THE QUAGMIRE OF STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT IN TOURISM PLANNING: A CASE EXAMPLE FROM AUSTRALIA

CHRISTOF PFORR* AND MARTIN BRUECKNER†

*School of Marketing, Curtin Business School, Curtin University, Perth, Australia
†Centre for Responsible Citizenship and Sustainability, School of Management and Governance, Murdoch University, Perth, Australia

After its first election win in August 2001 since the Northern Territory of Australia (NT) was granted self-government (1978), the incoming NT Labor government released a new tourism plan, the Northern Territory Tourism Strategic Plan—2003–2007 in the following year. Turbulent events of 2001 that had a significant impact on the tourism industry in the NT and included the collapse of the Australian carrier Ansett Airlines and “September 11” provided the impetus for the new strategy. Purportedly, this plan was designed to direct and guide the NT tourism industry’s future development based on sound research and extensive consultation with key stakeholders. Such a partnership approach was regarded as crucial for the success of future tourism in the Territory. This article specifically focuses on the formulation process of this Tourism Strategic Plan, exploring in particular the effectiveness of the underlying consultation process. Adopting a microperspective on tourism planning processes with the NT case example we portray a unique case that allows us to highlight not only the complex and dynamic nature of tourism planning during times of significant change in the Territory’s political landscape, but also the often-experienced contradictions between tourism planning rhetoric and practice. Even though we explore a planning process that dates back about a decade, we believe that the findings of the study are relevant and inform current tourism policy and planning discourses.

Key words: Planning; Consultation; Tourism plan; Stakeholders; Northern Territory (NT) of Australia

Introduction

For more than 30 years the tourism sector in the Northern Territory (NT) of Australia (see Fig. 1) has experienced significant growth and has thus developed into a core private sector activity. The tourism industry’s success has been underpinned by strong support of successive governments to ensure the Territory’s continuing economic prosperity. But only since the mid-1990s, with the release of the Northern Territory Tourism Development Masterplan. A Commitment to Growth (TDMP), has...
the rapid expansion of tourism trade been accompanied by a strategic planning process (Northern Territory Tourism Commission [NTTC], 1994). This first overall tourism plan under the patronage of the then Country Liberal Party (CLP) government recognized the need for a better management of the resources that underpin the attractiveness of the Northern Territory as a tourist destination. At the end of the TDMP’s life span the CLP government initiated an evaluation and review process, which led to a succeeding tourism plan, the NT Tourism Development Masterplan 2000–2005. A Commitment to Excellence (Department of Industries and Business [DIB], 2000). In many ways this document did not depart from the developmentalist path that has long been pursued across Northern Australia and represented only an updated version of the earlier tourism plan (Pforr, 2001, 2006b, 2009).

The defeat of the CLP by the Northern Territory Labor Party in 2001 marked the end of a 27-year period of conservative rule in the NT. This certainly brought about a dramatic shift in the Territory’s political landscape and presents an interesting backdrop to this article, as it allows us to examine if and to what extent tourism policy and planning has been impacted by this significant political event. Although the tourism planning process has continued since, with the latest strategic plan being the Tourism Vision 2020 (Tourism NT, 2013), this article focuses specifically on the development of the first tourism plan...
strategy under Labor rule, the Northern Territory Tourism Strategic Plan—2003–2007, which was released in December 2002 (NTTC 2002a).

The article analyzes its formulation process and explores in particular the effectiveness of the underlying consultation process and here specifically how the various stakeholders participated in, and contributed to, the development of the plan. In the light of a formal policy commitment by the then Labor government to transparency and genuine stakeholder consultation and participation by the NT tourism authority, this article evaluates the implementation of stakeholder engagement and interaction processes as they occurred in the negotiation and development of the NT government’s Tourism Strategic Plan—2003–2007 (NTTC, 2002a).

Although the study investigates a tourism planning event that dates back about a decade we believe that this case-specific analysis contributes to the advancement of the current debate on tourism governance, in particular “participatory” governance (Fischer, 2006), by focusing on stakeholder involvement in tourism planning. There is evidence from the literature of divergence between the rhetoric adopted in policy documents with regards to stakeholder engagement and the reality of stakeholder consultation and participation at an operational level (Conrad et al., 2011). We therefore specifically investigate whether the consultation process and practices adopted by the NTTC meet the ideals mapped out in its strategic tourism plan and also in its Stakeholder Engagement Charter.

Adopting a microperspective on tourism planning processes with the NT case example we portray a unique case that allows us to highlight not only the complex and dynamic nature of tourism planning but also the often-experienced contradictions between tourism planning rhetoric and reality. With this study we aim to contribute to a greater understanding of the implementation and effectiveness of consultation and participation processes towards an improved quality of tourism planning and governance of tourism destinations. The study offers not only interesting insights into governance theory regarding stakeholder management, collaborative arrangements, and community participation, but it has also potential practical relevance for tourism destination managers that are confronted with similar situations.

