

# Quality and preservation of local resources in coastal destinations from the tourists' perspective. The case of Hua Hin

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## Abstract

**Purpose of the paper:** *This paper investigates whether the quality and preservation of natural and cultural resources meet tourist expectations and whether they have an influence on their satisfaction and re-visiting intentions.*

**Methodology:** *A quantitative questionnaire was developed and administered to European tourists in Hua Hin, one of the most visited coastal destinations in Thailand. To identify and analyse possible effects, importance-performance analysis, principal component analysis and structural equation modelling have been employed.*

**Results:** *Results show that the visitors' expectations in terms of quality and preservation of local resources are not adequately met, thus should be improved. Findings also show that they affect tourist satisfaction and intention to return.*

**Limits:** *The main limitations of this paper are the characteristics of the sample, which do not allow a complete generalization of the results, and the limited number of variables considered in the analysis.*

**Implications:** *The study suggests that the quality and preservation of local resources are issues on which coastal destinations in developing countries should concentrate and invest in, in order to meet a growing tourists' demand for sustainability.*

**Originality of the paper:** *This paper is one of the few contributions examining if quality and preservation of tourism resources affect tourist loyalty in coastal destinations in developing countries.*

*Key words: Quality and preservation of local resources; Sustainable tourism development; Tourist satisfaction and loyalty; Coastal destinations; Developing countries; Hua Hin, Thailand.*

## 1. Introduction

Coastal destinations provide some unique characteristics for being attractive places preferred by tourists. Tourism growth is coupled with emerging concerns about potentially environmental and socioeconomic negative impacts on local development, especially in large-scale coastal destinations (Shaan 2005). In the past decades, a rich number of studies has focused on sustainability, which has been identified as a key determinant of the competitiveness of seaside destinations, both in developed and developing countries (Cucculelli and Goffi, 2016; Goffi *et al.*, 2019b). Sustainable tourism is defined by the "United Nation Environmental Programme" and the "World Tourism Organization" (UNEP and WTO

2005, p. 11-12) as the “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment, and host communities”. Natural and cultural resources are the key reasons that affect tourists’ decision - making when choosing destinations (Crouch and Ritchie, 1999). The centrality of the tourists’ perspective within the sustainability discourse has also been echoed by the UNEP and the WTO who recognized the preservation of natural and cultural resources in a destination to be two of the main pillars of the sustainability concept.

Despite the rich number of studies focusing on the different aspects of sustainability, the tourism literature is still exhibiting open questions and issues. In fact, there exists a lack in studies examining the linkage between the preservation of local resources and the quality of tourism resources, providing a theoretical or empirical perspective on the relationships between preservation and quality of natural and cultural resources, and tourist loyalty. Indeed, most of the previous studies focusing on either environmental or cultural preservation are mainly applied to protected areas and heritage sites. Furthermore, most of these studies focus on the supply-side perspective (e.g., hotels, tour operators). Nevertheless, and as already stated by Andrades-Caldito *et al.* (2014), a demand-side perspective is needed when it comes to assessing attributes of destination attractiveness. This paper aims to provide a novel approach to the study of tourism sustainability, analysing its role from the tourists’ perspective.

This study intends to fill this research gap by investigating whether quality and preservation of local tourism resources meet tourist expectations, and whether tourist loyalty is influenced by the quality and preservation of local tourism resources. To answer the first research question, an Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) was performed. To answer the second research question, as in Goffi *et al.* (2019a), a structural equation model (SEM) is employed to estimate the causal links between sustainability items (using the principal component analysis -PCA- to reduce factors) and the intention to return, which is mediated by tourist satisfaction. The survey was submitted to European tourists in Hua Hin, a leading seaside destination in Thailand.

Asian tourism destinations provide excellent case studies, as Asia has recorded the highest growth in international tourists’ arrivals worldwide in the last decade (UNWTO, 2020; Table 1).

Tab. 1: International Tourist Arrivals in World Regions

	Change (%)				Average per year
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2009-2019
World	3.8	7.2	5.6	3.8	5.1
Europe	2.5	8.8	5.8	3.7	4.6
Asia and the Pacific	7.7	5.7	7.3	4.6	7.1
Americas	3.7	4.7	2.4	2	4.6
Africa	7.8	8.5	8.5	4.2	4.4
Middle East	-4.7	4.1	3	7.6	2.7

Source: World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2020)

Therefore, studies analysing tourism destinations in Asia have multiplied in the last few years (Hall and Page, 2016; Cooper and Hall, 2019), in parallel with the growth of tourism flows and massive investments in tourism education in the region (King, 2015).

