

SUMMARY OF THE PH.D. DISSERTATION

**THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT ASPECTS OF
SUSTAINABLE TOURISM
AS SEEN THROUGH THE EXAMPLE OF THE NORTH
GREAT PLAINS REGION OF HUNGARY**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism can be considered as one of the most profitable sectors of the Hungarian economy, and in rural areas it is often the only successful economic activity. However, besides its economic benefits, the negative environmental and social impacts of tourism must be managed, as well. The principles of sustainable development must be taken into account in order to ensure the long term profitability of the sector.

„Sustainable tourism” is a frequently quoted concept. It is usually present in strategies and plans prepared at different levels, but it is also used in everyday life besides professional and academic circles. As the fundamental document of Hungary’s tourism planning, the National Tourism Development Strategy claims: „The sustainable utilization of the natural and cultural attractions is highly important for tourism; in the utilization of resources the irreversible negative processes must be prevented.” (National Tourism Development Strategy, 2005 p.20)

After the concept of sustainable tourism was defined, it is revised from time to time. In addition, the demand for measuring the impacts and changes of tourism received more emphasis in the last decade. The above mentioned strategy also states that „Presently, sustainable tourism is only a theoretical concept in Hungary. In spite of different initiatives the indicator system suitable for the verification of the sustainable operation of the developments and the comprehensive regulation are missing.” (National Tourism Development Strategy, 2005, p.20) Several researchers deal with creating models or systems to be used for assessing sustainability in tourism. (see e.g. Kovács et al., 2006; Kósi – Baranyi, 2006; Dávid – Baros, 2009)

However, there is a missing link between defining the concept of sustainable tourism and implementing it in practice. If sustainability is a major objective to be achieved, the *stakeholders of tourism must know the concept and principles of sustainable tourism*, moreover they *should have positive attitudes* towards its practical aspects.

It is especially important that the representatives of the local governments, the so-called local decision-makers, who are responsible for planning, developing and managing tourism, should know the principles of sustainable tourism and be aware of their duties in the field of sustainability.

2. THE OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH, MATERIALS AND METHODS

The primary objective of my research is to investigate local decision-makers' attitudes towards sustainable tourism on the settlements of the North Great Plains Region of Hungary. On the one hand, I aim to survey their knowledge concerning sustainable tourism, on the other hand I intend to get to know their attitudes towards the various aspects of sustainable tourism; the economic, environmental and social impacts of tourism.

Knowing the attitudes of local decision-makers is decisively important for many reasons. It is obvious that the sustainable development of any economic sector is impossible without careful planning. The governments and governmental organizations are the key actors of planning at the national, regional and local levels. The local governments have highly effective instruments to fulfil the requirements of sustainability, as they are aware of the local conditions. In addition to planning, they have the possibility to take measures to achieve the sustainable development of the tourism sector: they can influence the other stakeholders, the local communities, the enterprises and the tourists, while they can also initiate and coordinate their cooperation. The acts of the decision-makers are possibly determined by their knowledge and attitudes. Surveying these attitudes is an important area of tourism research.

In order to achieve my primary objective I intended to define the concept of sustainable tourism. However, it has several – sometimes contradictory – definitions and interpretations, therefore the analysis of the conceptual approaches to sustainable tourism became the other important area of my research. I aim to define the most important „components” of the concept, as they may serve as guidelines for the tourism planners and thus its practical implications are outstanding.

Furthermore, it can be supposed that even if the decision-makers do not exactly know the definition of sustainable tourism, they still may show positive attitudes towards its practical implementation, and consequently their decisions concerning planning and development will meet the requirements of sustainability. My objective is to highlight

the strengths and weaknesses of the decision-makers' knowledge and attitude, and if necessary, propose ways to improve them.

The research topic originates from the *resident* attitude surveys, which are regularly published in the scientific literature. Investigating the political decision-makers' attitudes are considerably less frequent in the international literature. First of all, I relied on a British survey which was carried out among tourism officers. (Godfrey, 1998) As in Hungary it is the first investigation of this type, it may contribute to the theoretical foundation of planning and developing tourism.

