

GREEN PRACTICES IN MANAGEMENT OF SUSTAINABLE TOURIST DESTINATIONS: THE CASE OF BELGRADE

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Abstract

The global tourism industry has undergone a paradigm shift towards sustainability, prompting tourist destinations to adopt environmentally responsible or green practices. This paper focuses on sustainable tourism management, with a special focus on Belgrade, exploring the city's endeavors to incorporate green practices in its tourist product. The primary goal is to assess the efficacy of these sustainable measures in promoting environmental conservation and enhancing the overall tourist experience. By employing a comprehensive research methodology, including analysis and synthesis of secondary data, and existing scientific literature in this field, this study aims to provide valuable insights into the impact of green practices on the management of tourist destinations. The paper highlights the importance of incorporating and promoting green practices in the management of sustainable tourism, emphasizing their critical role in sustaining Belgrade as a tourist destination.

Key Words: *green practices, destination management, sustainable tourist destinations, Belgrade, tourism industry, sustainability*

JEL classification: *Q01, Q26, Q56, L83, Z32*

Introduction

The tourism industry and international travel have recorded a strong growth in the previous decades, which makes it one of the leading economic activities (Khan et al., 2021; Al Fahmawee & Jawabreh, 2023;

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Streimikiene, 2023). Even the COVID-19 pandemic did not manage to drastically slow down the growth and development of the tourism industry and, after a decline during 2020 and a large part of 2021, due to restrictions imposed by states (Yanti et al., 2023) and tourists' fear of illness, there was a rapid recovery during 2022, and especially 2023. which ended with only 12% fewer tourist trips compared to the record 2019 (UNWTO, 2024).

Rapid development and massiveness of tourism results in a number of negative consequences for destinations, among which greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, ecological degradation of space, intensive energy and water consumption, waste generation, CO₂ emissions, etc. stand out most often (Lim & McAleer, 2003; Štetić & Šimičević, 2009; Hashim et al., 2013; Al Fahmawee & Jawabreh, 2023; Gavrilović & Maksimović, 2023; Streimikiene, 2023). Although the environment is the most affected, the negative impacts are not limited to it, but are also felt within the socio-cultural and economic environment (Lim & McAleer, 2003). The goal of sustainable development is to ensure long-term economic development through the preservation of ecological and socio-cultural resources for future generations (Štetić & Šimičević, 2009; Furqan et al., 2010; Do et al., 2019; Stankova & Amoiradis, 2019; Markose et al., 2022).

As there is a growing concern about the environment, and consequently the negative impacts caused by tourism, tourism industry is paying special attention to the sustainable development of tourism. Accordingly, the focus is on relations between tourism development and environmental quality (Erdogan & Tosun, 2009), resulting in the development of special interest tourism, including green tourism.

The concept of sustainable, i.e. green tourism is often associated with environment and nature-based tourism. It should be emphasized that green tourism goes beyond the natural environment, and includes a social and cultural environment where natural, social and cultural components are mutually inseparable (Furqan et al., 2010; Rani & Rashi 2014; Andari & Setiyorini, 2016; Trišić et al., 2022; Yanti et al., 2023). The implementation of sustainable or green tourism and reaching a sustainable destination can be achieved through the application of green practices.

Literature Review

Green practices are often identified as environmentally oriented strategies and tools that companies and destinations use to ensure a sustainable

performance on the tourism market. That is why the term „environmental management“ is used, which emphasizes the physical environment of destinations as a basic component of the sustainable development of destinations (Mihalič, 2000; Hu & Wall, 2005; Alonso-Almeida et al., 2017). This stems from the fact that the literature often emphasizes the threat to the natural environment by various forms of pollution, where tourism is one of the sources of pollution and burden on the natural environment (Lim & McAleer, 2003; Hashim et al., 2013; Andari & Setiyorini, 2016; Alonso-Almeida et al., 2017).