In what follows we review relevant literature on tourism planning, in particular with respect to stakeholder engagement and consultation processes. This will provide the conceptual underpinnings for this article and will form the requisite background for the ensuing analysis of the consultation and participation process underlying tourism planning in the Northern Territory as it occurred in the development of the Northern Territory Tourism Strategic Plan—2003–2007 (henceforth NTTSP).

Tourism Planning and the Importance of Stakeholder Engagement

Tourism planning is inherently political, and managing the diverse interests that shape decision-making processes is a rather complex undertaking. In this context, governance is now recognized as an increasingly significant issue within tourism planning. It is argued that a governance approach is able to foster partnerships, networks, and collaborative arrangements between government, industry, and community (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010; Bramwell, 2010; Hall, 2011; Healy, Rau, & McDonagh, 2012; Pechlaner, Volgger, & Herntrei, 2012; Ruhanen, Scott, Ritchie, & Tkaczynski, 2010; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014; Wesley & Pforr, 2010). Opening up the political space between public and private actors in order to better engage with a range of stakeholders has the potential to lead to more effective governance (Bramwell, 2011; Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Dredge & Pforr, 2008; Fischer, 2006). It is this interaction, engagement, and deliberation, which is described as “participatory governance” and entails shared decision making and collaboration among stakeholders, which is seen to enhance planning processes (Fischer, 2006; John & Cole, 2000; Kooiman, 1993; Wesley & Pforr, 2010). Thus, governance discourse in relation to democracy, collaboration, coordination, stakeholder management, decentralization, community planning, power politics, institutional arrangements, and community participation appears to be a key principle for tourism policy and planning (Wesley & Pforr, 2010). As argued by Laurian and Shaw (2009), “since the communicative turn of the 1980s and 1990s, planning theorists support more deliberative, or discursive, models that emphasize inclusive dialogue, mutual learning, and collective problem-solving” (p. 293).
This engagement of, and active participation by, stakeholders in areas such as planning, policy formulation, as well as program design and implementation are widely acknowledged as prerequisites for successful public and private sector processes. Especially within the public policy arena there is growing recognition of the importance of governments’ responsiveness to stakeholder demands, showing signs of a reemergence of a seemingly forgotten awareness that stakeholder participation is axiomatic in a democratic setting. Stakeholder engagement is traded widely under different terminologies—often interchangeably—such as citizen or public participation, community or stakeholder involvement, and active citizenship. Terms such as these generally imply an interactive process between members of the public and/or private and not-for-profit sector organizations and representatives of a government agency with the aim of giving participants a direct voice in decisions that affect them (Munro-Clarke, 1992).

The 1960s saw much interest among early writers in the community consultation and engagement field. Early writers such as for instance Arnstein, 1969; Bachrach & Baratz, 1962, 1970; Pateman, 1970) to position stakeholder participation as a means of giving a voice to minorities and underprivileged groups in the context of an increasingly technocratic and economically rational government apparatus. Government at the time was deemed impervious to outsider perspectives and hostile to public input, which explained agitation for the public’s right to be heard—participation was largely seen as a threat to government (Barber, 1984). Various Australian state jurisdictions are still seen to display these characteristics (Churches, 2000; Walker, 2001). The neoliberal political shift itself over the last 30 years, however, has also changed government–society relations. It brought about more collaborative forms of policy making (Vernon, Essex, Pinder, & Curry, 2005) as Western governments started to retreat from the provision of public services. This shift triggered the disappearance of the top-down approaches traditionally used by public sector institutions, and in their place have come more decentralized grassroots approaches and inclusive forms of governance that allow the public and the private sector to take a more active role in planning and decision-making processes (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010; Dredge, 2006; Dredge & Pforr, 2008; Hall, 2008; Pechlaner et al., 2012; Pforr, 2006a; Timur & Getz, 2008; Volgger & Pechlaner, 2014). It bears note, however, that new bottom-up approaches are not necessarily met with public approval for they frequently embody what Arnstein (1969) described as nonparticipatory and tokenistic forms of stakeholder involvement by government. These are at risk of being out of step with stakeholder aspirations (Buchy & Race, 2001; McCool & Guthrie, 2001) and fail to overcome the tensions and conflicts pervasive in society (Bramwell, 2010). Fractious relationships between planning agencies and their constituencies that can be observed, for example, in countries like Australia would attest to ongoing problems surrounding stakeholder engagement practices. This highlights that despite a more enlightened rhetoric the gulf between good intentions and practical outcomes can remain wide.

