Sustainable Tourism Destinations: A Pathway for Tour Operators

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between tour operators and their existing tourism destinations. The intent is to help the tour operators plan strategically for building the sustainability of their destinations.

A Framework for Strategic Sustainability Development, based on scientific consensus, was used to structure this work. Interviews with tour operators and tourism experts gave practical insight complementing the literature review and case studies analysed during the research. The key findings were the need for tour operators to: consider a whole-systems perspective; cooperate with the tourism destination to build a common vision of success and a clear understanding of sustainability; and to prioritise their actions based on achieving the vision. From this the authors proposed guidance notes to assist tour operators in addressing these barriers.

The paper concludes that tour operators can play a major role in building a sustainable society while perpetuating the tourism industry. In order to do so their actions must be chosen and managed correctly. This involves cooperation with the destinations throughout the strategic planning process and for all involved to be on the same page in terms of the end goal, a sustainable society.

Key words: tourism, tour operators, destination, systems thinking, strategic sustainable development
Acknowledgements

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Thanks also to tourism experts who gave their time to help us with our work: Jennifer Seif from the FTTSA – Fair Trade Tourism of South Africa, our model for a NGO that contributes to a healthy relationship between tour operators and tourism destinations; Cristiano Vasques from the HVS consulting company specialising in tourism development; Luiz Fernando Ferreira, Manager of the National Program of Eco-tourism from the Ministry of Environment in Brasil; and Adriana Budeanu from IIIEE, Lund University.

Lastly, thanks to all our classmates who have continually lifted our spirits and specifically to the friends that provided us with feedback. Finally, thanks to Merlina Missimer, Tamara Connell and Pong Leung from the BTH staff of the Master’s programme in Strategic Leadership towards Sustainability for their support and comments throughout the year.
Statement of Contribution

Karlskrona, May 2008

The thesis has been written in a group consisting of 3 members whose motto became, “everybody’s contribution is valuable and every idea is precious”. The development of the thesis subject was positively influenced by team members’ unique experience and mindsets.

The members’ tasks were divided according to specific needs of the work and skills of the authors within which the majority was compiled through the sharing of ideas, dialogue and brainstorming. As such, the work consisted in individual tasks and group tasks. The work required a division of tasks regarding the literature review, analysis of case studies, interviews, guidance notes and the finalising of the document.

Each member reviewed other members work and came with new ideas and feedbacks. Sergio’s analytical skills were concisely formulated by Liane and criticized by Roman, after this the roles were rotated according to the task. Each member of the group had the chance to organise, facilitate and give high quality feedbacks and critic. During the meetings everyone took on changing roles from idea-provider, to realist and critic. The team work was very important when organising interviews with the experts. Every team member proposed questions to be answered and suggestions on conducting interviews.

Because sustainable development is based on systemic approach, we were taking into account each member’s aptitude to analyse, explain and write. The bigger challenge was to accept the individual mindset and to align it to group’s interests and needs.

Liane Fredericks, Roman Garstea and Sergio Monforte
Executive Summary

Introduction

Tourism is known as one of the major contributors to the global economy delivering 10.9% of world GDP in 1996 (UNWTO 2003). It offers economic benefits to industrialised and developing countries alike by satisfying society’s curiosity of the unusual and people’s need for leisure. It is one of the most visible global industries, physically linking opposite sides of the globe, involving all levels of society and supporting many industries.

Given the knowledge we have regarding the economic power and influence of the tourism industry it makes sense that its presence is also felt socially and environmentally. The multitude of unsustainable activities embedded in the main characteristics of conventional mass tourism, leading to pressures at the tourism destination, suggest that, (mass) tourism, by its very nature, might be threatening its own existence. This represents a key challenge for sustainability in the industry (Budeanu 2003, Robinson 1999, Tepelus 2005).

Acting as an intermediary, tour operators are a pivotal link between the tourist and the destinations and thereby represent a leverage point for leading the move towards sustainability. The steps taken should be coherent and comprehensive with benefits equally distributed between the tour operators, tourists, destination communities and the environment. In addition, as global awareness about sustainability increases and international regulations become more restrictive, the link between sustainability and tour operators’ competitiveness makes good business sense. This statement is being reinforced through indicators like the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index (World Economic Forum 2008).

The purpose of this research is to understand how the tour operators can alleviate unsustainable pressures at the tourism destination, by working towards a sustainable society. This research used the Tour Operators Initiative for Sustainable Development members as a benchmark for the current planning framework used by tour operators for sustainability. The aim of this paper is to research: How can tour operators strategically contribute to the sustainability of their tourism destinations?
The three research questions that have helped to explore this topic:

1. **What are the basic characteristics of a sustainable tourism destination and the role of the tour operator within it?**

2. **What does an analysis, through the lens of a generic framework for strategic planning, reveal about the tour operators planning approaches for sustainability?**

3. **What does a comparison to a Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development reveal?**

4. **What recommendations can be made to the tour operators, so that they can lead their destination more strategically towards sustainability?**

**Conceptual Framework**

This research has been undertaken through the lens of the Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD). This provides a holistic and systematic tool for the strategic understanding, planning and analysis of complex systems in order to help society move towards sustainability. Built into this framework is ‘backcasting from Sustainability Principles’, which involves knowing what outcome one wants before planning how to achieve it (Holmberg and Robert 2000, 7; Broman et. al. 2000; Byggeth and Hochschorner 2006). The five levels of the FSSD are outlined below:

**System** – Understand the interactions and complexities between and within systems, within the global society within the biosphere.

**Success** – A vision of success as it looks within a sustainable society by eliminating our systematic contribution to the violations of the Principles of Sustainability.

**Strategic Guidelines** – ‘Backcasting’ from a vision of success to help ensure that all actions: move in the right direction; offer us a flexible platform; and generate sufficient return on investment to proceed with regards to economic, social and environmental resources.

**Actions** – Prioritise the possible solutions based on the strategic guidelines.

**Tools** – Decide on the appropriate tools to support the move towards sustainability and the vision of success within the system.
Methods

The data was collected through qualitative methods: a literature review, case studies, exploratory interviews and finally, expert feedback regarding our proposed guidance notes. There were three phases: background research, data analysis and the creation of guidance notes. Each phase built upon the previous phase in order to comprehensively respond to the research questions. The overview of the data analysis approach and how it utilised the FSSD is shown below. This phase enabled a juxtaposition of the current reality against the proposed planning framework. This brought about creative tension and built a pathway that strategically supports the tour operators planning process.

Results

A generic vision of a sustainable tourism destination was devised within which the role of the tour operator can be understood. It was kept broad enough to be able to incorporate both the tourism destination and the tour operator’s unique circumstances and identity. This in turn, allows for the co-creation of a more in-depth shared vision. A key component for those who agree to this vision is to collaboratively work towards eliminating systematic violations of the Principles of Sustainability. However, the vision is only a suggestion.

The data analysis phase explored the gap between the current planning framework and the ideal framework as represented by the FSSD. This uncovered that there were many strengths including: an existing
understanding of the interdependency between the social, economic and environmental systems; inherently high levels of cooperation between tour operators and their immediate stakeholders; the industry’s movement towards sustainability; and the strategies, actions and tools that have arisen to reveal the link between sustainability and the business case for tour operators. However, due to a price driven market and short-term thinking, the current tour operator planning process did not explicitly cover the following areas: whole-systems thinking, a shared vision of success as sustainability and backcasting from this vision.

Following on from this, guidance notes were created with the intention of generically incorporating these key findings. The aim was to assist tour operators in shifting towards the ideal planning process in a non-prescriptive fashion that did not predetermine the actions or tools to be implemented or used. Expert feedback on the guidance notes revealed areas for potential improvement.

Discussion

An initial exploration of the sustainability of the tourism system highlighted the most extensive pressure point as being the tourism destinations and it was decided to focus on the private sector by using tour operators as a leverage point for improving the sustainability of the tourism system. There is also limited research on strategic approaches for improving the sustainability of the destinations through tourism organisations and specifically how the mass tourism industry should move forward (Budeanu 2005).

As expected, tour operators are becoming more proactive in their response to these issues and are starting to perceive the need for longer term relationships between tourists, governments and communities. In addition, they recognise that the benefits of tourism should be fairly shared by all those involved in tourism and that this is one of the aims of sustainability. However to facilitate this, the research identified the tour operator’s need for a more comprehensive planning framework that could handle the complexities inherent in the tourism industry while ensuring the survival of both the tour operator’s business and the destinations they represented in their product portfolios.

To clarify the complexity of tourism in the context of sustainability, the FSSD provided a structured approach that helped to identify the main gaps
in the current planning framework for sustainability. Based on those gaps, this research advocates that the following three points should be considered:

1. A whole-systems understanding
2. Define success as sustainability
3. Backcasting from the vision of success

**Conclusion**

This research confirms that tourism and specifically tour operators have a responsibility in moving towards a sustainable society. The challenge is to use the tour operators’ role as an intermediary between tourists and tourism destination, as a catalyst for integrating sustainable practices into their work with the destination’s community. The incentive for sustainability becomes the value that these tourism actors create together. As such, the strong business case for sustainability reinforces the benefits of long-term relationships and in building the future of tourism.

Despite tourism’s violations of the Principles of Sustainability, the TOI case studies prove that tour operators are implementing on their knowledge of sustainability. Their measures are already bringing economical, social and environmental benefits to the destinations. Building on this, if improvements are made to the tour operators planning framework then tourism can help us move towards a sustainable society. Due to the diverse understanding of sustainability, a planning process that supports the co-creation and sharing of a vision of success will be best supported through cooperation between the tour operators and the destination’s community. Subsequently, the aim of tourism activities becomes the fair division of risks, responsibilities and benefits.

In order to move beyond the short-term thinking characteristic of a competitive market and a highly price-driven sector, it is proposed that tour operators incorporate ‘backcasting from a vision of success’ into their planning framework. Prioritising actions in this way allows the unique realities of each tourism destination to be considered and ensures all efforts work towards building a sustainable society. Consequentially, this planning process can support the sustainable development of the destinations as well as the tour operators business.
Acronyms

EU: European Union
GRI: Global Reporting Initiative
IPCC: International Panel on Climate Change
PPT: Pro Poor Tourism
TOI: Tour Operators Initiative for Sustainable Tourism Development
TTCI: Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index
UNEP: United Nations Environment Programme
UNESCO: United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
WEF: World Economic Forum
UNWTO: World Tourism Organisation
**Glossary**

**ABCD**: A strategic tool developed for applying backcasting from basic principles of success within four steps: A (Awareness) encompasses a complete understanding of the system, B (Baseline) assesses the current reality, C (Visioning) brainstorms solutions based on an envisioned state of success, and D (Setting and managing priorities) allows for strategic application of solutions. (Holmberg and Robèrt 2000)

**Backcasting**: The process of setting a vision for success and planning strategic steps to reach this vision from the current position.

**Brundtland definition**: "Meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs." (Brundtland 1987)

**Eco-labelling**: Environmental standard designed to provide consumers with information about the environmental effects of a product.

**Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD)**: A framework for strategic planning in complex systems that applies backcasting from sustainability principles to help guide society towards sustainability (Robèrt 2000; Robèrt and others 2002).

**FSSD Sustainability Principles**: Generic principles used to define sustainability from a strategic science-based and whole-systems perspective. They exist as the following:

In a sustainable society, nature is not subject to systematically increasing…

1. …concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth’s crust,
2. …concentrations of substances produced by society,
3. …degradation by physical means and, in that society…
4. …people are not subject to conditions that systematically undermine their capacity to their needs. (Robèrt and others 2000; Ny and others 2006)
**GDP:** Gross Domestic Product. A measure of the value of goods and services produced in a year

**Greenwash:** The term is generally used when significantly more money or time has been spent advertising being green (that is, operating with consideration for the environment), rather than spending resources on environmentally sound practices.

**HVS:** A global consulting and services organization focused on the hotel, restaurant, shared ownership, gaming and leisure industries.

**Stakeholder:** is a term to describe any organisation or individual that has a direct interest in actions or decisions. Their interest may be because they will have a role in implementing the decisions, or because they will be affected by the decision.

**TNS:** The Natural Step, a non-governmental organisation working towards a sustainable society

**TOI Members:** “Any company or organisation which, as a principal or regular part of its business, organises and offers for sale, directly or through an agent, travel arrangements that include transport, accommodation and other tourism services shall be eligible to be a Tour Operator Member of the Initiative, provided it is in compliance with the Initiative’s membership rules and procedures. The main requirement for membership is to sign a commitment to adopt the principles of sustainable tourism and to implement these principles through a corporate sustainable tourism policy. As part of this commitment, members also agree to monitor and report their progress.” (TOI 2008)

**Tourism:** “It comprises the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited.” (United Nations World Tourism Organisation 2007)

**Tourism Destinations:** “Is a physical space in which a tourist spends at least one night. It includes tourism products such as support services and attractions and tourist resources within one day’s return travel time” (TOI 2007).
Tour Operator: the company that acts as intermediary between tourist and tourism service provider (TOI 2007)

Triple bottom line: An expanded baseline for measuring organizational performance, adding social and environmental dimensions to the traditional financial "bottom line" results.
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1 Introduction

1.1 An Overview of Tourism

Tourism is known as one of the major contributors to the global economy delivering 10.9% of world GDP in 1996 according to the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO 2003). Since it requires relatively little investment to generate financial wealth from tourism (Robinson 1999), it is seen as an agent of economic development, particularly where there are few economic alternatives to fighting poverty and unemployment (Ashley 2006). Consequentially, it has become one of the top five exports for 83% of countries and the main source of foreign income for more than 38% of countries. This promise of economic wealth is the predominant reason for tourism cited by affluent and less-prosperous countries alike (UNWTO 2008).

One of the most visible global industries, tourism physically links opposite sides of the globe within a matter of hours and encourages unexpected experiences involving all levels of society. In addition, it blurs the distinction between industries by interlinking sectors such as: transport, construction, energy, technology, telecommunication, accommodation, restaurants, agriculture, events, communication and governmental institutions. Inevitably tourism's size, growth and pervasive nature make it an economically important topic, as well as a sector whose boundaries are difficult to determine.

With such ambiguous boundaries many definitions of tourism have arisen. The most current and prominent is the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) definition, which says, “tourism comprises of the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited” (UNWTO 2007). In brief, tourism is comprised of the tourists, the tourism destination and its people, and the routes and means by which they are brought together (Weaver 2006). It is an increasingly popular way of satisfying people’s curiosity of the unusual and their need for leisure.
The volume of tourists has seen considerable growth, particularly in developing regions where there has been an increase in destination options. Subsequently, global tourism is in its fourth year of consecutive growth despite major crises such as the Indian Ocean Tsunami, so much so that the international tourism arrivals are predicted to surpass 1.5 billion people by 2020 (UNWTO 2007). Such a mass movement of people could be considered an, as yet, unparalleled social and cultural phenomenon. This invariably influences the societal structures and quality of life for many of the world’s citizens (Crouch and Brent Ritchie 1999). From a social perspective, the tourism can have a positive impact on the local community by encouraging cultural exchanges and the preservation of heritage. Such processes promote the learning of new skills and languages, evoke a civic sense of pride and support the development of infrastructure that locals also benefit from such, as the transport connections.

