

What Do Tourism Students Know About Sustainability and Sustainable Tourism? A Preliminary Study of Latin American Universities

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Abstract

The topic of sustainable tourism education has only recently started to emerge in the tourism literature. A few tourism scholars have raised concerns about the need to prepare future tourism professionals for real life planning and management of sustainable tourism projects (cf. Jamal et al, 2010; Stergiou et al., 2008). The Tourism Education Futures Initiative (TEFI) also recognizes sustainability as an important value to be communicated through tourism education (Sheldon et al., 2008) and the BEST Education Network has published sustainable tourism case studies to inform teaching in this area (besteducationnetwork.org). Jamal et al. (2010) attribute this increased attention to sustainable tourism pedagogy to two factors; global dialogue about the future of tourism and hospitality education and the calls for graduating students to have the knowledge, skills, values and capacities necessary to operate and grow as practitioners who have to realize sustainability goals. However, while some studies have focused on determining the “what” (Deale et al., 2010; Jurowski, 2010, Lewis, 2005; Jurowski, 2003) and the “how” (delivery) in teaching sustainable tourism (Isacsson and Gretzel, 2011; Jamal et al., 2010; Jurowski and Liburd, 2001), no studies have assessed what tourism students actually know and feel about sustainability in tourism.

The purpose of our study was to conduct a preliminary study of tourism students’ knowledge and perceptions of, and attitudes towards sustainability and sustainable tourism. More specifically, our study measured students’ knowledge and familiarity with key principles and dimensions related to sustainability as well as their feelings of empowerment to make sustainable tourism decisions. The focus is on tourism students in Latin America, a region where tourism development has been highly problematic due to uncontrolled growth, lack of environmental regulation, uneven distribution of tourism costs and benefits among tourism stakeholders, and lack of participation of local communities in tourism decision-making (Dahles and Keune, 2002). Education in sustainability is therefore critical if the goals of sustainable tourism, which include optimal use of environmental resources, equity, and local control (WTO, 2004) are to be achieved in this part of the world.

This study was conducted through an online survey sent to students registered in tourism programs in universities in Latin America including Mexico, Costa Rica, Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, and Ecuador. The study consists of open-ended questions that ask students to define sustainable tourism and the goals it should pursue, followed by closed-ended questions and statements about their perception of sustainable tourism, familiarity with sustainability principles, and feelings of competence and empowerment to make sustainable tourism decisions upon graduation. The results show tourism students understanding of sustainable tourism, its goals and principles, and their perception of the importance and responsibility of planning and implementing sustainable tourism. Furthermore, this study explores their feelings of competence, empowerment, and support to make sustainability decisions in their future careers in tourism. Students participating in this survey represent an array of Latin American universities, both public and private, at different stage of their programs, and with diverse backgrounds and experiences within the tourism industry.

In general, tourism students' knowledge and perceptions of sustainability have not been researched. With this preliminary study we hope to help filling this gap by offering a first empirical study that measures students' knowledge, competences and readiness to promote and implement sustainability practices in tourism. Information from this study can help tourism educators to evaluate and make improvements in their curricula with respect to sustainable tourism education. Future research will focus on expanding the study to other regions to provide a global perspective on the state of sustainable tourism education.

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