

# TOURISTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT OF TIANZHU MOUNTAIN IN ANHUI PROVINCE, CHINA

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**Abstract:** *This research aims to examine tourists' perception of the sustainable tourism development of the Tianzhu Mountain in Anhui Province, China. It reviews tourists' opinions on three sustainability aspects of tourism (economic, environmental and socio-cultural aspects) and assess differences among tourist demographics. The research used non-random convenient sampling. 384 questionnaires were distributed to tourists who traveled to Tianzhu Mountain between October 2013 and March 2013. The findings show that the tourists' demographics (education and income) have a strong effect on the economic, environmental and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development. Additionally, tourists' age has a strong effect on the environmental aspects of tourism development and tourists' occupation has a strong impact on the socio-cultural aspects of tourism development. A series of recommendations are made based on these findings.*

**Key words:** *Tourists' perception, sustainable tourism, sustainability aspects*

## 1. Introduction

Today, the tourism industry has become one of the most important industries in the world and one on the increase in recent decades (Mbaiwa, 2011). Initially a domestic industry, the tourism industry has since evolved into an international industry. Tourism can meet people's growing material and cultural needs. It can improve people's health, broaden their horizons, increase their knowledge, and promote social development. Tourism has experienced sustained and rapid growth. However, as Aref and Marof (2009) pointed out, although tourism can generate enormous economic benefits, it can also be a threat to the environment. Evidence suggests that the impact of tourism occurs not just at the destination, but at all stages of a tourist's trip. Economic, social, cultural and environmental negative effects often gradually translate into the loss of traditional culture, environmental deterioration, and the disturbance of the ecological management system. One response to these tourism-related problems has been the development of sustainable tourism development.

According to the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), sustainable development "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987). From this, the concept of sustainable tourism was born. The term 'sustainable tourism' is derived from the more general concept of 'sustainable development.'

Altinay and Hussain (2005) have defined sustainable tourism development as the practice and use of the concept of sustainable development in the field of tourism, based on tourism development and its attendant growing economic and social issues.

In China, the rapid development of the tourism industry and growing number of tourists is leading to the over-exploitation of natural resources and destruction of the environment. If people fail to realize that there is a strong correlation between tourism development and environment, tourism will most likely face a deadly blow. So, tourism, natural resources and socio-cultural behaviors need to be considered as a whole in order to promote development.

Admittedly, not all tourists have the same socio-economic and cultural background. Different tourists behave differently and different tourists at different destinations have different opinions on the destinations. And not all tourists are equally aware of the importance - and necessity - of protecting the environment when staying at a tourism destination.

This study focuses on the sustainable tourism development of the Tianzhu Mountain, the highest mountain in Southern China, also known as the Wan Mountain and located within the boundaries of Qianshan County, Anhui province of China.

In an effort to understand the way sustainable tourism development can be implemented, this research seeks to examine tourists' perception of the economic aspect, environmental aspect and socio-cultural aspect of tourism development in light of tourists' demographic factors.

After reviewing the relevant literature and articulating the conceptual framework and

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research methodology, the article discusses the findings of the survey conducted among tourists in that area. It then makes recommendations.

## 2. Literature Review

### - *Tourism*

According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), tourism comprises the activities of persons traveling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purpose not related to the exercise of an activity remunerated from within the place visited. Simply put, 'tourism' refers to all activities of visitors, including both overnight and same-day visitors. (Source: <http://www2.unwto.org/>). Tourism denotes the temporary short-term movement of people to destinations outside the places where they normally live (Burkart & Medlik, 1974).

As Mathieson and Wall (1982) pointed out, tourism involves people who are engaged in activities in the temporary destinations outside of their usual places of work and housing. Visitors can gain rich experiences from tourism as it provides cultural heritage, employment, income and other benefits for host communities (Hall & Lew, 1998).

### - *Tourists*

Cohen (2004) defined a tourist as a voluntary, temporary traveler, traveling in the expectation of pleasure from the novelty and change experienced on a relatively long and non-recurrent round-trip. Tourists include all those who travel for leisure, recreation, vacation, health, education, religion, sport, business, or family reasons (Van Harssel, 1994).