Since green practices are far more comprehensive than mere environmental management, they are recognized as a way to ensure the economic stability of the destination, preservation of the environment, social and cultural characteristics of the destination on the one hand, and on the other hand to ensure a competitive advantage in the tourist market and encourage tourists to be their „favorite“ choice (Hashim et al., 2013; Mazhenova et al., 2016; Merli et al., 2019). The positive image that tourists create about destinations that implement green practices and develop green tourism greatly improves the destination's competitive position and influences decisions about future tourist visits (Rani & Rashi 2014; Andari & Setiyorini, 2016; Ashraf et al., 2020). Do et al. (2020) emphasize the importance of introducing Green Supply Chain Management (GSCM) in order to increase the competitiveness of the destination, i.e. encouraging the internal organization, suppliers and tourists towards sustainable and green products and services. In order to achieve an adequate competitive position, it is necessary to communicate with stakeholders honestly and transparently. However, according to Font et al. (2019) some companies and destinations consciously or unconsciously hide or omit complete information about all undertaken green practices and it is called greenhushing.

Green practices as the basis of sustainable management are important for the competitive position of the destination and the behavior of consumers. However, literature treats this problem in a very heterogeneous way, that is, there is no single approach or single criteria. Thus, some authors investigate the application of green practices in tourism companies (Rani & Rashi, 2014; Alonso-Almeida, 2017; Hamid et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2021), and others within tourist destinations (Hu & Wall, 2005; Ashraf et al., 2019; Do et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2021). This can lead to non-conformity of views on what is included in green practices. Lim & McAleer (2005) are primarily focused on the environment and

environmental protection, so they cite the examples of Boondall Wetlands Reserve and Couran Cove Resort as nature-based destinations, so the most important green practices are conservation, waste management, water and energy consumption management, pest management, community involvement and visitors' education. Merli et al. (2018) do not even state which green practices are significant for the development of coastal tourism destinations, but only determine the correlation between competitiveness, tourist loyalty and the implementation of green practices.

The use of ICTs in achieving sustainable tourism is called green ICTs and is aimed at the three basic directions of green tourism: recycle, reuse and reduce. Gavrilović & Maksimović (2023) single out the use of digital devices (smartphones, tablets, cameras, sensors, etc.), Internet of Things (IoT), web and mobile based services (Cloud services, social media, location services, etc.), and big data analysis. Destinations can significantly improve their performance, attractiveness and competitive position by applying green practices and innovative approaches. It is necessary to cooperate with all stakeholders and create context-spatial strategies and approaches in order to achieve the desired.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study is the Document Research Method (DRM). This method constitutes a systematic approach to analyzing professional and scientific content available in both print and online formats. As stated by Bailey (1994), DRM proves particularly valuable when researchers delve into documents addressing similar or identical research topics. Materials were sourced from Google and Google Scholar search engines using a combination of keywords pertinent to this study. Authors meticulously selected 30 sources deemed most relevant to comprehensively address the breadth of the chosen topic.

Belgrade Green Tourism Practices

On the global and regional stage, Belgrade abounds with authentic qualities and untapped potential, positioning itself as a recognizable and striking tourist destination. Its mesmerizing landscape, situated at the confluence of two mighty rivers, combined with a rich historical structure and indigenous customs, has created a rich diversity of urban atmosphere, landmarks, roads and vistas. These elements form the basis for creating

and marketing the city as a holistic brand. Also, lesser-known urban squares and recreational areas (such as river banks, rest areas, etc.) have significant value, serving as a refuge that is enjoyed by both locals and visitors. It is the authentic urban experience that embodies the uniqueness of Belgrade's tourist attraction.

Picture 1: *Green Tourism Practices Efforts*



Source: *Authors suggestions*

In order to achieve the sustainable tourism practices and initiatives, Belgrade should follow the list of actions (Picture 1.):

1. Green Spaces Preservation: focus should be on preserving its green spaces, such as parks, gardens, and waterfronts, which will enhance the city's aesthetic appeal and contribute to biodiversity conservation and carbon sequestration.
2. Promotion of Eco-Friendly Accommodations: encouraging the development and promotion of eco-friendly accommodations that adhere to sustainable practices.
3. Public Transportation Initiatives: investing in public transportation infrastructure and promotion of eco-friendly modes of transport such as electric buses, bicycles, and pedestrian-friendly zones.
4. Waste Management and Recycling Programs: implementation of waste management and recycling programs to reduce waste generation, promote recycling, and minimize the environmental impact of tourism.
5. Community Involvement: actively involve local communities, businesses, and stakeholders in green tourism initiatives, fostering partnerships and collaborations towards sustainable tourism practices.