Thailand was chosen as an exemplary case, as it is one of the most visited destinations worldwide, now facing severe sustainability problems. Thailand is among the top ten ranked countries worldwide for international tourist arrivals (UNWTO, 2019). In 2018, more than 38 million international tourists visited the country, while their number did not exceed 7 million in 1995 (The World Bank Data, 2020). Despite some limitation due to its non-academic nature (Crouch, 2007), the “Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report” of the World Economic Forum (WEF) is considered to be a useful tool for identifying strengths and weaknesses of countries in tourism development. It placed Thailand in the highest ranks worldwide for its natural resources (10<sup>th</sup>), its cultural resources (35<sup>th</sup>), and in contrary, in one of the lowest positions (130<sup>th</sup> out of 140 countries) concerning environmental sustainability (WEF, 2019). Such contradictions make Thailand an interesting case for investigations into the preservation of local resources.

Hua Hin, a small coastal town of 63,000 inhabitants, is situated less than a 3-hour drive South-West of Bangkok. It was chosen as an applied case, as it is one of the fastest growing coastal destinations in Thailand and hence with an urgent need to address sustainability challenges. In 2017, Hua Hin attracted more than 3.5 million tourists (Horwath HTL, 2019), with a tremendous growth of tourism flows in the last few years (compared to 1.5 million tourists in 2005). “The continued growth in the number of visitors has turned Hua Hin into a chaotic beach town and has generated various negative impacts” (Yaiyong, 2018, p. 144).

Unlike Pattaya, which has attracted major attention from tourism research (Franz, 1985; Wahnschafft, 1982; Lertputtarak, 2012; Longjit and Pearce, 2013), the lack of applied studies about tourism in Hua Hin is rather surprising. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first applied case focusing on this leading Thai and South East Asian coastal destination.

## 2. Theoretical Underpinning and Research Hypotheses

Sustainability is a multifaceted concept encompassing various elements concerning characteristics, resources, facilities, and services of a tourism destination. The notion of sustainability has been extended to tourism from the concept of sustainable development after the publication of the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987). The report has been criticized over the years (Adams, 1990; Lélé, 1991; Sneddon *et al.*, 2006); however, it represented an initial step towards the adoption of a different vision of sustainable development, and after more than three decades, it needs to be adapted to today's reality. There has been a broad consensus in literature that sustainability is composed by three interrelated elements: ecological, socio-cultural, and economical (Swarbrooke, 1999). The preservation of natural and cultural resources has been widely recognised as the main

pillar within the sustainability debate (Mihalic, 2016). Indeed, the concept of sustainability stems from the study of the negative effects of tourism, among which, the exploitation and degradation of environmental and cultural resources have been identified as some of the most damaging effects (Archer *et al.*, 2005).

The WTO has committed itself to help tourism destinations in the conservation and preservation of their natural and sociocultural capital, especially in developing countries. Specifically, it has focused on developing indicators to help destinations to move to more sustainable configurations. In 2004, the WTO published a guidebook (WTO, 2004), which provides a comprehensive analysis of the environmental, sociocultural, and economic tourism impacts, as well as a broad range of indicators for each concern. Together with UNEP, the WTO also published a comprehensive guide for policy makers about “making tourism more sustainable”, presenting instruments, strategies, and structures for a sustainable tourism development (UNEP and WTO, 2005). The European Commission (2013, p. 7) has implemented the “European Tourism Indicator System” for “monitoring, managing, and enhancing the sustainability of a tourism destination”.

As noticed by Baldwin (2020), coastal areas are particularly prone to experience the detrimental impacts of large-scale tourism, also due to large-scale tour operating activities (Goffi *et al.*, 2018). In fact, one of the main factors causing the degradation of marine and coastal ecosystems lays in the excessive number of tourists. Rejuvenation policies were adopted by coastal tourism destinations in developed countries in order to increase their competitiveness (Brau *et al.*, 2009). Mature coastal destinations provide an interesting case study (Presenza *et al.*, 2013). In particular, sustainable rejuvenation was identified as a key issue for mature Italian tourism destinations (Simeoni *et al.*, 2019). There are several examples, especially in developed countries, of mature coastal tourism destinations having been rejuvenated through the implementation of sustainable practices aimed at preserving environmental and cultural heritage (Blancas *et al.*, 2010; Ivars i Baidal *et al.*, 2013; Pulido and Lopez, 2013; Oreja Rodríguez *et al.*, 2008). As an example, the Balearic Islands, reacted to the decline in tourism flows by adopting sustainable initiatives (Dodds, 2007; Bardolet and Sheldon, 2008). Environmental assessment policies were also implemented by seaside Italian destinations in order to achieve higher standards of environmental quality (Bruzzi *et al.*, 2011).

