

Regional Coordination Policies of Alternative Forms of Tourism

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I am very pleased to be among so important politicians and experts. I'll do my best to be up to your expectations and to share the experiences from my District, an Island District, the Ionian Islands Region.

Journey is written into every person's **DNA**. From the day that we are born, we begin to explore, trying each time to find something new. A new destination. However, someone would wonder, why there is nothing to satisfy the human nature. Why humans never feel satisfied? Why they want to move from one place to another all the time? Why travel is an inseparable part of our life?

There are many answers indeed. It should be the personal needs, the environment in which we live, the place that offers us hospitality, or even how high each of us places our pursuits.

Let us go back to reality thought:

Tourism is said to be the basic lever of economic growth. In general, however, the economic field is nowadays very laborious to upgrade. That happens because people are not willing to **compromise**. However, in the sense of collaboration, when it comes to the claim of the general good this cannot be avoided. What will contribute the most in the accomplishment of this goal is the existence of the appropriate **guidelines**, upon which the economy of each country will be based, in combination with investments.

In Greece, in the Ionian Islands where I live and I were born, and especially in Corfu, the first travelers-tourists came in the nineteenth 19th century along with the emperors of the "great" Austria-Hungary. Some of them went to Zante, others to Ithaca because of **Ulysses** and less to the rest of our islands.

One hundred years later the situation seemed to have changed. After in 1955 the tour Operators came along and led the tourism to the 3S model (**sand - sun – sea**).

Greece has given sand and sun and sea. Everything closes to the waves. During a twenty year period we have reached 12 twelve million tourists per year. However, with the 3S the tourist market in Greece has reached saturation point. Of course the danger to shift to the other **3S (same situations, same suggestions, same solutions)** existed.

The increase of overproduction of the tourist products, even of the same form, leads almost always to "over-fishing" (I do apologize for the metaphorical meaning I am using) of our product and we end up mathematically to the bottom of the ocean that has nothing more to offer. **Overproduction, over-fishing, over-consumption.** Inevitably this type of tourism will lead to insufficient infrastructure, low demand, decline of prices, and **tourism of lower level** that had no cultural or environmental interests and therefore derived everything superficial that existed.

Even though, Greece can recover. I think that everybody agrees, that in Athens as well as in the region we should develop **quality tourism**, based basically to our strong features: the nature, the culture, the climate, in the framework of a sustainable development, which will result to the elongation of the tourist period, with alternative forms of tourism, with new markets, etc.

The enrichment, however, of the tourist product with special cultural activities presupposes **great organization**, approach and decentralization. The planning for the future of tourism should move from the capital to the region, to the District, to the Municipality. There, **politicians along with businessmen** will approach the success through a sustainability of the tourist product.

By the elevation of tourism through culture, nature, religion, as well as gastronomy. In one base: Tourism-culture- environment.

By the planning from those who live and experience the tourism in the Region, a solution could be found.

The above will only be achieved when the central governments decide to be **less self-centered** and more generous in financing the **Region**.

Of course this will happen gradually, and the model is already on the right track, if we take into consideration the fact that two years ago **the Ionian Islands Region**, which I represent has created a mixed company, the ITC, by businessmen, Local Authority and less government authority involved, in a normal form of Société

Anonyme (S.A), in order to watch over, to foresee, to handle crises but most of all to highlight by many ways the tourist product of the Ionian Islands.

What has it achieved? And I answer: It has been very successful. And this is proved by the fact that all the rest Regions in Greece, are trying to create similar companies in accordance to our pattern.

The political leadership of the newly- established **Ministry of Tourism**, declares that it will **support** and will help these regional politics, that know better and from close experience everything that concerns tourism, their Regions, cities, villages, hotels, rooms for let, restaurants, at all the points where the tourist product is of the Region is sold.

The question, however, is: what kind of tourism are we talking about? The tourism that has come to an end because of the overexploitation or another tourism, or **other forms of tourism?**

In my opinion I think that we should set up in common all over **the new Europe**, in this new vigorous market of millions of citizens that in a few years will share the same currency, Euro, a **different tourism**.

A form of tourism that will not destroy its sources, but to be instead, in itself a source of euphoria and happiness.

We are not willing to provide to all these people the easy and cheap tourism of the "seaside", but we would like to offer them the tourism of the "**gentle**" forms, of ecology, tranquility, nature, culture, local cuisine, materials close to the **environment**, sports tourism, flowers and trees, the kind of tourism that wont leave them feeling empty only with their passports and luggage, instead they will be full of satisfaction, and **knowledge** for what they have seen, they have heard and the best impression of the place that have hosted them for few days.

They will be introduced to the local architecture, the religion, the gastronomy, the **people**.

Which are these forms anyway?

In what stage of development they are at the present time and what ways are we using?

What kind of form could follow the **collaboration of all the regions** in order for this new model of tourism to succeed?

I answer and I state my experiences and my indications:

The last decade, a swift for the special forms of tourism is said to take place internationally, where the visitor is supposed to take part to several of activities that the life in the city deprives them of.

Here, in a totally **Island Region**, where the main islands are Corfu, Paxoi, Lefkas, Meganisi, Kefalonia, Ithaka, and Zante and surrounded by 20 other islands as well, you are suppose to meet a paradise.

More than 1200 different species of flowers and plants are said to grow in the Ionian Islands, and a local fauna of more than 30 different species of birds. And of course we cannot miss the well-known turtles **Carreta - Carreta**, who live in the southern coast of Zante, where they lay and take care of their eggs.

Festivals are organized each year in the Ionian Islands as well as religious events such as the **Holly Week** and Easter. Many **galleries** are hosting exhibitions of international and local **artists**. Further more many events are held open air such as **concerts** of modern and classical music, ballet, plays and traditional dances.

