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**Article**

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*Original scientific paper*  
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## **(UN)SUSTAINABLE AND (IR)RESPONSIBLE TOURISM IN OHRID: RESIDENTS' PERCEPTION**

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**Tanja Mihalič**

### **Abstract**

The aim of the paper is to identify the main factors that affect tourism development of Ohrid (North Macedonia) from the three-pillar sustainability dimension (socio-cultural, environmental and economic). Based on 630 questionnaires collected from residents in January 2020, exploratory factor analysis is conducted to assess residents' satisfaction with given impacts of tourism. The research revealed positive socio-cultural and economic factors and negative environmental impacts, indicating that Ohrid is practicing neither sustainable, nor responsible tourism development. Despite having legislation and an institutional framework to safeguard Ohrid's World Heritage property, many serious concerns were noted with regards to the sustainability values. The findings may assist policy makers in establishing tourism planning process and developing sustainable development strategies.

Keywords: sustainability, tourism development, locals, UNESCO

*JEL classification:* L83, Z32, Z38

### **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism destinations that are World Heritage (WH) sites often provoke large interest and attract many tourists. Large number of visitors increase tourism expenditure, thereby local economy benefits. Yet, the risk is on endangering socio-cultural, and environmental resources that represent a base for gaining the WH label. So, being guided only by economic impacts of tourism, provokes severe changes to the destination and local community in terms of other dimensions of sustainability, i.e. socio-cultural and natural. As such, residents perceive differently tourism impacts in the line of the broad concept of the three sustainability domains as separate factors.

Besides contributing to the current state of the art on exploring residents' perception on tourism sustainability, this study posts some valuable directions on measuring both positive and negative tourism impacts on the real case of Ohrid (North Macedonia) as a WH tourism destination. Specifically, the study identifies the main factors that affect tourism development and growth from the sustainability dimension. For that purpose, it investigates the sustainability tourism paradigm from the perspective of residents' satisfaction living in the destination. Furthermore, it focuses on the importance of tourism sustainability and responsibility highlighting the value of things other than economic benefits.

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The paper is organized as follows. After the introduction, Section 2 presents a brief literature review on sustainable and responsible tourism along with residents' perception on tourism impacts. Section 3 outlines the background material on the case of Ohrid with a focus on its tourism development. Section 4 describes the methodology and data. Section 5 presents the results, findings and discussion, and finally, last section considers the main conclusion and research limitations.

## 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous studies discuss tourism sustainability from various aspects offering variety of interpretations. Regardless the level of inter-dependency, it is concluded as essential to understand the principles of sustainability in order to ensure sustainable tourism development (Harrill, 2004; Sharpley, 2014; Popescu et al. 2017).

Furthermore, many arguments are raised about measuring tourism sustainability by proposing different methodologies with various indicators (WTO, 2004; Cernat and Gourdon, 2012; Mahdavi et al. 2013), with no consensus on how the best is to reveal the sustainability level of tourism. However, critique revealed on the issue of balancing tourism impacts on the three sustainability pillars (UNWTO, 2005), which lead to defining new ways of improving sustainability efficacy. This resulted in suggesting tourism responsibility as a complementary concept being responsible tourism implementation based on the sustainability concept (Goodwin, 2011; UNWTO, 2012). This led to sustainable and responsible tourism (SRT) model which means implementing the sustainability concept along with the responsibility as action and behavior of many pillars and enablers for sustainability implementation, cooperation among all stakeholders, including residents, leadership, and visitor satisfaction (Mihalič, 2016). So, the SRT model means an action for sustainable tourism implementation, also known as "sustainability in action" (Mihalič, 2020).

The relationship between the sustainability and tourism development when it refers to a WH destination, is argued as uneasy. Maintaining balance between preserving WH and making it accessible to the public is a subject to ongoing debate. There are myriad concerns since UNESCO tries to simultaneously embrace both, sustainability and tourism in one hand, while marking them as threats to the WH with the other hand (Evans, 2001; Labadi, 2013; Schmutz and Elliott, 2016).

There has been a proliferation of research exploring residents' attitudes to tourism impacts with no result with universal validity or efficacy and by utilizing various theories. Among the most extensively employed are the social exchange theory (Ap, 1992), the tourist area life cycle (Butler, 1980), the Irridex model (Doxey, 1975), the stakeholders theory (Byrd, 2007; Byrd et al. 2009; Nicholas et al. 2009; Yu et al. 2011; Garrod et al. 2012), the dependency theory (Lepp, 2008), the place attachment theory (Gu and Ryan, 2008), the resistance theory (Chhabra, 2010), and many more (Nunkoo et al, 2013).