Considering these arguments, two research questions are posed:

- RQ1. Do quality and preservation of local resources meet tourist expectations?
- RQ2. Do quality and preservation of local resources affect tourist loyalty?

Within the second research question, three research hypotheses are tested.

Natural and cultural resources are “the primary elements of the destination appeal. These factors are the key motivators for visitation to a destination” (Crouch and Ritchie, 1999, p. 146). Applying a model of destination competitiveness (Goffi and Cucculelli, 2014, 2018) that

extends the theoretical model of Crouch and Ritchie (1999), it has been demonstrated that the preservation of natural and sociocultural resources exerts an effect on the competitiveness of destinations, ranging from small and medium Italian coastal destinations (Cucculelli and Goffi, 2016) to large coastal destinations in developing countries (Goffi *et al.*, 2019b). The green practices adopted positively influenced tourist satisfaction and loyalty to an ecolabel-awarded Italian beach resort (Merli *et al.*, 2019). Two studies focused on coastal destinations in developing countries, such as Acapulco (Solís-Radilla *et al.*, 2019) and Punta Cana (Goffi *et al.*, 2020), also showed that tourist satisfaction and the intention to revisit the same destination are influenced by environmental and sociocultural preservation. Landscape, artwork, and architecture were found to positively and significantly affect tourist satisfaction when visiting Thailand (Tokarchuk and Maurer, 2017).

Thus, it can be hypothesized as follows,

- H1: The quality and preservation of the destination's resources affect tourist satisfaction.

The quality of the tourism services and its relationship with tourist satisfaction is a long-debated topic in tourism literature. Several research studies demonstrated that the perceived value of tourism services affects tourist satisfaction, which in turn affects their intention to return to the destination (Chen and Tsai, 2007; Zabkar *et al.*, 2010; Ranjbarian and Pool, 2015). Tokarchuk and Maurer (2017) posited that the quality of tourism facilities and of food and drink affects tourist satisfaction in Thailand.

Hence, a second hypothesis is developed,

- H2: The quality of tourism services affects tourist satisfaction.

A positive and significant relationship between tourist satisfaction and intention to return has been demonstrated in several research studies. Chi and Qu (2008) showed that destination loyalty is strictly linked to overall satisfaction and the satisfaction with different attributes of the destination. Similarly, Alegre and Cladera (2006, 2009) demonstrated that satisfaction has a positive effect on revisiting intentions. These studies have been further confirmed by Assaker, Vinzi, O'Connor (2011), who showed a direct effect of satisfaction on immediate intention to return. In Merli *et al.* (2019), tourists' satisfaction has also been identified as a significant antecedent of loyalty.

Following these considerations, a third hypothesis can be derived,

- H3: Tourist satisfaction affects return intentions.

### 3. Methodology

A quantitative questionnaire was employed to survey European tourists in Hua Hin, between March and April 2019.

The questionnaire was composed of the following sections: the socio-demographic profile of the respondent, previous visits to the destination, importance of factors for vacations in general, evaluation of quality attributes of the destination visited, agreement with the preservation of resources at the destination, satisfaction with the destination, and intention to revisit the destination. All the variables encompassing agreement,

importance, evaluations were based on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 was “not important” at “totally disagree” and 5 was “very important/ completely agree”. Data were collected on the basis of convenience, and participants were approached at three different open night food markets in Hua Hin. Only those visitors who stated to be towards the end of their vacation were interviewed. A total of 226 tourists answered to the survey. As shown in Table 2, 65% of the respondents were male and 35% female. Most of the respondents were in the age groups of 30-40 years old (35%) and 41-55 years old (33%); 38% spent one week or less in Hua Hin, 21% between one and two weeks and 41% more than two weeks. The sample is almost equally distributed between education levels (university/non-university degree) and between first time and repeat visitors. 19% of the respondents were travelling alone, 20% with friends, 32% with a partner, 12% with a partner and children, 17% with family and friends.

