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Ecovillages as A Destination and A Study of Consumer Approaches to Ecovillages

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Abstract

Ecovillages are models of sustainable settlements in cultural, ecological and economic context. There are several scientific studies related to ecovillages in other countries; however, there are no such studies in Turkey. This study is aimed to examine the consumer perceptions, attitudes and preferences regarding ecovillages. Based on 420 surveys with domestic and foreign consumers in Turkey, the findings revealed that, ecovillages are generally preferred by people who are between the 35-54 years old, and have high level education and income. “Being a sustainable life style” and “Having an authentic experience in a rural area” are identified as the most important factors that influence consumers' demand for ecovillages. Findings also manifested that transportation to the ecovillage accommodation, supporting services and attractions are the important factors for consumer preferences.

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1. Introduction

The recent economic, social, technological and environmental changes in the world have caused a need for differentiation of the tourism activities and services as well as the consumer habits. Such changes are characterized with the development of new tourism types, new touristic centers of attraction, and the development of the movement of returning to the nature and natural products. In this context, this study elaborates on the Ecovillages that are going to be the new living space and touristic centers of attraction of the future in the said process of changes.

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The Ecovillages emerges as one of the most important developments in tourism industry that show the characteristic features of the Ecotourism. Ecovillages are in fact human communities, with an intrinsic harmony, leading to form a sustainable lifestyle in harmony with all the living/dead formations in the world and over the universe (Jackson, 2004). Furthermore, these ecovillages have been aimed at creating a supporting sociocultural environment.

The Ecovillages may be considered as the rural enterprises that unify the sustainable environment friendly technologies, organic agriculture, and other farming activities and tourism services. All of these are according in the natural environment. The Ecovillages have some unique characteristic. First, the Ecovillage represents a type of lifestyle. Based on this philosophy, the Ecovillages are usually designed and built up within the framework of the four focuses, which are the ecologic, social, cultural and spiritual concepts (Jackson and Svensson, 2002).

In the ecologically-oriented Ecovillages, the design is based on the parameters that have a significantly less impact on the environment, and usually emphasize the improvement of the world. By working on landscaping and carrying out sustainable agricultural analysis, it is aimed at developing the future village model in harmony with the nature. In making a sustainable agriculture design, factors such as the utilization of the solar and wind powers, accumulation and use of the rain water, and the accumulated water capacity are considered. The layout and the architecture of the houses are decided by considering the above factors as well as the ecological principles. The food production activities, energy production, waste management, green works and civil processes are also based on these concepts (Gaia Education, 2006). An example of the agriculture based ecological villages is the Crystal Waters in Australia.

The Social Focused Ecovillages are the housing cooperatives, where the common use areas are centrally located. The living spaces are near each other and placed on a street, or around the common use areas. In general, the houses are divided into clusters with the objective of more interaction and socialization between these clusters. At the entrance of the Ecovillage, there is a common parking place for cars. The houses are usually not higher than one or two stories. The social focused Ecovillages are built up on the similar principles as to cover some other concepts (Jackson and Svensson, 2002: 43). Hertha Ecovillage in Denmark, and Tamera in Portugal are good examples of such villages (Iosnet, 2009; zegg, 2009).

In the cultural focused Ecovillages it is usually preferred to build a saloon at the center of the village for the theater or dancing, music or seasonal celebrations. There is also a central meeting point in the traditional Ecovillages in the southern hemisphere. This meeting area may be under a tree, a monument or a celebration hall where the young kinds are attended by the adults, and some stories are told from generation to generation, and a number of celebrations take place. In the traditional Scandinavian villages, there is also a church, a meeting hall or welcoming field next to a pool or water well (Jackson and Svensson, 2002: 44). The Ecovillages are built up around this field as to cover any other Ecovillage principles.

The spiritual Ecovillages are usually characterized with having a meditation hall that is easily accessible for every individual. In the United Kingdom, Peter Dawkins suggests that various social fields are to be built up in conformity with a Chakra-like landscape in respect of the emotional and natural laws (Jackson and Svensson, 2002). Damanhur, an underground tomb, has been located on a very special mountain where the three energy lines intersect, considering that it would be in a good communication with the entire world. Some spiritual groups, like Maharishi, have built their villages like a Mandala. In construction of many villages, the Vastu Sastra (Indian architecture) traditions, Fenhg Shui or other similar systems have been considered.

