

Unique Sales Proposition: A Sustainable Development Model for the Golf Tourism ‘Product’

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Abstract: *In Greece the topic of sustainable development has become extremely important due to the country’s unique and fragile geomorphological landscape. When one is making a business proposal for “green” investment, in starting-up a golf court, the overall cost of the investment should be seriously taken into account. A major concern is that such a project should not put any pressure on the surrounding environment and the ecological conscience of the tourist golf player. On the basis of a potential investment for such an eco-project, that will be compliant with the sustainability and growth of its surrounding environment, we propose a new model of sustainable development with a particular focus on golf courts. It is a combination that is based on the following two systemic parameters: a. the principles of sustainable development as described in Agenda 21, and b. the sustainable management and development model as it has been developed by the Golf Environmental Organization (G.E.O.); both will lead to a unique sales proposition. The research question that this paper will focus upon is whether this model can play a significant role in the investment decision-making process of setting up a sports tourism enterprise where its sole “product” will be golf. Regarding the factors that contribute to its sustainability we investigate them under the aspects of the tourism carrying capacity model where they are analysed based on its stages.*

Keywords: *Sustainable development (Agenda 21, G.E.O. model), golf tourism, Tourism Carrying Capacity, Unique Sales Proposition, Global Niche markets*

1. INTRODUCTION

Golf is a sport with a four centuries’ history. Its ancestor is considered to be the game the fishermen on the coast of Scotland used to play, who, upon finishing their daily spells, were trying to hit small stones with the help of a wood. Gradually this hobby evolved in its current form which we encounter for the last 100-150 years. It is a sport that can combine the development of self-esteem, physical exercise, fun, contact with the natural environment on a personal level as well as a business profit and tourism development both for countries as well as companies. Golf tourism is defined as that part of the sports tourism in which a tourist visits a country having as an almost exclusive aim either to play golf, or to play golf by linking it together with other relevant activities (Walton, 2010). The global financial crisis which began approximately in September 2008 in the United States and has spread all over the world (the worst since the 1930s) could not leave unaffected the tourism industry and, thereby, golf tourism. In particular decreasing tendencies appeared which differed from region to region.

At the global level, the framework conditions for the sustainable development of golf courts is evolving at a rapid pace; the outcome is that the modern agenda of sustainability to be the one affecting more and more the government policy, legislation and consumer preferences. Proper environmental management across the entire spectrum of golf investment actions is extremely necessary, as it has been found that practices can seriously affect the health of the players and, in extend, the reputation of firms and therefore their profitability, based on evidence of environmental negligence and unethical business practices. The investors, on a global scale, of golf courts have realized that the economic viability of their business depends on the level of social and environmental approach their business plans will entail, an event which would give higher fidelity in the security of players’ health and therefore higher quality in their end-product. There is strong evidence that consumers associate sustainability by ensuring the conditions for this sport, along with the quality and value of the product on offer. In addition, the proper planning and design of the courts can give higher value to the relevant investment and to provide assistance in the long-term profitability of the resources.

In this context, it becomes clear that the future economic development must be different. The particular point of change is the expectation that future growth plans will have to find and exploit the opportunities that will be catalysts for environmental and social improvement. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to make an academic contribution through the creation of a model for sustainable golf tourism development; this will be achieved by making an examination of the sustainable development of this form of tourism which could lead to a unique selling proposition (USP) as a distinct competitive advantage. Thus, the research question which arises from the specific purpose of the present work is whether such investments can, despite the higher adaptation and depreciation cost of the initial capital investment (turnover) in the long term, to lead to higher profitability, and therefore provide a sustainable approach incentive to existing and/or future infrastructures.

The research methodology used in the writing of this paper was based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data used were collected both during a research conducted for the writing of a postgraduate thesis, its topic was related to the golf tourism industry and it was part of a master's degree in Tourism Management in the Hellenic Open University, as well as the presentation of a publication in a scientific conference. The secondary data are the result of research conducted using books, other studies and specialized electronic internet sources relevant to the issue.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In accordance with a comprehensive definition given by Borrego (2002), we can define golf tourism as “a social phenomenon that religiously motivated the implementation of a particular sport whose goal is playing golf or watching it. That phenomenon necessitates a series of travels for the ‘stakeholders’ thus creating a significant economic activity on the ‘environment of space’. The golf and its related tourism or residential development use both local and surrounding natural and man-made resources and cause direct, indirect and secondary effects in both the construction but mainly in the operation of their respective investment infrastructures. At the same time, as Petridou(2011) indicates, many studies examine that golf players constitute a very strong and selective group of sports’ tourists that spend, on average, five times more than the usual tourists. In addition, because of the particularities of the sport, golf players travel primarily during the winter months (November - April), which contributes to the reduction of tourism seasonality and the expansion of the tourist season for each visiting country.