*Tab. 2: Sample descriptive statistics*

Gender		Whom are you travelling with?	
Female	79	Alone	43
Male	147	With friends	45
Age		With my partner	72
Under 30	32	With my partner and children	26
30-40	76	With family and friends	37
41-55	72	Other	1
Over 55	38	How long are you staying in Hua Hin?	
Level of Education		1-2 nights	20
Elementary/middle school	22	3-4 nights	31
Non-university higher education	81	5/7 nights	33
University education	122	8/15 nights	48
What is your employment status?		16/30 nights	38
Student	8	31 or more	54
Not studying not working	12	How many times have you visited Hua Hin?	
Working	175	It is the first time	106
Retired	30	Second time	33
How many people are travelling with you?		Third time	18
Nobody	43	More than three times	68
One	83		
Two	29		
Three or more	70		

Source: Elaboration on survey data

Tourists were requested to rate the perceived importance and the destination’s performance along different attributes measuring the quality and the preservation of local resources and tourism services on a 5-point Likert scale. Visitors were also requested to rate their overall satisfaction with the vacation and their return intentions on a 5-point Likert scale.

To answer the first research question, an Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA) was carried out. As an alternative of the classic “four quadrants” methodology, a diagonal “iso-rating line” was used, being “a

more suitable method for identifying areas of concern, compared to the subjective thresholds-selection method, as it directly focuses on differences in satisfaction and importance ratings” (Sever, 2015, p. 45). A gap analysis was used to calculate the difference between perceived importance and performance of each attribute. The gap analysis was performed following Randall and Rollins (2009) and Tonge and Moore (2007). Therefore, importance mean scores were subtracted from those of performance. Employing paired t-tests, the attributes with significantly different mean importance and performance scores were highlighted. Positive values represent attributes in which tourists’ expectations are not met. In this case, dissatisfaction increases with the increase size of discordance between the two values. The distance of the points from the iso-rating line indicates that there are large gaps between the importance and the performance scores.

The second research question was explored in two different steps. Firstly, a PCA was performed to reduce the number of variables related to sustainability assessment. Then, the obtained components were included in a SEM, estimating the causal links between preservation, quality, satisfaction, and intention to return. As indicated in Figure 1, an indirect causal link is considered between the two obtained components of the PCA and intention to return, mediated by the overall satisfaction. AMOS 25 was used to create and calculate the model.

#### 4. The case study

The Asian region is the fastest-growing tourism area worldwide, recording a 7.1% average annual growth from 2009 to 2019, compared to around 4.5% in Europe, Americas and Africa, and 2.7% in the Middle East (UNWTO, 2020) (see Table 1).

In response to the increasing interest and research on tourism in Asian countries, Cooper and Hall (2019) published the book “Current Issues in Asian Tourism”, a collection of papers published in the journal “Current Issues in Tourism” in 2018 on tourism development in Asian destinations. They also announced the publication of a new companion Journal focusing on tourism in the Asian region: “As editors of Current Issues in Tourism, we have seen a steady growth in both, submissions about tourism in Asia, and Asian authors of papers. We therefore decided to launch the journal companion Current Issues in Asian Tourism (CIAT) to focus research material on this region” (Cooper and Hall, 2019, p. 1). Furthermore, Hall and Page (2016) published the book “The Routledge Handbook of Tourism in Asia”, divided in sections dedicated to each Asian region with 28 chapters and a strong list of authors who offered their perspectives on the dynamics of tourism in Asia. Yang and Ong (2020) pointed at the need to redefine Asian tourism considering an indigenous point of view.

Thailand is the main tourist country in South-East Asia and the second in Asia after China (62.9 million). In 2018, 38.178 million international tourists visited the country. In the last decade international tourist arrivals have grown by 161% compared to the 14.5 million in 2008; in 2018, international tourist arrivals grew by 7.2% compared to 2017 (35.6 million) (UNWTO, 2019).

According to the “International Tourism Highlights 2019” of the UN World Tourism Organization, in 2018 Thailand accounted for 30% (38.2 million) of all tourist arrivals in South East Asia (total 128.7 million) and is ranked by far the first country in terms of tourist arrivals, followed by Malaysia (25.8 million), Vietnam (15.5 million), Singapore (14.6 million), and Indonesia (13.4 million) (UNWTO, 2019). South-East Asia has been the second fastest growing region worldwide (average annual growth of 7.8% between 2010 and 2018) and hence represents 9.2% of the total international tourist arrivals worldwide.

Thailand, with 69.799 million inhabitants, is the fourth largest nation in South-East Asia, after Indonesia (273.5 million), the Philippines (109.6 million) and Vietnam (97.3 million), followed by Myanmar (54.409 million), and Malaysia (32.3 million) (Worldometers, 2020).

