

Minimising the hidden costs of tourism in Mediterranean islands: Waste prevention actions and circular economy perspectives

Event Summary Report



Wednesday 29 April 2020 - Webinar

The Mediterranean Sea is the world's leading tourist region. According to the World Tourism Organisation, in 2017 about one third of the world 1.326 billion arrivals was generated in the countries surrounding this semi-enclosed sea. Tourism has developed into a major industry and often represents the main source of income for the local economy. The annual massive tourist wave toward the Mediterranean, largely concentrated within a short period, places a great burden on local infrastructure, especially for waste management. This is particularly true for seas-locked areas, such as islands.

Speakers:

- **Maria Spyraiki**, MEP
- **Catherine Chabaud**, MEP
- **Francesco Lembo**, ACR+ Association of Cities and Regions for Sustainable Resource Management
- **Athena Papanastasiou**, Cyprus Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment
- **Curzio Cervelli**, Interreg MED Joint Secretariat Coordinator
- **Gaetano Armao**, Vice-President and Regional Minister for Economy of the Region of Sicily
- **Jeremy Sampson**, CEO, Travel Foundation
- **Sebastià Sansó i Jaume**, Director General, Environmental Department, Balearic Islands Regional Government
- **George Alexakis**, Vice Governor on European and International Affairs, Crete

Opening remarks

MEP Maria Spyraiki

In her opening remarks, **MEP Maria Spyraiki** highlighted that the tourist sector is currently facing difficult conditions due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis, and that this risks to continue until solutions to the pandemic are found. However, this can be seen as an opportunity for stakeholders and local authorities to focus on the sustainability of the current tourism sector, especially as there will be less tourists over the coming months at popular destinations. **MEP Maria Spyraiki** also insisted that the tourism sector is particularly dynamic, and has observed many changes over the years; change is certainly needed, as for example the hotel sector alone is responsible for 1% of carbon emissions. Moreover, it is necessary to reduce single-use plastics in hotels and the whole tourism sector (restaurants/shops). Indeed, IUCN has estimated that over 300 million tons of plastics are used every day and that 8 million tons end up in the ocean each year, meaning that 80-85% of marine litter is made up of plastics. She stressed that everything is a matter of education; what is essential, is a change in consumers' perspective. To achieve this, according to **MEP Maria Spyraiki**, it is vital to focus on five principles which can be applied to the tourism sector; commit, measure, understand, reduce, reuse. They wield enough power to communicate the message for action against climate change and to influence policy. **MEP Maria Spyraiki** concluded her remarks by insisting on the need of a restructure of the tourism model, as well as on the need to act fast, as the longer we wait the higher the cost will be.

Introduction

Athena Papanastasiou, Cyprus Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Environment

Athena Papanastasiou gave a brief introduction on the [BlueIslands project](#). She explained that for the past 3,5 years the BlueIslands project has been carried out to investigate the effects of tourism in the Mediterranean area – the world's leading tourist destination. As highlighted by **Athena Papanastasiou**, the issue of waste generation, especially during high seasons, has never been approached methodologically. More information regarding the investigation on the effects of seasonal waste can be found on the project's [website](#) and [YouTube channel](#). The ultimate goal of this project is the establishment of the necessary conditions on each one of the participating islands, following their unique social, economic and environmental characteristics, so that the waste generated will serve as a resource bank which will be used to fuel local circular economies while preserving and encouraging sustainable tourism. The BlueIslands workplan is divided into three phases: studying, testing, and transferring. Summing up her intervention, **Athena Papanastasiou** claimed that with reference to sustainable tourism, "everything depends on us".

BLUEISLANDS project: the key lessons we learned after three years of international cooperation between 9 Mediterranean islands

Francesco Lembo, ACR+ Association of Cities and Regions for Sustainable Resource Management

Before introducing and moderating the two panels of speakers, **Francesco Lembo** stressed key lessons learned from the BLUEISLANDS project, such as the relevance of data collection as a pillar of punctual policy making, especially when it comes to waste prevention. In addition, he highlighted that policy-making cannot elude end-users engagement. Decentralised authorities have a key role in community engagement as they have levers and credibility to be in active and constant touch with both residents and tourists. Tourists produce on average more waste than local beachgoers, and targeted awareness campaigns can make them feel an integral part of local communities. Moreover, as highlighted by **Francesco Lembo**, marine litter is mostly the result of wider consumption and production models as well as waste management systems. Therefore, any effective solution has to aim for waste prevention through an integrated set of measures, especially taking into account that MED islands have limitations in waste infrastructures. Another key lesson learned, according to **Francesco Lembo**, is that smaller local waste treatment plants (e.g. composters, reverse vending machines) can have a double impact, increasing community engagement and improving resiliency of waste management systems. Last but not least, **Francesco Lembo** pointed out that this time of crisis must be seen as a transformative opportunity, and that we must now begin to outline models and policies that bring together environmental objectives, health and safety as well as the recovery of tourism industry.