Notwithstanding, the importance of meaningful stakeholder engagement is widely accepted, and active citizen involvement is seen as the symbolic pillar, indeed the very key to the survival of democracy in an increasingly individualized world under neoliberal rule (see for instance Saul, 1997; Theobald, 1997). Although some commentators warn of high associated cost in terms of time and finances (see for instance Davis, 1996; Okazaki, 2008) or the inability of the masses to participate meaningfully (Schumpeter, 1976), there is general agreement that higher degrees of community involvement will generally lead to better outcomes. A similar logic applies in tourism planning where, as noted by Murphy (1985) “more actors should become involved, those who are experts and those who are affected” (p. 172).

Within tourism, especially the sustainable tourism field, participation is a recognized element (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Mowforth & Munt, 2009; Pforr, 2004, 2015). In expounding Chapter 8 of Agenda 21, the action plan for sustainability emanating from the 1992 Rio Earth Summit (United Nations Division for Sustainable Development, 1992) calls for “public [access] to relevant information, facilitating the reception of public views and allowing for effective participation.” In a similar vein, the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (United Nations General Assembly, 1992) argues for the facilitation and encouragement...
of public awareness and participation underscoring the importance of public participation within the sustainability context, especially as it relates to the operationalization of sustainability principles (see for instance Carew-Reid, Prescott-Allen, Bass, & Dalal-Clayton, 1994; Franks, 1996; Lew, 2007; Palmer, Cooper, & van der Vorst, 1997; Pför, 2004, 2015).

Public input in planning and policy decision has recognized advantages. Lew (2007), for example, points to fair and representative decision making, while Mahjabeen, Shresha, and Dee (2009) explain that the active engagement of stakeholders in planning and decision-making processes enables a better matching of their needs, interests, and expectations. Indeed, the list of perceived benefits of stakeholder engagement is long. Such benefits relate to the social and political acceptability of processes and thus the longevity of process outcomes. Community involvement can lead to improved relationships and communication between governments and the constituencies as well as better risk communication, community empowerment, ownership of processes, and outcomes. It also facilitates the formation of social capital, sharing of power, expertise, and knowledge, as well as greater transparency and accountability, mutual learning, and building of confidence and self-esteem (see for instance Barber, 1984; De Sario & Langton, 1987; Forester, 1988, 1993; Laird, 1993; McCool & Guthrie, 2001; Moore, 1996; Renn, 1992; Slocum, Wichhart, Rocheleau, & Thomas-Slayter, 1995; Webler, 1995).

On the question of what constitutes a good consultation process, the literature points to a number of key process ingredients, which focus chiefly on aspects such as participants’ ability to be heard and to influence process outcomes. Vital in this regard is the issue of control referred to by Hansen and Mäenpää (2008) as citizen power, pertaining to processes that enable participants to affect agencies’ decision making. Equally important is participants’ access to high levels of information, technical expertise, and sound process facilitation (Wray, 2011) to enable both power sharing and informed decision making. Shown below is a summary provided by Tuler and Webler (1999) of key process ingredients, which mirrors other research findings (Brueckner, Duff, McKenna, & Horwitz, 2006; McCool & Guthrie, 2001; Wray, 2011) and what is accepted here as a form of consensus on the foundations of good, ideal, or successful engagement processes.

Key process principles include (Tuler & Webler, 1999):

- **Access to process**: Equal opportunity for participation and receipt of information for all parties who express interest are affected by the process or its outcomes, or can contribute to a decision. This also relates to geographical accessibility of venues and meeting places and the setting of timelines.
- **Power to influence process and outcomes**: The need for balanced power relations, referring to a process that is free from prejudice, preferential treatment, and imbalances in resource required for effective participation. It also relates to the representativeness of the process in terms of reflecting stakeholder views on process design.
- **Structural characteristics to promote constructive interactions and facilitation of constructive personal behaviors**: Constructive interaction draws attention to the discursive nature of, and social interaction (behavior) involved in, deliberative processes. Emphasis is placed on respect, openness, honesty, understanding, listening, and trust. The behavior of process participants and managers is genuine, meaning that it is based on the desire to constructively work towards solutions. The term structural characteristics refers to the timing, location, and set up of discussion fora and meetings. Both behavioral and structural characteristics define the quality of the discourse space.
- **Access to information**: Information flows are bidirectional between process participants and process managers, and information is sourced from both formally recognized experts and informal experts (e.g., local people, Indigenous people, amateurs). Information is used as a mechanism for mutual learning and teaching, involving active listening, and is transparent and accessible.
- **Adequate analysis**: This relates closely to the issue of access to information with emphasis placed on the quality of data and its analysis. Data is used for fact finding and informing the debate. Adequate analysis also relates to accountability in that decision making is based on “objective” data rather than on politics or vested interest.
Enabling of social conditions necessary for future processes: A participatory process is to create a discursive climate suitable for future planning and decision-making activities.