The tourism sector has provided a great support to the economic development of the country. It was considered by the Thai government as one of the most important sectors for income and employment generation (Chulaphan and Barahona, 2018). Thailand is the 9<sup>th</sup> most visited country worldwide by international tourists, with 63 million US\$ tourism receipts (compared to the 20.1 million US\$ tourism receipts in 2010) (UNWTO, 2019). According to the World Travel & Tourism Council, in 2018, the total contribution of tourism to GDP was 95 billion dollars in Thailand, accounting for 21.2% of GDP. The direct contribution of tourism to GDP was 42.2 billion dollars (9.4% of GDP). In 2018, with 5.8 million jobs, the tourism industry represented 15.5% of total employment, and visitor exports generated 19.2% of total exports (WTTC, 2018).

When compared to other countries in the region, Thailand benefits from the competitive pricing of its accommodations, the abundance of natural resources, and the overall development of the infrastructures (Lunkam, 2017, p. 1), and it has advantages in terms of geographical location, tourism services and cultural background (Liu *et al.*, 2018). During the late Nineties, Thailand concentrated on domestic and European tourist markets, rather than on its neighbouring countries (Ramos *et al.*, 2017). Thailand is frequently perceived in western imagination of Thailand as an exotic sex tourist destination (Garrik, 2005). This is common to the whole Asian area, as “the Orient is a geographically dislocated place of sexual plenitude where tourists can lasciviously flirt” (Tan, 2014, p. 147). The perceived risk of diseases (such as bird flu, or SARS), much more than terrorism, have negatively impacted the tourism sector in Thailand and particularly on its Southern Provinces (Rittichainuwat and Chakraborty, 2009).

Hua Hin, the applied case of this study, is situated in the Prachuap Khiri Khan Province, an area promoted by the government as the “Thai Riviera”, 199 kilometres south-west of Bangkok. It has a population of 63,000 inhabitants. According to the leading travel guide publisher “Lonely Planet”, “Hua Hin is where the city meets the sea”: “Hua Hin ( หัวหิน ) is a refreshing mix of city and sea with lively markets, good golf courses and water parks, excellent accommodation, and an ambience that just keeps getting hipper and more cosmopolitan. In fact, many visitors never even set foot on the sand.” (Lonely Planet, 2020).



Hua Hin municipality was established in 1937 and it has turned from a small fishing village to an important resort town for Bangkok's upper-middle class. According to the historical reconstruction of the town by Yaiyong (2018), the rise of Hua Hin as a leading tourism destination in Thailand has started in the 1920's, with the construction of the seaside palace of King Rama VI in Cha-Am, the building and expansion of the world class Railway Hotel and the Royal Golf Course, as well as with the linkage of the southern railway line (which passed through Hua Hin) with the British Malay railway. It was the same King Rama VI who aspired Hua Hin to be the leading coastal destination in Thailand.

In 2017, more than 3.5 million tourists visited Hua Hin, compared to 2.5 million in 2013, and domestic tourists accounted for 73% of total arrivals (Horwath HTL, 2019). The hotel occupancy rate ranges from 70 to 80% from December to April, and from 50% to 70% during the other months of the year. Hua Hin is a weekend destination for locals, resulting in an inability to fill in hotel rooms during the week; the United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden are the top five international incoming markets (C9 Hotelworks, 2015).

## 5. Findings

Regarding the first research question, the quality of cultural resources is perceived by the respondents to be the most important characteristic when visiting a destination (4.61 on a 5 Likert scale), followed by the quality of food (4.29), environmental preservation (4.24), the quality of natural resources, and cultural preservation (4.12), whereas quality of accommodation is rated as the least important among the six variables (3.9) (Table 3).

*Tab. 3: Importance and performance source gap and t test*

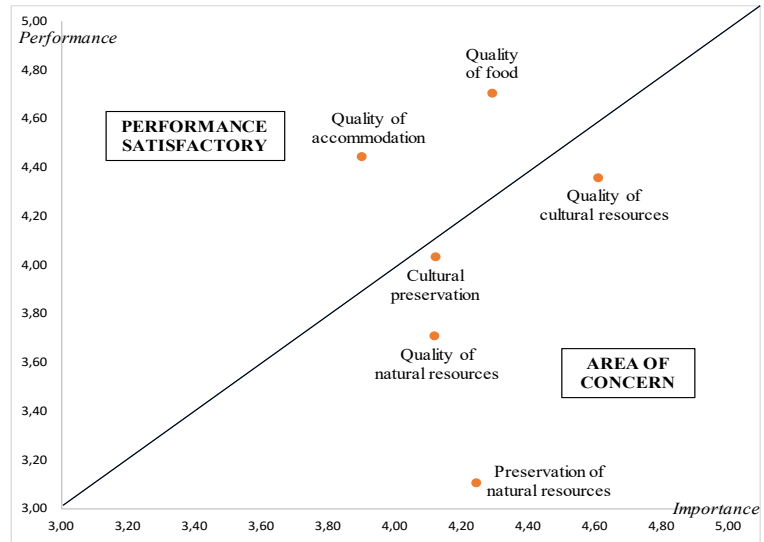
	Importance		Performance		Gap analysis	
	Mean	St.dev.	Mean	St.dev.	Gap value (I-P)	Significance
Quality of natural resources	4,12	0,86	3,71	0,79	0,40	0.000
Quality of cultural resources	4,61	0,97	4,36	0,87	0,24	0.000
Quality of accommodation	3,90	0,91	4,45	0,79	-0,55	0.000
Quality of food	4,29	0,76	4,71	0,72	-0,42	0.000
Environmental preservation	4,24	0,76	3,11	0,88	1,13	0.000
Cultural preservation	4,12	0,88	4,04	0,76	0,08	0.000

