areas may remain inaccessible to tourists”. Also tested was the theoretical preference for types of hospitality facilities that have either a low or a high impact on the landscape, asking for choices to be made between a pair of contrasting photos. The instrument used is a self-anchoring scale, with a forced choice, and it consists in inviting interviewees to choose between contrasting elements presented with very radical formulas. In the view of the people who devised it, this type of scale constitutes an effective simulation of the choices which are made in daily life (Osgood & al., 1957).
 - 4) Interaction with local people: most tourists appreciate direct contact with the local people, but less than half of the sample makes use of local guides.
 - 5) Consumption of local products: half of the sample identifies with this attitude, but sustainable behaviors are practiced by a smaller portion of visitors. Purchases of local craft products were regarded as an indicator of behavior.
 - 6) Open and curious approach to host context: this dimension, detected by observing the attitude of visitors towards street food, shows that half of the sample displays an open and curious approach towards the context. The relationship with food is typically seen as a sensitive area in which the individual’s most instinctive and deepest tendencies manifest themselves. It is therefore useful for testing the visitor’s immediate relationship with the visited place.

In individual experience, however, the dimensions examined are found to be in variable combinations. Therefore, we decided to combine the variables relating to responsibility in order to create a responsibility index.

The responsibility index simplifies the interpretation of the variables and, if we disregard the differing constellations with which the dimensions feature in individual cases, it provides an overall measurement of the degree of responsibility. It is important to note that the index refers totally to tourist behaviors and attitudes in terms of responsibility and not to the sustainability of the destination; in other words, the aim of the index is to measure the actual and the potential responsibility on the demand side, not to measure how sustainable tourism is in the destination (ACUM district).

The index was constructed by identifying one or more indicators for each of the dimensions illustrated above, which in turn are made operational by questions in the questionnaire. A score was assigned to each indicator, bearing in mind the need to distinguish between conceptual adherence to the principles of responsible tourism, and the actual adoption of responsible modes of behavior, with a higher score allocated to the latter category. The inclusion of indicators relating to behavior also made it possible to strip the index of the risk of responses marred by social

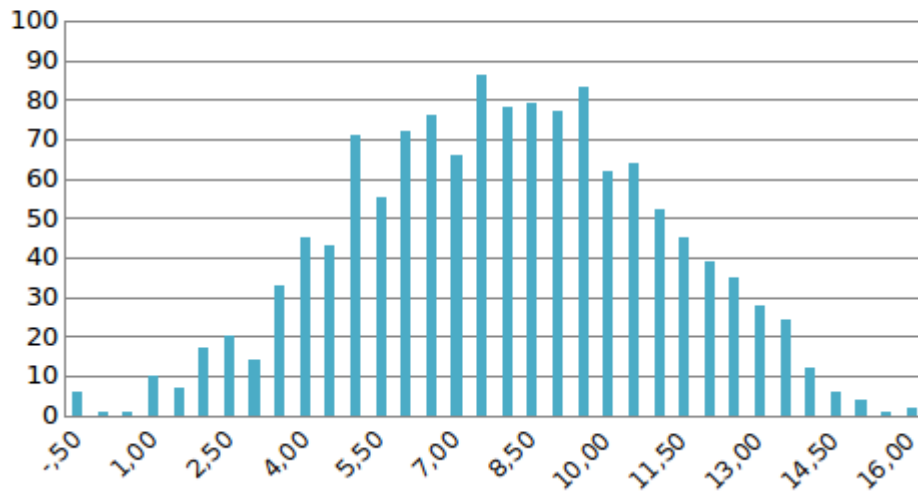
desirability.⁵ The responsibility index is the simple result of adding up the individual scores, and it measures the degree of responsibility of each visitor.⁶ Table 1 schematically reproduces the logic pursued, and explains the weighting criteria adopted.