Present and future of the Interreg MED program, fostering local sustainable policies through cooperation

Curzio Cervelli, Interreg MED Joint Secretariat

The first panel discussion began with the intervention of **Curzio Cervelli**. The Interreg MED program is currently financing 24 projects on sustainable tourism and co-financing 30 projects on new energy resources. The current focus of the program is on making a significant effort to reduce the impact of human presence on the Mediterranean area. In terms of what the future holds, **Curzio Cervelli** admitted that it felt strange to talk about it considering the current situation, and questioned whether the current crisis will allow us to only focus on the Green Deal or whether a Social New Deal will also have to be introduced as a response. In regard to the program, **Curzio Cervelli** explained that they focus on two main topics; climate change and economic development, both of which fall under the Green Deal. He did however also express his doubts on receiving the same amount of funding for the next program period. Should this be the case, then it will certainly impact the work of the program, making it harder to find solutions, as they will have to change their modus operandi. Because of this, they are considering on specifically focusing on sustainable tourism as it is the most important challenge in this area. **Curzio Cervelli** also acknowledged the lack of cross-cutting approaches, as currently each program around the Mediterranean is working alone, and expressed the need to increase Interreg MED's capacity to merge resources with other programs (ex: trans-national programs, European Neighbourhood Instrument). Last but not least, **Curzio Cervelli** presented the next steps for the program. In the first week of May a videoconference is to be organised to discuss thematic issues, and by mid-May there may be a possible new architecture of Interreg MED. Finally, the aim is to prepare a program by the end of Q1 2021 with the Commission.

Towards sustainable use of natural resources within the Mediterranean insular context

Gaetano Armao, Vice-President and Regional Minister for Economy of the Region of Sicily

Gaetano Armao stressed the importance of energy for small islands and the involvement of the Committee of the Regions in these kinds of topics. The problems of insularity are important, as **Gaetano Armao** underlined that the Committee of Regions is a consultative body of the EU that brings the voice of local communities to the table, and that the role of small communities in developing environmental policies at EU level must be considered and defined. In the context of the current COVID-19 crisis, the tourism sector is being hit very hard; in order to try to mitigate the impact the Committee of the Regions have developed an action plan to support the fight. Moreover, they are in a position to provide concrete feedback from local communities on how to address the socio-economical aspects of the crisis. **Gaetano Armao** acknowledged the new guidelines on waste management and shipment of waste in the COVID-19 context, and further welcomed the good practices' handbook produced by the BlueIslands project, as well as the fact that they have highlighted the link between litter and tourism. **Gaetano Armao's** concluded his intervention underlining that it is essential to invest in a circular economy, and that Europe is facing a new era in which environmental policy will mark the future.

MEP Catherine Chabaud

MEP Catherine Chabaud stressed the importance of the Mediterranean area in terms of economic development as a major transport hub, but equally in its potential for future innovations, such as marine energy. However, the current tourism model is having negative effects on the area but also globally, as pollution knows no borders. Some of these impacts include the creation of waste, the destruction of coastal ecosystems by boats, and an increase in bacterial levels. Fish resources are also overexploited and under great stress. WWF has been clear, the future of tourism and fishing activities are dependent on the well-being of the Mediterranean ecosystem. Sustainable management practices are therefore essential for the future of the region. What must be addressed is how to manage the sudden influx of tourists, along with the increase of waste generated during the busy months as thousands of people land every day, and put a huge pressure on these islands. **MEP Catherine Chabaud** believes that there are many missed opportunities of implementing a true circular economy system, as for example 92% of waste could be recycled. There is need for a systemic approach; the first efforts to ensure a circular system are to better protect and to restore the rich ecosystem and biodiversity in the area. Just like the maximum sustainable yield, there should be a maximum sustainable tourism concept. As highlighted, activities must be restricted along with reinforcing protected areas and increasing marine areas. Citizens must also be more included. **MEP Catherine Chabaud** recalled a report she worked on when in the French Ministry of Environment, which included five priorities for the Mediterranean: (1) better co-ordinated scientific network to understand the impact on ecosystems and better know them, (2) develop and reinforce marine areas, (3) limit impact of marine transport, (4) limit pollution from land and understand how sea currents affect the distribution of pollution, and (5) promote the concept of resilient islands. **MEP Catherine Chabaud** concluded that the Mediterranean is one of the prides of humanity and it is our

common good. We need to promote a global commitment to ensure its sustainable future. This must be done with the Green Blue Deal.