Strict adherence to principles cannot be seen as a recipe for success (Buchy & Race, 2001; Syme, 1992) as processes themselves are interpretive and fluid and very much context specific (Wray, 2011). Nonetheless, when appreciating participatory processes as processes of collective learning based on the collective construction and dissemination of knowledge, good process principles can act as safeguards for this learning, construction, and dissemination of knowledge to occur. In contrast, failure to structure engagement processes around guidelines such as these is likely to increase the chance of rejection of both process and outcome (Brueckner et al., 2006).

This brief overview provides a requisite backdrop against which government processes can be analyzed and judged. The process of interest here is the development of the NT government’s NTTSP (NTTC, 2002a), which at the time was portrayed as being based on good process principles, speaking of inclusivity and extensive stakeholder input. The Tourism Strategic Plan was said to be aligned with the aims of the NTTC’s Stakeholder Engagement Charter (2002d), which highlights Tourism NT’s commitment to transparency and genuine consultation. According to the Charter (NTTC, 2002d), the NTTC regards stakeholder consultation as:

- a two-way communication;
- interactive;
- information giving and listening;
- showing respect for the views of all parties;
- informing stakeholders; and
- valuing input.

It was on the basis of this understanding of, and commitment to genuine stakeholder consultation, that the NTTSP was promoted as being based on an extensive research and consultation program and as an exemplar of sustainability and a partnership-based approach to strategy formulation.

Upon the launch of the Strategic Plan, then Tourism Minister Chris Burns praised the tangible benefits the consultation work delivered referring to “stronger relationships at all levels of industry” and “improved channels of communication” and stressing the need for close cooperation between industry and government “to maximise the return for all parties and the Territory” (NTTC, 2002a, p. 1). Going by appearances, the strategy indeed rested on extensive consultation work. Appendix A of the Strategic Plan (NTTC, 2002a) lists a total of 171 stakeholders who purportedly were included in the consultation process underlying the strategic plan, ranging from airlines, hotels, and other accommodation providers to tour operators and various government departments.

In light of the NT government’s self-confessed recognition of the importance of meaningful stakeholder consultation and the grandiloquence surrounding the tourism strategy planning we present below an analysis of the experiences of process participants with a view to determine the degree to which process rhetoric was matched by perceived process reality.

In the following, after outlining the research design, a brief chronology of events in the lead up to the release of the 2003–2007 tourism strategy will provide an essential background against which the strategic plan was developed. This is followed by an overview of the consultation process that was meant to underpin the formulation and development of the tourism strategy, culminating in a discussion about the apparent discrepancies between government rhetoric and stakeholder experiences concerning the process. The article concludes, giving consideration to the importance of robust consultation processes as they relate to the protection of the interests of tourism stakeholders and their industry as well as the sustainability and efficacy of government policy making.

Methodology

Of the various methods of analysis available, the case study method was considered to be highly suitable for the study’s line of inquiry (Yin, 2009). Hall, Jenkins, and Kearsley (1997), for instance, advocate its relevance to tourism analysis within contextual situations because it emphasizes the complexities involved in actual tourism situations and arguably provides stronger real-world linkages to the theoretical constructs identified in scholarly discourse (Wesley & Pför, 2010). They point out
that “case studies are an important component of descriptive tourism research as they help analysts understand the effects that such factors as choice, power, perception, values and process have on tourism planning and policy-making” (p. 22).

Two research questions were developed in order to examine the nature of the debates and processes surrounding the negotiation and development of the NT government’s Tourism Strategic Plan—2003–2007. The first aimed to better understand tourism policy and planning and to identify the key group of stakeholders steering the development of the NTTSP, while the second investigated how the various stakeholders participated in and contributed to the development of the tourism plan. Pursuing a case-study approach this study thus provides a detailed empirically based analysis.

As this article aims to explain the issues, problems, and complex processes surrounding the nature of tourism planning in the NT, a detailed background analysis using secondary data sources (e.g., newspaper articles, government publications, and specialist reports) was first conducted. This included a thorough examination of NTTC archival records. These data sets (information from media releases, memos, cabinet submissions, and letters) were extracted from the 2002 Tourism Strategic Plan Files of the Northern Territory Tourist Commission (files 414 and 415) in 2004.

In order to examine the scope and nature of the consultation process underpinning the development of the tourism strategic plan, which was claimed to entail “a comprehensive consultation program with travel industry partners and stakeholders within the Territory, nationally and overseas” (NTTC, 2002a, p. 9), a self-completion mail-out questionnaire was developed. The questions not only aimed to identify the core stakeholders in the planning process but also tried to investigate how stakeholders perceived the consultation process underlying the development of the NTTSP and if they considered the process to be comprehensive. Before the survey was mailed out in October 2004, a letter of invitation to participate in the study was sent to those who were listed in Appendix A of the NTTSP as having been consulted or having contributed to its development. One hundred and twelve stakeholders agreed to take part in the research project and were subsequently sent a copy of the questionnaire, followed with a reminder letter to non-respondents. A total of 44 responses (39% response rate) to the survey were received.