Given the size and influence of the tourism industry economically and socially, it follows that its presence is also felt environmentally. This is particularly true at the destination. The destination forms the core component of the tourism product and can attract large quantities of people to specific areas of the world to visit areas of extraordinary beauty. For example, as Peru’s only intact Inca ruin, Machu Picchu had 400,000 visitors in 2003. What became evident here, as with many other tourism destinations, was that the economic benefits were not considered against the environmental impacts. The sheer volume of tourists at Machu Picchu caused damage to the ruin. As a result, the Untied Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) considered placing the site on their endangered list unless action was taken. The balance of benefits and impacts, both environmental and social, is delicate and the long-term consequences are often unknown.

1.2 Tourism and a Sustainability Society

The Machu Picchu example above is just one of many in which the tourism operation had positive and unintended negative consequences for the tourism destination. A synopsis of tourism’s positive and negative influence over the economy, society and the environment are outlined in Tables 1.1.1 and 1.1.2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Social &amp; Cultural</th>
<th>Environmental</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Major generator of revenue,</td>
<td>• Vehicle for raising awareness of, and</td>
<td>• Vehicle for the improved environmental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>locally, regionally and</td>
<td>promoting, the natural and built heritage, encouraging</td>
<td>stewardship of visitor attractions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nationally and it encourages</td>
<td>civic pride and access to places of interest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inward investment and social</td>
<td>• Creator of opportunities for personal empowerment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and economic regeneration</td>
<td>and self actualisation by providing access to a wide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>range of educational, environmental and cultural</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Creator of diverse</td>
<td>experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>employment opportunities; in</td>
<td>• Tourism as a force for peace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some areas it is the main</td>
<td>• Strengthening communities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>source of employment</td>
<td>• Facilities developed for tourism can benefit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>residents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Revaluation of culture and traditions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Tourism encourages civic involvement and pride</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Financial contributions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Improved environmental management and planning</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Environmental awareness raising</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Protection and preservation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Alternative employment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Regulatory measures</td>
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Table 1.1.1: Tourism’s positive impacts in society and at the destination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Social &amp; Cultural</th>
<th>Environmental</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Economic dependence of the</td>
<td>• Culture clashes eg/ tendency towards defensive</td>
<td>• Increases pollution – chemicals and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>local community on tourism</td>
<td>attitudes concerning host regions; high possibility</td>
<td>man-made materials such as human waste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>of misunderstandings leading to varying degrees of</td>
<td>• Increases need for energy and generally this comes from fossil fuels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>host/tourist hostility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increase in prices for locals</td>
<td>• Overcrowding</td>
<td>• Depletion of natural resources and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eg/ real estate speculation and</td>
<td>• Physical influences causing social stress eg/</td>
<td>environmental degradation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prices increase during special</td>
<td>acceleration of undesirable social trends such as</td>
<td>• Changes in land use from the need to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>events</td>
<td>excessive urbanisation</td>
<td>increase carrying capacity potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ethical issues</td>
<td>too quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Income leakage</td>
<td>• Seasonal character of jobs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Infrastructure cost</td>
<td>• Change or loss of indigenous identity and values</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>eg/ commercialisation of activities that may be of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Economic exploitation of local</td>
<td>personal or private nature; modifications of nature</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>population elite</td>
<td>of event/activity to accommodate tourism and in</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>order to reflect values of political systems the day</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.1.2: Tourism’s negative impacts at the destination
What is clear from the growing amount of literature is that tourism can make immense contributions to society. However, the industry has yet to recognise and mitigate all the negative impacts imposed on the tourism destinations. To explain why this imbalance can no longer be consistently ignored by society it is helpful to use the metaphor of a funnel as shown in Figure 1.2 (Holmberg and Robert 2000). Currently, there is a consistent decrease in life-sustaining resources around the world which is creating major problems such as extreme economic poverty, lack of drinking water and food shortages. Meanwhile, the demand for these life-sustaining resources is increasing as the global population escalates, as is the consumption of resources per capita.

**Figure 1.2: The funnel metaphor (adapted from Holmberg and Robèrt 2000)**

Historically, the economy has relied on these life-sustaining resources to maintain its growth believing them to be infinite. However, as availability of resources decreases and the demand for these increases, the walls of the funnel are converging so that the space and opportunity for resolving the ensuing problems is narrowing. As society and the organisations within society come into contact with the walls of the funnel they will experience
increasing challenges in terms of increasing: costs for natural resources, competition for accessing these resources, environmental regulations and insurance premiums. At the same time, they will see a loss of investment due to underperforming activities that have resulted from short-term and reactive thinking. If society continues in this unsustainable manner it will jeopardise all aspects of human life that rely on the services and resources granted by the biosphere.

In a sustainable society the demand for life-sustaining resources does not outweigh the availability of these resources. This means that society can meet its present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Bruntland 1987). Since the walls of the funnel are currently closing, change is inevitable. However, society can work towards opening the funnel by being proactive in navigating towards the vision of a sustainable society.

Applying this metaphor to an industry that has long been dependent on environmental and social resources, one might wonder why the tourism industry has not been more proactive in sustaining its long-term business. One reason appears to be that many unsustainable tourism activities are embedded in the main characteristics of conventional mass tourism and therefore, within the majority of tourism business. These characteristics include: high volumes, distinct high and low seasons, commercialised attractions, concentrated and large scale accommodation with growth based on the ideal of free markets, a tourist-only focus, non-local linkages and ownership of assets, a short-term focus on financial profit and enjoying low regulatory barriers (Weaver 2006, 41). For example, to support a high and rapid turnover of tourists a large amount of infrastructure is required. Local services and facilities then become overburdened and local culture is slowly eroded (Weaver 2006, 284).

It has been reported that Spain and Sicily have together lost 75% of sand dune habitats through tourism-related urbanisation. Meanwhile, the average tourist to Spain can use up to twice the amount of water as a Spanish city-dweller, consuming around 500 litres per day (BBC News 2005). Furthermore, the industry has continued to increase its demand and contribute to the scarcity of life-sustaining resources. For example, cheap flights entice more tourists to more remote destinations, which perpetuate the use of fossil fuels through travel as well as use of other sectors such as, the transportation of construction materials and goods (World Economic
Forum 2008). Such dependency on finite resources indicates that the current management of mass tourism threatens the very existence of tourism. This is often described as ‘killing the goose that lays the golden egg’ and represents a key challenge for sustainable tourism (Budeanu 2003, Robinson 1999, Tepelus 2005).

1.2.1 Existing platforms for sustainability

Nevertheless, the industry is now starting to pull together to play a more significant role in the changes necessary to support a sustainable society. This transformation towards sustainable tourism is currently associated with alternative concepts such as ecotourism, community tourism, ethical tourism and pro-poor tourism (PPT). These contribute to minimising the impacts and maximising the benefits of tourism through their specific area of focus. For example, PPT endeavours to reduce poverty by strengthening the links between tourism businesses and poor people. Using such concepts as platforms for moving the industry towards sustainability has been much explored in recent research (Ashley and others 2006).

Generally, small-scale and responsible initiatives have achieved notable reductions in the negative impacts of tourism. However, as a niche market, they represent less than 5% of the industry and hence, will not bring about the major overhaul needed to sustain the industry into the future (Budeanu, 2005). Mass demand cannot simply be fulfilled by mimicking alternative approaches since that advocates a ‘one size fits all’ approach and the reality that mass consumerism is responsible for the majority of negative impacts. Subsequently, there remains a lack of empirical evidence that these initiatives can be applied to mass-tourism and that such alternative approaches rule out tourism’s damaging qualities (Budeanu 2007, Jafari 2001).

With tourism clearly offering many benefits (see Table 1.1.1 for a summary of these) and yet habitually operating in an unsustainable manner, it is important to consider how tourism can move forward and increase its contributions to a sustainable society. Clarke (1997) makes two key points. Firstly, that the larger tourism organisations have greater lobbying power when it comes to the preservation of social and environmental assets particularly when fending off other potentially dominating economic activities such as mining. Secondly, those larger organisations have more extensive networks of influence. For example, their organisational
structures offer great opportunities for improvements throughout the whole supply-chain. Returning to the Spanish example from above, small water savings within each of the buildings owned by a large global hotel chain would represent sizeable water savings and a movement towards sustainability that is visible and involves clients.

1.3 Tour Operator as leverage

“Tour Operators are important for the destinations’ economy, and destinations are important for tour operators - without them, there would not be the tourism product.” (TOI 2008)

Acting as an intermediary, tour operators are a pivotal link between the tourists and the destinations. In this way they determine and fulfil the demand on behalf of a destination. The Tour Operators Initiative for Sustainable Tourism Development (TOI) summarises the role of tour operators at their destinations as follows (TOI 2003):

- Influence customers’ choices and behaviours
- Direct the flow of tourists
- Influence the supply chain
- Influence the development of destinations
- Influence the well-being of destinations / local communities

The importance of these roles can be understood by Figure 1.3 which suggests the degree of control that the tour operators have over other tourism stakeholders and to some degree, their interdependent relationships.

On the one hand, tour operators are key in deciding the volume of tourists reaching a destination (Leiper 2000). They also have direct control over the tourist’s choice of products and create the demand for a destination through their representation of the destination packages. For example, the image of a tourism destination is defined by the tourists and tour operators. As such it may vary widely from the destination’s own understanding of its identity. This variance can start to erode the social fabric of the destination’s community and alter the atmosphere that initially enticed tourists to the destination. Consequentially, the tour operators’ role is considered instrumental in determining the pace of change and sustainability of a destination (Tepelus 2005, Budeanu, 2005, Carey and others 1997, Holden and Kealy 1996).
Tour operators sub-contract 85-90% of all the services they sell and therefore they have little direct control. However, they can significantly influence their suppliers’ sustainability performance, as denoted by the Sphere of Influence in Figure 1.3.1 (Budeanu 2005). This is particularly true for large tour operators since they wield considerable negotiation power over their supply chains (Tepelus 2005).

Figure 1.3: Tour operator influence on tourism stakeholders (Budeanu, 2007, 120)

As a less fragmented branch of tourism, large tour operators are also influential in eliciting a change in customer activities (Carey and others 1997, Budeanu 2005). Wielding this influence over tourism stakeholders requires collaboration between all tour operators (Carey and others 1997) and that the strategies used should run throughout the three spheres of influence. This ensures that the actions taken are comprehensive with benefits equally distributed between all the tourism stakeholders.
1.4 Tour Operator’s Interest in the Sustainability of the Destination

The tour operators have an inherent interest in the development and sustainability of their destinations since their business depends upon this as is shown in Appendix 1 through a conceptual framework of tourism. This section offers a basic overview of how tour operators can act as a leverage point for moving their destinations towards sustainability. Section 1.4.1 provides a more practical example of how Jamaica’s tourism industry has been affected by unsustainability.

- The greater the tourism demand the more successful a tour operator’s business since it can charge more for its products or sell to a greater number of tourists. Meanwhile, the more successful a tour operator the more resources they require to promote and develop their business. This is a reinforcing process if one assumes that greater demand equals greater profit and that no quality is lost.

- Increasing tourism demand builds up the pressure on a destination due to unsustainable tourism activities and impacts (see Table 1.1.2 for the tour operator’s involvement in the negative impacts of tourism on a destination). There is an assumption that the growth in tourism demand is not managed sustainably. As pressure builds up at the destination, the success of the tour operator’s business is decreased. This can happen, for example, through increased costs in destination and product management and decreased destination competitiveness (Ritchie 2005). Due to the delay in this cycle, the cause and effect of tourism's negative impacts on a destination are not always obvious. The tour operator and tourist both have greater ability to choose a different destination and will tend to do so once an existing destination becomes undesirable. This generally leaves the existing tourism destination as the first of the three to lose out in the tourism process. Overtime this cycle holds back the success of the tour operator’s business, assuming that the destination remains in the tour operator’s product portfolio. This means that there are two potential delays in the whole process which often restricts tour operator’s awareness of how and where their activities impact on the sustainability of their destination.

- If the tour operator takes strategic steps to assist the sustainability of their existing tourism destination then these steps, by their very nature,
will help avoid and reduce pressure building up at the destination. This represents how the tour operators can help move their business, industry and tourism destinations towards a more sustainable society. Implementing this link will help ensure that the benefits of tourism outweigh its negative impacts.

1.4.1 Destination competitiveness

Due to the highly competitive nature of the tour operating sector, businesses must distinguish themselves through more than just their internal operations and management. They use the advantages offered by the destinations to add value to their products and thereby boost their income (Crouch and Brent Ritchie 1999). However, tour operators cannot single-handedly determine a destination’s competitiveness. Therefore unsustainable activities at the destination, whether directly related to the tour operator or not, can have serious consequences for tourism in that location.

One example is Jamaica’s negative media attention that resulted from increasing violent crimes portraying the destination as a dangerous choice for tourists (Aiagunna 2006). The increase in crimes was a result of social unsustainability building up at the tourism destination such as economic inequality. Unsustainability encouraged the perception that Jamaica was a bad destination to visit and hence, reduced its destination competitiveness. With the destination receiving less income from tourism the likelihood of unsustainable activities increases. In addition, it increases costs dramatically for the tour operators in terms of lost sales, marketing to redress the bad publicity and costs associated with changing their product portfolio. Such interdependency reinforces the notion that the destination’s competitiveness will increasingly determine the success of the tour operators now and into the future (Ritchie 2005, 63).

The World Economic Forum (WEF 2008) reinforced the link between a tourism destination’s competitiveness and it’s sustainability through the Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index. This index has recently been updated to consider the environmental and cultural resources of a destination so as to reflect sustainability. For example, they accept that the industry relies heavily on air travel and therefore fossil fuels. Their index reflected the increasing environmental costs associated with greater legislation and regulation to stem carbon emission. It also recognised that
customers were increasingly demanding ‘green’ tourism representing an opportunity to create value out of promoting sustainability.

