

# **Innovation and sustainability in a mass tourism destination: the Green Card in the Balearic Islands, Spain**

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## **1 Tourism, innovation and sustainability: the case of the Balearic Islands**

Today tourism is one of the main driving forces of economic growth in Spain, especially for the Balearic Islands. According to UNWTO, in 2007, Spain was second in the world in terms of international tourist arrivals (59.2 million people) and international tourism receipts (57.8 billion USD), up 1.7% and 13.1% respectively from the 2006 figures (Economic Research Center, 2008; World Tourism Organization, 2008). Comparing to the rest of European countries, these numbers represents the 12.2% of the international tourist arrivals, and the 13.3% of the total international tourism receipts. Within Spain, the Balearic Islands (Mallorca, Menorca, Ibiza and Formentera) were second only to the Catalonia region receiving 10.2 million tourists (that represents the 17.3% of total Spanish tourist arrivals), and 9,044 million euros in tourism receipts (Economic Research Center, 2008). The service sector represents around 80% of the GDP of the Islands, with the share related directly to tourism about 53.3%. Additionally, some recent estimates indicate that approximately 84.4% of total Balearic GDP is directly or indirectly related to tourism activities. These data show that tourism is extremely important for the Balearic economy and for its society, bringing wealth, business and a high standard of living to the islands.

The next important objective for the region is to achieve sustainable tourism development. The current tourism model has resulted in serious environmental problems. For example, congestion is a major issue. In 2007, the number of international tourists per resident was 9.54, and the number per square meter of territory and per meter of coastline was 1.97 and 6.8 respectively. These indicators of congestion are even more worrying if one takes into account the seasonal character of tourist arrivals to the Balearic Islands. Most tourists arrive in the summer months (from June to September), looking for the traditional sun and sand type of vacation. The direct consequences are traffic jams, crowded beaches, water supply problems and increased pressure on the waste and sewage treatment facilities (in 2007 the ratio kilograms of waste per residents was 730,1, the highest ratio between Spanish regions). Therefore it becomes apparent that the Balearic Islands need a new approach which will guarantee long-term sustainable development.

The concept of Sustainable Development was coined at the Earth Summit, celebrated in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This summit established Sustainable Development as the greatest challenge to be met by society during the new century. Sustainable development is what makes it possible to satisfy the needs of present generations without jeopardising the capacity of future generations. The three dimensions of the concept (economic, social and environmental) are closely linked to the taking of responsibility by the present generation. Sustainable development takes

into account the relationship between the environment, and the social and economic spheres. It attempts to harmonise human activity, while respecting nature and culture, and ensuring the well-being of society. The Rio de Janeiro summit achieved a series of compromises by the states, and through initiatives and directives it aimed to reorient public administration to gear policies and actions towards the promotion of natural spaces, non-contaminating energies, recycling, and in a special way, promoting the awareness of sustainability to the general population and to companies.

Sustainability is becoming an increasingly important concept for the tourism sector as has been pointed out in many international meetings and seminars (e.g. Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism, World Summit on Sustainable Development – Plan of Implementation). In the last Seminar on Policies, Strategies and Tools for Sustainable Tourism Development organised by the UNWTO Commission for Europe in Almati (Kazakhstan, April 2006), several important conclusions were reached. During this seminar the importance of developing “... policies and planning in order to raise the sustainability of tourism and increase the contribution of tourism to the overall sustainable development of societies” was emphasized (Conclusions of the first session on Tourism and Sustainability, page 1). The current high growth rate in European tourism implies there is increasing pressure on the natural and cultural resources of the tourism destinations. One of the final suggestions of the seminar, in line with recent UNWTO recommendations to public institutions, is the need to develop initiatives which will allow economic growth while maintaining the cultural and environmental goals of the region.

Environmental innovations, both technical and organizational, are already an extended phenomenon in the innovation activity in all segments of the tourism enterprises at the Balearic Islands. The empirical study of Aguilo et al. (2003) reveals that environmental innovations at the Balearic Islands play an important role, representing approximately 21,63% of all the innovations implemented in the period of 1999-2001, where environmental organizational innovations make up more than 30%.

In this context, the innovative initiative chosen to be discussed here is the Green Card developed in June 2005 by the Foundation for Sustainable Development in the Balearic Islands. This paper demonstrates that this is a good example of an initiative aimed at creating a long-term sustainable development model in the tourism sector. The European Parliament in 2005 hailed the Green Card as a pioneering and exemplary initiative to help raise funds for the protection and improvement of the environment, and encouraged other European regions to take steps in the same direction.

## **2 The Foundation for Sustainable Development in the Balearic Islands: Recognition of the sustainability problems of the Balearic mass tourism destination**

In the last decade there has been growing recognition of the need to achieve long-term sustainable economic development all over the world. Public institutions are