Regardless of the concepts having been focused on, there is no certain right or wrong concept while building up an Ecovillage. A careful design is important for a healthy development in the long run. The designs of many villages are based on the known examples of existing buildings, plans and development strategies. In many cases, the differences between the ideas and the real facts make it difficult to realize the original plans. It is however important to make use of the experiences of the others, so that it would be possible to create a process as sustainable as possible. Today, there is a serviceable ground for establishment of a sustainable life. In fact; in the past the Ecovillage concept was only a marginal dream for a happy minority; however, now it has gained wider acceptance and has been adopted by a considerable number of people over the world.

Based on a review of literature, there are ten basic features of the Ecovillages (Kanaley, 2000; Gaia Education, 2006; Kasper, 2008; Joseph and Bates, 2003; Sevier, 2008; Jackson, 2004; Jackson and Svensson, 2002), which are essential for a successful Ecovillage application. They are:

- Ecovillages recognize the community. The Ecovillages are not stemmed from certain ecological evaluations; instead, they are formed to satisfy the social needs of the people. In each Ecovillage, there is a conscious effort made to develop the community environment and to create a sense of belonging.
- Ecovillages use the latest technologies, e.g. passive solar energy design, housings that use natural isolation materials, methane or biomass gas converters, etc.
- Ecovillages have no standard dimensions.
- Ecovillages offers onsite employment opportunities to the village residents or visitors?
- Ecovillages require a planned architecture and landscaping.
- Ecovillages are so planned in a way that there would be no need to bring vehicles
- Ecovillages have specific social contracts or social management plans.
- Ecovillages provide cost-effective purchasable housings to their residents.
- Ecovillages are the reflections of the consciousness of nature.
- The local governments are essential for the successful Ecovillages.

Reviewing the organizational development of the ecovillage movement in the world, it is seen that the first example is the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) unofficially founded in 1994 in Denmark. The Ecovillage movement could get a central office with the financial support of Gaia Trust. The first organization of the sustainable communities to attain the Ecovillage ideal was comprised of the 9-member core group. The members included Findhorn Groups in Scotland, the Farm Tennessee in the United States of America, Lebensgarten in Germany, Crystal Waters in Australia, Ecoville St. in Petersburg/Russia, Gyurufu in Hungary, Ladakh Project in India, Manitou Institute in Colorado, and the Danish Society of Sustainable Communities (Gaia, 2009)

Today, there are also a number of successful Ecovillage projects in Europe. Some examples are: Torri Superiore, Ventimiglia – Italy; Damanhur, Vidracco, Turin – Italy; Lebensgarten, Steyerburg, Bremen – Germany; Hjortshøj, Arhus – Denmark ; Eco 99, Arhus, Denmark; Hooipolder, s-Hertogenbosch – Netherlands; Eva Lanxmeer, Culemborg, Netherlands; Hockerton Housing Project, Nottingham – United Kingdom; Findhorn, Forres – Scotland; Tweed Valley Ecovillage, Edinburgh- Scotland.

The attempts to establish Turkey's first ecovillage date back to the midst of 1990's. These attempts have been supported by the non-governmental organizations or voluntary groups focused on the ecological lifestyle. Contrary to some Ecovillages in other countries, the villages in Turkey were (and are) designed by forming a newly structured environment, rather than conversion of an existing settlement unit. The "Hocamköy Ecovillage Project" of the "Hocamköy Anatolian Ecological Common Life Movement" is the first known comprehensive experiential Ecovillage attempt in Turkey. The project was realized in a moorland field in Hasandede, Kırıkkale by a group of university students, who aimed at having a new lifestyle and production model.

As of 2011, there are six Ecofarms in Turkey, which are members of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) – Turkey. They are the Güneş-Village, Ankara; Eko Foça, İzmir; Hermes Project, Antalya; İmece House, Çanakkale; Western Ecology Community, Çanakkale; and Çanakkale and Dedetepe Farm, Çanakkale. Usually serving as the holiday farms, these facilities are very behind of the comparable examples abroad. They deal with the traditional farming activities and Ecotourism at the simplest level.

The Ecovillage tourism concept may be defined as the rural or semirural projects of an Ecovillage that has permanent residents, and unifies the daily works with the touristic factors. In the other words, when an Ecovillage goes beyond to be a sustainable living center, and earns revenues even from the tourism activities in addition to its income from the other green activities, mainly the sustainable farming, then it is called the Ecovillage tourism (Zeppel, 2006).