Due to the financial limits, the present research does not include the attitude survey of the other stakeholders, such as tourists, local residents, businesses, etc. Furthermore, the target group of the survey is the local government representatives and *not* the tourism officers. The reason for this is that the tourism officer post does not exist at most local governments in the North Great Plains Region, and the most influential decisions are made by the local government representatives. Presently, I do not aim to compare the attitudes of the decision-makers to their acts and the results of their decisions.

The dissertation does not include the analysis of the development strategies relating to tourism from the viewpoint of sustainability, although these documents inform and influence the stakeholders, while the local level strategies also reflect the local decision-makers' knowledge and attitudes to some extent. I do not analyse thoroughly the environmental, economic and social impacts of tourism either. In my opinion this area of research is in the foreground of academic interest in Hungary. (see eg. Puczko – Rátz, 2002)

These days several organizations and researchers focus on the assessment of sustainable tourism; the possible theoretical models and their practical implementation. In my research I do not aim to survey the decision-makers' knowledge about the indicators of sustainability. Instead, I intend to investigate their knowledge and attitudes towards sustainability, as they are the prerequisites for the successful assessment.

To summarize, the main issues of the research problem are the following:

1. The different conceptual approaches to sustainable tourism based on the international literature.

2. The concept of carrying capacity in tourism, and the methods of measuring it.
3. The indicators and assessment methods of sustainable tourism.
4. The roles of tourism stakeholders in sustainable tourism development with special emphasis on the role of the local governments and the governmental instruments.
5. The local decision-makers' attitudes towards sustainable tourism.

When exploring the theoretical background I emphasize the issues regarding the role of the local decision-makers. Furthermore, I aim to investigate the issues that have not been published in the Hungarian literature of tourism so far.

Materials and methods

Due to the complexity of the topic, I relied on both secondary and primary research methods to explore the rural development aspects of sustainable tourism. As a secondary method, I carried out a critical, comparative analysis of the relevant literature concerning the concept of sustainable tourism, carrying capacity and the indicators of sustainability. I found it especially important to explore the international literature in this field. The most recent literature was available to me at Indiana University, U.S.A., where I spent the spring semester in 2006.

I analysed the tourism of the North Great Plains based on secondary data. The data used in the analysis relates to the year 2008, partly because these were the most recent data published by the Hungarian Statistical Office at the time when the dissertation was completed. On the other hand, the empirical research was carried out in 2008, the results of which can be interpreted in terms of the data and facts of 2008.

As far as the local decision-makers' attitudes are concerned I relied on primary data gained from my own questionnaire survey. I sent out questionnaires to 364 local governments in the region between January and August, 2008. After removing the copies that were completed by people who cannot be considered as decision-makers, 123 questionnaires from 93 local governments were analysed.

Prior to this survey I took part in a joint research with Dr. Cem Basman at the Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Studies, Indiana University, U.S.A.. During the research I gained first-hand experience in preparing and conducting surveys.

The strict procedure needed to start the survey called my attention to the importance of ethical considerations in empirical investigations as well.

In the empirical research presented in my dissertation I conducted an attitude survey among the local decision-makers. This method is suitable for collecting and analysing subjective data. The significance of attitude surveys is emphasized by many authors. Halász et al. stated already in 1979 that attitude surveys constitute a methodologically well-founded chapter of the empirical social sciences. (Halász et al., 1979) Their importance is stressed by the fact that the attitudes – among others – influence the acts and decisions of the individuals, and thus they can be expected to forecast social phenomena. Attitude surveys are generally used to explore individual and social values, which contribute to learning the social reality. (Halász et al., 1979)

Attitude surveys are generally used in psychology, sociology and in marketing. As tourism is an interdisciplinary area, it often borrows methods from other disciplines. Attitude surveys are usually applied to survey the attitudes of residents and tourists in order to assess the perceptual carrying capacity of a destination.

In the empirical social sciences different types of scales are used to assess attitudes. In my research Likert-scale questions were used. Five dimensions of the investigated topic were separated and the attitude statements were related to these dimensions. The respondents had to agree or disagree with these statements. Basic statistical methods were applied to evaluate the data.