Viewing it from a different perspective, golf as a product, is usually of interest to specific markets and customers who, in their majority, are mostly concerned about the court's and the compound's standards rather than paying any attention to the environmental, or other, consequences these may cause to the surrounding area. Investing financially in an eco-friendly golf court project is many times higher than it would have been in a non-ecological golf court. Therefore, any potential investor could take a risk by making such an investment decision. The environmental cost on the other hand, if all eco-development factors are not taken into account, could turn out to be even higher. One could argue that usually the investors who provide the financial investment to such infrastructures and developments do not really believe in sustainable eco-systems rather than to a speedy return on their funding. According to the Environmental Institute for Golf (2011) the U.S. golf industry recognizes sustainability as the integration of environmental stewardship, social responsibility and economic viability as a critical and never-ending goal. They further suggest that the golf industry embraces sustainability as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

A historical example of such a compound is, according to Freibott (2006), the Olympia Fields Country Club, which was built in 1915 just south of Chicago, and it had as its main purpose to offer relief from industrial urban life. Freibott further argues that in the mid-20th century, the specific compound's existence meant that more density—buildings, streets and driveways—were not built, and today, it remains a rare green space in the area, regularly hosting bird-watchers who can ogle up to 95 different feathered species in between birdies. A series of such compounds, like the Kabi Organic Golf Course & Orchard in Australia, are a great example of this trend. More and more golf course superintendents are using fewer pesticides and fertilizers (or none at all), regularly testing water quality, mowing less often and in fewer areas, composting grass clippings, and using reclaimed rainwater. Some greens now provide sanctuary for local wildlife and are replanted with native grasses that require less harmful care.

The above-mentioned sustainable practices consider the environment, the community and the financial requirements to be main contributors to the long-term success of the golf industry. One could also argue that every industry today faces environmental scrutiny and challenges, whether from government regulation or public perception. Having that in mind it is not strange to understand why the golf course industry recognizes the need for a sustainability plan that is focused, organized, and fosters collaboration, unity, transparency, and participation as important principal elements in the context of the overall environment.

2.1 Diversification of the tourism product

Having already discussed about both golf tourism as a product, and also from an environmental perspective, one should also discuss about another important issue: the diversification of the tourism product that may arise as a result of the choice of a particular golfing destination, an event that leads to the increase of competitiveness. As Tassiopoulos and Haydam (2008) mention, ‘sports and tourism are among the world's most sought-after leisure experiences’. This constitutes

a very important aspect of this discussion as a notable proportion of people and stakeholders exists that focus mainly on the environmental consequences that the development of golf tourism could entail, who express a vertically negative view on the development of this form of tourism.

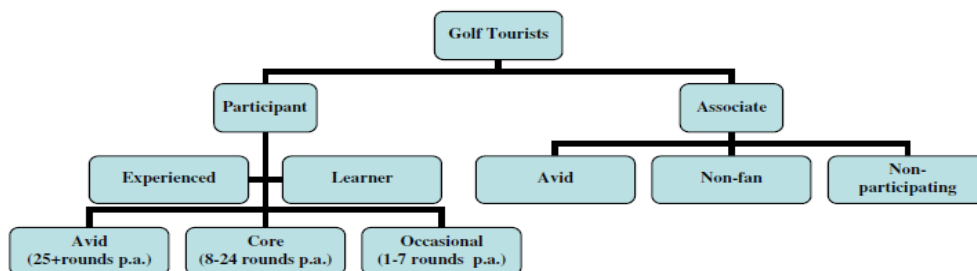


Figure 1: Typology of golf tourists (adopted from Tassiopoulos and Haydam, 2008)