### - *Demographic Variables of Tourists*

Tourism analysts often find it desirable to have information about the demographic variables of the various categories of travelers. These include age, stage in the family life cycle, gender, income, occupation, education, religion, nationality, and race (Hanna & Wozniak, 2001). As Mathieson and Wall (1982) pointed out, tourists' perceptions of, motivations for, and attitudes toward a destination are influenced by socio-economic characteristics such as age, education, income, residence and family situation. Gender roles are concerned with the consequence of being male or female and the social expectations and opportunities affecting these positions (Swain & Momsen, 2002).

Income can be defined as the consumption

and savings opportunity gained by an individual within a specified time frame, which is generally expressed in monetary terms (Barr, 2007).

As to occupation, It refers to the job which is a regular activity performed for payment, that occupies one's time.

### - *Sustainable Development*

As a general principle, sustainable development must ensure that it is the duty of all peoples and their governments to protect, conserve, preserve, and pass on to future generations nature's heritage and the legacy of human civilization, while preventing all deliberate measures and acts that might harm or threaten that heritage (Dwivedi & Khator, 2006).

According to Dwivedi (1997), sustainable development obliges humanity to use, develop, manage, and care for the environment and planetary resources in a manner that "supports the stewardship of all creation (including all natural resources, and the welfare of all living beings), and the continuity of cultural and spiritual heritage of each community, as well as the maintenance of harmony between people and nature for present and future generations."

### - *Sustainable Tourism*

As Swarbrooke (1999) noted, there are two clear links between sustainable tourism and sustainable development: First, Sustainable development is a prerequisite for sustainable tourism; non-sustainable development can reduce the quality of the tourism product by way of inadequate infrastructure and pollution from other industries. Second, sustainable tourism is a potentially powerful tool to help achieve sustainable development. It can to be a catalyst for small business development and can provide a market for agricultural products grown in rural regions in developing countries. In developing countries where traditional industries are decreasing, it can also help local economies and lead to community regeneration. At first, the concept of sustainable tourism was embraced by the industry with minimal consideration of the theoretical link between the concept of sustainable development and the particularities of the context of tourism (Miller & Berno, 2006).

Sustainable tourism is not only environmentally suitable, it is also appropriate and morally correct. It can attract more tourists and decision makers in the tourism industry, in both the public and private sectors (Wheeler,

1993).

Bulter (1993) described tourism in a sustainable development context as “tourism which is developed and maintained in an area in such a manner and at such a scale that it remain viable over an indefinite period and does not degrade or alter the environment (human and physical) in which it exists to such a degree that it prohibits the successful development and well-being of other activities and processes”. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic, and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development (Source from <http://sdt.unwto.org/en/content/about-us-5>). If natural resources or culture are destroyed, or if tourism is weakened, then it is almost impossible motivate people to maintain and enrich the environment. There is therefore a very important relationship between tourism and the overall environment.

#### *- The economic Aspect of Tourism*

Many national and local governments use tourism as a mechanism to help the development and regeneration of their economies as it provides many opportunities for work, income and revenue (Page, 2003). While the tourism industry brings both positive economic benefits, it also has as a negative impact on the host communities. It can create jobs for local people, provide additional income and attract investment. However, the jobs which may be created are seasonal in nature and have the issue of job security and sustainability. In addition, a large number of tourists can increase the cost of goods and services to the detriment of the local people who no longer have access to some commodities due to high prices (UNESCO Bangkok, 2008).

#### *- The environmental Aspect*

The increasing number of tourists also means an increasing population and infrastructure. Improperly-built infrastructure can affect land stability and impacts water resources. A surplus of pollution destroys food and water sources, degrading the livability of the community (UNESCO Bangkok, 2008).

Tourism can have a major environmental impact on the natural environment (Hunter and Green, 1995). As people travel by feet and vehicles or gather plants, they trample and damage the floral and faunal species composition and destroy breeding habits. Through clearance to adapt tourist facilities or through the creation of wild animal protection

area, they may change the natural vegetation and reduce forestry. Tourism also causes air pollution through vehicle emissions, noise pollution because of transportation and other related activities, and water pollution from sewage disposal and petrol leakage. Tourism often has a negative visual impact as it increases built-up areas, most notably residential ones. It can also result in an overload infrastructure.

#### *- The Socio-Cultural Dimension*

With tourists coming from diverse cultural backgrounds, the socio-cultural impact of the interaction between differing cultures can be either positive or negative. Educating tourists about the local culture should be developed (UNESCO Bangkok, 2008). As Dogan (1989) pointed out, tourist activities often conflict with resident activities and may interrupt the residents' daily lifestyles.