Times of Uncertainty and Change

As the largest employer and important revenue generator (second only to the mining industry) at the turn of the millennium the tourism industry was one of the Territory’s most important industry sectors (Pforr, 2001, 2008, 2009). Figures from 2000/2001, the time point of analysis of this article, aptly illustrate these developments. In that 12-month period the value of tourism to the NT economy was already significant with 1.7 million visitors contributing $1.03 billion to the economy, which accounted for 5% of the Territory’s gross state product. The sector had a share of 8.7% of total employment, which translated into around 8,400 jobs. Indirect effects added a further 6,600 jobs and around $1.05 billion to the local economy (NTTC, 2002b).

However, global and national events took a significant toll on Northern Territory tourism, particularly the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York and, only 3 days later, the collapse of Ansett, Australia’s second airline. With these events NT tourism entered a time of uncertainty, and very difficult years for the local tourism industry followed. With the closure of Ansett, for instance, which had 42% of scheduled domestic capacity into the Territory, access was an immediate problem as more than 60% of domestic tourists entered the NT by air. The following years brought about further challenges including the first Bali bombings, the war in Iraq, and the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) pandemic in Asia. Consequently, the NT tourism industry was faced with a sharp decline in visitor numbers and visitor nights in 2001/2002 with a further decrease in the following year (NTTC, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c; NT Treasury, 2005). According to Tourism NT (2008), “for the year ending September 2002, compared to the previous twelve months, interstate holiday visitation dropped by 3% and international holiday visitation slumped by 18%” (p. 1).

In this crisis context, the Territory’s government authority responsible for tourism, the NT Tourist Commission (The Tourism NT Act saw the Northern Territory Tourist Commission become Tourism NT in early 2006), had to respond swiftly to these
negative events and initiated a review of strategic priorities for the industry. This created the impulse for the development of a new tourism plan for the Territory, although the actual Tourism Masterplan at that time, which had been developed by the previous CLP government, was still valid until 2005. The new Managing Director of the NT Tourist Commission, who came into office in March 2002, announced only 2 months later the development of a new 5-year strategic plan, which was released to the public in December of the same year. To facilitate the new strategic directions, greater control was given to the NT Tourist Commission over Indigenous tourism and infrastructure development, which had been responsibilities of the Department of Industries and Business since 1998 (Pforr, 2006a).

The NTTC played a pivotal leadership role in developing new strategic directions “to guide the development and growth of tourism in the Northern Territory” (NTTC, 2002c). In its “Terms of Reference” it was highlighted the “development of the Plan will entail broad industry, Government and community consultation and comprise an assessment of the operating environment, key priorities, objectives, strategies and key performance measures” (NTTC, 2002c, p. 3).

Findings

Stakeholder Engagement Process

In consultation with the NT Tourism Minister, the NTTC Board instigated the process for the development of a new tourism plan in April 2002. A first step was the setting up of a “Strategic Project Team” by the NTTC. The main task of this Project Team, which consisted largely of a cross section of NTTC staff, was to assist Senior Management and the NTTC Board in the preparation of the new tourism plan (2002 NTTC files 414 & 415).

The commencement of the development of a 5-year Strategic Plan was publically announced in mid-May 2002 with advertisements in all NT regional newspapers as well as on the NTTC’s website. Members of the community and community groups were invited to forward written submissions or to contact their region’s Tourist Association to communicate their views. Furthermore, in May 2002 there were calls to all NT Ministers and NT government CEOs to provide a written submission, the tourism industry was invited to participate in so-called “industry consultation fora” organized by the respective Regional Tourism Associations, and NTTC staff took part in a number of “consultation sessions” (2002 NTTC files 414 & 415).

The Tourism Strategic Plan’s consultation process can be divided into two distinct phases. The first, from April to June 2002, consisted mainly of four tourism industry fora. They were coordinated by the Territory’s four Regional Tourism Associations (Tourism Top End, Katherine Regional Tourism Association, Tennant Creek Regional Tourism Association, Central Australian Tourism Industry Association), which are responsible for the provision of region-specific information to visitors, the servicing and maintenance of their membership base, and the region-specific promotion of their local tourism assets (NTTC, 2002a). The purpose of these meetings was to allow the industry to provide a regional perspective on a number of issues critical to the future direction of the industry. It is interesting to note, however, that only a limited number of industry stakeholders took up the opportunity to provide their input into the strategic planning process. At the meeting in Darwin 19 industry representatives took part, in Alice Springs it was 10, Tennant Creek had 11 industry participants, and in Katherine only four stakeholders attended (2002 NTTC files 414 & 415).