6. Educational and Awareness Campaigns: raising awareness among tourists and locals about the importance of sustainable tourism practices through educational campaigns, workshops, and eco-tours.

Overall, Belgrade's efforts in green tourism should demonstrate its commitment to promoting responsible tourism practices that benefit both the environment and the local community, while also enhancing the tourism experience for visitors.

In 2021 the Green City Action Plan (GCAP) was issued, and it is aimed to improve overall living and working environment in Belgrade in accordance with European environmental standards. The main goal of the GCAP is to improve air quality, overall energy efficiency with main focus on renewable energy sources, expand district heating, improve wastewater treatment, and greening of the city. This will contribute to the city's fight against climate change, and through creation of new „green“ jobs will accelerate overall economic growth (Mott MacDonald Limited, 2021).

City of Belgrade, Secretariat for Economy (2019) issued the „Strategy for the development of tourism of the city of Belgrade - 2020 to 2025, with a list of projects with a direct and indirect impact on the tourism industry. These projects rely on the ground project created in 2015 called Identity_Mobility_Environment of the City of Belgrade, which is in line with the following fundamental green practice principles (IME Project, 2015): Strengthening of the identity of the City of Belgrade and its recognisable geographic and cultural parts; Promoting the concept of sustainable urban mobility and making a pleasant and pedestrian-friendly city; Introducing the environmental awareness, where a sustainable living environment is a prerequisite for development. The Project objectives were set in line with green practices to make Belgrade recognizable, sustainable, more attractive place for leisure and business tourism by improving open public spaces, green markets and urban pockets, applying modern technologies to integrate spatial data – GIS, setting up environmentally acceptable hierarchy of traffic participants, and improving the stylish appearance of the city by renovating old facades and marking major public buildings with decorative lighting. Of the planned tourist activities that would be financed from the European Union funds, most are based on green practices and environmental protection. The most significant projects planned for the period of 2020 – 2025 are (City of Belgrade, Secretariat for Economy, 2019):

1. Ecological Park Eko Ada - which includes the construction of an ecological sports and recreation center on Ada Ciganlija including health trails, adventure park etc.
2. Introduction of electric bicycles in Belgrade by setting up parking spaces for electric bicycles for rent in the territory of the city.
3. Landscaping of the lakes (e.g. Duboki Potok - Barajevo, lake near Mladenovac) on the territory of the city.
4. Cycling tourism on the banks of the city - construction of a bicycle lanes next to the Sava and Danube in parts where it has not been done with solar service stations.
5. Eco marina - ecological marinas on the banks of the Sava and Danube in the territory of the city.
6. Youth ranger camps - Organization and offer of camps for young people from the country and abroad.
7. Education and workshops for children on various topics such as: nature around us, eco energy, so that we can't see the air, that the water is clean and clear, 5R (Reduce, Reuse, Refuse, Rethink, Recycle).
8. Danube experiences - various contents in nature, such as: bird watching, tracking wild animals, photo safari.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the management of sustainable tourist destinations requires an integral approach that connects environmental, social and economic considerations. This is especially important in the light of the intense growth of the tourism industry and the negative impacts on ecosystems, communities and cultural heritage. With the further expansion and development of tourist landscapes, the importance of green practices goes beyond merely mitigating the negative effects of tourism. They occupy one of the most important places in ensuring the longevity and vitality of tourist destinations, ensuring the well-being of current and future generations.

Belgrade not only accepts the necessity of green practices in the sustainable management of tourism development, but also proactively acts in this area. As the most important strategic and planning documents that set the strategic framework for green practices in the management of Belgrade as a tourist destination are the Green City Action Plan and the Tourism Development Strategy of the City of Belgrade. Implementation of these documents aim to improve the quality of the environment,

promote energy efficiency and encourage community engagement. Also, the green practices are aimed at promoting environmentally friendly accommodation, improvement of public transport infrastructure and implementation of waste management programs. In this way, not only the improvement of the quality of the environment is achieved, but also comprehensive economic resilience. In essence, the Belgrade's strategic projects and green efforts through the implementation of green practices define it as a destination that is ready to become a leader in sustainable urban tourism in the Balkans.

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