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Sustainable community - tourism in the Shire of Omeo

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ABSTRACT
The Shire of Omeo is a mountainous area of 560 000 ha in the East Gippsland region of the State of Victoria. Its 1991 population of 2100 persons is forecast to grow to almost 4000 by 2011. This paper will outline a plan for research into sustainable tourism in the context of a rural area that is not yet a prime tourist destination. My orientation to sustainable development is wider than the sustainability of a tourism industry; as a sociologist I am interested in sustainable community.

INTRODUCTION
The purpose here is to outline the early stages of this research project in order to explore not only the theoretical and methodological dilemmas I, as a researcher, face but also to discuss some of the 'findings' of the research thus far. But, hold on, it's really also about reflections on an aspect of tourism research agendas - and the 'connexions' between private and professional, between insider and outsider and between disciplines. Thus, part of what this paper does is to illustrate how the research 'question' evolves as the research progresses. Given this reflexive process, the abstract above is already 'out of date' as fieldwork and events since its writing have changed what it is now possible to develop in this paper - and what is likely in the project. It is thus appropriate to present a new abstract (changed parts in italics).

Abstract II: The subject of this paper is research in what used to be the Shire of Omeo, a mountainous area of 560 000 ha in the East Gippsland region of the State of Victoria. Its 1991 population of 2100 persons is forecast to grow to almost 4000 by 2011. This paper will outline some of the dilemmas faced by a researcher in this context, the discussions with some of the 'stakeholders', some comments on sustainable tourism and the way forward for this research project. This is a reflective, work-in-progress paper.

STUDY 'LOCATION'
Geographic
The ex-Shire of Omeo is situated in the East Gippsland region of the State of Victoria, inland from the town of Bairnsdale; this is the edge of 'the man from snowy river country' and is made up of narrow valleys, 'high' mountains and thick forests. The southern boundary of the study area is about 5 hours drive east of Melbourne and 1.5 hours inland from the coast and coastal resorts. To the north west of the study area is the new Alpine Shire which includes a number of popular snow ski resorts. The area's 1991 population of 2100 persons is living in a diverse range of valleys and mountains and is predominantly employed in Agriculture (37%) and Forestry (13%) while a further 5% of persons are employed in 'Recreation, Personal and other Services', within which category falls tourism. At present, then, tourism is a small part of total employment although there are other economic returns from passing traffic in the valleys of the area.

Academic
The Omeo Study is research in the context of a rural area that is not yet a prime tourist destination but which, given its location, is likely to turn to tourism to improve its economic base; or because outside developers target it as an area for exploitation (notwithstanding what Tourism Victoria suggests later). This research is located in the tradition of community and tourism studies that focus on small town and rural areas. At the same time it addresses the pressing contemporary concern for sustainable development, a political and academic concern that finds expression in a wide range of publications, research and teaching.

From the outset, this project threw up some serious dilemmas; these are embedded in the 'doing' of social research and arise in part where and because of the 'connexions' between sociology and tourism research. More accurately, possibly, these dilemmas arise because sociology and tourism research often don't connect. Focussing this research has been very difficult because of a number of questions or problematics that are not usually foregrounded in the way we write about the research.
we do. These include:

1. The researcher-subject relationship, which is usually top-down and outsider-in. Among other things this begs questions of eventual transference or use of research. This is related to the next point.

2. ‘Ownership’ of results. Here I am not referring to copyright but to the sense of ownership by the so-called subjects. How can the research facilitate their sense that this is somehow part of them and thus something to act on?

3. Not unrelated is the question of whose interests are served by the research activity, who the research is for.

4. A more practical question is at what political level to focus the research - local, regional, state, national?

5. There is also the dichotomy of ‘applied’ vs ‘pure’ to be faced, but maybe it is a false dichotomy, maybe a ‘connexion’.

In many ways it is easier to ‘do’ top-down, outsider-in research on a neat little conceptual question, take the data ‘and run’, write a few scholarly papers and move on. But, this approach did not suit me, partly for ethical reasons about the nature of research and partly because my other reasons for working in Omeo include a personal commitment to, and connection with, this geographical region. Further, my interest in sustainable development (note the title of the paper) means that I must also acknowledge the power relations that are foregrounded by one aspect of that concept: social sustainability relies on the empowerment of the local population. I will explore this definition of sustainability in a moment. But, first I will carry on with the reflections on the research process and explore some of the developments thus far.