The questionnaire method was used to explore the local decision-makers' knowledge and opinions regarding sustainable tourism development. Open questions were related to the definition of sustainable tourism, while closed questions were used to investigate the respondents' opinions. The possible positive and negative environmental, social and economic impacts of tourism were listed, and the local decision-makers were asked to set up a subjective rank out of the impacts. The results of these questions were in harmony with the results of the attitude survey. The statistical software, SPSS 13.0 was used in the analysis.

3. THE MOST IMPORTANT FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

The findings of my research are demonstrated in the order of the dissertation.

3.1. Interpretations of the concept of sustainable tourism development

In this part of the dissertation I systematize and critically analyze the definitions, principles and major characteristics of the concept. I quote the well-known definition of the WTO, which bears close resemblance to the sustainable development definition of the Brundtland Committee.

“Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social, and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecology processes, biological diversity, and life support systems” (WTO, 1998 p. 21)

Elaborating and revising the concept of sustainable tourism has remained in the focus of scientific debate. The WTO published its most recent definition in 2004, which allows several practical conclusions for the decision-makers. "Sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices are applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments. Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee its long-term sustainability.

Thus, sustainable tourism should:

- 1) Make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity.
- 2) Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance.
- 3) Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-

earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.

Sustainable tourism development requires the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building. Achieving sustainable tourism is a continuous process and it requires constant monitoring of impacts, introducing the necessary preventive and/or corrective measures whenever necessary.

Sustainable tourism should also maintain a high level of tourist satisfaction and ensure a meaningful experience to the tourists, raising their awareness about sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices amongst them." (WTO, 2004)

Besides the definition of the influential organization, numerous other definitions have appeared since the 1990s, which are based on the Brundtand-definition.

It must also be mentioned that there are researchers that doubt the implementation of the concept and claim that the concept is rather an ideology and not a practical issue.

I concluded that sustainable tourism development is not an unanimously defined concept. There are several, although minor differences, among the definitions. Most of the definitions are based on the sustainability concept of the Brundtland Committee.

The most often mentioned components of the definitions are as follows:

- balance of the environmental-economic-social interests
- tourists' satisfaction, the quality experience of the tourists
- improving the quality of life within the host communities
- long term development
- planned development
- participation of the local community in planning.

3.2. The concept of carrying capacity in tourism

I investigated the different aspects of the concept of carrying capacity in tourism. The concept of carrying capacity appeared in the tourism literature in the 1960s. The first definitions approached the concept from an ecological, biological point of view, later it was gradually extended to economic and social issues.

Carrying capacity has several definitions and they are not generally accepted either. According to the WTO carrying capacity

Researchers claim that a destination can have more than one type of carrying capacity, namely environmental, physical and perceptual/psychological. (Pearce, 1989) O'Reilly differentiates among ecological, economic, social and perceptual carrying capacities. (O'Reilly, 1986) Other authors believe that a destination has one carrying capacity but it has a physical-ecological, a socio-cultural and a politico-economic component. (Coccosis – Mexa, 2004)

The central issue in determining the carrying capacity of a destination is to decide the number of tourists that may visit the territory at the same time.

To sum up, it can be concluded that sustainable tourism is often identified with determining the carrying capacity of a destination. Researchers differentiate among several types of carrying capacity, such as environmental, economic, social, psychological. They express limits that cannot be exceeded. Defining the carrying capacity is usually not possible in an absolute figure but there are benchmarks that may warn the decision-makers to intervene.

3.3 The assessment of sustainable tourism

I reviewed the principles of assessment, the role of indicators, the criteria for their selection and some of the assessment methods.

According to the WTO, indicators are important management instruments and they are also future investments because the damage of the resources can be avoided by using them.