“Countries that score well in the sustainability category also tend to show a higher competitiveness scores overall!” (PATA 2008)

1.4.2 The business case

Reflecting Willard’s (2005) generic business benefits of sustainability, Tepelus (2005, 105) summarises the benefits observed by TOI tour operators of implementing sustainability practices inside and outside their businesses. Improved accountability and a greater sense of involvement and responsibility lead to additional benefits such as:

- Demonstration to employees that the top management's commitment for performance improvement and for transparency
- Active promotion of employees’ motivation for improved performance
- Facilitation of supply chain management processes
- Attraction of investors
- Cost reductions associated with energy and water savings
- Increased shareholder value

With millions of customers and a significant supply chain, a single large tour operator could inspire a significant movement towards sustainability. Mirroring the tourism industry as a whole, the top European tour operators are starting to understand not only the need for sustainability improvements (Budeanu 2005) but the business benefits of them as well. This movement encourages cooperation between tour operators and the rest of the tourism industry. With this comes the understanding that in such a competitive industry, sustainability requires a common commitment to promoting and integrating sound business practices. Consequentially, the Tour Operators Initiative for Sustainable Tourism Development (TOI) has been one of the main strategic alliances to bring tour operators together for the purpose of supporting business and sustainability. Two of the large European tour operators have signed up to this organisation, HotelPlan and TUI Group.
1.4.3 Tour Operators Initiative for Sustainable Tourism Development

The combination of the industry’s economic, social and environmental power; the growing awareness of the symptoms of unsustainability in relation to tourism; and the tour operators’ business case for sustainability has lead to the proliferation of related academic work. This has resulted in the creation of research groups such as, the Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre in Australia, as well as increased motivation on behalf of the existing tour operator associations like the Pacific Asia Travel Association. Overall, there is now greater involvement from governments and a better understanding of community interest in tourism (Simpson 2006; Zhang and others 2006). In addition, the public interest in sustainability is increasing and has encouraged the formation of tourism organisations such as Responsible Travel and The Travel Foundation. These have been successful in providing sustainable travel information for travellers and tourism businesses alike. Meanwhile, large non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as the UNWTO, United Nation Environment Program (UNEP) and UNESCO have also helped to bring the industry together and lead it towards sustainability. One organisation working closely with the large NGOs is the Tour Operators Initiative for Sustainable Tourism Development (TOI).

The TOI is a voluntary and non-profit organisation launched in 2000 with 15 initial members. It now consists of 18 various sized tour operators located mainly in Europe whose tourism destinations are predominately based in ‘developing’ countries. This international organisation was developed by tour operators for tour operators with the support of the UNEP, UNESCO and the UNWTO, who are also full members of the Initiative (TOI 2008). Its ultimate aim is to advance the sustainable development and management of tourism. Its second aim is to make sustainability a main stream issue in the tourism business. This is achieved by gaining commitment from tour operators ‘to the concepts of sustainable development as the core of their business activity and to work together through common activities to promote and disseminate methods and practices compatible with sustainable development’ (TOI 2008). Its members recognise that to achieve their goals they must work in partnership with all stakeholders in the destinations where they operate. ‘By acting together they can create a better tourism experience that safeguards
the destination, its culture, economy and environment, and increases benefits for the local community’ (TOI 2008).

Since its inception, the TOI has developed supply-chain management guidelines, has a list of best practices, stimulates the use of the Global Reporting Initiative tool and has developed and implemented destination cooperation projects around the world. All of which suggests that the industry is capable and ready to contribute towards a sustainable society. In this research, the actions of the TOI and its members are used to represent a benchmark for sustainability planning within the industry. The authors aimed to use this to bring less sustainability-savvy tour operators on an equal footing with TOI members, as well as to raise the benchmark for the actions taken by the TOI members.

1.5 Research Scope and Limitations

The recent literature is still fragmented, often providing detailed explanations of what types of tourism (eco-tourism, community-based tourism, conservation tourism) are best suited to maximising the benefits in certain areas (from wildlife parks to coastal regions to urbanised regions) (Budeanu 2007). The literature indicates that strategies must embrace the broader spectrum of tourism types in order to bring about movement towards sustainability since it will take all types and sizes to shake off the tourism industry’s bad habits in a feasible manner (Budeanu 2003, Carey and others 1997). However, there is limited research on strategic approaches for improving the sustainability of the destinations through tourism organisations and specifically how the mass tourism industry should move forward (Budeanu 2005). If strategic solutions are to consider the complexities of tourism then the most pragmatic approach to take is a whole-systems perspective as represented by the figure below.

The purpose of this research is to understand how one of the key players in the industry, the tour
operators, can help strategically move the tourism destination, where many of the unsustainability issues are most pressing, towards a more sustainable future. This research identifies tour operators as those acting as intermediaries between the tourists and a tourism destination by providing travel arrangements and tourism services either indirectly or directly. This research will only focus on the existing tourism destinations in which these tour operators are already actors. The results should be sufficient to provide guidance notes for any tour operator who is aware of sustainability issues and is seeking to improve their efforts strategically.

The TOI and its members are seen to have some level of sustainability awareness since the tour operators have voluntarily signed a ‘Statement of Commitment to Sustainable Tourism Development’ and their operations are expected to have sustainability concepts and objectives integrated into them. This research therefore used the practices and experiences of the TOI members as a benchmark for what sustainability-aware tour operators are currently doing.

1.6 Research Questions

The overarching aim of this paper is to research:

How can tour operators strategically contribute to the sustainability of their tourism destinations?

Below are three research questions that have helped to explore this topic:

1. What are the basic characteristics of a sustainable tourism destination and the role of the tour operator within it?

2. What does an analysis, through the lens of a generic framework for strategic planning, reveal about the tour operators planning approaches for sustainability?

3. What does a comparison to a Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development reveal?

4. What recommendations can be made to the tour operators, so that they can lead their destination more strategically towards sustainability?
2 Conceptual Framework

The multi-dimensional components that need to be considered when planning and moving towards a sustainable society require a thorough understanding of the relationships and interactions between the systems at play. The complexity of this can be simplified without reduction by applying System Thinking – the science that deals with the organisation of logic and integration of disciplines for understanding patterns and relations of complex problems (Haraldsson 2004).

As mentioned before, the phenomenon of tourism is complex and responsible for a wide diversity of unsustainable and often intangible impacts. Therefore, the industries activities need to be seen with a dynamic, holistic and long-term perspective in order to genuinely maximise the positives impacts and mitigate the negative impacts (Robinson 1999, 382; Budeanu 2005). Outlined below is a conceptual framework based on systems thinking which the authors used in order to analyse and plan for such complexity.

2.1 Generic Five Level Framework

The five level framework allows a structured understanding of complex systems that facilitates systematic planning and decision-making. It contains distinct but interrelated levels that can be applied to any scale of topic. It allows for a shared understanding and cooperation without reductionism. It facilitates effective leadership by building up consensus regarding the boundaries and constraints inherent within a system as well as creating a shared mental model of success. By providing a solid foundation all options can be explored creatively while ensuring that they move constructively towards success (Robert 2000).

System level - requires an understanding of the system in terms of its boundaries, its components, their functions, the flows, feedback loops, etc. Success level - outlines what constitutes the intent of
the planning and decisions within the System. **Strategic Guidelines** level - looks at how to achieve Success by using strategic guidelines that prioritise the actions that will best lead to Success. **Actions** level - describes the measures that are to be as prioritised by the Strategic Guidelines. **Tools** level - specifies various techniques, instruments and guides used to plan and evaluate.

### 2.2 Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development

The Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development (FSSD) applies the five level framework to the goal of moving society towards a sustainable future. It provides a holistic and systematic tool for the strategic understanding, planning and analysis of sustainability measures (Robèrt and others 1997). The FSSD uses Principles of Sustainability at the Success level. These reflect the natural laws inherent within society and the biosphere, with the biosphere as the uppermost System. Key to the framework is backcasting from these principles at the Strategic Guidelines Level. These components are outlined in greater detail below:

**System** ~ This defines society as residing and operating within the biosphere indicating the social systems dependence on the earth’s natural cycles. Within these uppermost systems reside numerous interrelated sub-systems, for example, the tourism industry as studied in this research.

**Success** ~ This level describes the goal, which should inform the strategies, actions and tools. In the case of the FSSD, success entails all individuals and organisations within society complying with the Principles of Sustainability.

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A sustainable society is one where we do not subject nature to systematic increases in the:

I. *concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth’s crust,*

II. *concentrations of substances produced by society,*

III. *degradation by physical means,*

And in that society we do not:

IV. *subject people to conditions that systematically undermine their abilities to meet their needs.*
These consensus-based non-overlapping principles were created with a scientific understanding of ecological and social systems and their interdependence. They provide broad and concrete constraints that can offer a common language so as to facilitate shared decision-making and co-creation when working towards building a sustainable society (Ny and others 2006; Broman, Holmberg, and Robèrt 2000).

In regards to the fourth principle, the opportunities to meet ones human needs can be systematically undermined through three common and universal mechanisms. These are economic, political and environmental abuses of power where the rights and responsibilities awarded through institutional and personal power are taken advantage of and misused.

**Strategic Guidelines** ~ To achieve Success, one ‘backcasts’ from the Principles of Sustainability. By backcasting one imagines the desired future, a sustainable society, and then determines the best measures for achieving this. Backcasting involves knowing what outcome one wants before planning how to achieve it, and is used in place of forecasting so as to (Holmberg and Robert 2000, 7; Broman and others 2000; Byggeth and Hochschorner 2006):

- …avoid being limited by the historic trends that are part of the problem
- …avoid unnecessarily constraining the choice of actions
- …remain flexible within an unpredictable system
- …effectively handle trade-offs if done from a principled definition of success.

To facilitate decisions that take us towards sustainability strategic guidelines are used to ensure that all measures will: be a move in the right direction with respect to the Principles of Sustainability; offer a flexible platform from which future strategic steps towards sustainability can be taken; and generate sufficient return on investment for the continuation of the process with regards to economic, social and environmental resources.

In addition, the FSSD call for the use of the Golden Rule Test. This is applied by asking if we (i.e. the decision makers at a personal and organisational level) find it an acceptable decision were we to find
ourselves subjected to it. The planning and decision-making process can be further explored by asking the following:

- **Participation**- is there sufficient participation and dialogue with people?
- **Transparency**- is information and monitoring sufficiently accessible and viable?
- **Responsibility**- has accountability been clearly communicated?
- **Honesty**- are we being truthful?

**Actions** ~ Having used the strategic guidelines to prioritise, the measures represent those that will maximise the chances of achieving a sustainability of society within the biosphere.

**Tools** ~ This level describes what tools are needed at the different levels to assist the movement towards sustainability. The tools can be divided in three types: *strategic tools* - for analysis, reporting, auditing, and communicating; *systems tools* - for measurement and monitoring; and *capacity tools* - for education, training, group learning and co-creation. As a method for implementing the FSSD a strategic tool is valuable, for example, the ABCD Process.

### 2.3 The ABCD Process

The ABCD Process facilitates systematically ‘backcasting from basic principles of success’ and can be used to implement the FSSD. The four logical steps outlined below were developed by the NGO, The Natural Step (Robert 2000). Applying this process helps: participants feel responsible for the actions chosen, facilitates communication and encourages cooperation to achieve success (Robert 2000).

**A-Step Awareness of the system**

The first phase involves having a common understanding of sustainability and the FSSD at the Systems and Success level. Therefore, it is important to comprehend: the Principles of Sustainability and the basic science behind them, a whole-systems approach, the current ecological, social and economic trends as well as the particulars of the sub-system that is under study.
**B-Step Baseline mapping**

This phase is the first step of backcasting. Cross-referencing the current reality against the violations of the Principles of Sustainability identifies unsustainable impacts within the system under study. These are understood through a whole-systems perspective so as to avoid creating new problems as the current ones are fixed.

**C-Step Creating a vision**

With the B-step in mind, a picture of a sustainable society is created that complies with the Success level of the FSSD and thereby with the four Principles of Sustainability. This vision should be co-created and shared so as to set the direction for all potential and implemented activities. By understanding both the current reality and the vision of success it is easier to perceive the gap that lies between the two. This generates the creative tension that encourages the brainstorming of possible actions.

**D-Step Down to action**

The brainstormed actions can then be chosen using the strategic prioritising questions seen in the Strategy level of the FSSD. These represent the best stepping stones for moving towards a sustainable society.

*Figure 2.3 The ABCD Process*
3 Methods

3.1 Research approach

Due to the non-linear behaviour associated with the topic, the research questions and methods were designed with an interactive research model in mind (Maxwell 2005). This meant that the research design evolved through the continual interactions of the research components: research goals, conceptual framework, methods, research questions and validity. This approach recognises and utilises the contextual factors such as personal experience, prior research, authors preferred style of research, participant concerns and perceived problems (Maxwell 2005, 6).

The data was collected through qualitative methods: a literature review, case studies, exploratory interviews and finally, expert feedback regarding our results. The methods were broken down into three phases. Each phase was considered through the lens of the FSSD in order to remain systematic and objective while exploring the research questions. Phase one and two together built a response to the first two research questions regarding a vision of success as well as the gap between tour operators current planning framework and the ideal framework when aiming for the vision. Phase two and three explored the third research question. They offered recommendations on how tour operators can start to close this gap and an appraisal of the proposed guidance notes using the expert feedback interviews.

![Figure 3.1: Research methods and phases](image-url)
In order to avoid result errors arising from bias the methods must have validity. Using multiple sources and methods of data collection has provided the results with a reasonable level of credibility and offer a broader understanding of the areas in question (Maxwell 2005). This does not rule out all errors and bias. The aim of the research did not entail providing prescriptive measures for tour operators. It is understood that the results are not all-inclusive and alternative responses to the research questions may be equally valid.

Although it was beneficial to have researchers from different cultural and professional backgrounds contributing their unique perspectives, the research was conducted through the FSSD to keep an objective lens and avoid researcher bias. The removal of personal bias was also assisted through the assistance of advisors and peer groups.

### 3.2 Phase 1: Background research

This phase built the background understanding needed to create the vision of a sustainable tourism destination and the current reality of the tour operators’ planning framework. It also contributed to the contents of the introduction.

#### 3.2.1 Literature review

A literature review provided an overview of the tour operator within the context of the tourism destination. The authors reviewed relevant material in the fields of tourism destinations, tour operators, community tourism, sustainable community, sustainable tourism destinations, sustainable tourism, sustainability, strategic sustainability and sustainable development. This material was gathered from the academic material of universities and peer-reviewed journals. The search engines used were: ELIN (Electronic Library Information Navigator – provided by Lund University Libraries), Libris (provided by the National Library of Sweden), ebrary®, BTH Library Catalogue and Google. Relevant literature from international organisations was also used. These included the Tour Operators Initiative for Sustainable Tourism Development (TOI), United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), United Nation Environment Program (UNEP), United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and the (EU) European Union.
3.2.2 Interviews

The aim of these interviews was to gain current, practical, relevant and personal insight beyond that of the literature review in regards to the tour operator’s current planning framework. In addition to building on the understanding of the first two research questions, the interviews were key in responding to the third research question by directing the development of the proposed guidance notes.

The interviews provided testimonials from people living the reality of the tourism market. The main topics discussed were: their vision of a sustainable tourism destination, the main challenges and barriers of achieving sustainability in an existing tourism destination, and the current strategic measures that tour operators are using to help the tourism destinations achieve sustainability. See Appendix 2 for the specific interview questions.

The primary research focused around interviewing members of the TOI since their involvement in this organisation suggested an existing awareness and commitment to sustainability. The TOI members were also selected because they provide a diverse range of tourism destinations (geographically), organisational sizes, activities and backgrounds. All 18 members of the TOI were invited to participate via the TOI Secretary. Three members (17% of the total) responded. The interviews were conducted by telephone.

