

**PETER BJÖRK • PROFESSOR (ACT.) • SWEDISH SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS
ADMINISTRATION, VAASA**

Sustainable tourism development, fact or fiction in small tourism companies?

Tourism companies are encouraged to take an active role in sustainable tourism development. The issue is whether small tourism companies have the necessary resources, including a knowledge dimension, to direct the development of the company towards a more sustainable phase?

The aim of this article is to examine sustainable tourism development in small Finnish tourism companies and to analyze the role project leaders play in the development process.

The theoretical framework used in this article is built on three concepts: sustainable development (SD), sustainable tourism development (STD) and sustainable tourism (ST). The philosophy of SD constitutes the platform from which the STD principles are derived. The result of STD is ST, which is not in itself a unique tourist form, but an identified state (process) and a set of guidelines. The list of guidelines which can be extracted from the theoretical discussion seems to be applicable in small tourism companies as long as the basic attitude found in these companies has a greenish shade and support in practical issues can be found.

Four main groups of actors can be identified as central in a partnership model pursuing ST. A four-level structure model is presented and focus is put on the two first levels. Tourism companies (tour operators, travel agencies, hotels, etc.) are found on a micro-level, while project leaders, responsible for the development of a larger tourism area, operate on a more abstract level (the second level). Organisations operating on a national level constitute the third level and international organisations the fourth one.

Two groups of respondents were analysed in this research project. Small tourism companies geographically located in Ostrobothnia (Finland) were asked about their attitudes towards ST and what they do in their day to day work to support STD. A quantitative research approach was used and a survey method applied. Project leaders who work in close contact with the tourism companies were asked how they perceive STD in this area. The qualitative research approach used in the second study gave us the opportunity to also analyse the level of environmental knowledge among the project leaders.

The attitudes found in small tourism companies are encouraging as regards the future of STD in Finland. The importance of focusing on environmental issues, one central dimension in ST, is recognized. In the light of the presented results most companies have done something to support STD. However, most actions mentioned are on a tactical level, leaving strategic issues untouched. It is interesting to note that an identified large group of companies want external support in order to direct the development of the company towards a more sustainable phase.

It is of utmost importance that the project leaders who work in close contact with the tourism companies as supervisors possess environmental knowledge and a deep understanding of the STD processes. None of the project leaders had any advanced training in STD, which means that they are not prepared to give consultation on environmental matters. On the other hand, they have some knowledge of where to obtain the right expertise when necessary.

The support tourism companies can get from project leaders is mainly on a philosophical level. This means that small tourism companies have to be active in order to pursue STD, and search for alternative information sources. Tourism organisations found on a national or international level may provide some support, as well as industry specific organisations.