In particular, the ‘industry of golf’ has realized the contemporary need for the protection of the environment hence creating an ‘eco-label’ in order to certify the sustainability of golf courses and their overall operating facilities. Thus, it is offering improved guidelines and practices in all the areas related to their management and development. These certification programs are given by the G. E. O.⁸⁵ (Golf Environment Organization) and are considered to be the most reliable eco-labels that exist today on a global scale and which meet the requirements of the times. In particular, G. E. O. has issued a Management Guide where it is stated that the viability of a golf course including all its operational facilities and by extension of the entire region, depends entirely on the sustainable design and its resulting development operations and management. This guide refers to six themes: (a) water, (b) energy and resources, (c) quality of the environment-landscape-ecosystems, (d) humans, (e) communities and, (f) in the logistics chain.

3. METHODOLOGY

With the help of a model we developed, the analysis of this proposed tourist product - the sustainable golf tourism - took place through an empirical research using secondary sources. At the same time a comparative study took place for the sustainable development of this tourist product on an international level; the findings of this study are coming from a research which formed a part of a postgraduate dissertation conducted by Petridouin 2011. Regarding the factors that contribute to its sustainability we have investigated them under the aspects of the tourism carrying capacity model where they were analysed based on its stages.

The sampling method used in the aforementioned research used a sample of residents in the area of central Halkidiki in Greece who were randomly selected in its variant format: cluster sampling. That area population was grouped based on geographical criteria, because its sought to have participation from all the regions which were directly related to the specific investment. With regards to the extraction of information about the behavior of golf players at an international level, a questionnaire was used to a random combination of non-random sampling. The random sampling technique was chosen again as we pooled a sample based on geographical criteria; the reason for that was that the size of the underlying population was scattered in more than a handful of economically developed countries of the world and our aim was the greatest representation of this population.

The greatest part of the total sample of this research comes from the aforementioned method. Moreover, the 20% of the sample was chosen based on non-random sampling because we had approached official organizations that were able to give us reliable and accurate information (Greek embassies around the world, Greek Golf Federation, magazine publishers relevant to the Golf Coaches Golf etc.). Moreover, apart from a questionnaire that was used on golf players, we also used the method of observation. For the latter in particular, during the world tournament that was held in Porto Carras from the 23rd until the 28th of March 2011, ‘privileged’ informants were used throughout the duration of the tournament, and at the same time there was direct involvement of the researchers in a golf ground, where semi-structured discussions took place with golf players from different countries, both amateurs and professionals, as well as with coaches; at the same time we talked to the people responsible for organizing this golf tournament and, generally, with people who were involved in this event in any kind of way. In addition, a number of questionnaires were collected using the method of face-to-face interview.

4. ANALYSIS – FINDINGS

4.1 Importance of motivation for selecting a tourist destination with golf facilities

⁸⁵The GEO is an international non-profit organization, having as its partners golf communities and environmental organizations, with its main focus the viability of golf courses (some of its partners include: The European Tour, European Golf Association, WWF, UNEP, the Club Managers Association of Europe, America, and China and The R&A).

	Not at all important	Somewhat important	Important	Very important	Extremely important
Golf court condition	2.8%	11.8%	21.5%	31.9%	31.9%
Golf court design	20.8%	36.1%	26.4%	15.3%	1.4%
Existence of other golf courts in the area	8.3%	7.6%	27.8%	37.2%	18.1%
Golf court level/difficulty	9.7%	20.1%	38.2%	25.7%	6.3%
Existence of luxurious facilities	14.6%	33.3%	31.9%	18.1%	2.1%
Existence of cultural areas	13.2%	26.4%	36.8%	21.5%	2.1%
Natural beauties	2.1%	19.4%	36.1%	29.9%	12.5%
Sea proximity	3.5%	11.1%	38.9%	37.5%	9%
Climatic conditions	3.5%	0.7%	18.1%	48.4%	35.4%
Nightlife	20.1%	27.8%	38.2%	6.9%	6.9%

Table1: Importance of motives for selecting a tourist destination with golf facilities

From the percentages in the above table one can observe that 83.8% of the respondents indicate that the climatic conditions are very important or extremely important when choosing a golf tourism destination, while an equally significant percentage of 63.8% place an emphasis on the golf court condition.

There are also many people who would like to have the option of finding other golf courts in the same area (55.3%). The minor incentives, as indicated in the above table, are nightlife (13.8%) as well as the golf court design (16.7%).