The indicators of sustainability are different from other indicators as they emphasize the relation among the economic, environmental and social dimensions. (UN 2004) There are many sets of indicators to be used in practice. There are general indicators that were not specifically developed for tourism but can be adapted to tourism's needs e.g. ecological footprints, some OECD indicators. Besides, there are tourism-specific indicators that can be used at the local level. If the aim is to define the sustainability of a destination, first the usable indicators must be defined. The already existing indicators can be used, with some modifications. After the most suitable set of indicators was defined, the assessment of the indicators can be started according to a chosen method or model. (Kósi – Baranyi, 2006)

There were many methods published in the international literature, but Hungarian researchers also investigate this issue. In my dissertation I highlighted some of the Hungarian methods. (Kósi – Baranyi, 2006; Dávid – Baros, 2009; Kovács et al., 2006)

3.4. The role of tourism stakeholders in the sustainable tourism development

In this chapter of the dissertation I explored the roles of the main tourism stakeholders: the local community, the tourists, the tourism businesses and the governments of different levels. I concentrated on the tasks and instruments of the local governments, because they can influence the other stakeholders as well. Figure 1 demonstrates the role of the local governments in the field of sustainable tourism development. (Fig.1)

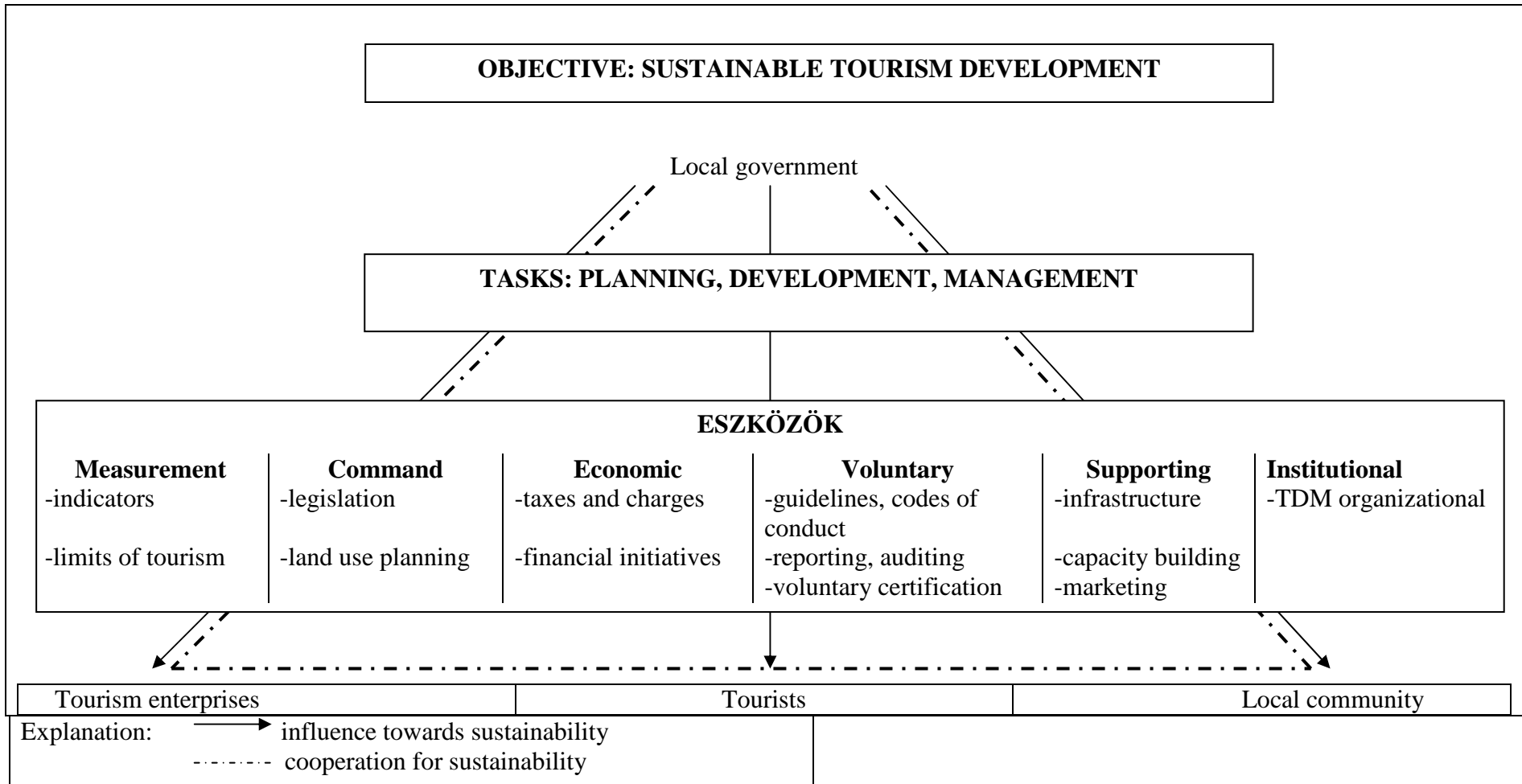


Figure 1: **The role of local governments in sustainable tourism development**

Source: WTO, 2005 modified

3.5. The local decision-makers' attitudes towards sustainable tourism development

The empirical research questions are the following:

1. What do local decision-makers know about the concept of sustainable tourism development?
2. Which tourism impacts do they find especially important?
3. What attitude do local decision-makers have towards sustainable tourism?

My first empirical research question regards the local decision-makers' knowledge about sustainable tourism development. The related hypothesis is as follows:

H1: The local decision-makers know the concept of sustainable tourism development, they are especially aware of the balance of the environment-economy-society.

In order to test the hypothesis I formulated a closed question to check whether they have heard about the concept of sustainable tourism development. The result suggests that the decision-makers are not fully aware of the true meaning of the concept; 54% of the respondents (n=66) said that they have heard about „sustainable tourism”, while 46% (n=57) admitted that they have not heard about it. In my opinion we could expect the decision-makers to know the concept of sustainable tourism as it is not a new ideology. Besides, the strategies related to the tourism development of the region (The Strategic Programme of the North Great Plains Region 2007-2013, and the Tourism Development Strategy of the North Great Plains Region 2007-2013) emphasize the importance of sustainable tourism development. For example, they aim to turn the North Great Plains Region into an „eco-region”. The second specific objective of the Strategic Programme is to maintain the environmental system of the region, and to treat environment as an asset. The related priority is to develop economic activities based on environmental resources, such as tourism. The requirement of sustainability is also present in the Tourism Development Strategy. We can assume that the decision-makers are familiar with these documents, therefore it is surprising that the concept of sustainable tourism remained unclear for so many of the respondents.

As the next step I asked where the respondents learnt about the concept of sustainable tourism. It is a striking fact that the majority of the respondents emphasized the various strategies, operational programmes and tenders as the most important sources of information, although it is not the primary objective of these documents to inform the stakeholders about sustainability. It is important to know that the requirements set by the strategies motivate the stakeholders to gather the related information. The other main sources of information were the media, the professional conferences and meetings, and the studies at higher education. Professional trainings were mentioned only by few respondents, which suggests that introducing training and educational programmes in this field may be useful.

I also asked the respondents to define the concept of sustainable tourism development. 46 out of the 123 decision-makers did not respond to this question. 12 people did not provide a definition although previously they answered that they heard about the concept. I received 77 definitions altogether. Six answers were „incorrect”, which means that the definition was not in connection with the concept at all. The other definitions included similar components, which suggested that the decision-makers know, or at least partially know the true meaning of „sustainable tourism development”. These common components are summarized in Table 1. (Table 1)

Table 1: The frequency of the *sustainable tourism* definition’s components

Mentioned characteristic	Number of appearance in definitions
Economic efficiency	49
Environment conservation	33
Social sustainability	13
Two or three of them mentioned together:	
Economic, environmental, social sustainability	12
Economic and environmental sustainability	7
Economic and social sustainability	1
Long term development	20
Returning guests	3

Respecting the carrying capacity	2
Quality development	2
Exploiting the unused potential	2
Elaborating a complex strategy	3
Reflects the Brundtland-report's definition	4
Ecolabels, as means of practical implementation	1

Source: Own analysis

N.B. One definition may have more than one component.