Phase One of the consultation process also entailed a so-called “national partners forum” that was held in Melbourne (Victoria), one-to-one talks with inbound tourism operators in Sydney (New South Wales), as well as a number of specific workshop sessions with NTTC staff. At the end of June 2002, at the conclusion of Phase One, the NTTC had also received 37 written submissions (2002 NTTC files 414 & 415).

The outcomes of the initial round of consultations, the results of the inventory, and the market research findings were reviewed in a Project Team meeting in July 2002, leading to a draft “in-house” plan, which was finalized in August 2002 but not released for public comment. It was also only presented in parts to tourism industry representatives in the second phase of the consultation process (September–October 2002). During that time key
outcomes of the previous phase were communicated to industry stakeholders at industry consultation fora in Darwin with a video link to Katherine and in Alice Springs with a link to Tennant Creek (2002 NTTC files 414 & 415).

This Second Phase of the consultation process was concluded with a draft (in-house) strategy in October 2002 for consideration by Senior Management, the NTTC Board, and the Minister for Tourism. The final plan was then endorsed by Cabinet (November 19, 2002) and publicly launched in December 2002 by the Tourism Minister.

Consultation Program

As outlined above, the Strategic Plan was developed over a 6-month period in 2002 and the NTTC had claimed that it entailed extensive consultation with key industry stakeholders (represented by the four Regional Tourism Associations), Ministers and the respective government departments, the NTTC Board and NTTC staff, as well as the wider community. This approach was in line with the NTTC’s proclaimed “Stakeholder Engagement Charter” (for a summary see Fig. 2), which was meant to demonstrate the NTTC’s commitment to transparency and genuine consultation and to ensure that all stakeholders “have a voice in the development of policies and strategies that affect tourism in the Territory” (NTTC, 2002d, p. 2).

Furthermore, the Charter also emphasized that consultation should be “a form of two-way communication,” which is “interactive, includes information giving and listening, shows respect for the views of all parties, informs the stakeholders and values input” (NTTC, 2002d, p. 2).

A closer examination of the consultation process, however, shows that this government assertion is not justified, because the NTTC targeted in its consultations mainly the tourism industry via its Regional Tourism Associations (RTAs). As one participant in the study highlighted, the consultation process,

Was a very fragmented process with very sparse consultation/public meetings that leads to suppose

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The NTTC charter has been developed to ensure that stakeholders have a voice in the development of policies and strategies that affect tourism in the Territory, demonstrating also the NTTC’s commitment to transparency and genuine stakeholder consultation. This commitment is also extended to so-called hard-to-reach stakeholders such as Indigenous communities and tourism operates in remote areas.

Under the charter the NTTC is committed to reach all relevant and interested tourism stakeholders and engage them by way of sharing information and collecting stakeholders’ viewpoints and opinions to inform strategy design and policy formulation. Stakeholders are able to discuss issues with NTTC senior management, participate in stakeholder forums and have the opportunity to be involved in advisory bodies.

**Principles for community engagement include:**

- Inclusivity
- Genuineness
- Quality information
- Stakeholder input
- Provision of feedback

(NTTC 2002d)

Figure 2. Overview of NTTC Stakeholder Engagement Charter (source: NTTC, 2002d).
that the most powerful “big boys” orgs [organisations] and private cos [companies] took the “strategy” over and limited the scope to what they want the public to hear—and consume.

Another participant commented that,

The input levels from small operators 0–10 employees is very low and virtually a handful of those outside Darwin, Katherine, Tennant, & Alice. Sub regions seem non-existent. Still heavily represented by gov’n dept [government departments] and large companies—I worry about the process.

Economic interests, represented by the tourism industry, in particular the RTAs, were thus apparently given a privileged position in the policy process, which “may seem appropriate,” as Hall (1999) comments, “given the need for coordination between government and industry. . . . However, such an approach also precludes the input of a wider range of stakeholders from environmental organisations, from public interest groups, and the wider community interests” (p. 284).

Public Participation

It appears, not only from the above comments, that despite the NTTC’s rhetoric the consultation process was very limited in scope and breadth. The adopted approach was obviously not a very effective mechanism considering the small number of participants in the industry consultation fora.

Furthermore, of those who took part in the study’s survey, almost half (46%) were critical about the consultation process with an astonishing 21% claiming not to have been involved despite being listed as “individuals and organisations consulted, or who have contributed to the Plan” (NTTC, 2002a, p. 9). Some of the participants in the study commented, for instance,

We were not invited to contribute to the Strategic Plan.

I was not aware of an NT Strategic Plan. To my knowledge we were not part of the consultative process.

Unfortunately I was not approached on any level to be part of the strategic planning process; I have never seen the plan or received information about it.