The index obtained has a normal distribution (the result of the Shapiro-Wilk normality test is 0.994), and varies from -0.5 to 16. In order to facilitate the interpretation of the results obtained, the index was divided into three categories in line with the percentiles method: low, medium and high degree of responsibility. In accordance with the following calculation: low degree up to 33rd percentile (scores from -0.5 to 6.5), medium degree from 33rd to 66th percentile (scores from 7 to 9.5), and high degree above 66th percentile (scores from 10 to 16).

Table 1: The Responsible Tourism index

| Dimension | Information on logistics and organization of the trip | Knowledge of local traditions | Respect (for cultural heritage) | Respect (for environment) | Interaction with local people | Consumption of local products | Openness and curiosity towards the host context |
|-----------|---|---|---|--|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| Indicator | Sources of information consulted before departure | n. of correct responses on Do's and Don'ts (items with true/false answer) | Attitude towards heritage (semantic differential for item) | Use of bicycle | Direct contact with local people | Purchasing local craft goods | Choice btw. alternatives for meals (by comparison of photos) |
| Score | 0.5 – one source; 1 several source; -1 no information | 0.5 for every correct answer | 1.5 for every decision in favor of respect | 1 if bicycle used | 1 if direct contact has taken place | 0.5 – purchase of one product; 1 – purchase of more than one product; -1 – no product purchased | 1 – street food |
| Indicator | | | Choice btw. alternatives in accomodation facilities (by comparison of photos) | Choice btw. alternatives in means of transport (by comparison of photos) | Hiring a local guide | | Consumption of street food |
| Score | | | 1 – low-impact facility; -1 high-impact facility | 1 if bicycle/ricks haw | 1 if local guide hired | | 2 – if tried (eaten); 0.5 – if subject would try it; -1 – if subject would not try it |
| Indicator | | | | Use of rickshaw | | | |
| Score | | | | 1 if rickshaw used | | | |

Figure 1: Respondents by degree of responsibility

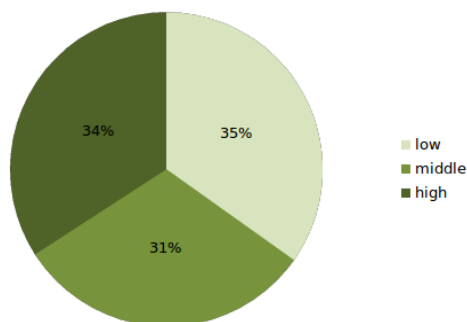


Source: Survey data. Processed by the author

4. ACUM district responsible tourist profile

On the basis of the index used, the visitors in our sample are thus divided fairly equally between the three groups having a low, medium and high degree of responsibility, with around 1/3 of the sample in each group⁷ (Fig. 2):

Figure 2: Division of the responsible tourism index into classes



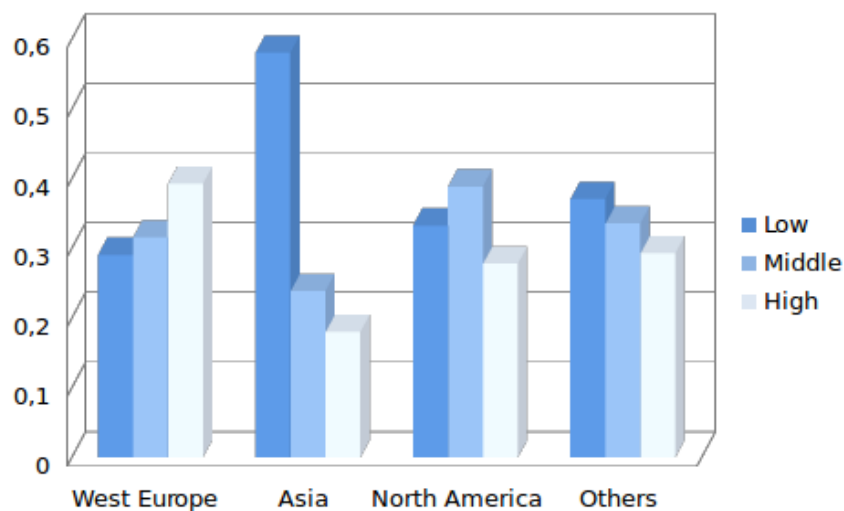
Source: Survey data. Processed by the author

The three levels of the index were then explored by means of a combination with other variables that serve to draw up the profile of responsible tourists in the Upper Myanmar context.