To give a more rounded view of the tour operators’ role in the destination, a selection of sustainable tourism experts were invited to contribute their perspectives. Two interviews were conducted. The interviewee from HVS Consulting was able to give two perspectives: as a sustainable tourism consultant and as an individual who assisted the TOI with their ‘cooperation with destinations’ initiative in Itacaré, Brasil.

In total, the authors interviewed six people from the tourism industry: three tour operators’ members of the TOI, one member of an international consulting company specialised in the tourism market, an NGO that provides certification labels for Fair Tourism practices, and an Eco-tourism coordinator from the Ministry of Environment of Brasil. See Appendix 3 for more details on the interviewees.
3.2.3 Case studies

The aim of exploring the TOI case studies was to provide a valuable link between the literature review and the interviews as a method of triangulating the data (Fielding and Fielding 1986). The data collected related to the activities of TOI members in cooperating with their destinations and focused on the current reality of the planning framework. In total, six TOI case studies were reviewed to increase the diversity of tour operators considered in terms of their size, geographical location, approach and the sustainability issues addressed. Other sustainable tourism case studies were used to inform the research. Although these were examined on a less formal basis they ensured that the final results were applicable to other tour operators as well as to TOI members. See Appendix 4 for the list of case studies examined.

3.3 Phase 2: Data analysis

Phase two brought together the background research and the authors’ knowledge of the FSSD in order to analyse the data and respond to the three research questions in a structured manner. Figure 3.3 gives an overview of the approach taken. Throughout this phase, the actions and tools of the TOI and its members were used to represent a benchmark for sustainability within the industry. The FSSD is designed for planning for sustainability in complex systems. It is therefore well-suited for the tour operators’ planning process where the tour operator’s system is perceived to be working within the tourism destination’s system (see Figure 1.5 outlining the scope of the research).

3.3.1 Vision of a Sustainable Destination

The current reality of the destination was outlined in the introduction. In order to gain a better idea of what the goal was, the authors created a vision of a sustainable tourism destination based on the conceptual framework outlined in Section 2.2. This vision is only a suggestion since ideally the tour operator and its destination would co-create their vision.

Two visioning sessions were undertaken utilising personal knowledge and experience of the topic as well as the background research from phase one. The initial session was based on the brainstorming of ideas of what a future sustainable tourism destination looked like within a sustainable society.
Later, after further background data had been collected, the research team went through a more formal envisioning process. The delay between the two sessions allowed for personal reflection and a growing understanding of the topic to be incorporated.

### 3.3.2 The gap in the tour operators’ planning

![Figure 3.3: Overview of the data analysis approach](image)

The creation of a vision of a sustainable destination highlighted the discrepancy between the current reality and the ideal and the resulting need for strategic action. In order to arrive at the most strategic approach to overcome these discrepancies, the authors assessed the tour operators’ current planning model and using the five level framework for planning in complex systems (see 2.1). Then they compared this to an ideal framework for the tour operators’ planning, based on the FSSD (see Figure 3.3). This highlighted the need to enhance how the tour operators plan so that they can lead the destinations towards sustainability. It drew attention to the gap between the current planning framework and the FSSD-based ideal planning framework and also created creative tension, which inspired the response to phase three of the research.

As a part of analysing the gap, components of the TOI’s planning process was also assessed. This covered: the TOI Statement of Commitment (which
is comprised of a commitment to sustainable development and management of tourism, principles of sustainable development and management of tourism and public awareness and communication), Mission, Strategic Objectives and Action Areas. This analysis provided the authors with a better understanding of the TOI members’ level of awareness and commitment to sustainability. It also provided background on the applicability, robustness and scope of the sustainability related tools used by the TOI and its members.

3.4 Phase 3: Strategic Guidance.

3.4.1 Proposed guidance to tour operators

The purpose of the research was to outline how tour operators could strategically help their destinations move towards sustainability. The process described above enabled the authors to propose a guidance note that would help tour operators close the discovered gap in planning approaches. This guidance note aimed to help tour operators strategically contribute to the sustainability of their destinations and to society by informing rather than prescribing the Actions and Tools levels of the tour operators’ planning process. Prior to external feedback, the content of the proposed guidance notes were improved through advisor and peer group feedback. Consequently, it underwent three major upgrades prior to the external feedback.

3.4.2 Expert feedback

To ensure the proposed guidance notes went beyond the theoretical, it was necessary to receive feedback from sustainable tourism experts and the intended users of the guidance notes, the TOI members. Due to the time constraints, the experts interviewed for feedback were predominately those with whom the research team had already made contact. Fourteen experts were emailed a request for collaboration and seven were sent the proposed guidance notes. However, due to time constraints on both sides it was only possible to receive feedback from three experts. The interviewees were asked to comment on the strengths and weaknesses they saw in the proposed guidance notes and offer any suggestions for improving their practical and strategic use. See Appendix 7 for the list of respondents.
4 Results

The results are structured into three main areas: the vision of a sustainable tourism destination and the role of the tour operator within it; an analysis of the gap between the current planning framework and the ideal planning framework as represented by the FSSD; and finally an outline of the guidance notes that embody the recommendations for tour operators seeking to close this gap.

4.1 Vision of a Sustainable Tourism Destination

Two visioning session were undertaken by the research team to elaborate on the role of the tour operator within a sustainable tourism destination. The final vision was not intended to replace either the tour operators or the tourism destination’s current vision. The vision of success, outlined below, was considered sufficiently broad as a vision for both the tour operator and the destination. This allows for both parties to have a shared understanding of the vision. Following from this, the deeper their understanding of the System level the more likely each party is to perceive the overlap between their visions. Therefore they would both be better prepared to work towards these common interests and recognise that a vision which eliminates their contributions to the systematic violation of the Principles of Sustainability is a way to gain competitive advantage in the long-term.

The researchers consider the three main characteristics of a strong and well-functioning social system to be key values within the vision (Robert and others 2004, 156):

Interdependence ~ The relationships and mutual dependency between tourists, tour operators, destinations and their activities reinforces reciprocity and trust. This can prevent the processes becoming too regulated and rigid (Homer-Dixon 2006, 233). For example, one of the ways a tourism destination can remain resilient is for its dependency on tourism to be in balance with that of tourism’s dependency on the destination.

Diversity ~ Social, cultural and environmental diversity is an important contribution towards sustainability and is needed to create the unique sense
of a destination place where social identities and values can be maintained and exchanged (Robinson 1999).

Self-organisation ~ Cooperation builds relationships and social structures so as to ensure mutual, sustainable and long-term benefits are supported by all the components working together to become greater than the sum of the parts.

Figure 4.1: Relationship between the visions

Within this generic vision of a sustainable tourism destination, each tourism destination is encouraged to identify aspects specific to their unique circumstances and incorporate these into the broader vision. The proposed vision is:

“A Sustainable Tourism Destination is a unique, interesting and attractive place where the tour operator facilitates the creation of experiences that are mutually beneficial for the tourists and the destination. All activities remain within the constraints of the Principles of Sustainability thereby ensuring that the tourism process offers a supportive and rewarding cultural bridge where there is economic equality and the ecosystem thrives.”

Both the tour operators’ and the tourism destination’s vision should be co-created by all parties involved to represent a more robust and meaningful vision of success (Collins and Porras 1996). This vision could be customised to incorporate specific ‘success criteria’ such as one of the
TOI’s ‘cooperation with destinations’ objectives that states ‘the destination perspective is priority’. For example, the vision could state that the indigenous population of a tourism destination is overtime, given the priority to make decisions regarding the use of their land.

4.2 The Current Planning Framework

This section explores the current planning framework used by tour operators in relation to their tourism destinations and is structured so as to walk through the five level framework. The analysis of the TOI planning process has been incorporated into this structure. An overview of the TOI planning processes against the five level framework is shown in Appendix 5 where success is deemed to be tour operators planning and achieving sustainability.

4.2.1 System

Challenges of Complexity

As found in the literature review, tourism is characterised by its ambiguous boundaries interlinking different industries, levels of society and geographical locations. Moreover, variables inherent to a destination such as cultural characteristics, environmental landscape, political stability, governance structure, and the breadth of interdependency all contribute to the unpredictability of demands on local as well as global resources. Tourism is also susceptible to externalities that it can neither predict nor influence. These externalities can be: economic, such as cheaper flights or exchange rates; social, such as political instability, EU CO2 emissions legislation or mass media attention; and environmental, such as the longer term consequences of climate change on tourism destinations.

“Climate change has the potential to seriously limit the growth of the travel and tourism industry, despite continuing strong consumer demand”

(PATA 2008)

Examples of the consequences of those externalities were reported by The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC Report, 2007). The report indicated that climate change is likely to influence major tourism flows at destinations where climate is an important motivator. It is likely to
have a significant impact on coastal, mountain and nature-based destinations in the less developed countries and small island states. The complexities of climate change will increase the chances of abrupt and pervasive changes that will alter the competitiveness of destinations making the industry as a whole vulnerable to the resulting environmental and social consequences (Becken and Hay 2007, 34).

It is difficult enough for a business to survive and prosper in the competitive market that tourism represents. On top of this, the inherent intricacies of tourism make the cause and effect of unsustainability hard to isolate or predict (Weaver 2006). Coupling the internal business issues with the complexities of achieving sustainability, one can see how difficult it is for tour operators to understand the system they are operating in as well as its boundaries and to plan strategically under these circumstances. Since tour operators lack an integrated way of dealing with these complexities, aiming for sustainability can often be perceived as yet another factor and cost to consider.

**Interdependence**

Much of the literature focused on understanding tourism actors’ involvement in unsustainable tourism practices and impacts. This highlighted that the tourism industry is aware of a level of interdependency between: the destination, its resources and the basic implications this has its own business (Zuelow 2006). On the one hand, there is a symbiotic relationship with the environment encouraging conservation and regeneration through endeavours such as wildlife parks and World Heritage Sites (UNESCO 2005). On the other, tourism conflicts with the natural systems in numerous forms, for example, the need for transportation and accommodation leads to greater air pollution and negative changes in land use. An overview of tourism’s contribution to the systematic violation of the Principles of Sustainability is shown in Appendix 6.

Tourism plays a major role in satisfying society’s need for leisure. It is also a means of supporting a two-way cultural exchange and can bypass political barriers to create a space for the cooperation and dialogue that leads towards peace (Zuelow 2006; UNESCO 2005, 5). However, tour operators play a major role in directing the flow of tourists and this movement inevitably influences the societal structures and quality of life for many of the world’s citizens (Crouch and Brent Ritchie 1999). A growing body of research recognises this issue and shows that despite economic growth
tourism may still create new, or accentuate existing social and cultural problems at the tourism destination. These range from overburdened local services and facilities to the slow erosion of local culture through practices such as commercialisation (Weaver 2006, 284). However, the research did not reveal how tour operators deal with and account for these interdependencies in their planning towards sustainability. This indicates, that while there is somewhat of an understanding if the interdependencies, a general whole-systems perspective is lacking.

Main stakeholders

Among the many complex systems, the tour operators seem to have the best understanding of their sphere of influence and their stakeholders. The tour operator’s main stakeholders at the destination have varying levels of influence and are impacted by the tourism process to varying degrees. As represented in Figure 1.3, regarding the tour operators’ relationship with its stakeholders, the strongest links are with suppliers and customers. Beyond this sphere, the tour operators are understood to play a supportive role with their stakeholders. The outer sphere also represents those stakeholders that create and influence the majority of the cultural characteristics and behaviours of a destination. In considering sustainability, the resulting social and cultural fabric of a destination cannot be ignored by the tour operator. However, this is generally intangible and therefore one of the harder elements to understand and plan for (Robinson 1999). It follows that tour operators cannot be expected to single-handily support and cultivate the social fabric of a destination. As a result, both the case studies and the literature review strongly associate sustainability with greater cooperation and involvement of all stakeholders.

Economic power

“It’s about the industry assuming responsibility, stepping up to the plate and be seen by the consumers and by media to be doing something very concretely that’s affordable and measurable and that makes a difference”

(PATA 2008)

Tourism often exploits the destinations cost-free benefits through the use of local facilities or natural resources such as, the transport and utility infrastructures or the local beaches and cultural sites. In addition, the drive
for the economic power associated with tourism rarely comes from within the community (Robinson 1999). Instead this aspiration comes from more influential stakeholders, such as governments and tourism intermediaries, who continue to determine where the majority of profits go. This imbalance encourages tour operators to team up with the stakeholders who can say ‘yes’ to tourism related development in return for economic benefit. Meanwhile, the local community has less coherent negotiation power and is left to learn about the true cost of tourism and leaving the full benefits of tourism unrealised (Joppe 1996, 479). Adding to this predicament is the fact that the flow of tourists’ runs mainly from developed to developing nations. Subsequently, the developed countries have become the top earners of tourism representing bias in the distribution and net benefits of the economic progress resulting from tourism (Weaver 2006, 152; Robinson 1999).

As the tourism industry has evolved, the choice of destinations has increased and today there are very few places on earth that a typical tourist can not travel to. This has reinforced the industry’s economic power over tourism destinations increasing the imbalance between a destinations dependency on tourism and the community’s power to prevent social and environmental degradation (Robinson 1999). The growing supply of destinations has also resulted in lower risk and costs for tour operators when choosing to leave a destination once it stops representing an attractive choice for tourists (Carey and others 1997). This lends itself to short-sighted thinking from the tour operators and conceals the industry’s reliance on the destinations as the foundation of the tourism products.

What was evident from the interviews was that tour operators do acknowledge that the destination is the first to lose out economically due to its weaker and less coherent sphere of influence over other actors. However, tour operators often claim that they operate in a competitive and unstable market where consumer demand for more sustainable practices and their willingness to pay for the resultant costs, is low (Framke 2002; Budeanu 1999, 6). This implies that their system focus is on their financial profit.

A couple of interviewees pointed out the extent to which tour operators try to continue with ‘business as normal’ by passing sustainability related costs down the supply-chain in order to hold onto their profit margin. For example, a supplier who meets a tour operator’s environmental criteria
could be successfully promoted as ‘green’ to the tourists. Meanwhile, the tour operator also asks the supplier to cut their costs. This encourages the suppliers to secretly cut corners in order to stay competitive burying unsustainable practices deeper, for example, by using cheaper but more polluting cleaning products.

Subsequently, the literature suggests that tourism is only socially and environmentally beneficial for a destination if it is not the dominant source of income. Otherwise, the increasing expenditure on public services and infrastructure can outweigh the expected income from tourism for a destination. Therefore, tour operators should ensure that the economic benefits of tourism are not short lived (Tooman 1997, 232). This requires knowing how the economic benefits are currently shared, the extent of the economic dependency, as well as developing a deeper understanding of the desired economic outcome.

The unbalanced economic power, again, highlights the lack of understanding from a whole-systems perspective as well as of the interdependencies between the tour operators and the different stakeholders. While the tour operators seem to know very well who their stakeholders are, they seem to underestimate the degree of interdependency and that depriving some stakeholders of their economic benefits will not be sustainable or conducive to the success of their business in the long run.

