Chapter 7
Ethical Consumerism in Tourism:
The Evolution of the Responsible Tourist Attitudes – Between Definitions and Tribal Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

The chapter focuses on responsible tourism as a form of ethical consumption, based on conscious travel choices and behavior. There is a growing demand for responsible tourism, although it seems to be characterized by some inconsistencies, both between tourists' intention and concrete behavior and between these behaviors and the official definitions promoted by the industry and institutions. Starting from the analysis of a recent survey about responsible tourism on the Italian market, the chapter then tries to investigate and explain these gaps, by applying the perspective of social studies and of researches on consumer tribes and new consumers' communities. The findings of the survey discussed in the chapter seem to confirm that consumers have their own perception of responsible tourism and that the meaning is discursively constructed within and outside responsible tourists' communities. Therefore, the intention-behavior gap and the difference between tourists' account of responsible tourism and "institutional" definitions cannot be categorized as true inconsistencies.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of consumption beyond minimal and basic needs and the resulting consumers' request of a large amount of products and resources have led to the development of a new ethics of production and consumption. Greater attention is currently being paid to quality, safety of consumers, environmental and social concerns: how are the products actually produced and what are the impacts of this production and consumption on the environment and the society (Shah, 2008)?

In the last few decades, several contributions in the literature about ethics in consumerism have been much discussed in order to study this phenomenon and to encourage responsible consumption behaviour and change in business practice (as Corporate Social Responsibility - CSR) (Tallontire, Rentsendorj, & Blowfield, 2001).

According to empirical findings, nowadays an increasing number of consumers seem to align their consumption decisions to ethical motivations, paying attention to eco-friendly products, respect for labour standards and human rights. Evidence suggests that the ethical approach can take different forms and "consumption styles", resulting in a complex phenomenon to explore. In addition, there seems to be a gap between consumers' opinions on green and ethical values and consumption of ethical products: even though consumers follow certain principles when they are shopping, there is a significant disparity between what people state to do and their actual purchase (Tallontire et al., 2001).

Tourism, as a form of consumption, is directly involved in the debate about ethical consumerism, even more if one considers the negative effects produced by mass tourism in several destinations. Impacts that have led, at the beginning of the '80s, to the development of a widespread concern among the international community and to a growing attention paid to the topic of sustainability for promoting and supporting alternative and ethical forms of tourism.

According to Sharpley, Hall, & Henderson (2012), the main issue is how to encourage ethical consumption and the spread of the so-called responsible tourism.

However, also in tourism, even though the demand for responsible products is growing in Europe, we seem to observe a significant inconsistency between consumer attitude and real consumption, together with some contradictions in the consumer behaviour of those people who define themselves as responsible tourists. Even the so-called responsible tourists seem to conceive responsible tourism on the basis of a superficial perception or of some preconceptions that differ from the most known and widespread definitions; such as the limited view that responsible tourism involves only destinations in underdeveloped countries or that it has to do merely with environmental protection. Tourism demand seems to be made up, on the one hand, of a small but non negligible segment of "believers", i.e. truly responsible tourists who seriously adopt conscious and respectful choices and behaviours before and during their holiday; and, on the other hand, of the large majority represented by "unaware" or "not willing" "tourists who do not follow a responsible path or "moderately sympathizer" tourists who act responsibly according to the moment, the destination, and other travel choices (Chafe, 2005; Gössling, Scott, Hall, Ceron, & Dubois, 2011; Sharpley, 2010).

Most sources in the literature agree in attributing these phenomena to a combination of factors: the difference of cultures (Lyne & Andrachuk, 2008); the lack of exhaustive information about responsible tourism; the still small offer of responsible firms (hotels, tour operators, etc.) and responsible products, that very often focus on some destinations only (for example many responsible tour operators propose only locations in poor and less developed countries, such as South America, Africa, etc. where tourism based on fair-trade values can be an important source of income for local communities).

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