

Landscape and Tourism; European Expert Views on an Intricate Relationship: A Commentary

Theano S. Terkenli*

Department of Tourism, University of the Aegean, University Hill Mitiline 81100, Lesvos, Greece

DESCRIPTION

Changing international rates and patterns of mobility and destination use require a renewed and more in-depth investigation into the desired types of sites and attractions and into the role of the landscape in the visitor experience [1,2]. The centrality of landscape to tourism is unquestionable and already a broadly established scientific area of research; however, much remains to be explored and understood regarding their interrelatedness [2-5]. This research was placed in the context of such efforts towards a better scientific understanding of the ways in which tourism destinations function and of tourism-induced changes to the landscape. The objective of the article was to investigate, analyze and assess notions and perceptions of the reciprocal relationship between the landscape and tourism, through an electronic survey among European researchers and scientists of relevant and associated academic fields. A top-down heuristic method was employed, namely the Survey of Expert's Opinions, in order to establish the state-of-the-art interrelations between these two interdisciplinary fields, as well as to develop a definition for "landscapes of tourism" or "tourism landscapes".

The research goals were conceived in the context and towards the objectives of the HORIZON2020 EU Project SPOT and achieved with the aid of an interview questionnaire survey, focusing on the experts' a) perceptions/understandings and visions of future optimization of the reciprocal relationship tourism-landscape, b) their conceptualizations of landscapes of tourism, and c) their assessments of the prospects (opportunities) and challenge(threats) coming out of the close tourism-landscape relationship, both for the tourism industry and the local societies involved. The survey was implemented from November 2019 to April 2020, using Google forms on-line and was sent to qualified experts in landscape and tourism, selected from national and international networks. The vast majority of the respondents came from European countries; 77 responses were obtained, mostly from academics and secondarily from researchers or high-ranking professionals.

The study findings underlined the fact that the links between tourism and landscape are obvious and inextricable [5,6]. Due to the importance of landscape for tourism, the experts participating in the study seemed to attribute a key role to landscape for its ability to induce tourism. Primarily, they saw landscape as a tourism attraction, per se, and secondarily as a retainer of tourism resources and attractions and as a means for promoting a destination. Conversely, concerning the impact of tourism on landscapes, the respondents stated that tourism promotes and manages landscapes as tourism products, but they tended to emphasize a rather negative aspect of these interrelationships, as reflected in 21st century trends of mass tourism and 'over tourism'-obviously before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There also seems to exist a great deal of confusion in the scientific literature around "tourist vs. tourism" in conjunction with landscape [6,7]. As regards the experts' understanding of the definition of a "tourism landscape", this term was indicated to express the most important features related to the development of such landscapes in order to meet tourism needs, like attracting tourists and generating income for the development of tourism functions. Therefore, in the authors' view, the term "tourism landscapes" ought to be distinguished as that which implies the ways in which these landscapes are produced, whereas "tourist landscapes" rather implies the ways in which these landscapes are used, a position reinforced by the study's findings.

As concerns the opportunities and threats posed by the close relationship between tourism and landscape for either/both the tourism industry and local societies, the study showed that the experts agreed that sustainable, 'green' development was key to the pursuits of both sides. With regard to possible future challenges and threats to the tourism-landscape relationship, the respondents mostly mentioned risks to the landscape, followed by risks to tourism. The concern of the responding experts focused on the possible despoliation of the landscape as a source, asset or resource for tourism, but also on landscape deterioration and tourism decline, in and of themselves.

Correspondence to: Theano S. Terkenli, Department of Tourism, University of the Aegean, University Hill Mitiline 81100, Lesvos, Greece, E-mail: terkenli@aegean.gr

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Overall, the respondents attributed great value to this relationship and revealed concern over its challenges, through expressions of social and environmental sensitivity and though support for the principles of sustainability, locality, economic independence, participatory governance, while advocating a call for appropriate governmental planning. Although this was undertaken as an exploratory investigation and basic inquiry in the context of the SPOT project, the study's results may prove to be useful input in future planning and management efforts, both in the realm of tourism and in the realm of landscape, and thus aid in the corresponding assessment and stewardship of landscapes in different settings and under different conditions and tourism pressures.

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