**TOI system perspective**

When outlining the boundaries of what the tour operator’s should consider, the TOI does not explicitly define the scope. In their mission statement, the TOI refers to the environment, culture and communities at the tourism destination as well as the design, operations, conduct of tour operator business activities as their scope. Needless to say the scope is rather vague and expansive and not clearly defined enough to allow for strategic planning. However, in the section, ‘cooperation with destination’, the TOI uses the views and issues of a cross-section of destination stakeholders to draw up the scope and depth of the tour operators’ interests.

On a more practical level, the background research showed that the TOI members and sustainability-savvy tour operators continued to focus their actions where they had the greatest influence, namely their supply-chain. Although this was understood to be the best use of tour operator’s connections it also meant that the understanding of the system was often
limited to the existing links between stakeholders. Consequently, any existing power bias between less influential stakeholders may not be fully addressed. In addition, one interviewee emphasised that the leverage of other more influential parties was not being fully utilised. The example cited was the lack of mass media involvement and participation when informing the community and tourists about the sustainability of tourism.

The TOI case studies showed that its members were looking beyond their existing networks. TOI tour operators understand that the breadth and diversity of the local community in neither homogenous nor static. In addition, the interviews revealed that the tour operators’ were concerned and motivated by the fact that the less dominant tourism destinations stakeholders lacked preparation, knowledge and understanding about tourism management. If this is the case then the potential benefits of tourism for a community cannot be brought to fruition.

4.2.2 Success

“We’ve always understood that the environment, along with culture and heritage, is one of the three pillars of the travel and tourism industry”

(PATA 2008)

Price driven focus

The tourism sector as a whole is described in the literature as a late adopter of sustainability practices. It suggests that the European tour operators lack proactive responses despite a high level of awareness of their negative impacts on a destination unless there is an immediate economic reward from doing so (Budeanu 2005, Tepelus 2005). As the quote above and the industry’s reaction to climate change suggests, the tour operators comprehend that their business compromises of three significant and overlapping parts that make up the whole. The background research presented the triple-bottom line as the most prolific concept for encouraging sustainable thinking throughout the decision making process (Weaver 2006), and a good stepping stone to incorporate sustainability. It represents the method most mentioned in the interviews and case studies as a way of incorporating and ensuring that the environmental and societal dimensions have the same level of relevance as the economic dimension throughout the decision-making process. The use of the triple-bottom line shows that tour operators understand that the three different systems
interact. However, from the background research it appears that tour operators continue to define success in terms of their net profit, linking success to increasing the customer’s loyalty to a tour operator’s brand rather than to a destination (Carey and others 1997, 426).

The mass tourism drive for economic growth involves sending a greater number of tourists greater distances for less money where the majority of the market is controlled by a few large tour operators and the purchase decision of tourists’ is heavily dependent on price. This highly competitive arrangement represents a significant economic barrier for achieving sustainability (Tepelus 2005). Tight profit margins and limited time to respond to tourist demands means that many tour operators are still not pro-active and strategic about their contributions unless there is short-term financial incentive to prove the success of a business. This focus has lead to tour operators consistently perceiving sustainability as a cost rather than an opportunity to add value to their products. As a result the social, environmental and economic interests of the destination still fall second to the tour operators’ quarterly financial reports.

In contrast to this, the interviews and the case studies reinforced the fact that clients who are concerned about sustainability prefer meaningful contact with the local community and are able to pay more for the experience. This connection suggests that sustainability is in-line with quality and that a quality destination product equates to better business in the long-term (WEF 2008). However, these clients represent a niche market and the concept cannot be applied to the general mass-tourism market.

*Common commitment and shared vision*

In such a competitive sector, if tour operators are to move towards sustainability it will require a change in attitudes and approaches so as to facilitate ‘a common commitment to promote environmentally sound practices’ (Budeanu 2005, 95). In-line with the WTO’s definition of sustainable tourism, this change is required by and relevant to all types of tourism and destinations (UNEP and WTO 2005). The literature review suggests that success will require the involvement and participation of all relevant stakeholders in a continuous learning process (UNEP and WTO 2005). This understanding has been slow to develop in the mass tour operator. However, the interviewees all instinctively understood this need and the TOI is actively working towards pulling various tourism and destination community stakeholders together through industry partnerships.
The background research revealed the continual cooperation between tour operators and their destinations in order to manage the supply of tourists to the destination (Budeanu 2005, 93). With the TOI having created a guidebook on how to push sustainability throughout the supply-chain these links were already being used by TOI members (TOI 2008). In terms of cooperation and communication between industry players, other tour operator associations, such as the Federation of Tour Operators based in the UK and the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), are also starting to take a proactive role. For example, PATA’s CEO Challenge 2008 brought together the many different tourism players to encourage a shared response to the challenge of ‘confronting climate change’.

In terms of the TOI members, they have a common voluntary commitment to the sustainable development and management of tourism within their operations and activities. Evident in the TOI member and non-member interviews was the similarity of visions described. The tour operators’ activities at a tourism destination where described as: maximising benefits for the local community and minimising negative impacts, where the local economy are able to take advantage of the inflow of money, the environment was managed in sustainable ways (water, energy and infrastructure) and where the process of development strengthened the social fabric of the destination.

TOI vision of success

From the analysis of the TOI planning framework outlined in Appendix 5, the TOI understand success to be the Bruntland definition of sustainability of ‘meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs’ (Brundtland 1987). The TOI becomes marginally more specific by recommending that tour operator operations and activities should avoid ‘degradation’ but neglect to provide more depth.

In terms of ‘cooperation with destination’, the TOI calls for a consensus based direction. It promotes the identification and co-creation of overlap between the destination and the tour operator’s vision of success. This process seeks a diversity of perceptions beyond those gained through the existing stakeholder relationships. By encouraging cooperation and participation with destination actors it also builds a strong picture of the pressure points at the destination.
From the TOI case studies it was apparent that a few destination based projects incorporated a shared vision of success, generally for the purpose achieving an activity that was beyond the everyday scope of the tour operator. For example, the TOI implemented a Sustainable Tourism Round Table in Punta Cana/ Bayahibe in the Dominican Republic. This aimed to strengthen ‘the cooperation among local authorities, private sector, civil society and non-governmental organizations’, and integrate ‘environmental, social and economic principles in the management of the destination and businesses’ (TOI 2008). The result was an alliance to develop ‘common long-term commitment and agenda for partnership’ in addressing the sustainability issues that had been identified and prioritised together.

However, overall the background research suggested that despite the overlap between visions, there was no concrete definition of sustainability that was easily communicated or shared. Despite the mention of the Brundtland definition, the Tour Operators did not seem to view this definition as useful to use as a vision of success for sustainability. Neither was there evidence to suggest that tour operators routinely sought to find the overlap between their vision and that of the destination actors beyond increasing economic wealth. With no specific vision of success, the TOI case studies and TOI member interviews showed that progress towards success was hard to determine despite the use of instruments such as the global reporting initiative, eco-labels and codes of conduct. In part, this is because the TOI activities are voluntary. Therefore, there is less motivation to monitor and quantify the financial benefits. However, the lack of a concrete definition of sustainability to use as a point of reference was seen as the main reason for a lack of measured progress towards sustainability. It also makes it harder to benchmark best practices and prove the business case for sustainability.

“These case studies could be more specific on the corporate social decision-making and accounting. Details on the reasons why companies chose to take the actions here reported, and not others, would facilitate understanding of how priorities were set.”

( TOI Sustainable Tourism 2003)
4.2.3 Strategic Guidelines

Beyond forecasting

Tour operators tend to use the historical context and their existing understanding of the situation to alleviate the negative impacts of tourism. This use of forecasting risks recreating old problems as well as creating new and more complex ones. Therefore, any sustainability planning undertaken by tour operators can still lead to ineffective use of their time and resources in terms of achieving ‘success’ due to the complexities that are characteristic of tourism and sustainability. This reactive approach used was highlighted by the consultancy firm interviewee. The example explained was based on the typical life cycle of a destination which usually starts without the intention and clear desire of the destination community. Tour operators then appeared once the flow of tourists is already growing. Consequentially, they do relatively little to assist the planning and management at the destination in preparation for the growing quantity of tourists and their impact on a community’s social fabric and environmental resources.

Sustainability Strategy needed for all, independent of size

Small-scale initiatives and niche-market operators have achieved notable reductions in the negative impacts of tourism (Budeanu 2007). A large number of studies have explored approaches such as eco-tourism, cultural tourism and community-based tourism as a pathway for the industry as a whole to follow. However, even these can have negative consequences (WTO 2005, 65) and the literature review noted that deviance from mass tourism does not equate to being more sustainable. They also only represent a segment of the industry and will not bring about the major overhaul that tourism industry needs to move towards a sustainable future (Budeanu 2005). The reality is that: mass consumerism creates the majority of negative impacts at a destination; mass demands cannot simply be fulfilled by mimicking alternative approaches; and that there is no evidence that alternative approaches rule out tourism’s damaging qualities (Jafari 2001).

As yet, there has been a lack of investigation or recommendations on how the mass tourism industry should move forward, although Budeanu (2005, 95) comments that, ‘all of the top 10 European tour operators are now seeking ways of integrating sustainability concerns into their activities’. The interviews indicated that many TOI members were attempting to
satisfy the growing need for capacity building through destination based actions such as, hosting tour guides in the tour operator’s base country (Kel 12) and offering more professional training for destination employees. Consequentially, the literature indicates that strategies must embrace the broader spectrum of tourism types in order to bring about movement towards sustainability since it will take all types and sizes to shake off the tourism industry’s bad habits in a feasible manner (Carey and others 1997).

Prioritisation

With an increased awareness of the dynamics of tourism, the majority of literature explored the trade-off between maximising the benefits and minimising the negative impacts of activities so as to enhance tourism and contribute to long-term changes (UNWTO 2007). These resulted from tourism’s double-sided relationship with the destinations. In addition, the tour operator’s capacity to respond to unsustainability, as well as their prioritisation of actions, is unique to each tour operator. However, the background research did not highlight any structured approaches to prioritising and dealing with the trade-offs.

The interviews with the smaller tour operators indicated that due to the lack of human resources the sustainability-related planning process did not take a formal structure. Instead, as niche market businesses their decisions tied into their businesses core values which reflected their understanding of sustainability. These decisions were also based on a knowledge and understanding that resulted from strong communication and grass root links with the destination. As a result, activities were chosen more intuitively and had greater responsiveness to the destinations cultural needs. One interviewee suggested this inside knowledge was particularly useful to sideline the formal governmental connections in a politically unstable destination. For example, a local tour guide could offer a more current and culturally sensitive understanding of political change at a destination.

However, the interviews suggested that the tour operator’s choice of actions do not always align with the destinations idea of success. For example, if a small tour operator’s niche market was imposed upon by mass tourism players at a destination, then the strategy was to shift the flow of tourists to an alternative destination. With a destination having become more dependent on tourism economically, this shift leaves the destination at the mercy of less sustainability-orientated tour operators. This highlights the need for long-term thinking and cooperation between tour operators and
influential stakeholders in order to institutionalise sustainable practices and build resilience into the destination and its community.

Cooperation

As a service-based industry there is an implicit understanding of the need and business benefits that cooperation can bring despite tourism actors being ultimately driven by their own interest (Ritchie 2005, 97). For example, tourism can become a model for cooperation where the political front is found lacking, although still driven by the potential for financial gain (Zuelow 2006). Leading on from this, escalating sustainability activities requires participation between the supply and demand-side (Carey and others 1997). While studies have extensively explored collaboration for gaining wider community involvement and acceptance through concepts such as, ‘pro-poor tourism’ and ‘community-based tourism’, research into the significance and details of why this cooperation is necessary, has yet to mount up (Framke 2002; Robinson 1999). As a result, community consultations often become a form of ‘greenwash’ in which an ethical outcome is less important than the recognition gained for implementing the project (Robinson 1999).

Robinson (1999, 389) clarifies that ‘without effective collaboration based upon consent, tourism will remain a major catalyst in the erosion of cultural diversity’. He points out that the disparity in the flow of economic benefits between rich and poor countries drives the bias of power between stakeholders. His paper implies that to incorporate the intangible cultural dimension into sustainable tourism a shift in this balance of power is needed. This should ensure that it remains the right of the destination community to decide what they want.

The development of healthy relationships between all players in the tourism chain was a common issue discussed by the interviewees. TOI members were strengthening their relations with destination suppliers and participating in workshops with communities, as suggested by TOI. A representative of the Brazilian government commented on a successful experience where a tourism council was created together with other main players at destination (NGOs, private and public institutions). The aim was to diminish the possibility of economical and political power abuse that had so far undermined the ability of the community to take advantage of the benefits of tourism.
The FreeWay Adventures tour operator commented about a community participation initiative in Itacaré in Brasil that was done together with TOI members. This case study suggested that there was a need for: short-term results in order to hold the community tourism players’ interest; community training and capacity building; participative government to catalyse the process and invest financial resources in tourism related projects; and that a tour operator was only an effective participant if the destination was in their product portfolio. Therefore, movement towards sustainability needs to be relevant to both the destination and the tour operator in order to be effective.

TOI Cooperation with Destinations

The TOI was formed with an understanding that cooperation is key in advancing the sustainability of tourism and the tour operator sector. Subsequently, the TOI planning framework strives to develop cooperation by improving communication between other tour operators, suppliers, customers, destinations, the public sector, relevant UN organisations and other key stakeholders (see Appendix 5 for the analysis of the TOI’s planning framework). In terms of ‘cooperation with destinations’, the objectives that the TOI provides are voluntary and are not presented as overarching aims for all the tour operators activities. Instead, they are intended to come into play specifically when a tour operator is seeking to work with its destination. They provided a strong basis for successful cooperation calling for ‘credible and transparent cooperation’ as well as a ‘shared and agreed way forward with the destination’ where actions ‘build on synergies between the tour operators and the various destination stakeholders’. The TOI also suggests a diverse cross-section of stakeholders which embraces a wide and in-depth systems perspective. Within the views and interests that arise, the TOI states that priority should be given to the destinations perspective while maintaining ‘business viability for all stakeholders’.

However, there is no concrete definition of sustainability for the tour operator or the ‘destination stakeholders’ to clearly check their progress against. This makes prioritising actions harder in terms of maintaining the right direction towards sustainability. Measures are meant to be assessed beyond their economic viability. However, they appear not to be consistently prioritised on the social and environmental return on investments or the flexibility they can offer in the long run.
4.2.4 Actions

Business as usual

One of the interviews stated that the majority of tour operators have difficulty in moving away from ‘business as usual’ due to their profits being so heavily influenced by consumer demand. Despite this, there has been an increase in action in the form of environmental policies, green purchasing strategies, and environmental training for their staff (Budeanu 2005, 95). Tour operator education schemes and sponsorship of environmental protection activities are becoming more prevalent in the destinations. However, these do not demonstrate a full understanding from the tour operator regarding the extent of their influence over a destination’s development and sustainability issues (Budeanu 2005, 95), or their role as the gatekeepers to the flow of tourist arrivals (Carey and others 1997).