During the holiday period, the cost, for 51.39% of the sample of the golf players, is a very important factor. On the other hand there are many people who responded that the cost is not so important to them than the comforts and quality of the offer. Finally, 12.50% expressed the view that for them the cost is the most important factor.

4.2. *Golf players' attitudes towards the environment*

At this point, the respondents' interest in the environmental management of a golf course was assessed. Again, based on the responses, as shown in the diagram below, 47.91% of the sample indicates a strong interest in the environmental management of a golf course and only sometimes they seem to be interested (40.28%) and not often or never interested (11.81%).

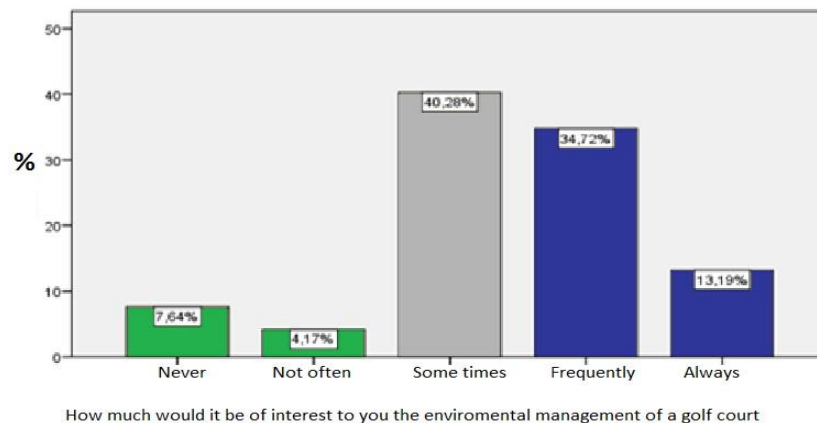


Figure2: Interest in the environmental management of the golf course

Quite important results is that the majority of the sample of golf players (38.89%) indicated that only sometimes they are willing to pay an extra amount, a premium, in order to safeguard the protection of the golf course environment. A significant interest (often and very often) on the aforementioned willingness is reflected on the 34.03% of the sample; on the other hand, 27.08% of the respondents seemed to be interested almost never (or not often).

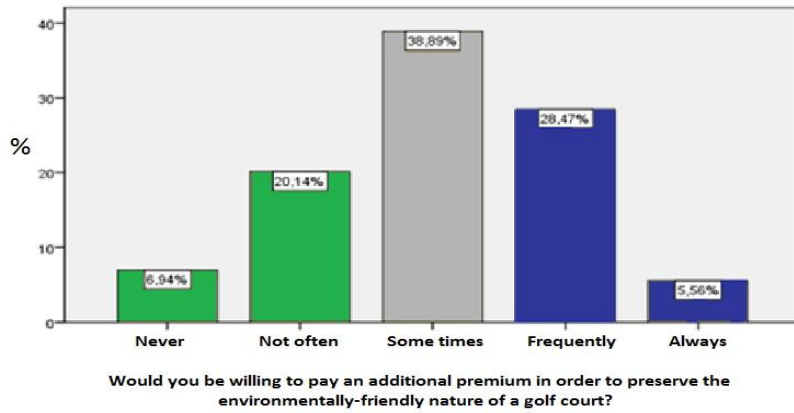


Figure3: Attitudes towards placing a premium on prices in the case of proper environmental management

4.3. Carrying capacity as an indicator which relates to the environmental, economic and societal aspects of golf tourism.

According to Coccossis (2004) the concept of tourism carrying capacity stems from a perception that tourism cannot grow forever in a place without causing irreversible damage to the local system, whether expressed in social, economic or environmental terms; the latter applies in the wide sense, including the built environment. Therefore, as Coccossis (2004) argues, there should be limits on tourism development in a place in terms of its size, intensity etc. This concept formulated our methodology in terms of identifying the factors and indicators which relate to the environmental, economic and societal aspects of golf tourism. Based on the afore-mentioned we propose not only the G.E.O. Good Practices of the above-mentioned guide, but also their application based on indicators, both qualitative and quantitative, in three areas: economy, environment and, society and culture, which consist the ‘background model’ of a modern sustainable tourism development approach based on the patterns of Agenda 21 for tourism as shown below.