Source: Elaboration on survey data

As Figure 1 shows, the respondents evaluate the performance of Hua Hin concerning environmental and cultural preservation and the quality of natural and cultural resources as “not satisfactory”. Their rated performance is lower than their rated importance. The four items mentioned above are positioned below the iso-rating line in the “area of concern”, indicating that they are key issues that need to be improved to meet tourist expectations.

In particular, “environmental preservation” scores the lowest, and, with a value of 1.13, represents the destination’s major weakness (Table 3). On the contrary, Hua Hin is perceived to perform fairly well concerning the quality of food and accommodation, since their performance level is higher than the importance counterparts. All features are statistically significantly different ( $p = 0.000$ ).

Fig. 1: IPA results



Source: Elaboration on survey data

Concerning the second research question, the PCA generated two components that account for 60.7% of the total variance. Results of Barlett’s test of sphericity (Chi-Square 256.309 Significance 0.000) and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO= 0.750) statistics confirm that the PCA is an appropriate analytical tool in the context of this study. The attributes encompassed by each component are displayed in Table 4. The first component, “quality and preservation of local resources”, includes the items “cultural and environmental preservation” and “quality of natural and cultural resources”, and it accounts for 35.7% of the total variance. The second component is associated with the “quality of tourism services”, including quality of accommodation and food, and it accounts for 25% of the total variance.

Tab. 4. PCA Results

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Components	Loadings	Variance (%)
<i>C1. Quality &amp; preservation of local resources</i>		
Quality of natural resources	0.796	
Quality of cultural resources	0.775	
Cultural preservation	0.660	
Environmental preservation	0.649	
<i>C2. Quality of tourism services</i>		
Quality of food	0.846	
Quality of accommodation	0.759	
KMO 0.750		
Bartlett's test of sphericity Chi-Square 256.309 Significance 0.000		

Source: Elaboration on survey data

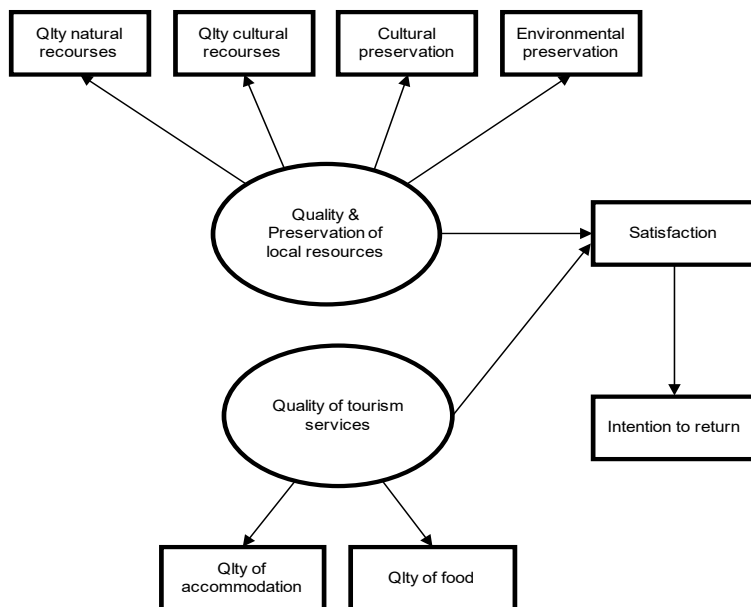
SEM results in Table 5 confirm the second hypothesis, as the path from the latent construct “quality and preservation of local resources” to tourist satisfaction is significant and positive. There is also a positively significant relationship between “quality of tourism services” and tourist satisfaction, corroborating our second hypothesis. The results also reveal a positive and significant relationship between tourist satisfaction and return intentions, thus confirming the third hypothesis. The estimated standardized path coefficients of the structural model are displayed in Figure 2.