Limited scope of actions

From the interviews it was evident that some tour operators are trying to develop deeper relations with the destination communities and that tour operators are starting to implement the corporate social responsibility practices of the business world. However, the interviews verified that many actions are still philanthropic and that more strategic approaches for alleviating the negative impacts of tourism were still in the exploratory phases. As a result, many of the implemented actions sidestep the root causes of tourism related problems, particularly the charity-based activities undertaken by larger tour operators. This supports the literature’s view that the tourism industry’s response to sustainability has so far been reactive. It has tended to choose negative impacts that concentrate tour operators’ resources on the more spectacular destinations in-line with their market demands (Robinson 1999).

TOI Actions

From the interviews and case studies, it could be seen that tour operators are taking many steps towards sustainability, especially to build their destination relationships. The flurry of actions is highlighted in Appendix 5, where it is shown that the TOI framework strongly supports ‘cooperation with destinations’ at the Strategy and Action levels. The various actions taken by TOI members can be summarised as (adapted from Tepelus 2005):
• Information – this is generally for the tourists and staff. It takes the form of leaflets, brochures and reports produced by tour operators sometimes in cooperation with other organisations. These do not actively stimulate the involvement of stakeholders in improving sustainability but can build an appreciation of the requirements and diversity between stakeholder value and identities.

• Education – investments in human and financial resources for staff, customers and locals through courses, seminars and workshops. The aim is to build the understanding needed for sustainable practices and strengthening customer and destination relations.

• Environmental performance criteria – this involves continuously monitoring all the facilities and resources used, such as water and energy, so that this can be promoted to clients building their awareness of the impact of their purchase decisions. There is a growing emphasis on supply-chain management in this area.

• Environmental management systems (EMS) – implementation of management systems such as the ISO 14000 standard for the internal management of a tour operator.

• Investments – where funds and client fees are siphoned off for improving environmental and social issues at the destinations. These promote local cultural and social development projects as well as environmental conservation in the area and help strengthen destination relations.

The current actions that TOI members have taken in order to improve sustainability can be categorised into the following groups (Tepelus 2005, 103): grants, information to tourists, internal codes of conduct and training, cooperation with environmentally proactive NGOs, projects for improving local living conditions and tourists’ products “designed for environment”. The way these actions are implemented depends on ‘a complex series of factors such as size, awareness, ownership structure, top management commitment, corporate organisation and culture, organisational context, market positioning, and many others’ (Tepelus 2005, 103). As such, they are unique to each situation and tour operator and cannot be prescribed.
The TOI ‘cooperation with destination’ section supports the building of partnerships to ‘address current pressure points…as well as future potential ones’. It also promotes establishing and strengthening ‘links with local authorities, the private sector, civil society and NGOs in the destination’ through the use of dialogue. As a result, the activities of TOI member were deemed more likely to mitigate negative tourism impacts than non-TOI members.

4.2.5 Tools

Many tools available

There are an increasing number of tools out there from Environmental Management Systems to the Clean Development Mechanism. Some are more specific to tourism such as, eco-labelling for tourism, carrying capacity assessments and Integrated Coastal Area Management (Hunter 2002). One interview brought to attention that sustainability was often integrated into the operations of large tour operators through destination assessments undertaken by the product development managers. This suggests that many tools do not explicitly look at addressing sustainability but instead rely on the assumption that a more competitive destination is also a destination with fewer unsustainability issues, as proposed by the World Economic Forum’s Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Index. Following on from this there has been a lack of information about: how and to what degree such tools are being used by tour operators and the industry in general; in what ways they interlink; and under what circumstances you use them.

TOI tools

In terms of the ‘cooperation with destination’, the TOI supports the use of dialogue processes and the establishment of a ‘steering group’ to represent the destination’s community. In addition, the TOI encourages tour operators to build partnerships particularly with UNESCO, UNWTO and UNEP, to strive for ‘continual improvement’ and to ‘manage and monitor their impacts’. For more specific suggestions the TOI appears to rely on the case studies to identify what tools and actions are suitable and effective in various situations.
4.3 Enhancing Tour Operator Planning

“As we all know, there are no magic solutions.”

(PATA 2008)

However, tour operators can make strategic choices for moving towards sustainability. The following recommendations for enhancing the planning of tour operators were identified and co-created by the researchers. They were the result of having highlighted the gap between the current planning process and the suggested planning framework, the FSSD. The three main enhancements are summarised below and went on to facilitate the creation of the proposed guidance notes:

1. A whole-systems understanding is required (Systems level):
   - Increase awareness of impacts and benefits, specifically the long-term, intangible and indirect ones
   - Deal with the unsustainable pace of change to avoid going systematically beyond a systems’ threshold
   - Understand how improved sustainability equates to a better business

2. Define and incorporate ‘sustainability’ into a vision (Success level):
   - Recognise that the economy is a concept created by society to serve society, and that society is dependent upon the environment for its very survival. Therefore, for long-term economic gain it is the social and environmental systems that must be supported.
   - Co-create a common language based on sustainability principles
   - Co-create a shared vision of success that incorporates sustainability

3. Use a ‘backcasting from the vision of success’ approach (Strategic Guidelines level):
   - Tour operator and destination should cooperate to move towards the destination’s sustainability and a shared vision.
   - All steps towards success should be strategic. Therefore, the FSSD strategic guidelines and the unique current reality and vision of each destination and tour operator should be considered.
4.4 Guidance Notes

A proactive and holistic approach that utilises scientific methods to compile the knowledge in such a way that the solutions can respond dynamically is needed (Robinson 1999). With this in mind the guidance notes were kept broad to make them applicable to a wider audience and increase the likelihood of a shared understanding of how to approach sustainability.

From the onset of the development of the guidance notes, the authors had a common understanding of the three main characteristics of the social system: 1) the interdependence between tourists, tour operators, destinations and their activities; 2) that social and cultural diversity has an important contribution to make towards sustainability; and 3) the importance of self-organisation in building relationships and social structures (Robert and others 2004, 156).

The first page of the proposed guidance notes gave instructions and outlined the tour operators’ business case for sustainability as an initial incentive. It aimed to reinforce the link between ‘sustainability, cost effective operations and marketing, as well as show how tour operators could approach these issues with a view of long-term economic development’(Tepelus 2005, 106). Also included was an example of the five-level framework applied to the planning of a holiday as a way of introducing whole-systems thinking and strategic planning in an approachable manner. The core part of the guidance notes was composed of three pages corresponding specifically to the main recommendations, namely the system, the vision of success and the strategic approach. The last page gave some background on: the development of the document, the key objectives, suggested tools, and how to provide feedback. See Appendix 8 for the Guidance Notes that were proposed to the experts.

4.4.1 Core areas of the guidance notes

A whole-systems understanding

Part one, ‘Your World’, was intended to ensure that tour operators had a clear view of the overall system by understanding: the different destination stakeholder perspectives; how the resources (human, natural and financial) they depend on are managed; and their activities main impacts.
Success as sustainability

The second part focused on cooperation as this would better guarantee a proportional division of benefits from tourism (Reid 2003) and allowed tour operators’ existing focus on cooperation to be utilised and strengthened. It set about doing this by building on: the need and capacity for cooperation, the understanding and alignment about what sustainability means, identification of common goals that can help co-create a vision, the Principles of Sustainability and how they might link to a vision of success.

Backcasting from the vision of success

The third part considered the strategy behind building a bridge for long-term cooperation by encouraging relationships between tour operators and their stakeholders. Strategic prioritisation of the next steps could then ensure that measures were: heading towards a sustainable society, could be adapted and built upon, and were feasible in terms of the triple-bottom line.

4.4.2 Sections within the three core areas

Each of the three core areas contained three sections.

- ‘It is important to…’ - A section outlining what is important for the tour operators to consider and why,
- Guiding questions - to inspire and direct the tour operators thinking rather than prescribe next steps,
- And more in-depth information relating to that sections focus.

The first two are outlined in more detail below using the Success level as an example. (see Appendix 8 for the whole Guidance Notes)

Content for the ‘It is important to…’ section:

At the Success level it is important for tour operators to...

…clarify the language you use to define sustainability to avoid misunderstandings.

…know your clients and the community (include interactions and social practices), so you can identify the common goals towards sustainability.

…co-create a common vision of success internally as well as with your destination, in order to facilitate dialogue and create a platform for
cooperation.

…consider all points of view because it provides a complete overview, helps avoid the unexpected and can increase your flexibility.

Content for the ‘guiding questions’ section:

Success level: What is the perfect picture?

1. What is your vision of a sustainable tourism destination?
2. Which key aspects did you consider to define this destination as sustainable?
3. What makes the destination a unique place for you, the tourist and the destination?
4. What are the common goals that you share with your stakeholders?
5. How can you co-create a common vision of success between you, the tourist and the destination, that you all can agree on?

4.5 Expert Feedback

The guidance notes were sent to seven experts who were asked to provide their opinion on the strengths, weaknesses and their suggestions on the document. Due to time constraints only three experts provided feedback.

Strengths. The experts were encouraged by the guidance notes’ simplicity, accessibility of language and brevity. As the target audience is the tour operator’s management, short and clear content is valuable. Furthermore, because of a low profit margin few companies have sustainability initiatives incorporated into their practices. Therefore, a strong business case and incentives for doing business in a sustainable way are necessary and useful.
Weaknesses. The feedback pointed out that it was not obvious why the companies should use these guidance notes instead of the numerous other sustainability focused guidebooks already out there. One expert suggested that the ‘system’ part was designed for top managers, the ‘success’ part for middle management and the ‘strategy part’ for operational staff. The researchers were encouraged by this comment because it reinforced the initial purpose of building a shared understanding and platform for sustainability throughout a tour operators business.

The experts felt that there was a lack of specific and additional knowledge that the tour operators would need and be searching for. In addition, it was mentioned that it may be useless to provide guidance notes that are too general – the more specific they are, the better. For example, tour operators are already aware of the fact that it is important to strengthen the relationships with stakeholders, especially in the destination place. However, it could not be assumed that they were strengthening these relationships with sustainability in mind. One expert went on to suggest that the guidance notes did not communicate the necessity of the tour operator to give back to the host community and that the definition of a sustainable society could be outlined in ‘simpler terms’.

Suggestions

The experts’ feedback provided many valuable suggestions. The main suggestion was to specify the intended audience, be it top management, environmental experts or the product development department. In addition, it was mentioned that there was a need to further explain the aim of the guidance notes and on what size of tour operators they are focused.

Also, providing specific case studies from different companies was suggested. Since the tourism industry is a cross-sector industry, examples from different, proactive sectors could be provided to inspire the tourism industry. More hyperlinks in the document could encourage and allow the readers to gain further information according to their needs. Another suggestion was that instead of using questions the guidance notes could present more employable steps that lead a tour operator through the implementation process. For example, ‘identify 3 key stakeholders and 3 key sustainability issues’. The notes could then explain how collaboration can strengthen sustainability initiatives. One expert recommended to develop and show the connection between the internal and external company’s actions and to suggest specific tools for implementation.
For the tour operators it is not necessary to know that the approach is called systems thinking, etc, but more importantly to see the benefits of following the guidance notes. Therefore, the most valuable suggestions for improvement would come from asking tour operator for feedback. This might be easier with small tour operators, one expert suggested.
5 Discussion

5.1 Key Findings Discussed

Jafari (2001) states there can be no generic planning and management strategies for the tourism sector because not only is each tour operator and destination unique, but so too are the interactions between the two. Therefore, what is needed is a proactive, precautionary, systematic approach that utilises scientific methods to compile the knowledge in such a way that the solutions can respond dynamically (Robinson 1999). With this in mind, the FSSD was a well-suited planning framework that offered a whole-systems perspective while allowing creative freedom to be constrained only by the Principles of Sustainability. This helped to keep the proposed guidance notes applicable to the tour operators understanding and knowledge of sustainability as well as incorporate their organisational approaches while stimulating ‘a holistic and preventative view’ (Budeanu 2005).

The FSSD provided a structured approach that helped to identify the main gaps in the tour operators’ current planning framework for achieving sustainability. The analysis identified the need for: an agreed understanding of the socio-ecological systems using a whole-systems perspective, sharing a vision of success constrained by the Principles of Sustainability, ‘backcasting’ from this vision, and prioritising the measures so that tour operator activities move strategically towards a sustainable society. These points are discussed in more detail below.

5.1.1 A whole-systems perspective

Historically, price is the main concern of the tourist when deciding which destination to travel to. In response to this and in seeking to create a viable and stable business, the tour operators try to offer a “good experience” for the tourist as cheap as possible. With this mindset the social, environmental and economic interests of the destination consistently fall behind the tour operators’ financial reports. The consequence of this price driven relationship is a growing pressure on the destination and its reduced capacity to ride out environmental and cultural degradation. The financially-biased focus of tour operators also fails to highlight how
dependent business success is on the social and environmental sustainability of destinations.

Due to the complexity that the tourism industry has to deal with, this encourages the tendency to simplify management practices by looking only in the financial aspect of the tourism business. This ignores the medium to long-term risks that are not fully represented by financial reports and which can go on to affect the viability of the industry as a whole. These risks include climate change, increasing legislation, the degradation of destinations and property speculation, to name but a few. Such externalities and complex factors can only be comprehensively addressed through cooperation with all stakeholders. Measures that build the relationship with the destination include sharing the financial benefits fairly with the destination, empowering local people to participate actively into the tourism development process, respecting the cultural and environmental diversity, integrate local institutions in the attractions of the destinations. All of these actions can help to build thrust and strengthen the social fabric of the host communities enabling stakeholders to better deal with complex issues and sustain the community in the long run.

According to this research, tour operators are attempting to move beyond the traditional ‘economic’ bottom line by integrating the environmental and social aspects into their planning processes under a concept know as, the ‘Triple Bottom Line’. This is a good stepping stone for bringing the idea of sustainability to the industry and is aligned with the TOI’s aim to increase tour operators’ awareness of links between the cause and effect of unsustainable activities within the social and ecological systems. This change in mindset helps to prevent the long-term negative and indirect consequences of tourism practices from being overlooked. Additionally, this should facilitate a better distribution of the power and value created by tourism activities as well as ensure a viable long-term business for tour operators.

5.1.2 Defining and envisioning sustainability

The tour operators, to varying degrees, recognised how a shared understanding and cooperative approach to sustainability could lead to the creation of common goals that would maximise the positive impacts of tourism and minimise the negative impacts for all involved. For example, tour operators already work towards building stronger links between
tourists and destinations, despite being ultimately driven by their own self-interests (Ritchie 2005, 97). The TOI case studies show that cooperation was a key component of most sustainability based goals. This proved valuable in terms of sharing knowledge and encouraging the institutionalisation of sustainability practices.