Such a tourism concept provides its guests with the opportunities for short or long term accommodation, drink and meals as well as the one-on-one interaction, discussion and contact opportunities in a rural or semirural land. This provides a number of educational activities, courses and seminar programs for those who want to learn the Ecovillage life, or to realize Ecovillage projects in their own living places (Borio, 2001). Besides, such other farm

animal care activities as the cattle and sheep herding, wool clipping, feeding and milking, and the agricultural works as fruit collection, wild grass and crops harvesting as well as the regional handicraft courses, riding, land survey, and the specific regional activities as swimming, canoeing, rafting, trekking, cultural and historical site visits, wild life observation, in which the stakeholders may be active participants or remote observers. The tourism focused Ecovillages are mainly characterized with the following features:

- They are sustainable settlements that integrate the tourism services into the activities necessary to reach their main goals,
- The agricultural activities are necessarily environmentally friendly,
- The tourism activities are considered to be an economic option to provide financial support and employment facilities for the villagers,
- Tourists can pay a certain accommodation fee, or contribute to the villagers by means of physical participation in the village works to substitute the accommodation fee,
- They can offer the customers with the accommodation, meal-drink and bed facilities as well as introduction and practical application of production activities, civil and garden works, harvesting, traditional handicrafts, preparation of specific regional foods, animal care and similar Ecovillage activities (Kasper, 2008; Zeppel, 2006).

2. The purpose of the research

The main objective of this study is to gain some insights about consumer perspectives about ecovillages in Turkey. Specifically, the study is aimed to examine consumers' perceptions of and attitudes toward ecovillages and to identify the factors important in preferring ecovillages. Also, the study investigates the existence of any relationship between consumer demographics and their attitudes towards ecovillages. The study is based on the assumptions that the Ecotourism is a rapidly developing market in Turkey and in all over the world. Therefore, the current holidaymakers in the ecological farms would be the potential consumers of the Ecovillages, and the consumers are expected to prefer newer and different tourism attractions in the future. Given the growth potential of the ecovillages, the results could provide some suggestions to develop successful marketing and promotion strategies for ecovillages.

3. Material and method

In order to accomplish the study objectives, a survey questionnaire was developed for this research. The questionnaire included questions regarding consumers' perceptions and attitudes toward the ecovillages, as well as consumer preferences and the factors affecting tourism demand for ecovillages. The survey also included some questions about the respondents demographic. Since there were no prior studies in Turkey in this area, this is considered as an exploratory study. The final survey was administered face to face to the respondents (consumers) who stayed at the comparable ecologic farms.

Some of the responses in the questionnaire were designed to be rated in order of priority and they were weighted according to this (Zeisel, 1982; Pinar and Ateş, 1983). Some other responses were measured with a 5 point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree).

The research universe or target population consists of the consumers who stayed at one of the ten farms which are recorded in the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) as the ecological farms in the Aegean Region of Turkey. These include İmece House (Çanakkale), Tekelioğlu Village (Manisa), Kirazlı Village (Kuşadası), Gürsel Tombul Farm (Kuşadası), Ersöz Family Farm (Afyon), Yonca Ecolodge (Fethiye), Pastoral Valley (Fethiye), Yakabağ House (Fethiye), Knidia Farm (Datça), and Kadir's (Antalya). The research is limited to the ecological farms, as there is no Ecovillage in Turkey. A sample was determined to be representative of the target population, and questionnaires were administered to 420 consumers. Questionnaire forms were written in three different languages, i.e. Turkish, English and German. The survey questions in these three languages were pretested to improve the understanding of the survey questions and convey the intended meaning.

Descriptive statistics (e.g. mean values), Chi-square, ANOVA and Scheffe Multiple Comparison Test were conducted to accomplish the study objectives. The Cronbach Alpha Value of items in the scale is higher than 0,752, which indicated high degree of internal consistency among the scale items.

4. Findings and discussion

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the consumers who participated in the study. The results indicate that the gender of the respondents is equally distributed, most of them (53;8%) are between 35-54 age group, most of them are married (56.9%) and college graduates (76.9%), 44.3% earn 2501-500 TL a month, and most responses were in Turkish (52.4%, followed by English (41.0%).

