www.business-systems-review.org

Business Systems Review

ISSN: 2280-3866
Volume 3 – Issue 2, 2014
Special Issue - Selected papers of the
2nd B.S.Lab International Symposium

How to become a benchmark sustainable tourist destination? A descriptive model.

Giuseppe Tardivo
Professor of Business and Management, Department of Management, Turin, Italy.
e-mail: giuseppe.tardivo@unito.it.

Angela Scilla
Ph.D. in Business and Management, Department of Management, Turin, Italy.
e-mail: angela.scilla@unito.it.

Milena Viassone
Researcher of Business and Management, Department of Management, Turin, Italy.
e-mail: milena.viassone@unito.it. Corresponding author

Submitted: April 30, 2014- Published: August, 21, 2014
DOI: 10.7350/BSR.D15.2014 – URL: http://dx.medra.org/10.7350/BSR.D15.2014

ABSTRACT

According to literature the future competitiveness of destinations will be based on their ability to be sustainable in time in terms of economic, natural and cultural resources. For these reasons, managers often try to establish strategies and operational procedures that lead to the achievement of sustainable competitive advantage of tourist destinations, including also benchmarking techniques. Several indices and processes of sustainability and competitiveness are identified in the economic and managerial literature and can act as guidelines for local actors and managers in strategic planning for the sustainable development of a tourist destination. Despite this, there have been limited applications of benchmarking in tourist destinations. This paper aims at identifying the set of features of worldwide benchmark destinations of sustainable tourism in order to propose an illustrative framework to be followed by destinations which choose the path of sustainability, through a systematic analysis of related literature and the analysis of worldwide tourist destinations awarded with the most important prizes for sustainability. This results in the creation of a set of best practices for tourist destinations thus providing an important contribution to the literature on this topic. However, it shows important limits: it only considers the sustainable destinations awarded in the last 5 years, it doesn't supply a distinction between different types of destinations and, finally, it employs the award assigned to different tourist destinations as unique parameter of benchmark of sustainability. In the future we will focus on particular types of tourist destination, awarded or not, thus identifying development strategies.

***Keywords**:* Tourist Destination, Benchmark, Sustainable Destination, Tourist Strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors in the twenty-first century (Wto, 2007). It is an important driver of development (Weaver, 2006; Scheyvens & Momsen, 2008) because it enhances economic growth and encourages local development, increasing employment and national income (Szivaz et al., 2003; Torres & Momsen, 2004; Na Sakalnakorn & Naipinit, 2011).
The tourism allows, therefore, a set of opportunities but, if badly managed, it can also lead a series of dangerous (Mowforth & Munt, 2008; McCool et al., 2001). In this context, the "Sustainable Tourism" has an important role for correct development and competitiveness of country. It is defined as a «*tourism which is in a form which can maintain its viability in an area for an indefinite period of time*» (Butler, 1993), enhancing opportunities, restricting damages and improving the competitiveness of tourist destinations.
The combination of competitiveness-sustainability is particularly emphasized in the context of tourist destinations and the theme of the competitiveness of a sustainable tourism destination has assumed, therefore, a major role in the international literature of recent decades (Franch et al., 2010; Hong 2009; Enright & Newton, 2005; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Hassan 2000; Pearce 1997).
Therefore, managers and policy makers must try to establish strategies and operational procedures that lead to the achievement of sustainable competitive advantage of tourist destinations, including also benchmarking techniques (Kozak & Rimmington, 1999).
Understanding the meanings of sustainability, then, suggests a focus on identifying what tourism should sustain (McCool et al., 2001). Following this discussion, indicators of sustainability need to be selected and monitored (WTO, 1996; WTO, 2004; OECD, 2010; Jurdana & Frleta, 2011).
Several indicators of sustainability and competitiveness, identified in the economic literature, are contained in the guidelines of the ecolabels or prizes of sustainability.
Thus the criteria used to obtain the certificates and/or ecolabels can become successfully guidelines for local actors and managers in strategic planning for sustainable development of a tourist destination. Benchmarking with other tourist destinations would allow, with a systemic point of view, the creation of a virtuous cycle for the long-term development.
The aim of this study is to identify a set of features that a tourist destination has to possess or develop in order to follow the path of sustainability.
To reach the goal, we decided to organize the paper in two parts. The first part propones a survey of the most recent contributions on:

- pro and con of tourism development in country and the importance of sustainable tourism;
- the importance of competitiveness of tourist destinations and the implications of sustainable tourism;
- the importance of monitoring indicator of sustainable tourism for the strategic decisions and planning of sustainable development of tourist destination;
- the role of criteria of prizes of sustainability as a sustainable indicators for benchmarking model for sustainable tourist destinations.

In the second part, the results of an analysis conducted on a sample of 81 European tourists destinations, awarded with the most important prizes for sustainability in the last 5-years, are presented and commented on, highlighting the different characteristics of the several factors

affecting destination sustainability, classified in five macro-areas: environmental management, eco-tourism/natural assets, supporting assets, cleaner production and tourism carrying capacity.
In the end, we will suggest strategies are also based on the results of the benchmarking model to improve the competitiveness and sustainability of tourist destinations.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 The two different sides of tourism for growth of Countries

Tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors in the twenty-first century (Wto, 2007). While the growth is significant in developed countries, international tourism growth also in the developing nations is even more impressive and not always with good results.
Tourism is an important driver of development (Weaver, 2006; Scheyvens & Monsen, 2008) because it enhances economic growth and encourages local development, increasing employment and national income (Szivaz et al., 2003). More specifically, the tourism: raises the revenue - direct and indirect revenues realized through the subsequent dynamic of the multiplier effect as other local economic sectors (Weaver, 2006) -, increases the employment - wherein the labor intensive tourism industry would provide a large number of direct and indirect jobs (Weaver, 2006) -, raises local incomes, improves economic local structures, stimulates the production of local goods that are related with tourism, allows the social development (Torres & Momsen, 2004; Na Sakalnakorn & Naipinit, 2011).
If this is evident in developed countries, tourism becomes more economically important for developing countries. In fact, for these, tourism represents a set of opportunities: to control their own contact with the outside world, economic opportunities, to promote a general understanding of a sensitivity towards their life, culture, society and belief systems.
The opportunities carried by tourism may become the double-edged sword if not properly managed. However, it can also represent a series of dangerous: of subversion of lifestyle and culture due to the corrupting effect of money, of corrosion of lifestyle as a new way, practices and fashions are introduced without due care and forethought, of exposure to desease, of conflict with squatters and developers, of extinction (Mowforth & Munt, 2008). Many of these opportunities and limits show themselves in many examples of developed and developing countries (Tosun, 2001; Butts & Sukhdeo-Singh, 2010; Kennett-Hensel et al, 2010; Mbaiwa, 2011; Vargas-Hernandez, 2012).
Sustainable Tourism can be one possible solution of these problems because it is developed and maintained in an area (community, environment) in such a manner and at such a scale that it remains viable over an indefinite period and does not degrade or alter the environment (human and physical) in which it exists to such a degree that it prohibits the successful development and well-being of other activities and processes (Butler, 1993).

2.2 Sustainable Tourism in Tourist Destinations

Sustainable Tourism permits to develop an area through attraction and creation of economic, social and environmental resources, without compromising the abilities and resources of future generation. But the tourism sector, just like any other economic sector, faces competitive pressures which are rising substantially in today's globalized society (Kozak, 2004).

These pressures are felt especially in tourist destinations that had to be more attractive to visitors and more competitive of other tourist destinations. The term competitiveness of destination or the territory is a concept particularly complex (Tardivo et al., 2012) because it is formed of a varied range of factors, wherein the sustainability plays a prominent role. According to Godfrey and Clarke (2002) sustainability becomes synonymous with long-term competitiveness, while according to Ritchie and Crouch (2000) the sustainability is the bases of long-term success of the competitiveness of destination.
The concept of competitiveness is multidimensional and, in the tourism field, describes the tourist destinations (Enright & Newton, 2005; Hassan, 2000, Pearce, 1997) as an area in which the pair-sustainable competitiveness is particularly emphasized. The concepts of competitiveness and attractiveness of a destination are different, because they see the destination from different perspectives: the attractiveness from tourist point of view, while competitiveness from destination point of view (Vengesayi, 2003).
Important definitions of competitiveness of destination are provided by Dwyer, Forsyth and Rao (2000):

«*tourism competitiveness is a general concept that encompasses price differentials coupled with exchange rate movements, productivity levels of various components of the tourist industry and qualitative factors affecting the attractiveness or otherwise of a destination.*»

and by d'Hartserre (2000):

«*the ability of a destination to maintain its market position and share and/or to improve upon them through time.*»

The combination of competitiveness-sustainability is particularly emphasized in the context of tourist destinations and the theme of the competitiveness of a sustainable tourism destination has assumed, therefore, a major role in the international literature of recent decades (Franch et al., 2010; Hong, 2009; Enright & Newton, 2005; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Hassan, 2000).
Sustainable tourism development in tourist destination is realistic if all stakeholders can agree priorities: ecological maintenance, local community, and tourist satisfaction. For these reasons, often managers are looking to establish strategies and operational procedures that lead to the achievement of sustainable competitive advantage of tourist destinations, including also benchmarking techniques (Kozak & Rimmington, 1999).
Therefore, the main goal of regional governments and destination management institutions is to succeed in competitive struggle by increasing the competitiveness of their destination. The quality of strategic planning and final strategies is a key factor of competitiveness.

2.3 Importance of planning of Sustainable Tourism decisions

If tourism is to be considered a legitimate avenue for attracting resources, specific strategies will need to be put in place. If they are to be effective, these strategies require direction from the state in terms of appropriate policies, plans and a regulatory framework, and the support of private sector and community stakeholders. Harrison (2003) affirms that:

«*properly planned and managed, tourism can conserve natural resources and bring widespread benefits to local communities*.»

The main conditions for sustainable tourism is an efficient planning practice, a systematic implementation of the plans, a continuous and efficient management, in addition to increasing

involvement of stakeholders. Sustainable development of a tourist destination must be able to support and ensure the social, cultural and economic development of the affected communities, to protect the natural and cultural environment, to offer quality products to satisfy consumers, to ensure adequate management and monitoring.

An appropriate strategy for sustainable tourism should contribute to creation of jobs at the local level, to build structures that can facilitate investment, to facilitate cooperation between public and private sector , provide relief to those who intend to work in the tourism sector, to ensure understanding of the role played by tourism in the local and national economics and the local tourism cohesion on development initiatives (Ene & Bărăitaru, 2010).

To control and plan the effects and the consequences of tourism decisions, the tourism managers and territorial actors need information.

Through information and data which tourism managers get from used indicators (not simply measures of current conditions but also "early warning" devices to alert managers of imminent problems), they can: identify easily some important and urgent problems in order to undertake appropriate measures, identify influences and act before the serious damage is done, minding limits and opportunities, giving help to the managers for better evaluation and responsible decisions (Jurdana & Frleta, 2011).

Evaluation is critical to understand whether policies and programs are appropriate and efficient in achieving their intended objectives. Evaluation involves quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative tools tend to be used most frequently (often simple arrivals or expenditure based measures), but the impact of tourism on communities and individuals cannot always be reduced to quantitative measures, hence the need also to use qualitative tools to understand how policy interventions may have shaped tourism outcomes (OECD, 2010).