There are many comprehensive and generic visions available, for example, the UNEP and the UNWTO’s 12 aims for sustainable tourism (UNWTO 2008). When it came to creating a common vision with the destination, overlapping aspects were generally not integrated into the tour operator’s vision. Instead they were only understood in relation to the specific sustainability projects. Meanwhile, the vision of sustainability, mainly the Burndtland definition, was found to be imprecise and even amongst TOI members there was not one solid and shared understanding of sustainability. Therefore, to create collaborative direction tour operators must create a shared and agreed vision of success within their own operations, at each tourism destination and between other relevant players in the industry. This requires a concrete and generic definition of sustainability from which progress towards success can be determined.

In order to work towards the same ultimate goal of a sustainable society, the tour operator and the destination actors need to have a shared and concrete understanding of sustainability. The guidance used scientific and consensus-based Principles of Sustainability, which provided the minimum constraints for any activity working towards a sustainable society, as shown in the conceptual framework in Section 2.2. The Principles of Sustainability intend to provide the creative freedom necessary for all relevant stakeholders to be involved in the process of building a sustainable vision for the destination. This can then guide all stakeholder actions towards a future within which there are many pathways towards sustainability. At present, measures are not prioritised with such a whole-systems-based vision in mind and therefore, cannot ensure that they are alleviating the root causes of unsustainability. Within the tour operator sector, the vision created by the authors is unique in its use of the Principles of Sustainability as outlined in Section 2.2. All organisations that incorporate this vision will then intrinsically and simultaneously be working towards a scientific consensus-based definition of sustainability (see Figure 4.1 for the relationship between multiple visions).
5.1.3 Backcasting from the vision

The results suggested that smaller tour operators use sustainability to promote themselves to their niche markets in order to offset the additional costs related to having a more sustainable approach to tourism. It followed that their core values aligned with sustainability approaches and therefore decisions were made organically. However, these values are intuitive rather than concrete, so this method for prioritising measures cannot easily be learned or shared. In addition, it does not prevent decisions from being ego-centric rather than sustainability driven.

The use of a comprehensive planning framework by tour operators was not uncovered in the research. Instead, the actions chosen and revealed by the background research were used to imply the prioritising approach. In general, prioritisation was based on: the marketability of the destination and the visibility of the results. Actions were not necessarily chosen based on whether they rectified a symptom or a root cause of negative pressure.

Such forms of prioritisation cannot adequately address the trade-offs that are likely to occur between the destination and the tour operators needs. It also suggests that the tour operator’s priorities do not go beyond financial feasibility of activities. This was supported by the interviewees who pointed out that, the cost of some activities increase the prices for tourists in the short-term, and therefore risk the economic viability of tour operators business.

By aiming for ‘best practices’ rather than a principled vision of sustainability, the TOI does not resolve the trade-off issue. In addition, this can limit the creativity of solutions to what is already out there and known. There was also limited monitoring of the activities. This reduced the ability to prove, share and improve the business case for sustainability as well as understand the indirect results and knock-on effects of sustainability related activities. However, the overall thinking behind the TOI ‘cooperation with destinations’ goes a significant way to offering a logical and solid base from which tour operators could safeguard and strengthen their business by supporting the sustainability of their destinations.

One way to overcome the unknowns naturally occurring in social systems and the trade-offs that will likely occur, is to backcast from an agreed vision of the future and then choose actions that best move towards this vision. This process helps to avoid mimicking the mistakes of the past by
avoiding unnecessarily constraining the choice of actions. Backcasting from a vision also ensures sufficient flexibility and can handle trade-offs effectively if used with concrete definitions of success. Backcasting from principles of sustainability, specifically, is easier because it allows creativity while only agreeing on the minimum.

What was apparent throughout the research was the TOI’s promotion of cooperation with direct and indirect stakeholders alike. This aligns well with the FSSD’s strategic guidelines regarding the process of moving towards sustainability. The TOI’s planning framework went some way to encouraging greater participation, transparency, delineation of responsibility and honesty. However, the measures are voluntary and it remains hard for tour operators to benchmark their progress against these recommendations.

5.1.4 Actions and tools

The analysis of key TOI practices showed that as a combination the Statement of Commitment, the TOI Mission, the Strategic Objectives and the Action Areas when used with the Global Reporting Initiative offered a flexible and strong set of tools from which tour operators can move towards the sustainability of their destinations. It was apparent that overall the actions and tools level was the strongest of the tour operators’ planning framework. Yet without a comparably strong strategy to give direction there is no method to ensure that implemented actions and tools are aligned and heading towards sustainability. Therefore measures taken can potential create new or further unsustainability issues. It follows that the tourism industry’s has an increasing, but generally reactive response to sustainability. From this tour operators have tended towards actions that do not prevent ‘business as usual’. This implies that the actions chosen are inline with the financial and marketing opportunities for the tour operators rather than considering sustainability as success. Many actions and tools therefore attempt to resolve complex problems with linear ways of thinking which prevents them going beyond a short-term and superficial level, for example charity based activities as a quick fix.

5.2 Guidance Notes as a Response

The literature review called for more holistic planning strategies that encouraged a proactive and dynamic response that would help with the
understanding of the tourism system (Robinson 1999). The whole-systems perspective offered this and the backcasting from the vision of success utilises existing knowledge. In this way the next steps come from a deeper understanding of the gap between the problem and the desired sustainable future. The guidance notes provided readable and structure overview of how to close the gap between the current planning framework and the ideal process. The main objectives of the guidance notes were to underpin the tour operators understanding of sustainability and to inspire them to: use whole-systems thinking, create a shared vision of a sustainable tourism destination with their destination stakeholders framed by scientific Principles of Sustainability, a ‘backcasting from the vision’ approach, and the use of prioritisation questions. By incorporating these aspects the tour operators can improve their planning process and strategically move towards a sustainable society.

5.2.1 Review of the guidance notes

The expert feedback confirmed that the guidance notes avoided jargon and were a suitable length. Although, one tour operator felt that the definition of a sustainable society could be explained ‘in simpler terms’. This insight was provided via email without knowing the historical context of the Principles of Sustainability and with limited time to reflect on their benefits. The expert feedback focused on first three specific areas explored below.

A need to define the audience – The organisational size and sustainability knowledge would determine what level of management needed to read the guidance notes, who would actually read the guidance and who would implement them. However, by having simple but concrete content, the guidance notes offer a flexible platform from which tour operators and their stakeholders can build a shared understanding of the framework required to strategically and creatively respond to the sustainability challenge. In support of this, one expert felt that the guidance notes could effectively address a wider audience since they complimented other areas of the tour operators business. In addition, they were relevant to similar organisations within the tourism industry such as, travel agents, and destination-based tourism service providers. For example, they are highly relevant to tour operators that have a low awareness and understanding of sustainability and Eastern Europe was suggested as a potential testing ground.
A need for uniqueness – There are existing guidelines for tour operators around specific issues so the lack of depth in the guidance notes did not lend themselves to suggesting something new for the tour operators. This implied that the European based tour operators who were practicing sustainability would find the guidance too generic and not useful in bringing about action. However, neither the background research nor the data analysis uncovered revealed strong examples of: whole-systems thinking, a principled definition of sustainability, backcasting from the vision of success, or a vision of sustainability within which both the destination and the tour operator’s vision could remain unique and simultaneously move towards a sustainable society.

A need to assist with the implementation of measures – The feedback indicated that the guidance notes lacked examples, case studies and measures that could be readily adapted and implemented. If a range of actions and tools were offered, the tour operator could use its expertise to identify which measures would work best for them while still embodying the thinking behind the guidance notes. However, as Tepelus suggests, promoting sustainability through case studies is showing ‘the way’ rather than offering a flexible and holistic approach (2005). The more that next steps are prescribed the less room there is for learning and developing the mental models that can empower individuals and organisations to fully utilise the opportunities presented to them.

General points regarding the guidance notes are outlined below:

Strong background support – The background information and data analysis phases of the methods provided a solid understanding of the main sustainability issues and challenges in supporting the destination’s sustainability. This was coupled with interviews which gave a practical perspective from tour operators, an NGO that working on sustainable tourism, a tourism consulting company, and a governmental employee.

TOI benchmarking and need for practical methods – The TOI members provided an insight from a variety of countries and companies that had already been implementing, sharing and developing sustainability practices for the last eight years. The TOI case studies and pilot projects provided information about current sustainability measures that tour operators were implementing at their destinations to give a rounded picture of the opportunities relating to tour operator cooperation with their existing tourism destinations. However, the results did not include primary data
collected from mass tourism tour operators so this was covered using websites and case studies from the larger European tour operators such as TUI and HotelPlan. Overall, the need for practical methods for tour operators to instigate the changes need for sustainability was confirmed (Budeanu 2005). These results were sufficient to develop a functional set of proposed guidance notes as envisioned at the outset of the research.

**Tour operators` internal process** – The guidance notes are based on data collected from those with a prior practical knowledge of sustainability. However, the internal process of tour operators’ in relation to sustainability was not assessed. The researchers perceived that the visibility and depth of the tour operators` internal approaches to sustainability varied according to their values and organisational history. Therefore, the guidance notes can act as a sustainability compass and a benchmark for organisations irrespective of their current internal management processes.

**Applicability** – Generic within the tour operators’ field of work, the guidance notes are applicable to any tourism-destination focused operation whether instigated by a large or small organisation. It follows that they can be understood, integrated and used by all levels of an organisation.

**Time constraints** – The practical success of the guidance notes was not substantiated by tour operators due to the time constraints of the research. This could have revealed potential leverage points within the organisations such as, the destination manager or the product development process, where strategic actions could best be implemented.

**Co-creation** – Due to limited direct participation from tour operators it was not possible to co-create the guidance notes or consider the perspectives of other destination stakeholders comprehensively.

**Shared understanding** – The experts would have benefited from more time to reflect on the proposed guidance notes prior to the feedback interviews. The time constraint also meant that a shared understanding of sustainability with the experts and the co-creation of the guidance notes was not attempted. This dialogue would have given a more comprehensive base to the research.
6 Conclusion

The main driver that brought the authors together around the topic was the understanding that the tourism sector can help society by promoting cultural diversity and cooperation between different cultures. Having discussed the purpose of tourism and the benefits it could bring to society when managed in a sustainable way, the researchers proposed that the core purpose of tourism is, “to provide a learning experience in an unusual environment”. With this shared understanding, an initial exploration of the sustainability of tourism highlighted that the most extensive pressure point was at the tourism destination. Looking deeper into who the main actors were that influenced this pressure point, the researchers decided to look at the private sector and focus on tour operators as a leverage point for improving the sustainability of the tourism process.

6.1 Tour Operators Perspective

Taking into account that tour operators are one of the largest economical powers in tourism also bestows on them an equally significant responsibility to contribute towards the sustainability of the industry. The results of the research confirmed that it was indeed viable for the tour operators to do so and that tour operators are becoming more proactive in this regard. They recognise the need, as well as the growing demand from tourists, communities and governments, for longer term relationships that benefit all the tourism players in economic, social and environmental terms.

Of the TOI members and experts interviewed, it was apparent that many tour operators already make significant contributions to the sustainability of their destinations. However, there was no evidence to suggest that tour operators in general, strategically chose their actions through the use of a shared vision of success and common understanding of sustainability. It is therefore harder to ensure that the chosen measures impact the root cause of unsustainability rather than offer more superficial improvements. The research identified that tour operator’s need a more comprehensive planning framework when looking at sustainability. This requires a whole-system perspective in order to address the complexities inherent in the industry and to ensure the survival of the tour operator’s business and the destinations that they represent.
Tourism is a way to integrate cultures, preserve the environment and promote development. However, assessing the activities of tourism against the Principles of Sustainability revealed negative impacts at the destinations are prevalent. The majority of tour operators are aware that their business is dependent on the health of their destinations and that they should endeavour to alleviate these impacts while advancing the benefits of tourism. In addition, there is also a business case for sustainability due to the threat of tougher legislation and an increasing demand from society to undertaken more sustainable actions. Applying sustainable practices can transform these threats into opportunities and drive a viable business. They also enable tour operators to be the leverage point and catalyst for moving the destinations and society towards sustainability.

Inline with previous research in the field, it appears to be the case that the tour operators have many tools to assist them in responding the sustainability of their destinations. However, the industry and the tour operating sector have been slow to adapt to the growing need and urgency in addressing tourism's unsustainability. Currently, any activities undertaken require a certain level of economic return in order to inspire the implementation of practical action. Yet these actions and tools are often not comprehensively implemented because they infringe upon ‘business as usual’ through their need for time and human and financial resources. As a result they are sometimes considered ineffective and bureaucratic. In order to facilitate sustainable practices that address the complexities between the negative and the positive impacts of tourism, a holistic planning framework is needed. Within this the actions and tools can be chosen strategically for improving the sustainability of the business and society.

Due to the diversity of tour operators and issues at the tourism destinations, the authors proposed generic guidance notes that encouraged the incorporation of key concepts into the tour operators’ planning framework. The key concepts were determined by comparing the current planning framework of tour operators with that of the FSSD – Framework for Strategic Sustainable Development. This brought about the creative tension needed to inspire a solution that could close the gap and work towards the suggested vision of a sustainable tourism destination.

**Whole-system perspective** - In the life cycle of tourism destination, there is a tendency for the destination to become overwhelmed by tourists to the extent that its sustainability starts to dramatically decline. In order for tour
operators to move strategically towards a sustainable tourism destination, it is suggested that they identify the main resources (social, environmental and financial) that they and their destinations are dependent upon. They should then analyse how their operations are impacting and undermining those resources within the context of the life sustaining systems. Cooperation with destination actors is fundamental in gathering and understanding these interdependencies.

**Shared sustainability goals** - There is a diversity of perspectives regarding sustainability and limited drive to identify common interests between tour operators and other destination actors. To address this it is suggested for tour operators to use the Principles of Sustainability as a base for dialogue with the destination when co-creating a common vision of success.

**Long-term strategy** - Tour operators characteristically operate within a competitive market and a highly price driven sector where short-term decisions tend to override the long-term perspective. Therefore, the researchers suggest the use of ‘backcasting from a vision of success’ to facilitate decisions that will bring both the destination and the tour operators towards an agreed vision in both the short and long-term.

It is fundamental that the social, environmental and economic return on investments are given equal weightings; that actions build a flexible platform for furthering sustainability and that actions work towards a concrete vision of a sustainable society from both the tour operator’s and the destination’s perspective. If these are implemented, then tour operators can support the long-term success of the tourism industry and drive sustainability throughout society. This ensures that actions build up the destination’s resilience to tourism-related pressures, such as the variability in tourists demand, and start to revitalise the social fabric of society.

Despite tourism’s violations of the Principles of Sustainability, the TOI case studies prove that tour operators are acting on their knowledge of sustainability. Their measures are already bringing economic, social and environmental benefits to the destinations. Building on this, if improvements are made to the tour operators planning framework then tourism can consistently help us move towards a sustainable society. Therefore, tour operators must take the initiative to create a whole-systems understanding based on cooperation with destinations while working towards a common vision of success that perpetuates the sustainable development of the destinations as well as the tour operator’s business.
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Conceptual Framework of Tourism

Adapted from Mathieson & Wall, 1982
Appendix 2: Phase One - Interview questions

1. How does your organisation define sustainability?

2. What do you see as the main sustainability (economical, environmental and social) issues facing your tourism destinations? How have you determined these and in what ways are you addressing them?

