

# BACK TO THE FUTURE:

RECONFIGURING THE TRAVEL INDUSTRY?

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**PANAYOTA KOULOURI AND COSTAS DOUNAS***Hellenic Centre for Marine Research, Greece***ATHANASIOS MOGIAS***University of Thrace, Greece***A Pilot Survey Investigating Naturoid Artificial Reefs as a Tool for Sustainable Marine Eco-Tourism**

Recreational scuba diving is nowadays a nature-based multibillion-dollar tourism industry across the globe. However, degradation of many recreational diving destinations all over the world due to "soft" ecotourists necessitates the adoption of innovative management measures. HCMR has developed an innovative technology for the creation of artificial underwater ecotourism attractions ("oases") to divert visitors away from sensitive marine natural areas of high ecological and aesthetic value. This innovative technology includes specially constructed artificial reefs in an attempt to simulate the functional and morphological characteristics and the aesthetics of the natural rocky reefs. In this study, a pilot survey was conducted during summer of 2019 in three diving centres of Ag. Nikolaos of Crete Island, one of the most important tourist destinations in the Mediterranean Sea, involving 144 scuba divers from all over the world. The survey aimed at investigating divers' profiles and perceptions concerning the use of artificial reefs technology for recreational diving. A questionnaire was administered to scuba divers in order to explore whether the HCMR's innovative artificial reef technology can be proposed and used as a tool for sustainable marine ecotourism applications. Findings of the survey showed that the most crucial factor of attraction of interest to the participants, who were found to have a relatively high diving experience, is the observation of marine life and especially of large fishes (e.g. groupers). Furthermore, innovative man-made constructions simulating both the aesthetics and the function of natural reefs and attracting these large fishes and other invertebrates (e.g. corals, sponges, crustaceans) can be used as a tool for sustainable eco-tourism applications.