I wish to advise that . . . did not participate in or provide input in the NT Tourism Strategic Plan.

Unfortunately . . . did not participate in the original plan.

I was not involved in the NTTC Strategic Planning process . . . I have canvassed senior staff . . . to ascertain if they had been involved and they had not.

There is no obvious explanation for the stark discrepancy between the claims made by the NTTC about the inclusiveness of the consultation process and the contrasting assessment by the alleged “individuals and organisations consulted, or who have contributed to the Plan” (NTTC, 2002a, p. 9). Nonetheless, in the following sections of this article some factors that might have contributed to the above situation will be explored in greater detail.

It appears that the process was lacking innovative mechanisms to ensure a comprehensive consultation and participatory process for the general public and interested parties. Consultation through media invitation seeking written submissions from the wider community was not conducive to public participation because only 37 written submissions had been received at the end of consultation Phase One (2002 NTTC files 414 & 415). Thus, the new Strategic Plan was neither a result of an adequate level of public debate and consultation nor an outcome of community involvement. Rather, it can be seen more as a top-down approach that renders the Tourism Strategic Plan to not much more than “a prescriptive statement by professionals rather than an agreement among the various parties” (Hall, 1998, p. 256). This is in stark contrast to the NTTC’s objective of providing stakeholders with “a voice in the development of policies and strategies that affect tourism in the Territory” (NTTC, 2002d, p. 2). Community groups appear to have been demoted to the margins of the consultation process and economic interest, represented by tourism industry peak bodies, taking center stage as main partners of an albeit limited industry consultation process.

Also, the Tourism Strategic Plan was purportedly “engaging in a rigorous consultation process” (NTTC, 2002a, p. 30) with indigenous stakeholders, which was seen to be crucial for the successful development of indigenous tourism products. It was
loosely integrated into the planning process. Consequently, effectively integrated tourism planning and development, which requires a much stronger coordination and collaboration within government, was not achieved. The set up of the Project Team can also be seen as a missed opportunity to capture potentially valuable contributions from outside the machinery of government, leading to particularly parochial public servants’ view. Interestingly, this approach seems to be in contrast to the measure taken by the former CLP government, where a specific Task Force representing a cross section of various government agencies assisted in the preparation of the previous Tourism Development Masterplans (Pforr, 2001, 2009).

Analysis and Discussion

The data presented above make plain that the development of the NT government’s Tourism Strategic Plan was running counter to both what the literature identifies as good stakeholder engagement principles and importantly the NTTC’s own Stakeholder Consultation Charter (see Table 1). With reference to the engagement process principles identified by Tuler and Webler (1999), only limited and seemingly selective access was provided to tourism stakeholders during the consultation phase with many organizations and tourism operators indeed unaware of the development of the NTTSP. Primarily, RTAs were key participants, yet the wider range of industry stakeholders remained outside the consultation process. As a result, access to information was limited and only available to those inside the process, affording them a privileged position also suggested that Indigenous organizations such as ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) and the Land Councils (areas of Aboriginal self-governance) “play a pivotal role in providing services and undertake an advocacy role on behalf of Indigenous people” (NTTC, 2002a, p. 31). Yet, the consultation process was not underpinned by a partnership approach to capture these views, despite cultural tourism, next to nature-based tourism, constituting one of the two building blocks of NT tourism. Then NT Tourism Minister even raised the obvious question in a memo (7151) to the NTTC why no Aboriginal representative organization took part in the consultation process. One participant in the study commented,

I am concerned at the lack of response by Indigenous organisations. . . . Concerned at the lack of involvement by Community Gov’t [Government] Councils. These people/organisations hold the key to development in smaller communities that in many cases provide first contact.

Whole of Government Approach

As outlined earlier, a Strategic Project Team had been formed to coordinate and lead the development of the Tourism Strategic Plan. However, this approach certainly did not reflect a whole of government perspective in line with the NTTC’s interpretation as outlined in the Strategy. There it was highlighted that “the broad nature of the tourism industry requires cooperation across a number of Government departments” (NTTC, 2002a, p. 22). In contrast, the Strategic Project Team consisted mainly of NTTC staff with other relevant government agencies being only

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Stakeholder Engagement Principles</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to process</td>
<td>Two-way communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power to influence process and outcomes</td>
<td>Interactive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Structural characteristics to promote constructive interactions and facilitation of constructive personal behaviors</td>
<td>Showing respect for the views of all parties</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access to information</td>
<td>Information giving and listening</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adequate analysis</td>
<td>Informing stakeholders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enabling of social conditions necessary for future processes</td>
<td>Valuing input</td>
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and the power to influence the process outcomes. Despite government claims to the inclusivity of the process, stakeholders’ experience of the consultation phase points to serious shortcomings, affecting the ability of interest groups from inside and outside the tourism industry to participate in the process, let alone contribute meaningfully or exercise control. In terms of the NTTC Stakeholder Engagement Charter (NTTC, 2002d), the findings of this study draw into question the extent to which two-way communication was enabled, information was shared, and the degree to which all views held within and outside the industry were heard and valued.