In addition, plenty is elaborated on residents' perception on negative tourism impacts. This is generally done by arguing dissatisfaction, irritation, tourist rejection or overcrowding (VALICON, 2017; Dioko, 2017; Hughes, 2018; Coldwell, 2018; Martín Martín et al. 2018; Seraphin et al., 2018). On the other hand, many studies highlight the favorable residents' perceptions of tourism impacts which lead to greater support of tourism (Látková and Vogt, 2012; Stylidis et al. 2014; Rasoolimanesh and Jaafar,

2017). One may conclude that it is very important to understand residents' perception on tourism impacts in order to gain their support necessary for developing tourism in a sustainable manner.

## 2. CASE DESTINATION OHRID

Ohrid (North Macedonia) is an old historical city with over 52,000 inhabitants and the most famous national tourist destination. It is one of the oldest human settlements in Europe, and with 365 churches has been referred to as "Jerusalem of the Balkans" (Vankovska and Wiberg, 2003; Petrovski and Talevski, 2004). Due to its natural outstanding value of the Lake Ohrid (UNESCO, 1979), and for its cultural and historical area (UNESCO, 1980), Lake Ohrid region is inscribed as a transboundary mixed WH property, one of only eleven in Europe. Its exceptional mixture of natural geographic and human action (UNESCO, 2015) creates a rare harmony making the region truly unique (UNESCO, 2019).

Over the years, Ohrid's historical heritage and natural resources, gastronomy, and numerous cultural events, generally constitute the basis for tourist attractions. Ohrid city authentic architecture (Kuzman et al. 2009; Panevski Nikoljski and Karanakov, 2013) is among the best preserved and most complete ensemble of ancient urban architecture in the region (UNESCO, 2019), while the Lake Ohrid is one of the world's few ancient lakes, along with the Lake Baikal (Russia) and the Lake Tanganyika (Africa) (MANU, 2009). Knowing that WH site provokes larger interest for natural than for cultural heritage (Su et al. 2014), the Lake Ohrid gains in additional value.

In 2019, Ohrid accounted almost one-third of all tourist arrivals (322,573) and overnights (1,101,563) recorded in the country (State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia, 2020). Generally, Ohrid has a traditional profile as a summer destination with strong and robust seasonality patterns (Petrevska, 2015). Particularly during the high season (July-September), the number of tourists exceeds by far the number of residents, indicating a tourism-based economy (Garay and Cănoves, 2011). So, tourism became the main industry for local development and growth. As such, Ohrid often reaches its critical point for physical and social carrying capacity (Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000; Russo, 2001; Weber et al. 2017) which provokes many changes for the city and its residents. Severe physical, environmental and anthropogenic pressure particularly in terms of heavy traffic, congestion and costal exploitation, resulted in urban transformation leading the Ohrid region to critical level of stress (Mitrović, 2015; Petrevska and Collins-Kreiner, 2017, 2019; Ohrid SOS, 2019). As a result, Ohrid as a destination was faced with real problems and UNESCO made strong consideration to put the site on the List of WH in Danger (UNESCO, 2019).

Yet, although being fully aware about the problem, local authorities and key-tourism stakeholders continue further and ignore UNESCO's alarms. They neither follow UNESCO's recommendation nor develop appropriate destination management plans for practicing responsible tourism development that will sustain its growth. This in return has an impact on the sustainable development of the local community (Galland et al. 2016)

### 3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The study is based on a quantitative method with data obtained from a survey. A questionnaire containing three groups of statements measured residents' perception on a broad range of impacts relevant to tourism development. The three main sustainability pillar impacts (socio-cultural, environmental and economic) were addressed through 22 items formulated following a set of sustainable indicators proposed within the European Tourism Indicator System (EC, 2016).

The survey was conducted in January 2020 among 630 randomly chosen residents who live in various locations in Ohrid. They were asked to evaluate each factor on a five point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). Collected data were transferred in the SPSS 24.0 and an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed.

### 4. RESULTS, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

EFA confirmed seven factors (three from the socio-cultural impacts, two from the environmental impacts, and two from the economic impacts). The measurement variables for each impact factor in a form of a statement are presented in Table 1. Two items are not presented due to low loadings.