Table 1. Profile of the Respondents

		n	%
Gender	Female	211	50,2
	Male	209	49,8
Age	18 - 34	149	35,5
	35 -54	226	53,8
	55 >	45	10,7
Marital Status	Married	239	56,9
	Single	181	43,1
Educational Background	Primary school - High School	36	8,6
	College – University	323	76,9
	Graduate – PhD Degree Holders	61	14,5
Average Monthly Income	<2500 TL	164	39,0
	2501 TL- 5000 TL	186	44,3
	5001 TL>	70	16,7
Language	Turkish	220	52,4
	English	172	41,0
	German	28	6,7

The distribution of participants by country are 53.6%, 34.3%, and 12.1% for Turkey, Europe (Sweden, Poland, Norway, Luxemburg, France, Finland, the United Kingdom and Germany), and Northern America (USA, Canada), respectively.

When analyzed according to having knowledge of Ecovillages, 79% of the respondents indicate that they got some knowledge about the Ecovillages. The majority of people (84.5%) who have some knowledge are in the range of 35-54 years of age. It is important note that respondents with high levels of education and income are also more knowledgeable about the Ecovillages.

When “Ecovillage” is mentioned, the most important concepts that come to respondents’ mind are: the “organic farming village” (35.8%), a “sustainable lifestyle” (35.5%), and a “self-sufficient village” (20.4%). On the other hand, Ecovillages are associated the least with the concepts of “modern village” (3.9%) and “environment friendly holiday village” (4.4%).

The Chi-square test ($\alpha=0.05$) revealed that, the variables of age, marital status, education and income had no statistically significant relationships with the concept of “Organic Farming Village” that ranks first in terms of importance in preferring Ecovillages. Hence, these demographic characteristics of the participants do not seem to have any impact on their perception of “Organic Farm Village, indicating a common opinion that the Ecovillages are used for organic farming activities. Also, based on the Chi-square test ($\alpha=0.05$), there is a statistically significant relationship between “wishing a holiday in Ecovillages” and the variables of gender and income. The result indicate that the female respondents are more inclined to live in the Ecovillages than male respondents.

Whether or not the participants of this study had ever been at any Ecovillage was also investigated. The results show that more than one half of the participants (53%) had never been at an Ecovillage, while rest of the participants (47%) had been at an Ecovillage. When respondents were asked whether they wish to have a vacation in an Ecovillage, overwhelming majority (94%) responded “yes” to this question.

The respondents were asked to state their opinion about various issues regarding Ecovillages. Table 2 shows the mean values and standard deviations for this items. Also, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to test the inter-country differences for each item, and the F values of this test are given in the same table.

Table 2. Comparison of the mean values regarding the consumers' opinions about Ecovillages

	Country	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	F Value	Significance Level (p)
" Ecovillages are going to be the new living spaces and holiday centers of the future"	Turkey	225	3,97	,942	,509	,601
	North America	51	3,86	,749		
	Europe	144	3,89	,862		
	Total	420	3,93	,893		
"Ecovillages represent an efficient and feasible way to overcome the social, ecological and emotional depressions, and shows us the way of an environment friendly life in the 21st century"	Turkey	225	4,30	,760	2,184	,114
	North America	51	4,33	,683		
	Europe	144	4,15	,693		
	Total	420	4,25	,731		
"Ecovillages will have negligible adverse effects on the environment, compared to the other zones."	Turkey	225	4,53	,655	1,524	,219
	North America	51	4,35	,820		
	Europe	144	4,51	,637		
	Total	420	4,50	,672		
"I am prepared to pay more for an Ecovillage holiday than what I pay for the mass touristic holidays"	Turkey	217	3,42	1,196	6,557	,002
	North America	50	2,80	1,030		
	Europe	142	3,41	1,060		
	Total	409	3,34	1,146		

Whether the opinions of consumers about Ecovillages differ from country to country was also examined. The results in Table 2 revealed no significant differences ($F=.509$, $p = .601$) among the respondents from Turkey, the Northern America and European countries. This finding suggest that respondents from all the three regions agree with the idea that "the Ecovillages are going to be the new living spaces and holiday centers of the future", as indicated by overall mean of 3,93. The respondents from all the three regions seem to agree with the item "Ecovillages represent an efficient and feasible way to overcome the social, ecological and emotional depressions, and shows us the way of an environment friendly life in the 21st century". This because, as shown in Table 2, the ANOVA test is not significant ($F=2.184$, $p = .114$). The overall mean of 4,25 indicates a high level opinion for this concept. At the same time, the respondents certainly support the idea (overall mean of 4,50) that the "Ecovillages will have negligible adverse effects on the environment. Since the ANOVA is not significant ($F=1.524$, $p=.219$), this perception is similar among the respondents across three regions, as compared to the other zones" as well.