Figure 4: General display of a sustainable model of Golf

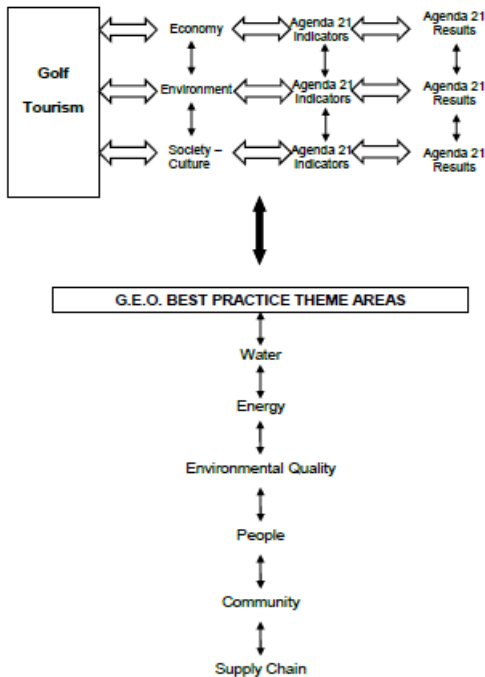
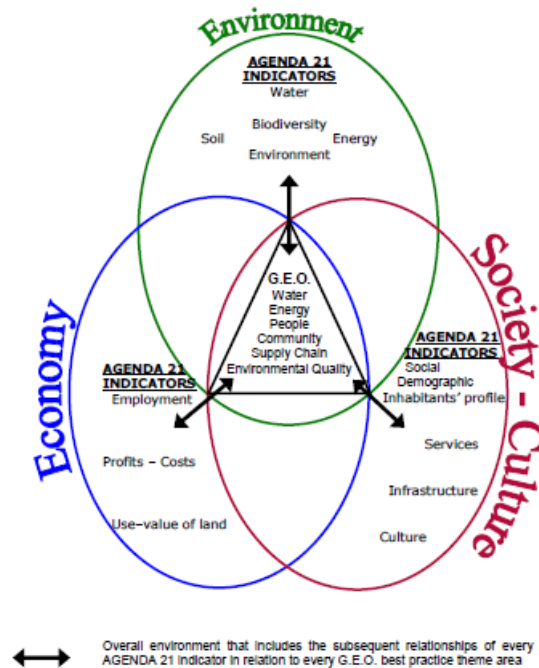


Figure 5: Functioning display of a sustainable model of Golf



4.4. Environmental Management Systems (EMS)

According to Carrow and Fletcher (2007) since the Environmental Management Systems (EMS) approach to management of environmental issues is voluntary and integrated into daily management of a facility, the aspects of benefits

and costs related to an EMS are important components in development and implementation of a facility EMS. Carrow and Fletcher (2007) further argue that the implementation of an EMS entails benefits to a business as well as costs. Based on their research they summarized the benefits and costs of EMS in terms of both business and environmental aspects around the following themes:

Benefits to a Business	Improve overall environmental performance
	Prevent pollution
	Save money on landscape maintenance, energy, materials, etc.
	Enhance existing compliance efforts related to environmental aspects
	Reduce or mitigate risks and liabilities
	Exhibit environmental due diligence
	Increase efficiency
	Reduce costs
	Enhance employee morale and possibly enhance recruitment of new employees
	Achieve/improved employee awareness of environmental issues, responsibilities, and initiatives
	Promote a positive, proactive corporate image related to environmental issues and club achievements with public, regulators, lenders, investors.
	Qualify for recognition/incentive programs such as the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency in the U.S.) Performance Track Program
Costs to a Business	An investment of internal resources, including staff/employee time
	Costs for training of personnel
	Costs associated with hiring consulting assistance, if needed
	Costs for technical resources to analyze environmental impacts and improvement options, if needed.