The indicators of sustainability must be coupled with other tools and approaches to managing tourism in a sustainable way. Having in mind all the attributes of the tourist destination, indicators of sustainable tourism enable the identification, measurement and tracking of key changes and potential risks. (WTO, 1996)

The literature suggests identifying economic, environmental and social indicators (Butler 1991; Pigram 1990; Carbone, 2005; Weaver, 2006; Schevenes & Momsen, 2008; Jurdana & Frleta, 2011; Albu 2012) to control the sustainable tourism.

In particular, Waever (2006) affirms that an indicator set should incorporate variables that describe the condition, viability and potential influence of the tourism system (number of tourists, annual growth, unit of accommodations, labor force employed in tourism), the effects of the target system on the viability of other systems (water and air pollution, gas emissions produced by tourism activities) and the conditions of external systems (infant mortality rate, labor force unemployed, GDP per capita), hence different drivers regarding aspects of the environment, economy and society.

Even the WTO, since 1996, had suggested several measures of sustainable tourism, identifying eco-tourism/natural assets such as site protection, tourism contribution to local economy, development control, critical ecosystem; cleaner production as waste management; tourism carrying capacity as planning process, consumer satisfaction, local satisfaction, use intensity (WTO, 1996). Few indications were given on environmental management and supporting assets.

Tourism theory recognized the basic importance of environmental quality to ensure the future existence of most kinds of tourist destinations. Tourism managers have been willing to incorporate environmental measures into current management strategies and methods because they can generate lower costs (first aspect) and/or higher revenues and profits (second aspect).

The first aspect usually refers to energy (Iaea, 2005; Holmes & Mohanty, 2012), water and other resource (Gossling et al., 2011; Weaver, 2011) saving programs and thus, in many cases, it results in cost reductions; it is also economically attractive for environmental managers and easily supported by business and political forces located at the destination. The second aspect requires higher environmental awareness, more information and co-ordination, public management and substantial (public) financial resources; it is much more exacting and expensive to manage. It also requires a long-term view; it brings present costs and future benefits (Mihalič, 2000).
The focus of the literature has also focused on the preservation of cultural, environmental and landscape resources (Hawkins, 2004; Santonocito, 2009; Osmanković et al., 2010; Bagadion & Del Fierro-Juan, 2013) as a source of attraction of the tourist destination to be preserved and enhanced.
Thanks to diffusion of mobile life (Gambari, 2010), indicators of level and quality of infrastructure and supporting assets are most popular (Cernat & Gourdon, 2007).
Even if the high interest shown by the managerial literature (Viassone, 2012; Tardivo et al., 2012; Cernat & Gourdon, 2012; Vargas-Hernandez, 2012; Tosun, 2001) towards the assessment of tourism sustainability doesn't result in a universal accepted framework of indices capable of identifying a sustainable destination, the analysis of the doctrinal contributions leads to the identification of five dimensions of sustainable tourist destination: environmental management, ecotourism/natural assets, supporting assets, cleaner production.
Several of the indicators of sustainability and competitiveness identified in the economic literature are contained in the guidelines of the ecolabels or prizes of sustainability.
The criteria for obtaining of certifications or/and awards of sustainability can be successfully guidelines for local actors and managers in strategic planning for sustainable development of the tourist destination. Moreover, benchmarking with other tourist destinations would allow, with a systemic point of view, the creation of a virtuous cycle for the long-term development.
Even though the tourism sector is not the typical field where the benchmarking methods are widely used, such approaches could be successfully applied (Luštický & Kincl, 2012).

2.4 The role of prizes of sustainability to define the strategies for sustainable tourism destinations

To grow through tourism is necessary that strategic decisions are oriented to sustainable development. Policy makers need data and information that can be combined into a model can support the sustainable development of tourism destinations.
Moreover, the benchmarking with other tourist destinations, that won the prize for sustainability, would allow, with a systemic point of view, the creation of a virtuous cycle for the long-term development. In this way, governments, environmental groups, tourism organizations, tourists, focus their efforts on sustainability, proceeding to conceptualize, measure, and standardize sustainable tourism practices.
The sustainable certification has two important issues. First, that the principal positive benefits of sustainable tourism indices and measures are not the establishment of internationally recognized and technically rigorous measurement. Rather, development and implementation of sustainable tourism certification is a process that can result an important dialogue and policy-making process about the type of tourism development that a country wishes to pursue, greater awareness in the business community of the needs and contribution of the local communities, and a shift in attitudes across sectors and generations. The second issue is that the certifications brings to

awareness of the importance of country capacity. It is the ability of a government to develop and successfully implement effective policies of sustainable tourism.
The sustainable tourism certification process must provide governments and stakeholders with an opportunity to carefully consider such factors as the type of tourism that they want, the amount of local cultural and economic participation involved, and the products and activities to be encouraged. These local conditions and goals must be a major component of the sustainable index conceptualization, measurement and aggregation.
Therefore, local actors do not have to plan their strategies based only on the information of ecolabels and benchmarking, but they must adjust them according to the specific conditions and characteristics of the tourist destination.
The implementation of tourism certification of one way to encourage sustainable tourism and to harmonize the conceptualization of sustainable practice. Honey (2003) defines certifications as a set of procedures that audits and gives written assurance that a facility, product, process, service or management system meets specific standard or sustainability.
The guidelines of prizes of sustainability can be a good tool for tourist destination development but must be used cautiously in order not to turn it into a tool negative. As a sustainable development tool, the guidelines of ecolabels have their advantage, such as showcasing good practices and encouraging voluntary improvements; they also has its drawbacks, such as not being equitable and efficient (Sasidharan et al., 2002).

3. METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this paper consists of identifying the set of features of worldwide benchmark destinations of sustainable tourism (Luštický & Kincl, 2012) in order to create an illustrative framework to be followed by destinations which choose the path of sustainability.
We choose this methodology because it has resulted appropriate in other fields like for example that of social accountability (Viassone, 2010) and business social responsibility heritage tourism SMEs (Winkler & Günther, 2010). To achieve this task, the research involved 81 benchmark variegated European tourist destinations (towns, regions, beaches, etc) awarded with the most important prizes for sustainability (Environmentally Sustainable City Award, Blue Flags, Eden European Destination of Excellence, Tourism for Tomorrow's Awards, European Green Capital Award, European Prize for Tourism and Environment) in the last 5-years. This number is a representative sample for our exploratory research, which aims at mapping the benchmark models to follow. The heterogeneity of world destinations considered in our sample is useful to determine the main common characteristics that make them excellent (Tardivo et al., 2014). In particular our analysis involved 36 destinations awarded with Environmentally Sustainable City Award, 5 destinations awarded with the European Green Capital Award, 12 Blue Flags destinations, 20 Eden European Destinations of Excellence, a single destination awarded with the Tourism for Tomorrow's Awards and 8 destinations awarded with the European Prize for Tourism and Environment.
We chose to apply this analysis only to European benchmark destinations in order to reply to the need for compatibility of data and their accessibility; even if only applied to the European destinations this sample is representative for our exploratory research and allows us to draw up paths of sustainability for tourist destinations. The process followed in this study is structured in 3 main steps: first, we individuated the main drivers (macro-dimensions) of sustainable

destinations supported by literature and by practice; second, we individuated all the tourist destinations awarded with the most important prizes for sustainability; third, the qualitative research is based on a frequency analysis of the levels of different characteristics of the several macro-dimensions and sub-dimensions affecting destination sustainability, classified in five macro-areas: environmental management, eco-tourism/natural assets, supporting assets, cleaner production and tourism carrying capacity;,
The qualitative research based on this process supports the emerging of new variables necessary for improving our knowledge of the sustainability of tourist destinations. Table 1 shows sample characteristics (Tardivo et al., 2014).

Table 1. Sustainable destinations awarded in the last five years.

Environmentally Sustainable City Award	*"Blue Flags" destinations*
Provincia di Isernia, IT	Netherlands, NL
Regione Calabria, IT	Licko-senyska, HR
Växjö, SE	Réunion, FR
Provincia di Chieti, IT	Etelä-Savö Södra Savolax, FI
Provincia di Barcellona	Rethymno, GR
(Sabadell), ES	Regioni italiane (Toscana, Marche, Liguria,
Lund, SE	Campania, Puglia, Emilia Romagna, Lazio), IT
Puerto Lumbreras, ES	
Provincia di Alicante, ES	*Eden European Destination of Excellence*
Stockholm, SE	Città di Gmünd / Carinzia (AT)
Riga, LV	Marche-en-Famenne (BE)
Agueda, PT	Pustara Višnjica (HR)
Pilea-Hortiatis, GR	Kalopanayiotis (CY)
Regione Abruzzo, IT	Slovacko (CZ)
Regione Sardegna (Quartu	Lahemaa Manieri (EE)
Sant'Elena, Nuoro, Carloforte,	Roubaix (FR)
Sassari), IT	Comune di Delphi (GR)
Vignola, IT	Mecsek (HU)
Aachen, DE	The Great Western Greenway,
Provincia di Girona, ES	Co Mayo (IE)
Cipro, CY	Montevecchio, Comune di
Hannover, DE	Guspini (IT)
Provincia di Genova, IT	Ligatne Village (LV)
Provincia di Roma, IT	Rokiškis Manor (LT)
Regione Veneto, IT	Għarb (MT)
Goteborg, SE	Veenhuizen (NL)
Provincia di Torino, IT	Żyrardów (PL)
Plumaugat, FR	Parco Naturale di Faial (PT)
Montedinove, IT	Alba Iulia (RO)
Andalucìa, ES	Idrija (SI)
Barreiro, PT	Trasmiera Ecopark (ES)
Bilbao, ES	
Vila Nova de Gaia, PT	
Loures, PT	*Tourism for Tomorrow's Awards*
Malta, MT	Alpine Pearls (SLO, A, IT, D, CH, FR)
Bruxcelles, BE	
Rennes Metropole, FR	
Regione di Stuttgart, DE	
Provincia di Granada, ES	*European Prize for Tourism and Environment*
	Zielgebiet Colbitz-Letzlinger Heide, DE
European Green Capital Award	Oscos Eo, ES
Amburgo, DE	Päijänne Lake District, FI
Vitoria-Gasteiz, ES	Waterways britannica, UK
Nantes, FR	Corfù e Vido Island, GR
Copenhagen, DK	Veluwe Piano della Mobilità, NL
Bristol, UK	Azzorre, PT
	Ponte de Lima, PT

Source: Tardivo et al. (2014).

4. KEY FINDINGS

Results of this analysis allow to map the characteristics of the tourist destinations on the base of the five macro-dimensions (environmental management, ecotourism/natural assets, supporting assets, cleaner production and tourism carrying capacity) and provide a picture of the benchmark sustainable tourist destination. Throughout the frequency analysis it has been possible to understand the value, the importance and the frequency of each dimension and sub-dimension in terms of its contribution to the sustainability of the tourist destination (Table 2 in Appendix).
Table 2 shows the percentages associated to the highest frequencies in a particular level of a certain sub-dimension in bold characters. Despite only in a few cases we get frequencies corresponding to 100%, in most cases the highest frequencies are above 50%, representing real distinctive features of sustainable destinations.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Even if the high interest shown by the managerial literature (Viassone, 2012; Tardivo et al., 2012; Cernat & Gourdon, 2012; Vargas-Hernandez, 2012; Tosun, 2001) towards the assessment of tourism sustainability doesn't result in a universal accepted framework of indices capable of identifying a sustainable destination, the results of this paper confirm the relevance of the five dimensions previously cited in its determination.
In addition, they emphasize how the various sub-dimensions provide a different contribution in the definition of a sustainable tourist destination.
In Table 3 we have summarized the two highest percentages shown for each macro-dimensions, that is the features present in most benchmark destinations:

Table 3. Features present in most benchmark destinations.