To summarize, we can see that the decision-makers give priority to the economic sustainability instead of the environmental issues. On the basis of the definitions it can be concluded that the majority of the respondents misinterpreted the concept of sustainable tourism development.

Therefore the H1 hypothesis was not accepted.

The second empirical research question regarded the impacts of tourism. I asked which impacts the decision-makers find more important than the others. I found this issue remarkable because the answers may reflect the decision-makers future expectation concerning the possible impacts as well. In order to investigate this issue a rankscale was used ranging from 1 to 8, where the respondents had to mark the most important impact as '1' and the least important as '8'.

To avoid ambiguity, the positive and negative economic, social and environmental impacts were separated in the questions.

The hypothesis regarding the economic impacts is as follows:

H2: The local decision-makers give priority to the economic impact in connection with employment over the other economic impacts.

The most important positive economic impacts were: the creation of jobs, the additional incomes and the rising of the life standard. The most important negative factors were: seasonal employment, strengthening of the black economy, and dependence on tourism. Consequently, the impacts ranked as first were in connection with employment in both cases.

Therefore the H2 hypothesis was accepted.

The hypothesis regarding the environmental impacts is the following:

H3: The local decision-makers consider the direct environmental impacts more important than the impacts on the man-made, built environment.

The most important positive factor was the infrastructure development, which can be explained by the disadvantaged position of the region. The impacts regarding the quality of the environment follow this factor. The most important impacts were the increased waste, the damage to the flora and fauna and soil contamination. The least important factor was the visual damage due to the changes in the manmade, built environment. Besides the most important environmental impact, the „infrastructure development”, the impacts regarding the natural environment were ranked before the impacts on the built environment.

Therefore the H3 hypothesis was accepted.

The hypothesis regarding the social impacts is the following:

H4: The decision-makers consider the conservation of the existing socio-cultural values as the most important social impact, while, they are mainly afraid of the anti-social behaviour (e.g. crime) as the major negative social impact of tourism.

According to the decision-makers the most important socio-cultural impact were the decreasing emigration from the region, the preservation of the local cultural values and the boosting of the social, cultural life. The most important negative phenomena were the increase in the economic inequality within the community, the strengthening of the antisocial behaviour (alcoholism, prostitution, vandalism, drug consumption). The increase of crime and the deterioration of the ethical norms can be included in the category of the anti-social behaviour.

Therefore the H4 hypothesis was accepted.

After investigating the knowledge and opinions of the stakeholders I surveyed the local decision-makers' attitudes. I divided the statements about sustainable tourism development into five categories.

The categories are the following:

- tourism and environment
- tourism and economy
- tourism and society/culture
- strategic planning in tourism – the role of the local community in decision-making
- influencing tourists' behaviour towards sustainability

The hypothesis concerning the local decision-makers' attitude was:

H5: The local decision-makers' attitudes support the implementation of sustainable tourism development.

The respondents found 29 statements on the questionnaire, and they were asked to agree or disagree with them. Their opinion were measured on a Likert-scale, where 5 meant „fully agree” and 1 meant „fully disagree”. Table 2 demonstrates the attitude statements used in the questionnaire. (Table 2)

The finding suggest that the local decision-makers do not pay attention to the possible negative environmental impacts of tourism. They assume that above all, tourism has positive economic impacts. They support the development of tourism but they find the development of other economic sectors, such as agriculture equally important. This attitude seems favourable as the diversification of economy is a significant requirement. The decision-makers believe that the social impacts of tourism is usually positive, although they have concerns about the negative impacts, such as the anti-social behaviour. The respondents' attitude meets the requiement of sustainability concerning strategic planning and social participation. The decision-makers recognized their role in planning and development but also emphasized the importance of the local communities and the other stakeholders' participation in the process. They support the use of ecolabels, and support the environmental awareness of the enterprises. Altogether the attitude of the decision-makers support the implementation of sustainable tourism.

Therefore the H5 hipotesis was accepted.