The invisible burden of tourism

Jeremy Sampson, CEO at the Travel Foundation

The first panel discussion was concluded by **Jeremy Sampson**, who presented the Travel Foundation's report "Destinations at Risk: The invisible burden of tourism", the main finding of which is the lack of understanding regarding the negative impacts of tourism despite the positive economic impacts. The current tourism model lacks a holistic approach. There has also been a very recent shift in the agenda to immediate needs such as public health and safety, business survival and returning visitors. This is an opportunity for destinations to take the time to connect with their communities, understand the needs of their residents and seize this change to rebalance tourism. The smartest recovery plan will put the community and resource protection at its centre. As a result, Travel Foundation proposes a new tourism model built upon the following: (1) a shared understanding and agenda of local communities with a mandate built around serving communities and not only visitors, (2) better data on impacts and risks to make evidence based decisions, (3) tools and levers to manage impacts, (4) a shared public/private agenda, to ensure a better understanding of who is accountable, (5) funding and investment allocated in the right way for sustainable outcomes. Furthermore, **Jeremy Sampson** gave an insight into the private sector's perspective, which remains increasingly concerned that destinations are vulnerable while looking for high-quality local experiences. All in all, businesses are getting ready for the recovery by looking at reducing their footprint and by investing into resource circularity.

Q&A Session

During the Q&A session for the first panel discussion, **MEP Maria Spyra**ki was asked how the European Union can support the recovery of tourism after the crisis. For **MEP Maria Spyra**ki what is primordial is to establish specific areas to focus investments on, while sustainable tourism must be one of them. The whole sector must be transformed, and this opportunity must be grasped to renovate the buildings for example. The implementation of the single use plastics directive will also contribute to the recovery of tourism. There is also the possibility to use funds provided by the Green Deal to invest in sustainable transportation especially in small islands. What is important is engaging with people. **MEP Maria Spyra**ki concluded that funding must be allocated to specific sectors in order to have the desired outcomes. The second question, regarding Interreg, touched upon the support existing for entrepreneurial activities and how much of a priority tourism will be on the next program. **Curzio Cervelli** responded that currently tourism is not a priority under the proposed regulation, however it is difficult to imagine not taking tourism into account in the future, underlining that by tourism it is meant sustainable tourism, and not economic tourism development. Interreg MED cannot face all the problems alone, so common answers must be found.

Regional perspectives

Sebastià Sansó i Jaume, Director General, Environmental Department, Balearic Islands Regional government

Within his intervention, **Sebastià Sansó i Jaume** presented the situation of the Balearic Islands. The context is similar to the other Mediterranean islands as the economy is based on touristic activities. There has been a continuous increase in tourism over the past few years, particularly during summertime. However, this increase in tourists has led to an increase in waste. For **Sebastià Sansó i Jaume** we have the opportunity today to change the economic model. Currently the Balearic Islands have just 20% of selective waste collection according to data from 2019. For residual waste there is an incinerator in Mallorca and two landfills for the other islands, otherwise most of waste is sent between islands or to the mainland. In terms of good practices, a pay-as-you-throw program has been implemented, in Esporles a door to door waste collection, and in San Lorenç (a touristic municipality with 20.000 hotel beds) waste has been massively reduced since the introduction of a door-to-door collection with a weighing for large generators such as hotels. The implementation of the Law for Waste Management as of 2021 will also introduce a series of measures which aim to contribute to the reduction of waste. These measures will include payment per generation, where the rates will vary depending on the type and quantity generated and where good practice bonuses will be applicable. Other measures will involve a tax for the treatment of waste in landfills and incinerators, as well as a deposit system for bottles. Equally, as of 2021, certain products made of single-use plastic will not be able to be sold, distributed or used. Regarding circular economy actions, support has been offered for example in the implementation of the computerization of green points and in projects of waste to offset the environmental impact of the visitors with the budget of the Sustainable Tourism Tax. **Sebastià Sansó i Jaume** concluded that with the creation of more green jobs it will be possible to further implement circular tourism.