3. Who are the main stakeholders that you work with at your existing tourism destinations?

4. How do these stakeholders define sustainability?

5. In what ways do you work with them? Where possible, provide examples of the tools and strategies you use, the strategic goals you share and how you determine if it was a successful cooperation.

6. What are the main challenges and barriers you face when working with the tourism destinations?

7. What kind of support would you need to help work towards the sustainability of your tourism destinations?

8. Could you share with us some case studies, best practices and lessons learned based on your experiences of working with your tourism destinations?

9. What are the benefits to you of creating a sustainable tourism destination (environmental, economic and social)? Could you share with us any documents you have that quantify or express these?
# Appendix 3: Phase One - Interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (e-mail)</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Interview date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edgar Werblowsky</td>
<td>FreeWay Adventures – TOI Tour Operator</td>
<td>26 - 03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stefania Saporetti</td>
<td>Kel 12 – TOI Tour Operator</td>
<td>07 - 04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cristiano Vasques</td>
<td>HVS Consulting</td>
<td>08 - 04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer Seif</td>
<td>Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa</td>
<td>10 - 04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabina Llewellyn-Davies</td>
<td>TLB Destinations – TOI Tour Operator</td>
<td>14 – 04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responded to interview questions via email</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luiz Fernando Ferreira, Manager of the National Program of Eco-tourism</td>
<td>Ministry of Environment, Brasil (Ministério do Meio Ambiente)</td>
<td>28 – 04</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 4: Phase One - Case studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study Name &amp; Focus</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>TOI Member</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supporting Research for Health and Hygiene, Morocco</td>
<td>Atlas Voyages</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Eco-Fund to Support Sustainability</td>
<td>Hotelplan Swiss Group</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributing to the Local Economy, Karakorum Region</td>
<td>Travel Walji</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restoration of the Sarica Church, Cappadocia, Turkey</td>
<td>VASCO Travel</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting Local Communities, Dominican Republic</td>
<td>Viaggi del Ventaglio</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fundraising for CSR programs</td>
<td>Thomas Cook</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 5: Phase Two - TOI Planning Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement of Commitment</th>
<th>Mission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Commitment to sustainable development and management of Tourism</td>
<td>2. Principles of sustainable development and management of tourism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>System</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Bruntland, 1.4 Avoid degradation throughout TO operations and activities</td>
<td>2.6 aim for best practice in resource use, pollution &amp; waste, biodiversity, social system, cooperating, local products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Success</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Sustainable Tourism Development as a guiding concept, 1.3 undertake forms of tourism which make a positive contribution</td>
<td>2.8 cooperation with public sector, 2.9 cooperation with destination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategic Guidelines</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 comply with laws (success), 2.10 develop principles into a corporate policy, measurable goals, 2.5 manage and monitor impacts</td>
<td>3.1 Create awareness and active involvement among customers &amp; host communities 3.2 public communication and advertising should promote behaviour and activities compatible 3.3 We will encourage other tour operators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Actions</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.5 UN partnerships</td>
<td>2.10 Monitoring and reporting tools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tools</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Objectives</td>
<td>Action areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 Platform for dialogue with stakeholders; Involving tour operators in the relevant UN programmes. 2. broaden the support for sustainable development among other players 2.1 Cooperation with key stakeholders in specific activities and projects; 2.2 Increase awareness of key players;</td>
<td>Implied that this is built up through dialogue and cooperation * Credible and transparent cooperation at destination level. * Identification of a shared, agreed way forward with the destination for promoting sustainable tourism * An agreed action plan to build on synergies between the tour operators and the various destination stakeholders, setting out who is committed to doing what. * The way forward gives priority to the destination perspective, and maintains economic and business viability for all stakeholders. * Work with a cross-section of stakeholders encompassing the diversity of views and interests present in the destination - including the local authorities, the private sector, civil society and NGOs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions</td>
<td>TOI pursues its mission through 5 key areas of action (Research and information exchange, Capacity building, Technical support, Communication, Outreach to open direct dialogues)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tools</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 6: Phase Two - Systematic violations of sustainability principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles of Sustainability</th>
<th>Violations (adapted from UNEP)</th>
<th>Violations (adapted from Ritchie 1987, 225)</th>
<th>Tour Operators Role in the violations (adapted from TOI 2003)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SP1</td>
<td>Increases need for energy and generally this comes from fossil fuels</td>
<td>Rely heavily on transportation that are fossil fuel dependent</td>
<td>Encourages the development of destinations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rely heavily on transportation that are fossil fuel dependent</td>
<td>Require energy for lighting, air conditioning, heating etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP2</td>
<td>Increases pollution — chemicals and man-made materials such as human waste</td>
<td>Environmental damage</td>
<td>Directs the flow of tourists and influences consumption eg/ food drinking water, swimming pool water, gifts, clothing etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relies heavily on its supply chain which it has no direct control over</td>
<td>Overcrowding</td>
<td>Encourages the development of destinations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increases waste eg/ sewage, packaging</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>SP3</td>
<td>Depletion of natural resources</td>
<td>Price increases during special events</td>
<td>Encourage the development of destinations</td>
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<td>Changes in land use from the need to increase carrying capacity potential too quickly</td>
<td>Real estate speculation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Environmental damage</td>
<td>Acceleration of undesirable social trends such as excessive urbanisation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Overcrowding</td>
<td>Tendency towards defensive attitudes concerning host regions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>High possibility of misunderstandings leading to varying degrees of host/tourist hostility</td>
<td>Commercialisation of activities that may be of a personal or private nature</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Modifications of nature of event/activity to accommodate tourism</td>
<td>Economic exploitation of local population elite</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Economic dependence of the local community on tourism</td>
<td>Distortion of true nature of events to reflect values of political systems of the day</td>
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<td>Seasonal character of jobs</td>
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<td>SP4</td>
<td>Culture clashes</td>
<td>Influence the customers’ choices and behaviours</td>
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<td>Physical influences causing social stress</td>
<td>Encourages the development of destinations</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ethical issues</td>
<td>Controls the level of interaction between the local community, tourists and their internal management activities</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Change or loss of indigenous identity and values</td>
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<td>Increase in prices for locals</td>
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<td>Income leakage</td>
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<td>Infrastructure cost</td>
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<td>Economic dependence of the local community on tourism</td>
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<td>Seasonal character of jobs</td>
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## Appendix 7: Phase Three - Expert Feedback

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (e-mail)</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Interview date</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer Seif</td>
<td>Fair Trade in Tourism South Africa</td>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; May 2008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Sabina Llewellyn-Davies | TLB Destinations – TOI Tour Operator           | 13<sup>th</sup> May 2008  
  *responded in brief email format* |
| Adriana Budeanu     | IIIEE, Lund University                           | 13<sup>th</sup> May 2008        |
These guidelines are for all types of tour operators. If you wish to contribute to the sustainability of the destinations as a method of adding value to your business, contributing to the longevity of the industry as a whole and for the greater benefit of society, then these guidelines are for you.

The aim of the guidelines is to help you, the tour operator, take strategic steps towards co-creating activities that will contribute to the sustainability of the tourism destinations.

Instructions: Each section contains questions to guide and expand your thinking, as well as highlight important aspects that build your understanding of what is required and why. After this, the actions and tools you require will be specific to you and the situation. They should be identified and strategically chosen using the combined knowledge and expertise of those within the organisation and from relevant stakeholders.

Business Benefits of Sustainability

Integrating sustainability into your business will lead to a more sustainable tourism destination, preventing the degradation of your product and inevitably the value of your business.

- The tourism market is in a state of transition, coupled with climate change, the future of tourism is unpredictable so it’s vital to stay flexible and aware.
- Sustainability can improve your non-price based competitiveness as well the competitiveness of your destinations in the long run.
- Customers are becoming increasingly aware of the impacts of their purchase decisions, so ingrained sustainability thinking into your operations to ensure you don’t get caught ‘greenwashing’ and promote your innovative thinking where ever relevant.
- With visible sustainable actions you not only share your risks with your stakeholders but boost the cooperation of the destinations community as well as the retention and satisfaction of staff and customers alike.
- Keeping the long term in mind reduces the financial resources often thrown away through short-term problem solving.

Imagine you’re planning a holiday...

We’re always making plans that attempt to organise complicated interactions. Below is an example of the 8 levels that we often intuitively use when planning anything, for example, a holiday.

SYSTEM
- Geography, transport, family, language, money, work, health, previous experiences, governments, etc...

SUCCESS
- A cheap and relaxing 2-week holiday somewhere sunny

STRATEGY
- Having success in mind means seeing all the possibilities and then deciding which ones will work best

ACTIONS
- Check transport options and routes.
- Call friends, check bank account, check dates, book time off work, etc...

TOOLS
- Tour operators, Internet, a friend’s advice, money, maps, phrase book, passport, swimming costume, etc...

The same concept can be used to plan for sustainability in complex systems, such as tourism. These guidelines are based on the first three levels (System, Vision of Success and Strategy).
1. Your World

It is important to...

- Understand the system you are working with, so you can identify and manage leverage points.
- Understand the relationships you have with your stakeholders, so you can better utilize them and maximize their benefits.
- Identify which resources are you dependent on to run your business, because they might not be available in the future.
- Identify the impacts that you have on the resources you are dependent on, so you can better plan your strategies to preserve those resources.

What's the bigger picture?

1. Who are your key stakeholders (try to put them in order of influence)?
2. What are the main concerns and needs of these stakeholders?
3. How can your response to their concerns and needs add value to your business?
4. Which resources are you dependent on (human, natural, financial)?
5. How long do you think that the resources you need to operate will last (human, natural, financial)?
6. Consider the feedback process, how can you help to maintain and regenerate those resources (human, natural, financial)?

The goal of corporations, society and environment is to survive and prosper. This means that corporations must create more value than they consume, people must meet their present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs and at the same time all activity has to stay within the carrying capacity of the planet.
2. A Sustainable Destination

It is important to...

- clarify the language you use to define sustainability to avoid misunderstandings.
- know your clients and the community (include interactions and social practices), so you can identify the common goals towards sustainability.
- co-create a common vision of success internally as well as with your destination, in order to facilitate dialogue and create a platform for cooperation.
- consider all points of view because it provides a complete overview, helps avoid the unexpected and can increase your flexibility.

Agreeing on a Definition of Sustainability

With so many stakeholders and destinations to work with it is important to find a definition of sustainability that you can agree on and share easily without limiting innovation.

The following principles are founded on science and can provide the base for a shared understanding of sustainability. From within these constraints each individual and organisation can incorporate their strategic goals, such as the UNWTO’s 12 aims of sustainable tourism.

A sustainable society is one where we do not subject nature to systematic increases in the:

- concentrations of substances extracted from the Earth’s crust,
- concentrations of substances produced by society,
- degradation by physical means,

And in that society we do not subject people to conditions that systematically undermine their abilities to meet their needs.

What is the perfect picture?

1. What is your vision of a sustainable tourism destination?
2. Which key aspects did you consider to define this destination as sustainable?
3. What makes the destination a unique place for you, the tourist and the destination?
4. What are the common goals that you share with your stakeholders?
5. How can you co-create a common vision of success between you, the tourist and the destination, that you all can agree on?

Vision of Success

An example of a Vision for a Sustainable Tourism Destination:

A unique, interesting and attractive place that creates a supportive and rewarding place for the mutual and shared benefit of all involved where decisions are only constrained by the principles for sustainability.

These principles have been used by Whistler Resort (www.whistler2020.org) and Scandic Hotels (www.scandichotels.com).
3. Building the Bridge

It is important to...

- ...establish and strengthen links with your stakeholders because none of us are able to solve all the issues alone and through cooperation we can share the responsibilities.
- ...create and determine some strategic steps to move you towards the vision, because it will help you to notice if you are heading in the right direction.
- ...ensure that your actions are flexible so that you can maintain the benefits and avoid blind alleys.
- ...assess the feasibility of your steps in terms of the resources so you can ensure that the benefits will outweigh the overall costs.

What’s the plan behind the picture?

1. ACTIONS ~ What actions do you think will lead you towards the vision of success and what part will cooperation play?
2. RIGHT DIRECTION ~ What are the benefits and costs of those actions for you, the tourist and the destination in terms of the resources involved (human, natural, financial)?
3. FLEXIBLE PLATFORM ~ How can the benefits of these actions be maintained and foster benefits now and into the future?
4. RETURN ON INVESTMENT ~ Which actions are best shared in terms of costs, responsibilities and benefits?
5. TOOLS ~ What tools do you need to plan, implement, monitor and measure your steps?

Creating a vision of success (like your ideal holiday) and understanding the current reality, makes it easier to choose the steps you need to succeed. This concept is called ‘backcasting’. How does it help?

- It prevents the constraints of today restricting movement towards your vision.
- It highlights current areas for improvement and strategic opportunities.
- It helps avoid the creation of additional problems in the future.
- It connects short-term measures with the long-term vision.

What are some of the ways that Cooperation, Communication and Coordination with Stakeholders can help?

- Working with locals ~ local products and activities can differentiate you and enable cost-savings.
- The more perspectives the more knowledge, innovation and resilience ~ avoid unnecessary delays through good communication and transparency.
- Share the costs and gain support ~ keep customers and locals informed and involved so they can grow with you.
- Work with other tour operators and influential bodies ~ help institutionalise long-term sustainability actions.
- Demonstrates your commitment by integrating sustainability throughout your business ~ avoid backlash from ‘greenwashing’.

The Strategy
Background to the Guidelines

The guidelines were developed by three researchers undertaking a Masters in Strategic Leadership towards Sustainability at Blekinge Institute of Technology, in Sweden. The guidelines are the result of exploring the research question, “How can tour operators strategically contribute to the sustainability of their tourism destinations?” The research team used a structured model for planning and decision making in complex systems, recognizing that the interaction between tour operators, their destinations and moreover, the sustainability challenges are all multifaceted components.

During the development of these guidelines we had in mind three main characteristics of the social system: 1st the interdependence between tourists, tour operators, destinations and their activities; 2nd that social and cultural diversity has an important contribution to make towards sustainability; and 3rd the importance of self-organisation in building relationships and social structures.

Objectives of the guidelines

The objectives are to inspire tour operators to use systems-thinking, create a shared vision of a sustainable tourism destination and to build an understanding of how they can move strategically towards that vision by carefully assessing their choice of actions.

What’s your feedback?

As part of research we are looking for expert feedback on the guidelines regarding the following:

- The strengths of the guidelines
- The weaknesses of the guidelines
- How could the guidelines be improved
- And any other comments

For further information please contact us on llianefredericks@gmail.com

Created by Liane Fredericks, Roman Garstea and Sergio Montforte, 2008.

1 Bob Willard, The Next Sustainability Wave, 2005