Macro-dimensions	Sub-dimensions with the highest percentage
Environmental management	Good quality of energy supply Good quality of energy efficiency
Ecotourism/natural assets	High nature conservation Increasing tourism development
Supporting assets	Telephones/mobile phones in line with other national/European areas Medium presence of internet
Cleaner production	On average waste generated Discrete hygiene and sanitation
Tourism carrying capacity	High Customer care Positive image

Source:Authors' elaboration.

With respect to "*environmental management*" the sub-dimensions that show the highest percentages are energy supply, that has registered a high level in 100% of cases, and good quality of energy efficiency (96%): in fact, there is a growing recognition that the global tourism industry requires vast amounts of energy for the production of its products, services, and visitor experiences (Kelly & Williams, 2007). Moreover, there exist several energy indices of

sustainable development both in literature and in practice (Iaea, 2005). Despite the importance of energy efficiency, according to Holmes and Mohanty (2012), out of 200 billion Euro spent globally on clean energy in 2011, less than 7% went to energy efficiency.
Buildings turn out to be efficient in 83% of destinations (Tardivo et al., 2014). As emphasized by Mensah (2007) with reference to hotels, most of the environmental management programs have been occasioned by the quest for sustainable tourism development.
Furthermore, in our research, as an instrument of consumer choice, ecolabels result a valuable environmental management tool in tourism (Honey, 2003; Sasidharan et al., 2002; Buckley, 2002): in the form of ISO 3166-2; UNI EN ISO 9001:2008; UNI CEI 11352, UNI-EN-ISO 14001, eea, ISO 50001, UNI EN ISO 9001. UNI EN ISO 27001. ECOLABEL and EMAS (university and hotel), tourism ecolabelling is present in every destination awarded (Tardivo et al., 2014). There are specific tasks that ecolabels are intended to perform in the service of sustainability (Watanatada, 2010): set common definitions and guidelines for social and environmental impact, engage stakeholders in decision-making and collaboration, communicate good performances to consumers, provide assurance to consumers and other stakeholders, increase sales because of the better performance of a product, change expectations of a product or service. Even if ecolabelling is too expensive and requires time (Synergy, 2000; Tardivo et al., 2014), this represents an effort of every destination to improve the environmental performance (Font, 2002). Literature also emphasizes some aspects reviewed recently, such as water consumption and climate change (Gossling et al., 2011; Weaver, 2011), which in our study show quite good performances.
With reference to the sub-dimensions of "*ecotourism*", in the last years the tendency in the tourism sector was that of return towards nature and towards the authentic cultural values. This resulted in a number of new forms and terms such as ecotourism and responsible tourism (Mowforth & Munt, 2008) which were often seen as more "environmentally conscious" products (Saarinen, 2014; Hughes, 2004).
Ecotourism, defined as "*ecologically sustainable tourism with a primary focus on experiencing natural areas that foster environmental and cultural understanding, appreciation and conservation"* (Ecotourism Australia, 2003), represents the most important form of manifestation of sustainable tourism and involving activities that directly contribute to the nature protection and to keeping the old human creations unaltered. Despite its importance, the concept is widely misunderstood and it is often used as a marketing tool in order to promote tourism businesses related to nature (Barna, 2009). Results collected by Tardivo et al. (2014) demonstrate how, with regard to this sub-dimension, for almost each one the highest percentage is above 50% apart for natural assets and protected areas: the first ones are mostly hilly and mountainous in 46% of cases, symptom of destinations capable of overcoming the limits that a mountain territory can determine in terms of transports and logistic connections and of making mountains their point of strength for winter season and related sport activities (ski, snowboard, etc.) (i.e. the Province of Turin), for trekking or simply for natural reserves and panoramic views (i.e. Ligatne or Alpine Pearls). In the same way, despite the high importance assigned by literature (Hawkins, 2004) to protected areas in the field of sustainable destinations, they are present in high percentages only in 46.5% of destinations. This is a very critical point because protected areas are considered by literature as the cornerstones of conservation strategies spearheaded by local, national, international actors; furthermore they become refuges and havens for species and ecological processes (Bagadion & Del Fierro-Juan, 2013).