Tab. 5: Estimates of the model

			Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P
Tourist satisfaction	<---	Quality & preservation of local resources	.467	.145	3.220	.001
Tourist satisfaction	<---	Quality of tourism services	.508	.220	2.309	.021
Quality of natural resources	<---	Quality & preservation of local resources	1.000			
Quality of cultural resources	<---	Quality & preservation of local resources	1.168	.144	8.100	***
Quality of food	<---	Quality of tourism services	1.000			
Quality of accommodation		Quality of tourism services	1.202	.268	4.489	***
Cultural preservation	<---	Quality & preservation of local resources	.955	.123	7.781	***
Environmental preservation	<---	Quality & preservation of local resources	.737	.131	5.611	***
Intention to return	<---	Tourist satisfaction	.863	.071	12.079	***

Source: Elaboration on survey data

Fig. 2: SEM results



Source: Elaboration on survey data

Tab. 6: Goodness-of-fit indices for the SEM

Indices	Goodness-of-Fit Statistics	Recommended value
Absolute Fit Indices		
Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) of the estimated model	41.982	
degrees of freedom df=18 p= 0.001		
Minimum discrepancy per degree of freedom CMIN/DF	2.332	<3
Goodness-of-fit index GFI	0.957	>0.90
Root mean square error of approximation RMSEA	0.077	<0.08
Incremental Fit Indices		
Adjusted goodness-of-fit index AGFI	0.913	>0.90
Normed fit index NFI	0.907	>0.90
Parsimonious Fit Indices		
Incremental fit index IFI	0.945	>0.90
Comparative fit index CFI	0.943	>0.90
Parsimony normed fit index PNFI	0.583	>0.50

Source: Elaboration on survey data

The goodness of fit indexes of the measurement model (Table 6) indicate that the measurement model exhibits an acceptable fit compared to thresholds commonly considered in the literature (GFI = 0.957; RMSEA = 0.077; AGFI = 0.913; NFI = 0.907; IFI = 0.945; CFI = 0.943; PNFI = 0.583). The Chi-square test is statistically significant. “For models with about 75

to 200 cases, the chi square test is generally a reasonable measure of fit. But for models with more cases (400 or more), the chi square is almost always statistically significant” (Kenny, 2020). For this reason, CMIN/DF (Chi square/degrees of freedom) was computed with a value of 2.332. “Chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) to degrees of freedom ratios in the range of 2 to 1 or 3 to 1 are indicative of an acceptable fit between the hypothetical model and the sample data” (Carmines and McIver, 1981, p. 80).

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## 6. Conclusion and discussion

The present study aims to advance the existing body of knowledge on tourism sustainability in coastal destinations by offering a new perspective onto the positive effects of preservation and quality of local resources on visitor loyalty. The study shows that the quality and preservation of local resources are issues on which Hua Hin should focus and invest. The importance of the quality of natural and cultural resources and cultural and environmental preservation emerge strongly from the analysis. IPA results indicate that the environmental preservation is the destination's main weakness, and hence the critical feature to be addressed and enhanced. Moreover, the findings support the hypothesized positive linkages between quality and preservation of local resources and tourist satisfaction, as well as between tourist satisfaction and intention to return. As also identified by Goffi *et al.* (2020b) in a study on an Italian Lake destination, the quality and preservation of local resources are not disconnected constructs in the view of tourists. These results help us to corroborate the evidence of a linkage between quality and preservation of local resources and tourist loyalty and provide a new lens for interpreting such connection.

The results of this study may stimulate local destination managers and policymakers to focus their investments on attributes identified in the “area of concern”, such as the implementation of effective actions to preserve the natural and sociocultural capital, and the improvement of the quality of natural and cultural assets. The challenge for local destination managers is to recognise the preservation of the local environment and culture as absolute priorities, providing them with a sustainable platform for connecting tourists to the history and culture of the place. Findings of a survey among international tourists in Thailand revealed that the unique cultural heritage and the environmental friendliness of the destination were rated as the most important attributes (Choovanichchannon, 2015). Tourists in Southern Thailand are increasingly looking for authentic and high-quality experiences (Kontogeorgopoulos, 2003). The key role of the quality and preservation of local resources in determining tourist loyalty requires to develop developing appropriate destination marketing strategies, whereby particularly the variables included in the marketing mix need to be reconsidered.