NOT LISTENING TO TV

In the process of ‘consulting’ with people in Tourism Victoria (TV), the state government department charged with promoting tourism, I was provided with an interesting illustration of the dilemma over who is the client. In a meeting with two officials (one dominated) from Infrastructure Development, I was told that Omeo was a ‘sleepy hollow’, a non-event, that ‘it’ had resisted tourism years ago and had missed the ‘gold rush’ of tourism development. Nothing is going to happen except ‘they’ll’ get to be on a tourist driving route. Part of the reasoning behind this was a lack of major infrastructure, including a poor water supply and no sewerage system. Yet I find that the new water supply should be operational in early to mid-1995 and that the plans and costing for a sewerage system are almost complete (Cool Clear Water on tap).

But, hold on, where is TV coming from? Where is this official coming from? In another part of the meeting, I was told how an ideal 1000 hectare bush property had come on the market and how even his Malaysian investor wouldn’t invest in it because there wasn’t the right infrastructure. This should be read in the context of TV’s direction as represented by two documents, the Strategic Business Plan (Tourism Victoria, 1993) and Marketing and Industry Program (Tourism Victoria, 1994). It would appear that it is big developments using outside, even overseas capital, that are of interest.

Similarly, the Strategic Business Plan, and the Marketing and Industry Program both emphasise increasing tourism with no discernible concern for negative impacts nor of potential or existing community concerns. The latter includes reference to ‘research’ and a research unit, but all of it is directed at marketing and promotion. The word ‘sustain’ is notable by its absence in the latter but does appear in the former. The language is all ‘business speak’ and their clients are investors and ‘consumers’.

But, there is another dimension to the reaction of my TV informant and his search for mega-structures. He was, it appears, suffering from a common problem identified by McGovern (1993:19) as “the search for simplicity and ‘the single solution’”. This view sees more tourism investment as an economic end in itself and thus the only ‘end’ of worth. TV’s aim is to promote and sell more consumption of tourism and you aren’t worth anything but condescension if you have other goals.

My visit to the Country Victoria Tourism Council was not so dramatic but this NGO’s Business Plan (Hore, 1994) is still interesting. The ‘mission statement’ includes the magic word sustainable on page 4 but appears to never define nor use it again. Lip service?

I left the TV meeting in a daze until I pieced together their agenda and held that up to the light of my potential agenda. Their ‘clients’ might be investors and consumers but my ‘client(s)’ could be the community of people directly affected by the development of tourism in the Omeo region. I might usefully make different ‘connexions’.

TALKING WITH THE COMMUNITY

In contrast to the TV perspective is that developed by The Hunter Valley Research Foundation in its publication Tourism and Australian Local Government: issues impediments and actions. Final Report. (Black, Paradise and O’Connell, 1993). They use the word ‘sustainable’ in the
context of residents (p11), a significant foregrounding of locals that is found elsewhere in the report as well, for example when they note that tourism 'places extensive pressures on the environmental, social and economic fabric of communities.' (p11) This publication becomes almost heretical when it says that tourism may not be the answer for all communities (p11), a position expanded when the Report shows concern that if we are not careful, tourism ‘will fail to provide a sustained improvement in quality of life of individuals and local communities’ (p11). Maybe it is axiomatic that a research process that has as its focus ‘local government’ will ‘notice’ local issues, will give some consideration to local people. This would suggest that the stakeholders who matter are the ones that loom large within the particular lens that you use.

However, the Hunter Valley report also recognises that locals are at some point also ‘hosts’ and have to be prepared (or may be ‘required’) to act hospitably and with pride. Maybe Omeo people don’t want to act this way - and maybe that should be their choice. The following quotation from a respondent to the Hunter Valley study puts this another way.