As regards provenance, visitors from western Europe⁸ are the most present group, in percentage terms, in the group with a high degree of responsibility. Meanwhile, the

component from Asian countries is prominent not only because its percentage of very responsible tourists falls to 18%, against just under 40% among western Europeans, but above all because it contains a particularly large presence of tourists with the lowest degree of responsibility: 58%, as against 29% among western Europeans (Fig. 3). This difference is probably to be ascribed to the fact that in Asian countries tourism is a relatively recent phenomenon, and travelers have limited previous experience of making trips, and the debate over tourism’s implications for the destination is still restricted to fairly small circles.

Figure 3: Tourists by provenance and responsibility (no. = 1,357)



Source: Survey data. Processed by the author

A second factor which strongly correlates with the degree of responsibility is age, in accordance with an inversely proportional relationship between the two variables. The impact of the age factor can be appreciated especially clearly when the area of provenance is kept constant. If, for example, we isolate the group of tourists from western Europe, and we divide them up on the basis of age and the degree of responsibility, we note that the probability of coming across as responsible tourists is double among younger tourists compared with the group above the age of 55 (Tab. 2).

Table 2: Tourism by age

| | Low | High | No . |
|-------|-------|-------|------|
| < 30 | 31.6% | 68.4% | 275 |
| 31-55 | 46.0% | 54.0% | 237 |
| >55 | 65.4% | 34.6% | 78 |

Chi2: .00

Source: Survey data. Processed by the author

A third factor which correlates with the degree of responsibility is the type of trip: a high degree of responsibility is proportionally more frequent among tourists who organize their trip independently compared with those who travel on an organized trip. The incidence of this factor – although not as strong as that of age – can be appreciated by keeping constant both the area of provenance and age. For example, upon taking tourists from western Europe aged between 31 and 55 alone, and dividing them up on the basis of the type of trip and the degree of responsibility, one notes that the probability of meeting very responsible tourists among those who arrive on an organized tour is 15% lower than in the group of independent travelers (Tab. 3).

Table 3: Sustainable Tourism by type of trip (31-55 age group only)

| | Low | High | No. |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|-----|
| Package tourists | 55.2% | 44.8% | 67 |
| Independent travelers | 41.0% | 59.0% | 166 |

Chi2: .00

Source: Survey data, Processed by the author

Finally, if we keep the type of trip as well as age constant, we can fully determine the high correlation between provenance and degree of responsibility. If, for example, we only consider independent travelers under the age of 30, we see that the probability of encountering very responsible tourists in the group from western Europe is almost 30% higher than in the group from Asian countries (Tab. 4).

Table 4: Sustainable Tourism by provenance (under 30 age group only)

| | Low | High | N |
|-------------|-------|-------|-----|
| West Europe | 29.2% | 70.8% | 253 |
| Asia | 57.1% | 42.9% | 49 |

Chi2: .00

Source: Survey data. Processed by the author

In the ACUM district, the profile of the tourist who tends to express responsible forms of behavior is that of a young person, with good travel experience, who independently organizes his/her visit, and comes from western Europe.

It is important to stress that specific characteristics are not associated with this profile as regards spending capacity, and thus responsible tourism does not equate with poor tourism in economic terms.⁹ If, for example, one only takes tourists from western Europe under the age of 30 who travel independently, and we compare the average daily spending for food and drinks (beverages) by travelers with a high and a low degree of responsibility, we note that there is no difference between the two groups,

and that the variables of spending and degree of responsibility do not correlate (Tab. 5).