According to Pearce (1989), in terms of social-cultural impact, tourism is likely to: change the occupational structure of the local community (e.g. increase low-skilled, female and seasonal labors); reduce the use of native languages/dialects; increase gambling and prostitution, encourages migration from rural areas to urban tourism resort areas; and changes social values.

A suitable balance must be established between the economic, environmental and socio-cultural aspects of tourism in order to guarantee its long-term sustainability. Sustainable tourism should conserve natural resource and biodiversity, respect the socio-culture of local community, help the local community protect its built and living cultural heritage and traditional culture, and provide economic benefits to all stakeholders (they should be fairly distributed) (UNWTO, source from <http://sdt.unwto.org/en/content/about-us-5>).

#### *- Perception*

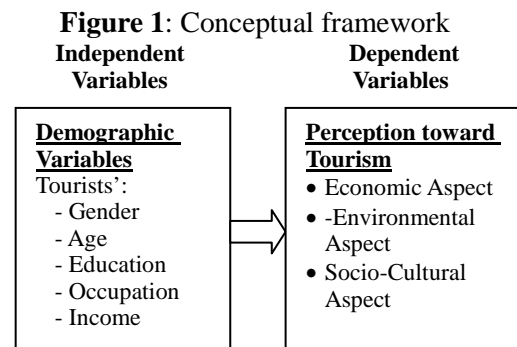
Perception can be broadly defined as “the acquisition and processing of sensory information in order to see, hear, taste, smell, or feel objects in the world; also guides an organism's actions with respect to those objects” (Sekuler & Blake, 1990). The recognition of perception as a biological process underscores another important point: perception is a symbolic activity (Frisby, 1980). It represents “the final product in a chain of events stretching from events in the physical world external to the perceiver, through the translation of those events into patterns of activity with the perceiver's

nervous system, culminating in the perceiver's experiential and behavioral reactions to those events" (Sekular & Blake, 1990).

Perception is the process of selecting, organizing, and interpreting sensations into a meaningful whole. Three concepts are intimately related to perception: exposure, attention, and sensation (Hanna & Wozniak, 2001). As Yantis (2001) has argued, clarified perception is not merely an "internal picture of the retinal image; instead, it is a joint result of sensory input on the one hand and what observer knows and expects on the other."

### 3. Conceptual Framework and Research Methodology

The conceptual framework for this study is based on Wray's et al. (2010) model. Tourists' demographics represent the independent variables and include gender, age, education, occupation and income. The dependent variables are tourists' perceptions of the economic, environmental and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development.



Source: Developed by the author for this study

The research seeks to determine the relationship between various tourists' perception and the economic, environmental and socio-cultural dimensions of sustainable tourism in Tianzhu Mountain, China.

A questionnaire with close-ending questions was used for data collection. A total of 384 questionnaires were distributed to tourists who visited to Tianzhu Mountain in October 2012 and March 2013.

The questionnaire consists of 30 items designed to obtain quantitative and qualitative data from the respondents. Part 1 includes six questions about the demographics of the respondents (gender, age, education, occupation and income) and Part 2 twenty-four questions on tourists' perception of the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental

aspects of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain. A five-point Likert Scale was applied, ranking from "Strongly Agree=5" to "Strongly Disagree=1".

### 4. Summary of Findings

As shown in Table 1, a large percentage of the respondents are males (51%) and aged 20-26 years. Over half the respondents (57%) have a bachelor degree and a majority of them (64.3%) work as employees. 43.2% of the respondents have a monthly income ranging from 3,001 to 5,000 Yuan, with a low 2% with an income over 10,000 Yuan.