Table 2: Benefits and costs of EMS in terms of both business and environmental aspects (adopted from Carrow and Fletcher, 2007)

As noted, development and implementation of an EMS by a golf club demonstrates to the public and regulators a proactive attitude toward environmental stewardship that does enhance the corporate image. However, positive benefits of a golf facility to the community 'stakeholders' encompass more than the environmental aspects; and all benefits should be included in the EMS – i.e., job creation, impact on the local economy, recreational goods and services provided, positive environmental contributions. Too often in the past, when discussing a particular environmental issue that may have high visibility among environmental activists or the public, only the negative aspects were included without the counterbalance of benefits or positives. Carrow and Fletcher (2007) claim, that an EMS program and its associated documents can be valuable tools for planned outreach and educational efforts by a golf course. A good outreach and educational program involving club officials can result in significant benefits at the community level. The above-mentioned approach can be extended with any other indicators' system for sustainable development and in particular with one that is related to a golf court.

	Protection or Enhancement of Soil Resources and Quality	Protection and Enhancement of Water Resources	Climatic Enhancement and Protection
Functional/Environmental	Prevent soil loss from wind erosion--a primary reason turf grass is used as a groundcover	Reduce sediment movement into water features---a primary reason turf grass is used as a groundcover.	Reduces/moderates climatic temperatures
	Protect for soil loss by water erosion---a primary reason turf grass is used as a groundcover.	Capture water from runoff for soil moisture recharge	Reduces sod/soil surface temperatures on sports fields and turf grass areas used for enjoyment
	Contributes soil organic matter and enhances soil quality/health---physical, chemical, biological/microorganism aspects	Entrapment of organic chemical pollutants and enhances degradation Many turf grass sites incorporate wetlands, surface water capture, trees, shrubs, naturalized environmental areas	Reduce air borne dust and associated health problems
			Fire protection by providing a green zone that is not combustible (firewise landscaping)
		Glare reduction	
		Air pollution control	
Recreational	Integral part of many community, school, professional sports---soccer, golf, football, baseball, lawn bowling, tennis		
	Enhances youth and adult participation and enjoyment in outdoor activities and sports		
	Contributes to a safe playing environment for athletes---cushioning and surface stability, smoothness		
	Contributes to spectator enjoyment		
	Low cost, living surface that can be self-repairing		
Aesthetic	Beauty contributes to quality of life		
	Feeling of mental well-being---horticultural therapy		
	Community pride		
	Ornamental compliment to trees, shrubs, and flowers		
	Allows individuals to express themselves and influence their surroundings through individualized landscape activities		
Economic	Direct revenues, taxes, jobs from sporting events and golfing in the local economy		
	Enhancement of tourism---in some cases tourism is built around golfing		
	Parks, sports venues, golf courses, and landscape industry contribute jobs, money and taxes		
	Suppliers of turf grass equipment, supplies, and services contribute jobs, money, and taxes in the economy		
	Enhanced home and properties values and, therefore, greater tax revenues		
	Contributes to purchase of non-turf items goods and services in the community ---restaurants, dry cleaners, service stations, transportation, hotel and resort accommodations, sports equipment		
	Direct revenues, taxes, jobs from sporting events and golfing in the local economy		

Table 3: Benefits that turf grass sites contribute (adopted from Carrow and Fletcher, 2007)

Nevertheless, the bibliography so far has not gone into great depth regarding the associations such activities may entail to a very important element: the golf players' health. According to Borgert et al. (2012) there have been alarming claims recently made in the press which state that chemicals used in turf maintenance may cause to golfers a variety of health problems, including reduced sex drive, reduced fertility, cancer and even fatal allergic reaction. As Borgert et al. (2012) argue that it may be incumbent upon the golf industry to study chemical exposures that could be encountered by golfers just as manufacturers have a responsibility to study the potential toxicity of chemicals they produce. However, one should take into account that although the available data and relevant information do not link golf with diseases or health-related issues, a more complete data set would provide scientific answers to alarmist claims made in the popular press about health risks from golf courses. Therefore, it is quite important for a relevant study to take place in order to examine whether any health issues are related to golf.

4.5. Unique Sales Proposition – A development under the scope of sustainability

The ecological sports tourism industry already possesses an advantage; its healthy industrial development. This period of industrial development, one could suggest, could result in the progress of science and technology through the existence of excellent professional-talent teams, and based on those, to promote economic development, social progress and an ecological culture, thus exhibiting a profound prospect for the industrial sustainable development. For the implementation of sustainability, the sports tourism industry utilizes the latest developments on issues such as environmental science, sports science, the science of tourism management, etc. In these areas it should be applied a research system which would include the research resources of the tourism product, i.e. the analysis and evaluation of resources and the exploitation and the management of resources. Based on these principles we suggest the above proposed model of sustainable management of a golf destination, which could form the basis for a unique selling proposal for a similar investment.