The socio-cultural sustainability impacts have a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.751 and are represented by three factors (one positive and two negative) (Table 1, numbers F1-F3), each represented by set of items. The first factor, "Socio-cultural benefits", has a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.679, a mean value of 3.87, and consists of four items. The second socio-cultural factor "Socio-cultural conflicts" has a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.753, a mean value of 3.13, and consists of three items. The third factor "Destructive human activities", has high Cronbach's alpha value of 0.820, the highest mean value of 4.20, and consists of two items.

The second dimension of sustainability refers to the environmental impacts with a mean Cronbach's alpha value of 0.745, represented by two negative factors (Table 1, numbers F4 and F5). So, the fourth factor of influence "Destruction of physical fabric" has a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.791, a mean value of 3.16, and consists of three items. The fifth factor "Pollution" has a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.699, a mean value of only 2.50, and consists of four items.

The third economic sustainability dimension has two identified factors (one positive and one negative) (Table 1, numbers F6 and F7) with a mean Cronbach's alpha value of 0.790. The sixth factor "Pricing" is consisted of three items with a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.800 and a mean value of 4.28. The last, seventh factor "Economic benefits" (two items) has a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.780 and a mean value of 4.16.

On a five-point Likert scale it was found that Ohrid residents perceive the economic negative effects of pricing with the highest mean value (4.28), followed by the negative socio-cultural impacts in terms of destructive human activities (4.20), economic benefits (4.16), socio-cultural benefits (3.87), destruction of physical fabric (3.16), socio-cultural conflicts (3.13), economic dependency (3.05), and by far the lowest value for pollution (2.50) (details in Table 1).

**Table 1.** Factors of Ohrid

No	SRT Item	Loading	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>Socio-cultural impacts</b>				
F1	Socio-cultural benefits	0.751	3.73	
1	Tourism improves shopping...	0.679	3.87	
2	Quality of public services is better ...	0.766	4.17	1.034
3	Community benefits from tourism and tourists...	0.651	3.20	1.328
7	Preservation of local culture.	0.703	4.33	0.944
<b>Socio-cultural conflicts</b>				
F2	Socio-cultural conflicts	0.596	3.79	1.195
4	Conflict between visitors and locals.	0.753	3.13	
5	Crime is on the rise.	0.770	2.47	1.179
10	Traffic problems arise.	0.831	3.10	1.274
F3	Destructive human activities	0.657	3.83	1.155
8	New facilities destroy Ohrid architecture ...	0.820	4.20	
9	Tourism increases illegal building construction	0.841	4.25	1.109
<b>Environmental impacts</b>				
F4	Destruction of physical fabric	0.798	4.14	1.166
13	Tourism is likely to destroy green areas.	0.745	2.83	
17	Tourism endangers endemic flora and fauna ...	0.791	3.16	
18	Increased water traffic endangers natural ...	0.728	2.98	1.288
F5	Pollution	0.823	2.86	1.414
11	Tourists pollute with their solid waste.	0.823	3.65	1.313
12	Tourism increases air pollution.	0.699	2.50	
14	I am annoyed by the night noise caused by tourism.	0.531	3.33	1.263
16	Tourism poses a threat for the National Park Galicica.	0.811	2.19	1.180
<b>Economic impacts</b>				
F6	Pricing	0.728	2.36	1.294
22	Because of tourism, life is more expensive.	0.725	2.11	1.193
23	Due to tourism, prices in bars and restaurants in the city center are high.	0.790		
24	Due to tourism, real estate prices are high.	0.800	4.28	
F7	Economic benefits	0.849	4.43	0.908
20	Encourages production of local products.	0.863	4.42	0.935
25	Brings benefits to other economic sectors.	0.687	3.99	1.149
<b>Economic benefits</b>				
		0.780	4.16	
		0.809	4.34	0.901
		0.790	3.98	0.977

Source: Authors' calculations

Note: Extraction method: principal component analysis; Rotation method: promax with Kaiser normalization

The results from Table 1 point that negative impacts of tourism development in Ohrid are very much present and highly perceived by the residents. It is not surprising that negative economic effects in terms of pricing (increase in prices due to tourism) is found to be the most influential tourism factor. Namely, Ohrid is a famous tourism destination, which consequently leads to increase in all prices (bars, restaurants, real-estate properties, etc.) thus affecting everyday life of locals. In addition, the study found that Ohrid residents score the positive economic impacts with the third highest mean value (4.16). Thus, the economic environment in terms of benefits (tourism encouragement to production and sales of local products; tourism brings benefits to other economic sectors, etc) shapes directly the residents' satisfaction level with tourism. So, it is to be expected that economic environment may further enable creation of tourism development and shaping local business environment.