Local Government must plan for the appropriate levels, type, scale and location of tourist development in accordance with the wishes of the community. Otherwise, the community can be imposed upon by inappropriate development or development out of context with the local community’s social fabric and lifestyle values. (Peter Gleed, Shire Planner, Augusta-Margaret River, WA) (in Black, Paradice, and O'Connell, 1993: 28; their emphasis)

Some even go so far as to say that “the public’s right to participate in the planning of activities that affect their daily lives is now a widely accepted principle throughout the democratic world” (Simmons, 1994:99). Simmons recognises that the politics of this process mean that a ‘right’ is one thing and reality another but for my purposes the key point is that the community is important not just because of rights but because residents themselves are being seen increasingly as essential part of an area’s ‘hospitality atmosphere’” (Simmons, 1994:98 [sic]) The World Travel Organisation (1994) includes support for the idea that local people be given effective voice in tourism decision-making (Manning, 1994). However, as Manning points out, the interests of the community was not one of the indicators of sustainable tourism initially included in the WTO study upon which Manning was reporting.

In talking with the community we might pose some obvious, but taken-for-granted questions. Following McGovern (1993:8), we (my ‘community’ and I) might like to consider a complementary set of questions:

“What do tourists want?

Do we want to provide what they want, or think they want?”

Why should we?”

Marketing people ask these questions to try and match product with potential consumers. But, they ask the questions for the instrumental reasons of selling more consumption. I pose these questions for the community, individually and collectively, to answer in relation to their own life spaces. Idealistically, my answer to McGovern’s (1993:17) question “Who decides?” is that the ‘locals’ decide but that his ‘theorists’ and ‘practitioners’ must also be part of that decision process. How it is done is more complicated.

But, the above does suggest an ‘action research’ approach, one that involves researcher/community collaboration, cooperation, participation and ongoing reflective evaluation. It affirms the challenge to the scientific orthodoxy of the independent/objective ‘outsider’ running the show. It poses the problem of how to become enough of an ‘insider’ to facilitate an action research process.

If Role (1993:3) is correct and there is a trend toward a “humanisation” of tourism research and an ethic to involve “the interest of all parties concerned”, then I should be in good company in moving away from the outsider-in quantitative survey.

This leaves me with good instrumental and intrinsic reasons for working with the community and for taking up the challenge posed by Bryan Farrell in a personal communication:

I can see you as researcher, participant observer and local activist all rolled into one. It’s your area so why not get stuck into it in terms of getting out a real community ST plan, having the community accept it, then writing about what you have done. Most of us are so academic we talk of what might be done without having done it. Why not do it as well and the work you publish will have so much more credibility, [especially if] you have a couple of neutral observers chosen by someone other than you, to analyse and critique what you have done. (December, 1994)

‘ST’ stands for the next issue of concern in this paper.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM
There is considerable debate in tourism circles,
including email forums, about how to define sustainable tourism (ST) (see also Leslie, 1994; Macbeth, 1994). This is not the place to do an extensive review of the concept but let me say that it is contested and often misappropriated. However, I also want to signal my basic unease with this and the wider concept of sustainable development (SD). My reading of the debates on sustainability suggest that we may be deluding ourselves in assuming that any further development is sustainable given the rate of consumption in industrialised, especially Western, countries. As Leslie (1994) points out, and he is not the first to do so, a child in the US (and Australia?) consumes up to 40 times the energy equivalents of a child in most developing countries. Tourism is but one example of the sorts of conspicuous consumption that lead to this resource (ab)use. I wonder if this really suggests that the only ST is low energy and thus local tourism. That said and left as a ‘background caveat’, let me look briefly at sustainable tourism concepts.

Sustainable tourism (ST), drawing on the basic concept of sustainable development, includes four essential components, namely ecological, economic, social and cultural sustainability. These four factors provide an holistic perspective on the nature of developmental impacts and implications.

"Sustainable development incorporates the following four principles, each of which is applicable directly or indirectly to all development activities:

a. Ecological sustainability requires that development be compatible with the maintenance of ecological processes, biological diversity and biological resources.

b. Economic sustainability requires that development be economically efficient and that it be equitable within and between generations.

c. Social sustainability requires that development increase people's control over their lives; and maintain and strengthen community identity.

d. Cultural sustainability requires that development be compatible with the culture and values of the people affected by it." (Commission of Inquiry into the Conservation, Management and use of Fraser Island and the Great Sandy Region, 1990.)