A Unique Selling Proposition (USP) is the description of the attributes that are unique to a particular product or service and distinguish it in such a way that makes customers willing to buy and not to buy these products or services from competitors (Zhu, 2009). Thus, environmentally-sensitized golfers-consumers along with those who are now discovering their environmental concerns and provide a dynamically growing global target group in accordance with the relevant primary and secondary quantitative data presented above, consist a USP for the golf tourism product. We therefore propose that this USP will be a combination that is guided by the best practices in sustainable management of GEO and Agenda 21. Under the proposed model, an assumption has taken place: that the construction of a golf court and its necessary related infrastructure, which is being accredited from a sustainable environmental management perspective, has a competitive advantage and a unique selling advantage compared to a golf court not certified accordingly. Therefore, we believe that this model can be used as a tool for marketing differentiation of a sustainable golf tourism product in the process of determining when developing a strategic marketing approach for the global niche markets of golf. The latter are the so-called 'global niche markets sustainable golf management' or, in terms of the players and consumers' perspective, the 'environmentally conscious markets for golf players'.

As Tassiopoulos and Haydam (2008) believe, in an increasingly competitive global sports market, destination management organizations and tourism marketing authorities need to clearly define the needs, wants and characteristics of the golf tourism sub-sector with accurate, relevant and up-date information concerning their target markets. The segmentation of the golf tourism market thus has direct implication for the type of golf tourism offering that has to be developed, and has direct implications for the type of niche opportunities that can be targeted in destination marketing (Tassiopoulos and Haydam, 2008). In order for a USP to be further enhanced, they suggest that the following actions should be taken by the relevant stakeholders:

- Improve awareness amongst golf business about the tourism industry, and its relevance to their businesses.
- Improve the tourism knowledge and customer service performance of the golf tourism industry by establishing educational programmes and accreditation.
- Monitor and quality assure the quality of golf tourism services being delivered by golf tourism providers.

5. CONCLUSIONS

All developments in this industrialization context that has been described are carried through the specific design and implementation of the project led by a scientific and regulatory development planning and management so that their implementation is significant and can guarantee the actual sustainable development. This industrial development requires a strong financial guarantee, but the planning and designing sometimes may include a series of contradictions. In fact, the relationship between economic, ecological and social services is complementary. A relevant scientific research could mitigate these conflicts. Therefore, it becomes paramount to the design perspective, the science of project planning and the achievement of this embodiment of technical progress. Studies on similar issues, such as environmental science, sports science, the science of tourism management and so forth, should be undertaken successfully to implement the sustainability of the project through the planning, design, enforceability and its validity. The Principles of planning and design should give priority to economic benefits but also consolidate the management of economic and social benefits. They should also highlight the adaptation to local conditions, protection and rational exploitation of the necessary resources and of a single planning while stressing the main themes and a step by step approach. A similar approach must be taken towards golf tourism, which is worth noting that it may bring significant economic benefits, not only in the countries where it is being developed. At the same time though, it may cause serious economic, social and environmental impacts. In this context, it is understood that the future economic development of this form of tourism should be consistent with the afore-mentioned principles of sustainable growth and development.

Therefore, the main finding of this paper is that the environmentally-sensitized golfers-consumers along with those who are now discovering their environmental concerns and provide a dynamically growing global target group in accordance with the relevant primary and secondary quantitative data presented above, consist a USP for the golf tourism product. We therefore propose that this USP will be a combination that is guided by the best practices in sustainable management of GEO and Agenda 21. Furthermore, the element of health protection for the people who play golf from a possible contamination by pesticides should be strongly considered by potential investors in 'green' associations and golf courses, since they could use this aspect as an additional competitive advantage.

Finally, it should be noted that this research had a series of limitations. In particular, since the proposed model has not yet been implemented anywhere it should be considered from a purely theoretical and methodological perspective. It could also be argued that, given that environmental factors are particularly important for the development of such investments, it is likely that in the future they could become compulsory. Future research is proposed to take place in the area of cost-benefit analysis by comparing revenue and expenditures of the golf courts that have an ecological attitude to those who do not have set up the appropriate facilities.

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