Relatedly, the structural characteristics of the process were found to have been a barrier to stakeholder engagement, relying not only on seemingly selective industry engagements but also limited public discussion, which was invited by media invitation only. The chosen format meant that many NTTSP stakeholders were restricted to providing written submissions during the consultation process, which itself was poorly advertised and gone largely unnoticed by many people who the NTTC in its public documents referred to as critical for the formulation of the NTSSP; especially indigenous organizations and small tourism operators.

On the question of adequate analysis, the data suggest that largely NTTC staff were in charge of developing the NTTSP with limited and sporadic input from other government departments and agencies. Although the process was purported to be based on a whole of government approach designed to allow for the holistic assessment of the strategic needs of NT tourism, in the end it was largely driven by a single department. This in itself does not suggest that the analysis was inadequate; however, the analysis lacked the multistakeholder input that was meant to underpin the NTTSP and thus its purported robustness (NTTC, 2002a).

Importantly, the negative process experience of many NTTSP stakeholders provided a poor foundation for future government engagement processes because the development of the NTTSP lacked critical trust elements. Trust is decisive in political processes for it frames perceptions, communication, and actions, and it can be regarded as both integral to, but also a requisite for, public processes. However, trust needs to be developed, earned, and nurtured (Giddens, 1991, 1994). The development of trust is dependent on structural context (such as transparency of governance and governmental processes) and agential endowment (social moods and collective capital) (see Marks & Zadoroznyj, 2002), and it requires time and process. Positive past experiences with government processes (e.g., competence, unbiased, due process, caring) are likely to aid the social and political acceptance of current/future government processes and their outcomes (see Kasperson, 1986). In contrast, as is evident in the case presented here, perceptions of bias and exclusion erode the basis for trust.

The issue of trust and stakeholder control over process and outcome are closely related (Edelenbos & Eshuis, 2012). The NTTSP was meant to draw on the knowledge gained from NT tourism stakeholders to improve the quality and enhance the legitimacy of the strategy. Horizontal forms of decision making such as this require cooperation between different actors, and trust between actors is an important precondition for cooperation. Trust is contingent, however, on the way in which control is shared and exercised. The closed nature of the NTTSP process precluded power sharing compounded by its selectivity and exclusiveness. Many tourism industry stakeholders were found to have little input in, let alone control over, the consultation process and the outcomes reached.

Although the rhetoric of the NTTSP gave the impression of shared governance, the process reflected programmed governance (see O’Riordan & Stoll-Kleemann, 2002). Structures were hierarchical in character, power was centralized, and information was controlled. The consultation process was restricted, limiting stakeholder input and exhibiting a form of resilience to external change. Key decisions on process and outcomes remained in the domain of a narrow policy community, at risk of resulting in a bureaucratically mediated garbage-can strategy document (after Walker, 2001).

In short, the consultation process underpinning the development of the 5-year Strategic Tourism Plan was characterized by strong political–administrative control facilitating the dominant economic paradigm of tourism development in the Territory. These controlling forces determined the issues of the debate as well as the scope and nature of the consultation process. The elected NT Labor Government, despite acknowledging the benefits of interaction,
A core question emerging from this study has, however, remained unanswered in the above analysis—how such a mismatch between the NTTC’s rhetoric about the consultation process and the reality of its implementation was possible. The discrepancy between rhetoric and reality is most obvious in the contrasting assessment between the NTTC and alleged participants on the question of who actually provided input into the consultation process. One could see this as a deliberate attempt by the NTTC to mislead the public about the true nature of the consultation process adopted in the development of the Tourism Strategic Plan. In all fairness, however, it needs to be acknowledged that although the objectives of the new incoming Labor government after almost three decades of conservative rule in the Territory had changed significantly, the NTTC as an organization might have been simply unable in its operations to change long-adopted practices in a short period of time. Particularly, the “Stakeholder Engagement Charter” might have been just an attempt by the NTTC to act politically correct in a new political environment without being able to engrain these new objectives into its immediate operational practices.

Learning from this, strategic planning processes in the future need to be truly more inclusive based on trust and consensus building. Such an approach...
is contingent on forms of collaboration that build on the expertise and knowledge of all relevant stakeholders and their willingness to engage in good faith—a true partnership approach. In order to close the gap between rhetoric and reality of tourism policy and planning and to improve the governance of tourism destinations, more attention needs to be placed on political power structures that underpin exclusionary approaches to tourism planning that reflect only the interests of a very narrow range of stakeholders.

References