**Table 1: Summary of Tourists' Demographic Characteristics.**

Tourists' Demographic Characteristics	Findings
Gender	Male (51%), Female (49%)
Age	Below 20 years (4.9%), 20-26 years (25.8%), 27-33 years (20.8%), 34-40 years (13.3%), 41-47 years (17.2%), above 47 years (18%)
Education	High school (27.3%), bachelor degree (57%), master degree (8.3%), others (7.3%)
Occupation	Student (11.2%), employee (64.3%), retired (8.9%), government officer (8.1%), business owner (2.1%), others (5.5%)
Income	Below 1,000-Yuan (10.9%), between 1,000 and 3,000-Yuan (21.6%), between 3,001 and 5,000-Yuan (43.2%), between 5,001 and 8,000-Yuan (15.9%), between 8,001 and 10,000-Yuan (6.3%), above 10,000 Yuan (2.1%)

In this research, there are fifteen hypotheses to test the difference among different tourists' perceptions toward economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects of sustainable tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain. The results of hypothesis testing show that there is a relationship between the dependent and independent variables.

### 5. Discussion and Conclusion

This research aims to determine tourists' perception of sustainable tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain from three sustainability perspectives. The following summarizes the discussion and conclusion of this research:

#### - Economic Aspects

Tourism can have much influence on the economic and socio-cultural environment. That tourism development plays a conspicuous role to tackle poverty has long been recognized as it provides many employment

**Table 2: Summary of Hypothesis Testing**

Hypotheses	Results	P-Value
H1	There is no significant difference in tourists' perception of the economic aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by gender.	0.355
H2	There is no significant difference in the tourists' perception of the economic aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by age.	0.428
H3	There is a significant difference in the tourists' perception of the economic aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by education.	0.006
H4	There is no significant difference in the tourists' perception of the economic aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by occupation.	0.363
H5	There is a significant difference in the tourists' perception of the economic aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by income.	0.017
H6	There is no significant difference in tourists' perception of the environmental aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by gender.	0.397
H7	There is a significant difference in the tourists' perception of the environmental aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by age.	0.040
H8	There is a significant difference in the tourists' perception of the environmental aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by education.	0.000
H9	There is no significant difference in the tourists' perception of the environmental aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by occupation.	0.062
H10	There is a significant difference in the tourists' perception of the environmental aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by income.	0.000
H11	There is no significant difference in tourists' perception of the socio-cultural aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by gender.	0.581
H12	There is no significant difference in the tourists' perception of the socio-cultural aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by age.	0.229
H13	There is a significant difference in the tourists' perception of the socio-cultural aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by education.	0.000
H14	There is a significant difference in the tourists' perception of the socio-cultural aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by occupation.	0.006
H15	There is a significant difference in the tourists' perception of the socio-cultural aspect of tourism development in Tianzhu Mountain when classified by income.	0.036

opportunities for the local people, who can supplement their incomes from traditional farming or fishing with tourism-related part-time jobs or even switch career and for a full-time job. Tourism development also improves the local infrastructure and welfare such as shopping, entertainment, restaurants, hotels, roads, travel agencies, communication facilities, etc., which therefore will improve the quality of life of the local residents, that is, providing, however, all this is done with sustainability in mind. The tourism industry has the potential to bring significant revenues and great benefits to the destination. But also, there may also be a few negative impacts such as seeking lopsided economic benefits to the detriment of the stability of the local economy.

*- Environmental Aspects*

Tourism can promote economic growth, but the government and other stakeholders often only pay attention to the economic benefits of tourism, neglecting the overall efficiency of the system, at the detriment of the environment. While recognizing the close relationship between sustainable tourism and the

environment, the negative impact tourism development may have on the environment if full priority is given to economic benefits is often neglected. As a result, in the absence of a balancing test, developing the tourism industry may jeopardize its long-term survival due to the neglect of the environment, which is the main reason for its success in the first place.

The Chinese government, local people and tourists must pay greater attention to and protect the environment while developing the tourism industry as the beautiful and clean Tianzhu Mountain environment – if preserved – can attract more tourists. Already the trend toward ever-growing built-up areas and over-capacity of visitors is starting to damage the ecology of Tianzhu Mountain. This may hurt tourism in the area over time. The perception of the tourists surveyed in terms of environmental dimensions is negative as they have noticed air, water and environment pollution as well as plants and animal interference and damage. Another issue contributing to the negative perception is the growth of tourism facilities that may lead to the

over-exploitation of natural resources,

*- Socio-Cultural Aspects*

Tourists' perception of the socio-cultural dimension of sustainability has both positive and negative impacts. Regional or national cultural differences are powerful tourism generators. People want to discover other local cultures and also take their native cultures to the residents of the destinations. Tourism can thus promote cultural exchanges. It is therefore critical for the government to protect the traditional culture as well as the historical heritage of the local community in order to ensure the long-term sustainability of the tourism industry.

