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Mass Tourism VS Niche Tourism

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Title: Managing Niche Tourism in Developed Countries. The Case of Vital Villages Association

ABSTRACT

Weaver (2000) elaborated a model based on the relationship between tourism intensity and the regulation of the sector. According to it, destination development consists in four ideal-types (Circumstantial Alternative Tourism or CAT, Deliberate Alternative tourism or DAT, Unsustainable Mass Tourism or UMT, and Sustainable Mass Tourism or SMT) and their possible evolutionary scenarios.

Within this framework, mass tourism and alternative tourism are not polar opposites, with the former being perceived as implicitly bad/unsustainable and the latter as good/sustainable. When the principles of destination management are applied, even mass tourism can be a possible sustainable option in accordance with both Jafari's knowledge-based platform (1989) and Clarke's notion of convergence (1997).

The theoretical and practical implications are that:

- a) the *approach to tourism sustainability* (WECD 1987, Johnson 1993) can be extended to both mass and niche tourism;
- b) this approach has to inspire the destination tourism development. The future competitiveness not only of developed but also of emerging destinations depends on the strategies which balance economic, social and ecological impact of tourism.

This challenge seems to be crucial in the post-modern era in which niche tourism cannot be conceived as the long tail of mass tourism (Gaussian distribution), whereas it corresponds to a wide range of tourist segments of small-scale which involve an allocentric clientele with specific motivations. The authentic and unique tourism experiences that they are interested in are sought at different times and in different places (Pine and Gilmore 1999).

According to recent analysis (Dwyer et al. 2009), both the orientation towards sustainable development and the new culture of tourist consumption are emerging mega-trends that will deeply affect the tourist sector at an international level. Destinations able to address these innovative trends proactively will be able to gain a competitive advantage combined with a

durable socio-economic well-being and the conservation of natural resources and cultural identity.

Within this context and the focus on niche tourism, the paper proposes the approach to tourism sustainability as the strategy to promote local development and increase the competitiveness and attractiveness of rural marginal areas of central European countries (Italy, Austria, Germany, Czech Republic, Poland and Slovenia) (www.listentothevoiceofvillages.org). These areas, which present features of CAT or DAT ideal-type destinations, retain a tourist potential that could become an economic and social driving force if properly exploited. According to the principles that put into practice the approach to tourism sustainability (planning and local stakeholders participation), pilot projects within the sector of sustainable tourism are the tools that are used to promote bottom up development strategies in these areas (e.g new forms of support and promotion for traditional activities, innovative forms of accommodation, quality certification etc.). However, universities and local institutions support the process providing local stakeholders with training and competence in the field of sustainable destination planning and management.

The expected result is that The Vital Villages transnational association should coordinate all of these destinations and promote their facilities. At the same time, it should encourage the extension of the association and the mutual exchange of skills and expertise among its members.