The highest frequencies with reference to the ecotourism are registered with respect to high tourist conservation (99%): in fact, it is supported by Tsaur et al. (2006) how residents' participation and support of resource conservation could influence the destination sustainability (Tardivo et al., 2014). Despite about 3.8 billions Euro have been potentially made available for nature investments across all ERDF Operational Programs, the allocation of funding varies enormously between projects and between countries across Europe (Brandl et al., 2011). Still related to ecotourism, also the increase of tourism development turns out to be important (96%), thus showing an effort by these destinations to improve safety, promotion and to differentiate their offer. According to the UNWTO data (2014), international tourist arrivals in Europe grew by 5 % during the first half of 2013, with best results recorded in Central and Eastern Europe (+ 9 %) and Southern and Mediterranean Europe (+ 6 %). In particular, there is an agreement on the need to promote sustainable tourism development in order to minimize its environmental impact and to maximize socio-economic overall benefits at tourist destinations (Ahmed, 2013).
In her paper focused on Sicily, Santonocito (2009) emphasizes the need for an excellent tourist development, based on quality and uniqueness of its resources. In order to achieve this scope, she suggests to privilege models of tourism development that are increasingly in line with the requirements of a sustainable and durable growth.
As for cultural resources, in 89% of cases they are represented by artistic and cultural heritage, while only 2% of destinations show both natural and artistic heritage and 9% just natural heritage: this emphasizes how the most sustainable destinations are basically artistic sites. In particular Osmanković et al. (2010) underline how the tourists are becoming more interested in different elements of the culture and nature of the host country and how often the sun and sea offer of certain countries is complemented with additional cultural or natural resources of different types (Tardivo et al., 2014).
Another important peculiarity of the benchmark sustainable destinations is given by the fact that, in 83% of the awarded destinations, tourism represents a key point in their employment. In terms of employment, tourism development often provides the dual advantages of generating employment and income while promoting cultural heritage and traditions (World Travel Tourism Council, 2012). This shows how tourism, which is assuming a more and more important role in the economic literature (Franch et al., 2010; Hong, 2009), is strictly connected to the concept of territorial competitiveness (Tardivo et al., 2012) and how the latter has sustainability at the basis of its success in the long run. Furthermore, also the presence of beach assets seems to be a positive factor since present in 54% of the destinations of our sample while the situation of congestion in terms of traffic, even if with a frequency of 67%, is not so important to prevent them from being awarded for their sustainability (Tardivo et al., 2014).
In the same way, also the dimension "*supporting assets*", considered as a key to sustainable tourism development, is able to determine a precise profile of the benchmark sustainable destinations, showing percentages equal or higher than 50% for each sub-dimension. In literature infrastructure indicators generally refer to transport infrastructure, electricity production, sanitary, water access, accommodations, restaurants and other tourist facilities; a very important role is also played by ICT infrastructure captured by several classical indicators, such as number of phone lines, mobile phone penetration, and Internet hosts. Finally, also entertainment infrastructures are considered very important, although not necessarily for all types of tourism (Cernat & Gourdon, 2007). With reference to our framework, almost all destinations (97%) owns an intensive internet network while the totality owns telephones and mobile phones in line with other national/European areas: this results in a profile of sustainable destinations equipped with a

medium/high telephone and internet network. This means that these destinations reflect the current market trends that show how tools of mobile communication are becoming always more integrated in our daily life (Dabholkar et al., 1996) and often used together with other mobile devices (Collier & Bienstock, 2006; Tardivo et al., 2013). Despite these data, the use of the resources available on the Internet in a country depends on many factors. Thus, there are Countries such as Iceland, Norway and Sweden, showing the highest penetration rates of Internet (near to 90%), compared to the United States that presents rates of 77.3% (The Gallup Organisation-European Commission, 2012). In particular, Europe presents average rates of 61.3%, compared to 28.9% of the average rate for the rest of the world (Ficarelli et al., 2013).

Medium values (or on average with national/European data) are registered with regard to networks (roads, railways, airports) (82%), to sanitation access (good only in some areas in 61% of cases) and to the presence of restaurants (68%). Main weaknesses registered by the networks involve the lack of internal motorways (i.e. in the province of Isernia) or only discrete communication hubs (i.e. in Pilea-Hortiatis). It is important to emphasize the presence of a scarce level of sanitation access in 33% of destinations: main problems involve the difficult accessibility to these services because of the fragmentation of the territory, of the old age of the population and of cuts in public spending for this sector. An opposite situation is registered by the offer of restaurants that counts 32% of destinations with several restaurants, sign of a variable extremely important in the choice of a tourist destination as emphasized in literature (Viassone, 2012; Symons, 1999). Finally, entertainment, considered as crucial in the choice of a destination (Viassone, 2012; Krešić & Prebežac, 2011), is present in every sustainable destination (Tardivo et al., 2014).

"*Cleaner production*" defined as "the continuous improvement of industrial processes, products and services to reduce the use of natural resources, to prevent — at source — the pollution of air, water and land and to reduce waste generation — at source — in order to minimize risk to human population and the environment" (van Berkel, 1996), could be applied in the tourism industry, focusing on certain components of the environmental issues within an organization (i.e. minimizing the use of resources and improving eco-efficiency in terms of energy and raw material, preventing and reducing waste and emissions, etc. (Lee, 2001)). Li and YingPing (2007) demonstrate that it is an inevitable path for the sustainable development of the tourism industry and emphasize the important role played by tourist landscape eco-design. In particular, these two authors conduct a systemic analysis on the spatial structure of tourist landscapes and presents an ecology, culture, region and science (ECRS) model of tourist landscape eco-design.

Cleaner production shows different situations with regard to its various factors: while the level of pollution is optimal (50%) or on average (50%) in every destination, hygiene and sanitation are discrete in 60% of cases, with services of poor quality in some destinations like Andalusia and Stockholm. In the same way, the situation of the recycling waste is also critical, since it is low in 44% of destinations; this datum is even more serious if we consider that waste generated is on average in 83% of destinations and high in 16% of them. In fact, as societies grow more wealthy, they create a larger amount of waste: in 2012 cities generated about 1.3 billion tons of waste per year and this is expected to increase to 2.2 billion tons by 2025. For this motivation, its disposal becomes a major challenge (The World Bank, 2012).

Only sporadic cases are exceptions with reference to recycling waste and, in this framework, one among the highest percentages of recycling waste in Europe can be attributed to Stockholm.