Finally, the participants were asked if they supported the statement, "I am prepared to pay more for an Ecovillage holiday than what I pay for the mass touristic holidays". The ANOVA results were significant ($F=6.557$, $p < .01$), indicating inter-country differences among the respondents for this statement. The pair-wise comparisons was conducted using Scheffe Multiple Comparison Test if the country groups differ from others. The results show that the respondents from Turkey and Europe expressed their willingness to pay more for the "Ecovillage holiday" than those from North America.

Concerning if there is any correlation between the idea of "Ecovillages will be newer and different centers of touristic attraction in the future" and the demographic variables of the respondents. To answer this question, Chi-square analysis (significance level of $\alpha =0.05$) was performed, and relationships between this idea and demographic variables of age, education and income level were found to be statistically significant. However, there was no significant relationship between this idea and the marital status. This idea is well supported particularly by the age group of 35-45 years old (78.3%). For the education and income level variables, those respondents who are well educated and have high incomes seem to support this opinion at a higher rate compared to the others. In the study, it is also found that the idea of "paying more" is supported by married and high income level consumers older than 55 years.

Finally, the respondents were asked to express their priority sequence for the attractions/activities in an Ecovillage. Based on the results, the respondents indicate that the most important attractions are the “farming activities” (30.7%), “regional food and beverage enterprises” (18.6%) and “regional food and handicraft markets” (14.4%), “cycling and walking fields” (9.4%), “hobby workshops” (7.7%), “riding natural sport fields” (5.6%), and pubs (4.4%). The attractions/activities that respondents found the least preferred are “show center”, “library” and “sport center” by (0.8%), (1.3%) and (1.5%). The respondents who indicated the “farming activities” as the most important attractions/activities are from the European countries, Turkey, and the North American countries by 46.2%, 35.7% and 18.1% respectively.

5. Conclusion

Dissatisfaction caused by urban life has led some people to search for a healthier and more peaceful life closer to the nature. To meet this expectation, the Ecovillages have emerged as an alternative settlements and lifestyle in line with the need of ecological life. Still being in the early stages of its life cycle, such attempts come with the question that how the Ecovillages can be improved to satisfy the consumer need and meet their expectations. In this context, the conclusions from the findings of this study can be summarized as follows.

First, consumers perceive the Ecovillages as a “place of organic farming” and “center of sustainable life”. Therefore, the Ecovillages should not be designed to be used by only tourists. Instead, they should be designed to include the people who permanently reside in the village and/or in the area. This will distinguish an Ecovillage from other tourism destinations in a way that the some of the villagers could manage the operators, while the other villagers and the visitors could serve as voluntary employees to care of the chores and needed activities in the village. As a result, this could be one of the ways to increase local people participation, even up to one hundred percent, in the Ecotourism. However, it is necessary to establish an Ecovillage and make it fully operational before developing a tourism attraction center. An Ecovillage should be based on three basic activities, which are organic farming, ecological architecture and renewable energy.

Second, the findings indicate that since the idea of the “Ecovillages as new living spaces and holiday centers of the future” is well supported by people who are 35-45 years old (78.3%), are well educated and have higher income, these potential customers seem to be able and willing to pay higher rates than other customers. This profile is similar to the Ecotourist classification announced by the ecotourism market profile of the World Tourism Organization. If the Ecovillages are to be promoted as a new product, these consumers could be selected as the target market. The study also found that the female consumers seem to prefer having vacation holidays in the Ecovillages at a higher rate than the male consumers. This could be important for those who make the buying decisions in a family.

Another finding of the study is that the respondents from Turkey and the European countries indicate that they “are prepared to pay more for the Ecovillage holiday”. It is particularly interesting to note that the idea “paying more” is supported by the married and high income consumers who are 55 years old or older. Finally, the results show that those respondents who are from the North America kept reluctant especially on the “paying more”.

In conclusion, since the Ecotourists in the ecotourism market are similar to the profiles of the World Tourism Organization, they should be considered as the potential consumers of the Ecovillages.

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