Table 2: The attitude statements

<i>Number</i>	<i>Statements</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Rel.S.D.</i>
1	Tourism usually leads to environmental pollution.	2,53	0,162
2	Tourism damages the natural ecosystems and contributes to the decrease of biodiversity	2,56	0,181
3	Environmentally conscious businesses are favoured by tourists.	3,40	0,264
4	Tourists should pay extra fees/taxes in order to preserve the natural values of the destinations.	2,95	0,445
5	Tourism must be developed in spite of its negative environmental impacts.	4,14	0,245
6	Residents should have more information about the costs and benefits of tourism.	4,48	0,161
7	Tourism income benefits the total local population.	4,12	0,249
8	Other forms of land use must also be taken into account when developing tourism.	4,03	0,228
9	Developing tourism is more favourable for the local community than developing agriculture.	2,85	0,112
10	The economic advantages of tourism are more important than the possible negative impacts therefore tourism must be developed wherever possible.	3,30	0,295
11	It is sufficient if the tourism development decisions are influenced by market forces only.	2,02	0,483
12	The local community usually does not participate in preparing tourism development strategies.	3,44	0,138
13	The local community should participate in preparing tourism development strategies.	4,38	0,194
14	Tourists should pay extra fees/taxes in order to preserve the cultural values of the destinations.	2,97	0,441
15	Tourism contributes to the increase of crime.	3,03	0,377
16	Tourism contributes to the conservation of local culture and traditions.	4,35	0,167
17	Tourism development is usually beneficial for the local communities.	4,56	0,116
18	Successful tourism development is only possible by regional cooperation.	4,23	0,225
19	The cooperation of the local community is essential in the long term development of tourism.	4,56	0,138
20	Tourism planning and strategy-making is a governmental responsibility only.	1,85	0,218
21	Businesses not involves tourism should not take part in tourism planning.	2,21	0,244
22	Local tourism development strategies should be prepared by the tourism businesses, the local residents and the local government.	4,70	0,116
23	Local interest groups and civil organizations should be consulted when deciding on tourism development.	4,48	0,135
24	Consulting local interest groups and civil organizations is a waste of time and money.	1,38	0,253
25	Formal regulations are the best way to influence tourists' behaviour.	3,02	0,263
26	Codes of practice are sufficient means of influencing tourists' behaviour.	2,29	0,473
27	Tourists' environmental awareness could be raised by educational programmes.	3,25	0,349
28	Educational programmes are sufficient means of influencing tourists' behaviour to respect local culture.	3,31	0,338
29	Ecolabels that guarantee the good quality and environmentally friendly service are effective means of achieving sustainable tourism.	4,34	0,151

Source: Own compilation

To summarize, after exploring the theoretical background I turned to the findings of my empirical investigation that is the local decision-makers' attitudes towards sustainable tourism development in the North-Great Plain region. I concluded that the majority of the local decision do not know, or misinterpret the concept of sustainable tourism. Most of the respondents identify the concept with economic sustainability, instead of giving priority to environmental interests.

However, according to the results of the survey on the opinions and attitudes of the local decision-makers – although the importance of the natural environment is not emphasized and the direct economic benefits seem to be in the foreground – on the whole, the local decision-makers show positive attitudes towards several aspects of sustainable tourism. For instance, the importance of social capital is highlighted, the participation and cooperation of the stakeholders is recognized, and other economic sectors are not neglected because of tourism development.

In order to make progress towards sustainability I proposed a training programme for local decision-makers regarding the concept and practical aspects of sustainable tourism development, as well as the tasks and instruments of local governments.