However, negative socio-cultural problems have emerged. There are cultural conflicts with local people, some local residents have a prejudice against tourists, and some are losing their native dialects. There has also been a moral decline in the local community.

Sustainable tourism development is vital to the long-term interests of any region. Governments, local communities, and tourists therefore need to achieve a balance among economic growth, social development and environmental protection. There is a strong relationship between tourists' perception and tourism management. Some tourists are less sensitive about sustainable tourism development, so tourism planners and managers need to find various measures to beef up sustainability education and teach tourists about natural resources conservation, local cultural and heritage maintenance and sustainable tourism spread in Tianzhu Mountain.

To achieve all of the above, the following recommendations should be implemented. They may especially useful to planners and managers in the destination in helping them increase Tianzhu Mountain attractiveness:

1) Tourism planners need to make sure economic growth does not result in environmental damage. Good planning and management can prevent many of the problems typically associated with overdevelopment as discussed earlier and ensure maximum long-term benefits. Tourism planning should be an essential component of tourism development.

2) Tourism destinations should provide for some rewards to tourists who make an outstanding contribution to environmental protection as this would motivate tourists to pay attention to and protect the environment.

In order to cater to the different types of

tourists, tourism destinations should tailor their offering and have some special and cost-effective tours that specifically meet the needs of each category of tourists. For instance, there should be student tours, old people tours, cultural tours (for college students and teachers). There should also be premium discount package of Tianzhu Mountain tour (for low income tourists). While different rules could be set for different tours, all should have sustainability as their main objective, which among others mean avoiding the peak traveling period. Although on the face of it encouraging more tourists to the area through financial incentives and customized tours may seem to run against the principal of sustainability, this is all feasible provided the preservation of the environment remains at the forefront of the concerns of all those involved in the planning and implementation of such projects.

3) The local Chinese government, the private sector and other local stakeholders should collaborate and coordinate their efforts to plan and formulate rules and guidelines that restrict tourists' behaviors so as to protect and maintain the still predominant environmental quality of the area. For all those measures to be efficient there should be an enforcement mechanism. Equally important is the need to provide clear information to tourists about what they are expected to do and not do and how their behavior can help maintain/improve the environmental quality of the area. Any new rules and guidelines should therefore be ubiquitous and be made clear and visible to all. Of course, all this requires the public and private sectors to work together and establish a monitoring system.

4) In keeping with preceding recommendation, green tourism programs should be set up so as to raise tourist awareness about the importance of the environment and the need to conserve natural resources and preserve the beauty of the area (which is why they came to the area in the first place). Tourism planners should adopt policies to manage the environment and come up with specific and detailed rules and regulations to enforce them.

5) Since different tourists have different backgrounds and perceptions, it is also important to gather their opinions and viewpoints and get them involved. Making them part of the solution will make enforcement easier and raise their level of awareness. Giving them part ownership of the decisions made will also motivate them to

protect the environment.

6) Since at times, the area reaches over-capacity, which lead to lead to huge traffic jams and air pollution, traveling to Tianzhu Mountain during the holiday season should be monitored. Local authorities could limit the number of tourists when it is too busy.

7) To improve the negative socio-cultural impacts of tourism, all the tourism management agencies such as the Tianzhu Mountain Scenery Committee, the Tianzhu Mountain Tourism Ltd, and the Qianshan County Tourism Bureau need to cooperate toward sustainable tourism development. They cannot make economic benefits the only goal. They also need to use tourism as a way to raise the living standards of the local people. More attention should thus be paid to protect the traditional culture and history of the area. While, as a tourism destination, there is a need for the region to protect its own culture, there is also a need, within appropriate parameters, to accept the penetration of “foreign” cultures (non-local but still Chinese). This of course requires appropriate restrictions to prevent the destruction of the native culture. Perhaps in the future, the tourist and residential areas should not be built as one single area.

8) Tourists and residents need to respect and understand each other. Since residents play an important role in the local tourism industry, they should be culturally-educated, i.e., they should increase their knowledge of their own culture and those of others coming to Tianzhu Mountain.

9) Finally, locals need to participate in tourism decisions. As the main stakeholders in the preservation of the environment and the development of sustainable tourism, their opinion and feedback matter.

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