With reference to "*tourism carrying capacity*", the situation is more positive because every sub-dimension shows the highest percentages at optimal or medium level. In fact, even if tourism

gives an important contribution to the tourist destination development, it can cause also negative impacts mainly on the environment and social context in case of uncontrolled development of the tourist activities and the intensive land exploitation, that can cause a rapid reduction of the environmental, cultural and social resources, with negative effects on the tourism development. For this motivation it has become a real challenge for both planners and managers (Maggi & Fredella, 2011). In fact, carrying-capacity thinking could be interpreted as an application of sustainable tourism (Butler, 2010) and this concept occupies a key position in understanding the limits of growth thinking in tourism (Tribe et al., 2000). In literature, talking about carrying capacity means to search for the "magical' number" of tourists in a certain space (and time period) which cannot be overstepped without causing serious negative impacts on the resources (Saarinen, 2014; Lindeberg et al., 1997). With regard to our sample the sub-dimension that shows the highest frequencies at high level is customer care, characterized by high levels in almost the totality of destinations (96%), with continuous and important investments in welcome services. Also image collects a frequency of 94% at the level "high" and it is prevalently associated to the cultural and natural heritage. Given that destination image influences tourists' travel decision making towards a destination and satisfaction levels of the experience, the perception of it is very important in the evaluation or selection process (O'Leary & Deegan, 2003; Casalegno & Viassone, 2012). In 2014 Porto has been elected the Best European Destination 2014 and won the title ahead of 19 big European cities. Zagreb, Vienna, Nicosia, Budapest, Madeira Islands, Milan, Madrid, Berlin and Rome are considered the next best destinations for a holiday or city-trip in 2014.

Sustainable destinations show also a high lodging occupancy in 88% of cases, thanks to the policy of hospitality and accommodation to tourists. A medium level is shown by other dimensions: in this case, the highest percentages are covered by: food quality, rated as "good" in 92% of destinations thanks to the typical territorial products; number of days of the visit, that in 92% of cases are 4 to 7, not resulting only in a excursionistic tourism; the number of tourists, "on average" in 84% of cases, while high only in a few destinations like the Province of Barcellona, Stockholm, four Italian Provinces, six Italian regions and one Italian site (Tardivo et al., 2014).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Given that the topic of the competitiveness of a sustainable tourism destination has assumed an increasing importance in the last decades (Franch et al., 2010; Hong, 2009; Enright & Newton, 2005; Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Hassan, 2000) we have integrated ideas from destination management, sustainability management, and tourism research, showing how the benchmark sustainable destinations share a very peculiar profile, showing how some elements are considered as basic for sustainable destination and, for this motivation, present at high level in all of them (energy supply and nature conservation): in fact, it is well known that the global tourism industry requires large amounts of energy in order to facilitate transportation of travellers, to provide amenities and supporting facilities at the destinations visited (Kelly & Williams, 2007; Mensah, 2007). The abundance of the investment potential in energy efficiency (estimated by DG Climate Action to be 4.25 trillions Euro across the economy between 2011 and 2050) and the supposed modest costs of its investments compared to power generation investments indicate that there exist important barriers to express the potential of energy efficiency and they should be pulled down (Lewis et al., 2013). Another very important aspect is high nature conservation; a definition

of environmental sustainability is provided by Morelli (2011) who describes it as an expansion of the common perception of the nature of human activity so as to more clearly connect it with the ecological concept of interdependence and to serve as a goal for environmental managers. As supported by Carlsen (1999), without an attractive environment no economic and social impact would occur. Nature conservation results an important driver to support a destination sustainability as maintained by Tardivo et al. (2014) and by Tsaur et al. (2006) Given the important amounts provided by EU for project concerning nature conservation, successful project application should show: the specific requirements of the respective program, strategic knowledge, bringing the right proposal at the right time, having the lead partner from the 'right' country and the quality of the project itself (Brandl et al., 2011). At the same time, also an increasing development in tourism is a constant in benchmark sustainable destinations, in particular when it is based on quality and uniqueness of its resources (Santonocito, 2009).

In addition, also supporting assets (in particular Telephones/mobile phones and presence of internet) are indispensable for the sustainability of an area and increasingly integrated in our daily life (Dabholkar et al., 1996). Furthermore, an extreme importance is assumed also by tourism carrying capacity that varies from place to place and represents both a driver and a limit of sustainable tourist destination (Tribe et al., 2000): with regard to this dimension, customer care and image are absolutely the most important sub-drivers to consider - the latter plays an important role on destination choice and it has become an essential part of a destination's strategic equity (Milman and Pizam, 1995).

For this reason, there is a strong need to develop research strategies in order to investigate how external images of a destination could influence the internal process of identity formation among the European tourists.

In the same way, other elements could be considered as not essential - even if very important - in reaching the denomination of sustainable destination because, even if their level is low, they do not prevent these destinations from representing a benchmark: these are a hilly and mountainous territory and low levels of recycling waste (Tardivo et al., 2014). In the same way, the very high frequency shown by an only discrete hygiene sanitation could be considered.

The contribution of this paper both for literature and tourism management is important: in fact, it enriches literature providing a framework of the common characteristics shown by benchmark sustainable destinations; furthermore, it helps policymaking in drawing long-term planning strategies. Furthermore, the proposed methodological framework would allow for the creation of a comprehensive database against which the sustainability of tourist destinations in various countries can be assessed (Tardivo et al., 2014).

This paper allows also to draw important strategies of action for destinations interested to begin a path of sustainability or to improve it:

First, it is very important to offer to these tourists, often interested in the culture and image of these destinations, a high level of quality at all stages of their travel, as well as investing in information services to make known the potentialities and itineraries suitable for the specific needs of these categories (Groth, 2000).

Second, it is essential to develop campaigns of sensitization towards environment protection: this is possible throughout a communication of the advantages that a good recycling waste program could bring and by incentivizing the development of programs capable of leading to the UNESCO candidature. In order to diffuse a sustainable culture it is more and more important to involve all stakeholders: a sustainable approach requires widespread and committed participation in decision making and practical implementation by all those implicated in the outcome (Institute

for Tourism Research in Northern Europe, 2011). Furthermore also a suitable communication program of the model of sustainable tourism is required. The future diffusion of the culture of sustainability not only in the entrepreneurial field but also in tourism will strongly change the management of destinations.

