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EVALUATION OF THE COMMUNITY PLACEMENT OF THE TAPESTRY TOURISM FUTURES PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

The Tapestry Tourism Futures Project was an STCRC funded project from 2000-2003, aimed at developing a regional sustainable tourism model. This paper reports on an evaluation of the community placement of the project. Key objectives of the TTFP were regarded as being for marketing, planning, & promotion (74%). The most difficult aspects of the placement of the project were obtaining participation by stakeholders, operational issues relating to the ability of respondents to become involved and communication issues between stakeholders. Promotion of the project, ongoing feedback and community skill development were seen as key factors for further implementation.

BACKGROUND OF INITIAL TAPESTRY TOURISM FUTURES PROJECT

The Tapestry Tourism Region is located in the southwest of Western Australia and includes the six local government areas of Bunbury, Harvey, Collie, Dardanup, Donnybrook-Balingup and Capel (see Map 1). Local stakeholders in the region view tourism as an actual and potential key sector of a varied regional economy that includes agriculture, dairy, fishing, forestry, mining and energy (Richardson & Fluker: 261).
The Tapestry Tourism Futures Project (TTFP) aimed to identify potential impacts from an economic, environmental, and social perspective to facilitate appropriate planning and management strategies through the development of a computer model for testing future tourism opportunities. This model is called the Tapestry Tourism Futures Model (TTFM) (Walker et al. 2005: v). The TTFP was a Sustainable Tourism CRC project involving Murdoch University, Edith Cowan University, and CSIRO during the period 2000 to April 2003. The project embraced a holistic approach to regional development through input into a modelling process whilst concentrating outputs on tourism outcomes (Lee & Chok 2005).

The TTFP also involved an intensive data collection component and the establishment of a tourism database to provide relevant information to the industry and local government. It was foreseen that this would be administered and maintained by local stakeholders (Walker et al. 2005:25).

PROJECT SIGNIFICANCE

The principal objective of the TTFP is to promote sustainability within regions. Sustainability refers to a set of principles concerning a balanced approach to development that takes into account the economic, social, and environmental needs of people both in the future as well as the present. Empirical evaluation of tourism development projects is an essential component of the implementation phase of applied research. The innovative aspect of this research involves the way in which it draws on program evaluation techniques to assess a sustainable tourism project.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THIS PROJECT

The main aim of the project was to evaluate the Tapestry Tourism Futures Project with a view towards further implementation should the project be regarded as worthwhile. The specific objectives of the project were:
1. Evaluate the placement of the TFP in the Tapestry region
2. Note issues of placement of the TFP
3. Note examples of capacity building of the TFP placement
4. Determine opportunities for TFP approach to WA regions

The study comprised two phases as follows:

1. The development of an evaluation interview schedule by an ‘expert’ panel
2. Interviews of representatives from the Tapestry region, who are involved in the TFP placement

This paper will highlight issues arising from the second phase of the overall study.

TAPESTRY INTERVIEWS

The groups from which representatives were selected included shire personnel, operators, visitor centre staff, representatives from the regional development commission, chamber of commerce and industry, and project officer. In the initial contact, 72 potential participants were approached and invited them to participate, resulting in a total of 50 people completing the interview process during the period July-September 2005.

EVALUATION OF PLACEMENT

Respondents were asked what they considered being the key objectives of the TTFP. A selection of responses was provided (note: responses are not mutually exclusive):

1. marketing/planning/promotion (74%)
2. data (56%)
3. community capacity (30%)

The impost of visitor surveying was seen as having a net benefit by 61% of respondents with 8% indicating that the costs outweighed benefits with the rest being unsure or neutral. Questions relating to the simulator (TTFM) were not applicable to all respondents as the use of the simulator was targeted towards shire personnel, visitor centre staff and representatives from government organisations. Most of those who had used the TTFM indicated use only during the training session offered as part of the project during 2000 – 2003.

A further question of evaluation asked if the project had influenced the way the respondent thinks tourism planning should be undertaken, 14% indicated that they were unsure or that the question was not applicable to them, 33% indicated that it had influenced that way they thought about tourism planning and 36% felt that it had not influence their thinking. In asking the respondents for a brief comment to illustrate their reasoning, the data set was a main focus for comment. Key issues included that the data was not useful yet due to having limited participation rate, but in contrast, the access to locally and regionally specific data was a positive influence. Other explanations included that the TTFP showed linkages in tourism previously unknown, raised the profile of tourism in the region, provided feedback at a local grassroots level, and encouraged thinking and analysing of the information provided rather than making ad hoc decisions.
ISSUES OF PLACEMENT

The most successful aspect of the TTFP, was the resulting ‘data and information’ for the majority (50%) of respondents’, followed by ‘linkages’ (34%), linkages in this context encompasses bringing stakeholders together and working together for a common cause, building of customer relations, and stimulation of dialogue and cross pollination of ideas. The next category which developed was ‘awareness’ with 14%, reflecting greater awareness of tourism linkages, greater awareness of tourism issues in the region, and introducing a broader framework and getting local government authorities together to consider potential social and economic impacts of tourism.

In determining the perceived strengths of the project respondents regarded the ‘data’ (40%) as the most important aspect. Respondents’ considered the data being specific to tourism and can assist in planning, being available free of charge for participants in the project, and being able to obtain data on a regional level which is useful for regional representativeness. Another identified strength of the project were ‘linkages’ (26%), again, bringing stakeholders together and forging relations for cooperative efforts, and linking the six shires in the region. Marketing/planning (18%) was identified as strength to be able to use the data for better planning and marketing. Raised community awareness with 14% followed by the ‘champion’ with 10% were the last two aspects identified as a strength of the project.

The most difficult aspects of the project, respondents identified can be grouped into:

1. participation (62%),
2. operational (26%),
3. communication (24%)

Lack of participation was considered by far the most pronounced difficult aspect of the TTFP in respondents’ views. Operational difficulties were experienced by respondents from all groups, these included getting to meetings and workshops; time constraints; and, conflict of interest – time is money in the tourism business and the surveys were not a top priority. Communication and the lack of feedback was an important aspect in determining the difficulties of the TTFP.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Respondents were asked what support mechanism could be offered to facilitate implementation of the TTFP. Improved resources, financial and human, incentives, a champion, better promotion of the simulator, better promotion of the project were the categories outlined by the interviewees. More resources were considered having the greatest possibility of success as a support mechanism to facilitate implementation of the project. In accordance to this statement, employing a full time paid champion was viewed to increase the likelihood of achieving the goals and objectives of a project like this. Respondents saw a close link between the availability of a full time champion working on the project and the rate of participation. The potentials of the simulator are also viewed as an area which can facilitate the implementation of the project.
OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPANSION OF THE TTFP

When asked if respondent agreed that the projects visitor surveying techniques and reports should be adopted by other tourism regions, the majority (36%) strongly agreed, and 31% agreed. The reasons provided where that a project like the TTFP generates useful data and that it will be beneficial to have access to uniform data across different tourism regions. In addition, respondents thought that collective statistics, across a region is more effective than individual statistics for promoting specific region.

CONCLUSION

When asked what the respondents would do when ‘starting over again’ responses included: to ensure ongoing feedback, promote the project, demonstrate the simulator as a decision aiding tool, emphasis skill development within the community, ensure collaboration and empowerment of stakeholders within the community, revise the survey forms to be more relevant to their individual business, develop a strategy that included key performance indicators, and manage the expectations of individuals with regards to the overall project and specifically the simulator of what it can or cannot do. Two key concepts emerged for further development of the TTFP, these were, to provide better education of the projects potential and the empowerment of stakeholders.

REFERENCES