Table 5: Daily spending for food and beverages per person (western European, under 30 age group only)

| | Average expense | N | Sig. |
|------|-----------------|-----|------|
| Low | 13.2 USD | 68 | .908 |
| High | 12.3 USD | 172 | |

Source: Survey data. processed by the author

Conclusion

The responsible tourism index has enabled us to define the profile of the responsible tourist in Upper Myanmar. The set of motives of the responsible traveler-type in Upper Myanmar, who is demanding from the point of view of the quality of tourist experience, but fairly elastic as regards comfort levels, ought to provide the main reference point for a sustainable development policy in the ACUM district, since it is a forerunner of a type of demand which will tend to become more consolidated in the near future in European countries, and to also spread to countries which came to practice tourism at a later date.

As regards the less responsible components of tourist demand, it is certainly necessary not to give support to habits which have the biggest impact (e.g. a tendency to use tourist buses for any distance, or else a low regard for the sacred nature of places of worship). However, it would also be opportune to try to guide the actions of less responsible tourists in the direction of greater responsibility. In this respect, travel agencies could be one important hinge: if adequately informed and involved, they could rethink the packages they offer with a view to responsibility, and play a useful role of mediation between the destination and visitors. This idea appears promising, especially with reference to tourist demand from China, which, as we have seen, is a quantitatively important component of demand (28% of foreign visitors to the area), and in 90% of cases visits Upper Myanmar on organized trips, but features a low degree of responsibility, as well as actions and behavior with a high impact, both in terms of ecology and culture.

From a methodological point of view, the technical tool created to detect the dimension of responsibility certainly proved effective and reliable. Nevertheless, the methodological problems inevitably caused by the operationalization of such a complex and porous concept as “responsible tourism” cannot be played down. The strong correlation that we have seen between responsible behaviors and provenance from European countries can indeed be given a positive interpretation. In this view of a linear conception of the tourist phenomenon, the demand necessarily evolves from

forms of package tourism towards experiential and responsible tourism. According to this reading, the European tourist experience is more mature, with a paradigmatic value for the evolution of the tourist demand from countries which adopted this practice later on (e.g. China). Nevertheless, were it considered that tourist style instead depends on the context of provenance, and that linear pathways in the maturation of tourist demand do not exist, then the correlation could be read negatively as a bias, namely, as a structurally distorting element of the sample examined.

However one may wish to assess it from the methodological point of view, this research experience was nevertheless an interesting attempt to give empirical evidence to the visions of sustainability and responsibility set out at the beginning of this piece.

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¹ This paper is the joint work of the two authors. Mirella Loda has written section 1, 2 and the Conclusion; Ester Macri has written section 3 and 4.

² ASEAN members states are: Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Viet Nam.

³ The plan has been developed as part of a cooperation project with the Myanmar Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, financially supported by the Italian Directorate for Development Cooperation (DGCS).

⁴ For bibliographical references, see Goodwin's useful summary (2012). Operating suggestions were also taken from the Tourism Concern NGO website (<https://www.tourismconcern.org.uk/>).

⁵ Social desirability means the tendency of interviewees to provide answers in line with what is socially acceptable, see Corbetta (1999).

⁶ All the indicators which make up the index have a positive sign with regard to the concept of responsible tourism. Therefore a high score on the index corresponds to a high propensity on the part of the tourist to adopt responsible decisions.

⁷ Even though the index has been divided according to the percentile criterion, the classes do not contain exactly 33% of the cases each. Indeed, when an index is built through a summation, it is more probable that more interviewees will register the same score. Therefore, when the value corresponding to the percentile is identified, all of those who obtained a score up to that value (or between the two values) are inserted even though the overall total of the individuals in the class do not correspond to exactly 1/3 of the total interviewees.

⁸ The western European visitors interviewed were from: Greece, Italy, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, France, Portugal, Finland, Malta, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Belgium, Austria, the Netherlands, Spain and Germany.

⁹ Its ability to exclude biases deriving from equating responsible tourism and poor tourism reinforces the methodological interest of the index.