Despite the academic and practical relevance of the paper, it also displays important limits: first, it provides the same framework for every kind of destination (see, mountain, cultural, religious ones etc.) while in the future it would be useful to create a specific set of characteristics of excellence for each type of destination; furthermore, this research doesn't analyze the contribution of each dimension to the global level of sustainability throughout a quantitative analysis but limits itself to a frequency analysis. Moreover our study only considers the sustainable destinations awarded in the last 5 years and belonged to the European area and not the totality of them; finally, as unique parameter of benchmark of sustainability it employs the award assigned to different tourist destinations, neglecting other parameters that may affect the competitive destination (Tardivo et al., 2014).

Further researches should be directed towards finding and defining possible benchmark models for particular type of destination (bathing, mountainous, religious, etc.); moreover, it is possible to further develop this research by analyzing, on a wider scale, characteristics of benchmark destinations in order to predict the guidelines to be followed by destination managers and tourism firms and the new destination concept emerging from the adoption of a sustainability-oriented culture (Tardivo et al., 2014).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Although this paper is based on a combined effort, Prof. Giuseppe Tardivo is to take credit for Introduction and Conclusion and Implications; Angela Scilla is to take credit for paragraphs, 2.1, 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4; while Milena Viassone for paragraphs 3, 4 and 5.

We thank Roberta Pinto for her help in the collection of the data.

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APPENDIX

Table 2. Frequency value of each sub-dimension of sustainability emerging from the analysis.

		High	*On average or Problems only in a few areas*	*Low*	
Environmental Management	Water shortage	18%	21%	**61%**	
	Crime indices	12%	**46%**	42%	
		Efficient/good quality	*Discrete quality*	*Problematic*	
	Energy efficiency	**96%**	4%	0%	
	Buildings	**83%**	12%	5%	
	Energy supply	**100%**	0%	0%	
		Very rich resource	*Not present but very closed to it*	*Absent*	
	See water	**45%**	24%	31%	
		Mild	*Not bad, not mild*	*Hot summer and cold winter*	
	Climate	**59%**	6%	35%	
		EDEN European destination of excellence	*Winner of the European Green Capital Award*	*Winner of Tourism for tomorrow's awards*	*Covenant of Mayors and/or blue flags*
	Environmental agreement	11%	19%	11%	**59%**
		Present	*Absent*		
	Tourism ecolabelling	100%	0%		
		Mostly flat	*Mostly hilly and flat or with coast*	*Mostly hilly and mountainous*	
Ecotourism/ natural assets	Natural assets	15%	39%	**46%**	
		Present	*Absent but close to the destination*	*Absent*	
	Beach assets	**54%**	10%	36%	
		Key point in the employment of the destination	*Seasonal*	*Scarce*	
	Employment in tourism	**83%**	17%	0%	
		Artistic and cultural heritage	*Both natural and artistic heritage*	*Natural heritage*	
	Cultural resources	**89%**	2%	9%	
		Congestion	*Some cases of congestion*	*Sustainable traffic*	

	Traffic	**67%**	12%	21%
		High	*Industrial touristic offer*	*Low*
	Nature conservation	**99%**	1%	0%
		High percentage	*Medium percentage*	*Absent*
	Protected areas	**46,5%**	**46,5%**	7%
		Increasing	*Seasonal*	*Scarce*
	Tourism development	**96%**	4%	0%
		Excellent	*Good*	*Scarce*
Supporting assets	Networks	8%	**82%**	10%
		Good everywhere	*Good only in some areas*	*Scarce*
	Sanitation access	6%	**61%**	33%
		Intensive	*Medium*	*Scarce*
	Internet	**97%**	2%	1%
		Numerous	*In line with other national/European areas*	*Scarce*
	Telephones/mobile phones	0%	**100%**	0%
	Restaurants	32%	**68%**	0%
	Lodging	**52%**	42%	6%
		Historical/cultural tours	*Natural tours*	*Other*
	Entertainment	**50%**	**50%**	0%
		Optimal	*On average*	*High*
Cleaner production	Level of pollution	**50%**	17%	33%
		High	*On average*	*Low*
	Percentage of recycling waste	19,5%	36,5%	**44%**
	Waste generated	16%	**83%**	1%
		Efficient	*Discrete*	*Scarce*
	Hygiene and sanitation	7%	**65%**	28%
		High	*On average*	*Low*
Tourism carrying capacity	N. of tourist	16%	**84%**	0%
	Customer care	**96%**	4%	0%
		High	*Good*	*Low*
	Food quality	8%	**92%**	0%
		Excellent	*Good*	*To be improved*
	Level of service	18%	**70%**	12%
		Good (via Web)	*Good (via newspapers, journals…)*	*Scarce*

	Tourist information	**49,5%**	**49,5%**	1%
		Attention to sustainability	*Standard*	*Scarce*
	Furnishing or furniture	27%	**72%**	1%
		Yes	*More or less*	*No*
	Homogeneity of tourism flows	**50%**	**50%**	0%
		High/increasing	*On average*	*Cuts/decreasing*
	Public expenditure in tourism management	37%	**41%**	22%
		High (More than 50€)	*Discrete (30-50€)*	*Low (Up to 30€)*
	Expenditure par day	6%	**48%**	46%
		Higher than a week	*4-7*	*Up to 3*
	N. of day of the visit	3%	**92%**	5%
		High	*Discrete*	*Low*
	Lodging occupancy	**88%**	12%	0%
		High (More than 100€)	*Discrete (60-100€)*	*Low (Up to 60€)*
	Hotel prices	11%	**72%**	17%
		High	*Discrete*	*Low*
	Safety	**70%**	27%	3%
		Positive	*Quite positive*	*Negative*
	Image	**94%**	6%	0%

Source: Tardivo et al. (2014).