This orientation to sustainable development, when applied to tourism, suggests a broader perspective than the simple sustainability of a tourism industry. It also requires that attention be paid to impacts of tourism on the 4 components mentioned and not just the impacts on tourism (ie. the tourism industry). This point is further illustrated by Butler (1993, 29; his italics) when he says:

"A working definition of sustainable development in the context of tourism could be taken as: tourism which is developed and maintained in an area (community, environment) in such a manner and at such a scale that it remains viable over an indefinite period and does not degrade or alter the environment (human and physical) in which it exists to such a degree that it prohibits the successful development and wellbeing of other activities.

That is not the same as sustainable tourism, which may be thought of as tourism which is in a form which can maintain its viability in an area for an indefinite period of time.

These are key distinctions underlying my approach to this study; as a sociologist my primary focus will be on the social and cultural aspects of tourism in this context.

RESEARCH ON, McDUFF

Following Wildman (1993), one of the underlying objectives of the Omeo Study, especially as a sustainable tourism study, is the facilitation of a duality of action research and action learning. The four key characteristics of ST mentioned above include the principle that local control is an important aspect of developing strategies that not only provide so-called development activities but which provide some chance of these activities being sustainable.

My key research questions thus include the following:

1. how does a rural community cope with tourism development?

2. how can a rural community use and control tourism to meet its need for sustainable 'development'?

3. how do residents, farmers and small businesses maintain some political control of tourism development in an increasingly centralised local government context?

4. what role will the local political structure (Mayor, Council, tourist groups, etc) play in this development process, having in mind the likely changes in local government boundaries and representation? (see #3 and an earlier footnote). This also begs the question of power and the problems of rationalising different factions and power bases within the study area as well as beyond it.

5. what sorts of tourist activity are congruent with the lifestyle, sense of community and environment of this rural area?

6. what research design will most effectively answer these questions in a manner consistent with the 5 questions or problematics discussed earlier in this paper?
CONCLUSION
Outcomes are not really the subject of this paper but, given the orientation taken then one possible outcome of this research would be the development of a tourism strategy for the area. A manual such as that produced by the Government of Alberta, Canada might be used as a model in this process (see Alberta Tourism and Recreation, 1988). But, to be a strategy of 'value' in an action research sense, it would have to be developed from the inside.

Let me return to the title of this paper and reflect on its limited representation of the contents. Yes, my underlying research question is about sustainable development and tourism. But, as important is how that research is conducted, what sorts of questions it tries to answer and who it tries to serve. The aim of the paper has been to outline some of the dilemmas and choices I face as a researcher in the mountains of Eastern Victoria. Yes, and it is also about research agendas and 'clients'. The reflective style of this paper is also meant to be part of the representation of tourism research agendas.

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Leslie, David, "Sustainable tourism or developing sustainable approaches to lifestyle?" World Leisure and Recreation, 36 (3, Fall), pp 30-36, 1994.


Macbeth, Jim, "To sustain is to nurture, to nourish, to tolerate and to carry on: can tourism?", TRENDS, 31, 1, 1994, pp 42-45.


**ENDNOTES**

1 The 1994 review of local government boundaries in Victoria has recommended that the Shire of Omeo be amalgamated with 4 other shires. This may not significantly alter the physical boundaries of this study but will have strategic and political ramifications for my research methods. The boundaries used to delimit this study are geographically based as well as political because the Shire boundaries tend to follow the mountain/valley structure of the area. The final determination of the study boundaries will be informed by processes similar to those used by the Commission of Inquiry into the Conservation, Management and use of Fraser Island and the Great Sandy Region and developed in the *Final Discussion Paper Volume I: Background* (1990)


3 This represents 36 persons employed in 'Restaurants, Hotels and Clubs'. It would appear that farm stay accommodation was either not identified or did not exist when this data was collected.


6 This is all part of my 'conceptual baggage', as Kirby and McKenna (1989) call it.

7 Peter L. Keage, General Manager and Valerie Cheong, Projects Manager, Infrastructure Development, November 21, 1994.

8 I was able to access only the first 13 pages but these pages summarise the main directions, according to Bob Annells, CO of TV, who sent them to me. He told me that the 100 odd page report is a "scarce as hen's teeth".

9 I am not here using the word 'community' in its strict academic meaning(s) because there is still some doubt as to the degree of 'community' inherent among the farm residents and 5 main townships who are spread over the half millions hectares of mountains and valleys.

10 It has not escaped me that even attending these conferences is problematic from this perspective.

Whither leisure CONNEXIONS tourism wither?