Table 3 represents the summary of the research questions and the relevant hypothesis, and whether they were accepted or rejected. (Table 3)

Table 3 : **Summary of the empirical research questions and the hypotheses**

Research questions and hypotheses	Accepted	Refused
1. What do local decision-makers know about the concept of sustainable tourism development?		
H1: The local decision-makers know the concept of sustainable tourism development, they are especially aware of the balance of the environment-economy-society.		X
2. Which tourism impacts do they find especially important?		
H2: The local decision-makers give priority to the economic impact in connection with employment over the other economic impacts.	X	
H3: The local decision-makers consider the direct environmental impacts more important than the impacts on the man-made, built environment.	X	
H4: The decision-makers consider the conservation of the existing socio-cultural values as the most important social impact, while, they are mainly afraid of the anti-social behaviour (e.g. crime) as the major negative social impact of tourism.	X	
3. What attitude do local decision-makers have towards sustainable tourism?		
H5: The local decision-makers' attitudes support the implementation of sustainable tourism development.	X	

Source: Own compilation

4. THE NEW FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

1. I collected and systematically organized the definitions of sustainable tourism, its principles and theoretical approaches based on the international literature. In the Hungarian studies published so far this type of comprehensive approach was missing. As a result of the analysis, I defined the main components of the concept, which may serve as guidelines for the practical implementation as well. I highlighted that interpreting the concept is still an open question for future research.

2. The issue of carrying capacity is of great significance from the practical implementation's viewpoint. I analysed the concept of carrying capacity, its practical applications, and the challenges concerning its measurement based on the international literature. I concluded that defining an absolute number is usually not possible but certain benchmarks may be determined when analysing the impacts of tourism, which may warn the decision-makers if intervention is needed. Consequently, determining the carrying capacity may be a useful tool in planning and managing tourism.

3. In my dissertation I analysed the role of tourism stakeholders in achieving sustainability. I focused on the role of the government. This is especially important because the role of the government is usually described in terms of its economic developing activities, neglecting its tasks in preserving the natural resources and achieving sustainability. I demonstrated the objective, tasks and instruments of the local governments in achieving sustainable tourism development. I highlighted their role in influencing the other stakeholders: the local community, the tourists and the tourism enterprises.

4. Tourism has a priority in the economic development plans of the North Great Plains Region of Hungary. Members of the local governments, the local decision-makers are responsible for persuading the other stakeholders to respect the principles of sustainability, therefore their knowledge, opinions and attitudes have a crucial importance. My empirical research was the first to survey local decision-makers' knowledge, opinions and attitudes towards sustainable tourism development in the North Great Plains Region of Hungary. The results call our attention to the fact that

local decision-makers give priority to the economic interests over the environmental issues.

5. In order to reach sustainability in the tourism sector I proposed the compilation of an educational program for the decision-makers. On the one hand, the program should inform them about the concept, the principles and the practical implementation of sustainable tourism, while on the other hand it should clarify the tasks and instruments of local governments.

5. THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESULTS

I intend to emphasize the fact that informing the local decision-makers about sustainability and sustainable tourism development is of crucial importance. The most surprising result of my research was that most decision-makers were not aware of the concept of sustainable tourism and many of them misinterpreted its meaning. The majority of them identified the concept with the economic sustainability, and they did not give priority to the environmental interests.

This negative view of the local decision-makers' knowledge is modified if their attitudes are taken into account. It became clear that although the importance of the environmental issues is not emphasized and the direct economic benefits seem to have an advantage over the ecological issues, the decision-makers' attitudes mostly suit the principles of sustainable development. For instance, they consider the components of the social capital as highly important, they agree with the view that the local community should participate in planning and decision-making, etc.

On the basis of the results there are two areas where intervention is needed. First, it would be important to inform the decision-makers about the principles of sustainable tourism development and the ways of monitoring. Secondly, it would be useful to make them aware of their decisive role in the implementation of the concept. The visual representation of the local governments' tasks and instruments may contribute to the efficiency of such an educational program. (Figure 1: The role of the local governments in sustainable tourism development) Distributing this type of information would be possible via the Internet or as a set of guidelines in printed version.

6. PUBLICATIONS

Idegen nyelvű tudományos folyóirat:

1. **Vargáné Csobán K.** – Bauerné Gáthy A. (2009): *Long-term government responses to sustainable tourism development: principles and strategies.* APSTRACT: Applied Studies in Agribusiness and Commerce. Vol. 3 No. 3-4, 2009 <http://purl.umn.edu/53550> 0,2

Magyar nyelvű tudományos folyóirat idegen nyelvű összefoglalóval:

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