Furthermore, based on Table 1, it can be seen that residents are strongly affected by the negative socio-cultural factor "Destructive human activities". Namely, new

facilities (tourism and housing) in the old city-center and along the lakeshore, illegal building construction, etc.) destroy the traditional architecture in Ohrid and irritate the locals. Obviously, this group of negative socio-cultural impacts must be a matter of serious consideration for the local government tourism policy. To this, one may add other set of negative socio-cultural effects (the factor identified as “Socio-cultural conflicts”) being perceived with mediate influence (3.13). This factor covers items as: rise of conflicts and crime and traffic problems as a result of tourism rapid development. On the other hand, the socio-cultural benefits are found to be a factor with upper medium positive influence. Here, the perceived benefits mostly stem from the community benefits of tourism and tourists (4.33), and the power of tourism that improves shopping, restaurants and entertainment opportunities (4.17). This is not unusual since often residents positively value the fact that tourism positively influences services offered by the community (Andereck and Nyaupane, 2011) or preserve local culture (Oviedo et al. 2008).

What was found to be very interesting is the fact that negative economic and negative socio-cultural impacts are perceived much more intensively compared to the environmental negative impacts. Unlike Bujosa and Rosselló (2007) who confirm residents' concern from the negative aspects of natural environment, in the Ohrid case it is not found as a matter of serious concern. Surprisingly, the complete destruction of physical fabric in a natural manner (like: destruction of green areas due to tourism, endangerment of endemic flora, fauna and whole natural heritage of Lake Ohrid), along with pollution provoked by tourism, are not perceived as important to locals. Finding that locals do not perceive the environmental dimension of sustainability to be of priority (mean value of only 2.83 for the overall negative environmental impacts) is alarming when knowing that Ohrid region is under UNESCO's protection.

It seems that residents prefer to support tourism only if provides economic benefits, putting its advantages ahead of environmental damage (García et al. 2015). Such perception to live economically better as a priority concern ahead of living in an environmentally protected tourism destination, raises the need for reshaping current tourism development plans and strategies. One may speculate that further development of tourism in Ohrid may result in even higher degradation of natural resources pointing to unsustainable and irresponsible development.

## CONCLUSION

The study explored the main tourism impacts perceived by residents of Ohrid and identified seven factors based on the SRT conceptual model. With regards to the socio-cultural sustainability impacts, three factors were identified: socio-cultural benefits, socio-cultural conflicts, and destructive human activities. When investigation the perception on the environmental sustainability dimension, two factors were identified: destruction of physical fabric, and pollution. As per the third, economic sustainability pillar, two factors were perceived: pricing, and economic benefits.

The study found that Ohrid residents are rather led by rational (economic motives) than emotional viewpoints (natural environment). Namely, locals are by far the most concerned with the negative economic factors, and the least with the environmental negative factors. Probably that is the reason why over the years and still, natural

resources are neglected and put in the shed when it comes to protection and preservation.

Although many negative natural effects derive from tourism development (like: all types of pollutants, damage to the environment and ecosystems, as well as deterioration of the fabric of the heritage in natural connotation), residents seem not to be concerned. This points to conclusion that locals have low awareness for the significance and importance of the natural heritage they possess (Lake Ohrid, natural park Galicica, endemic flora and fauna, etc.). This results in lack of understanding and poor interlinks between nature, culture and values of the property (Aleksova and Miranda, 2017). With a lack of concern about the natural environment and its conservation, it may be expected less support in future sustainable development (Jaafar et al. 2015; Nunkoo and Ramkissoon, 2010).

Consequently, with no reaction on maintaining sustainability, Ohrid is seriously approaching to fail to practice sustainable development of tourism. This is the moment to remind that Ohrid is still a WH destination and in order to keep and maintain the UNESCO's status, inevitably must shift perception of locals from purely economic to environmental dimension of sustainability. This calls for urgent modification, adjustment and reshaping of current tourism policies along with strong collaboration among all stakeholders when it comes to effective tourism planning and sustainable development.

The research has several limitations which can be addressed in future work. First, it applies limited set of sustainability indicators which may be further expanded. Second, it addressed only residents' perception, so it may be extended with other aspects of investigation, like tourists, stakeholders, etc. Finally, the research was conducted before the official start of the tourist season (in January), so it may be repeated during the main season in order to observe any changes in the perception. Yet, these limitations do not diminish the significance of the findings. The study enables better understanding of the current residents' attitude on tourism development in Ohrid, as a destination which is obliged to practice sustainable and responsible tourism in order to keep and maintain UNESCO's status of WH property.

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