The appeal of Hua Hin is due to its unique characteristics. These include the proximity to the capital Bangkok, long white sandy beaches which are ideal for swimming and water sports, affordable prices, cultural attractions, a rich typical gastronomy, and a variety of experiences offered. Hua Hin

has historically been the summertime retreat of the royal family, “people therefore trust it to be safe and calm, and have a good atmosphere for tourists” (Kityuttachai *et al.*, 2013, p. 1481). Even if there are no published studies about tourism in Hua Hin in international Journals, some useful insights can be drawn from the results of the “Searching for Paradise” project aimed at analysing the international retirement migration to Hua Hin, which “is touted as the new ‘retirement heaven’ of Thailand” (Husa *et al.*, 2014, p. 140). According to the study, the increasing popularity of Hua Hin as one of the top destinations in Thailand is due to the warm climate, the high quality of life, and the comparatively low cost of living. Hua Hin’s beachfront has been gradually crowded by sky-high condominiums, hotels, restaurants and private properties, with traffic congestions and overcrowding during weekends and holidays (Yaiyong, 2018). Since tourists are loyal to Hua Hin for the reasons mentioned above, there is a potential risk that the destination managers and planners are not motivated to focus on the preservation and quality of its resources, resulting in negative effects on tourist satisfaction.

The model developed in this paper might be suitable for analysing the relationships between preservation and quality of resources, satisfaction, and loyalty also in other destinations. Specifically, it could be applied to other coastal destinations affected by socioeconomic and environmental problems. As pointed out by Franch *et al.* (2008), the growth of a market segment interested in landscape and natural resources, as well as in discovering local culture and traditions, may provide to mature destinations an opportunity to innovate their products in a sustainable way. To this end, the authors argued that on one side, the public sector should define the normative framework, on the other side the private sector should develop product and services accordingly. In this sense, appropriate legislation can help to establish an effective agenda for tourism businesses in Thailand, also by enforcing voluntary initiatives and environmental awareness (Azam *et al.*, 2018). Stakeholders’ involvement appears as the key factor for achieving a successful implementation of such initiatives in coastal destinations in order to produce socially and environmentally positive impacts (Vellecco and Mancino, 2010).

This study offers significant managerial implications, as it provides public agencies and private operators with insights on the role of preservation and quality of local resources on tourist satisfaction and loyalty. It encourages destination planners and managers to adopt strategies that are respecting the local environment and communities. It is of utmost importance to create and devise a new planning and management model that places environmental outcomes at destination level at the top of the agenda. As pointed out by Aguiló, *et al.* (2005, p. 219), sustainability is a key issue and condition for the survival of sun-and-sand tourism destinations and for the hospitality industry, which are now required to adjust to a changing demand. The implementation of initiatives of environmental management, such as environmental certification, may represent an effective way of improving sustainability in such destinations (Pencarelli *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, they can affect future tourists’ decisions to visit a destination (Capacci *et al.*, 2015) and play a significant role in generating added value

for coastal tourism destinations (Cerqua, 2017). From the perspective of the private businesses, this study can support in the development of managerial and marketing strategies. It encourages the private sector to adopt at least strategies that are not harmful to the local community and the environment.

Although this paper offered an initial contribution to the relationship between quality and preservation of tourism resources and tourist loyalty, it has limitations which future research studies are encouraged to overcome. One limitation concerns the sample size, which for the type of analysis employed can be considered relatively small. Thus, to confirm the relationships found in this work and to further advance it to a generalised model, future studies are encouraged to utilize larger samples. Nevertheless, despite the relatively small sample, the findings of this study should be considered as an initial step to improve the understanding of the importance of quality and preservation of local resources in coastal destinations from a demand point of view. A further issue that may attract critique is the limited number of variables considered in the analysis. Future studies will certainly be able to employ more factors, identifying further features of environmental and cultural preservation. Extending this type of analysis would result in an improved understanding of the dimensions contributing to the concept of preservation of local resources. Yet another limitation may be the visitors' ability to appraise the preservation of local resources. Sustainability discourses so far have focused on the supply side, hence not sufficiently taking into account the demand perspective (Curtin and Busby, 1999).

Therefore, this research can be considered as a first attempt to investigate the quality and preservation of local resources in coastal destination from the tourists' point of view, and hence the frequently called for demand perspective. To enhance the generalisability of the model and its findings, replications of this study to other seaside destinations in and outside Asia are encouraged. Thus, to confirm the relationships found in this work and to further advance it to a generalised model, future studies are encouraged to utilize a larger sample.

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