The natural environment and the landscape in many parts of the Ionian Islands Region, provide extraordinary conditions for the development of new activities and therefore of new tourist products. The Region is been developed in a significant **agrotourism** destination, after the encouragement of new farmers as well as businessmen through special programs by the 3rd Community Support Framework. As a result, the locals in order to satisfy their needs they come closer to nature and therefore they are involved to activities that are almost forgotten, such as, the home made bread and sweets, horse riding, walking in the forest, cultivation of land.

The Government provides significant aid up to 60% of expenses for such investment, for agrotourism, handicraft, local customs etc. through special program.

In the Ionian islands Region we come across alternative forms of tourism such as **Ecotourism, Geotourism, National Parks, Agrotourism, Archeological Tourism, Museums and Castles, Congress Tourism,**

Religious Tourism, Gastronomy, and the wine and olive tree production, the Sports tourism, Sailing and Yachting, Scuba diving and Horse riding.

Ecotourism is developing gradually, since a lot of lakes, rivers and lagoons are spread in the cluster of the Ionian Islands, Corfu, Lefkas, Kefalonia, as well as in the Carreta-Carreta's Sea Park in Zante.

Geotourism is the less developed form of tourism in Greece, it is though, a new dimension in the environmental tourism. However, the magic of the nature is spread all over the Ionian, in lakes, as we mentioned before, in caves, in geological breaches, with erosions and elevations. These places are said to be of great scientific and esthetic value and constitute places of significant tourist interest.

In the Ionian Islands the **plains** rotate with the **torrents**, lakes and **lagoons**, stone and sand coasts and reefs.

As a result of this diversity of form in the landscape, 380 out of **433 species of birds of the whole Europe**, are in the Ionian Islands, and more than 700 species plants grow in our Islands.

The **Sea Park** in **Zante** was especially made for the protection of the well known Carreta-Carreta sea turtle in the area of Lagana, where the turtle is protected in order to lay its eggs.

About the archaeological tourism we could say only one word:

A history of 4.000 years. **The Ulysses and the Ithaca**. This same Ithaca that is also today a member of our Region.

Is the Odyssey way with the entire spectrum of Odyssey and all the legends of the area for the most important King of the Trojan War.

Fur from all these, it's a **nexus of castles**, that in the past were associated with legends and traditions, where our history is kept; all put together the sense of the **cultural tourism** of the Ionian Islands.

Finally, **Congress Tourism** is also developing in the Ionian Islands. It is said to be new form of tourism throughout the year. Today, in the Ionian Islands 62 conference rooms of capacity of 50 to 600 persons, supplied with all the latest technology.

Those who are interested in faith and religion may visit innumerable **churches and old monasteries** that prove the rich religious heritage of our Region.

Additionally, Marine Tourism should not be left out. There are a lot of marinas spread out in the Ionian Sea for **yachting and sailing**, as well as special beaches for **surfers** and **kite surfers**.

The unique tourist indulgences, of **olive** and **wine** will always attract our foreign visitors. Exquisite wines the so called "**blessed**" **olive oil** and plenty of fresh fish will excite your senses.

With regard to Sport Tourism it should be pointed out that there are golf clubs in Corfu as well as magnificent places with sport Facilities for Athletics and Swimming found in all islands.

In order to conclude two new forms of tourism should be mentioned;

Horse riding is being developed along with Ecotourism, Agrotourism and scuba diving. Special schools for all these activities are being provided offering the necessary diving equipment and professional divers who accompany all of you interested to explore the strange and magnificent submarine world of the Ionian Sea.

All in one three- dimensional base **Tourism- Culture – Environment**.

However, it should be mentioned that all the above forms of tourism are not at the same level of development. Some of them are already developed, and some of them are in the process of developing.

Most forms of tourism – mentioned above – are being aided by special financing programs provided by the E.U. or by governmental sources, all via the **Ionian Islands Region** that could reach a **60%** of the initial investment, and do not concern only the new forms of tourism.

As a result a new tourist product that is being developed, gives the chance to young people to stay home, combats unemployment and promotes and supports local products.

Therefore the provided tourist product contributes to the protection of the environment, creates **sustainability** and the natural sources are not dried out.

For a common policy, for a common regional co-operation at the level of construction of special strategies, for sustainability and the creation of **alternative forms of tourism** - which according to my opinion is the future of tourism and ecology of my country - I suggest the creation of a **coordinating body**, a **reviewing commission** targeting in;

- The **communication** among the Prefectures with regard to the alternative forms of tourism being applied
- The **communication** among the Prefectures with regard to the ways every country realizes those targets.
- The **sources of financing** and subsidy of every investor
- The establishment of a **permanent body** which will substantially put pressure for more decentralization of sources and authorities to the prefectures.

Thank you for your patience

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Mr Panagiotis Skliros (born in 1949) is the Managing Director of Ionian Tourism Corporation S.A. The fundamental goal of I.T.C. is to support and promote the secure growth of the Tourist industry within the Ionian Region by continually upgrading the quality of both the product offered and its presentation in Greece and abroad. Mr. Skliros was the Mayor of Lefkada Municipality from 1999 to 2003. He has written many articles for newspapers and magazines on tourism and he has participated and made presentations in many seminars and conferences including:

- Cultural Tourism In The Balkan Countries (Corfu, Greece, Sept 03)
- 1st World Tourism Association Seminar (Rhodes, Greece, Nov 03)
- Organisation of tourist Municipalities of Greece (Corfu, June 2001)
- The role of island Municipalities in the Mediterranean (Milan, March 2000)
- Sustainability and tourism: problems and solutions (Kefalonia, Greece, September 1999)
- Tourism and environment (Capri, Italy, May 1999)
- Tourism and forms of cooperation (Athens, April 2002)

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