Regional perspectives

George Alexakis, Vice Governor on European and International Affairs, Crete

George Alexakis recognised that sustainability is more crucial than ever. Crete has welcomed more visitors gradually each year; more than 5 million tourists have visited over the last years. Tourism represents 47% of Crete's GDP. Three pilot beaches which have implemented the BlueIslands' protocols have led to significant results regarding waste prevention. **George Alexakis** explained that recently a Crete region has been selected for the CAPonLitter Interreg project, which aims at improving policies and practices that can help in preventing marine litter that results from coastal tourism and recreational activities. However, **George Alexakis** stressed that the COVID-19 crisis presents a new reality and with that a major challenge. As many questions and uncertainties remain, solidarity amongst countries and governments is crucial. Crete is faced with two potential scenarios this summer in terms of tourism, either a short season from July, or no tourism at all. **George Alexakis** acknowledged that Crete would obviously prefer the first scenario. However, he did recognise that public health is the first priority and that staff must be trained in health protocols, should a short tourism season go ahead. COVID-19 has no respect for political, geographical or political boundaries; this crisis has also highlighted how interdependent our globalized societies and economies are. It is therefore time to review our short- and long-term strategies and policies

towards a new perspective of sustainability and climate change-related challenges, on a local, national, European, but also global scale, as stressed by **George Alexakis**.

Calling the EU tourism sector for a behavioural change towards sustainability

Cristina Nunez Cuesta, NECSTOUR Managing Director

Cristina Nunez Cuesta presented NECSTouR's 5S approach: Statistics and indicators; Safety and resilience; Smart destinations; Socio-cultural balance; and finally, Skills and talents. For **Cristina Nunez Cuesta**, it is clear that sustainability is the way forward to recover by transforming destinations and businesses. NECSTouR has issued a call for a behavioural change towards sustainability addressed the European tourism sector. Moreover, for NECSTouR, what is crucial is to consider that "what is good for residents is good for visitors". Local communities must be included at all levels of the decision process. **Cristina Nunez Cuesta** presented the Sustainable Tourism Horizontal Project, an Interreg MED initiative helping BlueIslands with other projects to capitalise on their solutions to transform the tourism sector. The three main objectives of this project are (1) to enhance and enlarge the MED Sustainable Tourism Community, (2) to generate a capitalisation responsive environment and (3) to mainstream the results of the Community into national and regional policies. NECSTouR is part of the consortium. To achieve sustainability within the sector, there is a need for proper strategies with proper plans and proper tools. **Cristina Nunez Cuesta** insisted that the Sustainable Tourism community is a tool to help mainstream all the outcomes of the projects being developed, and to reach out to the right policy actors. **Cristina Nunez Cuesta** final message was that NECSTouR's response to this crisis has been to establish a specific dialogue on the impact of the EU emergency measures, as well as to position the Green and Digital transformation of tourism ecosystems in the long-term budget

Q&A Session

During the second Q&A session, **Sebastià Sansó i Jaume** was asked about the polluter-pays principle and the Sustainable Tourism Tax in Balears and whether he had the impression that this mechanisms will be affected by the current crisis. He replied that it is important to go towards a circular model and that the Balearic Islands Regional government is not planning on ending these measures. Secondly, a question was addressed to **Cristina Nunez Cuesta** and **Jeremy Sampson** regarding the key factors leading to community engagement. For **Cristina Nunez Cuesta** the issue is that the socio-cultural sustainability of tourism is less addressed. Residents do not feel the ownership of their own culture, which leads to them not being consumers of their own cultural heritage. With the outbreak of COVID-19, there is an opportunity to reshape the product all the way to its own development. There is a need to promote the re-focus on the domestic markets. **Jeremy Sampson** additionally stressed that there must be an evolution of the product, to ensure that its foundations are built on new sustainable indicators rather on than attracting high number of visitors. He concluded that the issues below the surface must be addressed in order to achieve a fundamental shift in how touristic destinations are managed. Finally, **MEP Maria Spyraiki** answered a question on whether the COVID-19 outbreak would increase or reduce efforts to protect coastal environment. From her point of view, the amount of money available will be used first to tackle the consequences

of this crisis; tourism should however be included in the Green Deal. This is also the opportunity to push for the private sector to invest in sustainable tourism projects and engage more with the local communities.

Take-away messages and conclusions

MEP Maria Spyra

For **MEP Maria Spyra**, the main take-aways from the webinar were that first and foremost it is important to understand that tourism must be changed in regards of services, consumer models, and touristic residences. It is important to start investing in these parameters, not only with funds from InvestEU, EIB, but also from the private sector. We must invest in circularity. The recent Circular Economy Action Plan is an important roadmap and instrument to achieve this. Secondly, campaigns must be organized in terms of local communities, for these communities to understand the role of circularity and waste management. Last but not least, according to **Maria Spyra**, all of us must also question how we are producing and consuming as a society, towards the achievement of sustainable tourism.