

**THE TAPESTRY TOURISM FUTURES PROJECT: LESSONS
LEARNED FOR GOVERNANCE IN COMMUNITY TOURISM
PLANNING**

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INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

This paper focuses on the findings from an evaluation (funded by the STCRC) of the three-year Tapestry Tourism Futures Project (TTFP) in the context of governance models in community tourism planning. The TTFP was a tourism resource management project that was carried out in the South West Region of Western Australia (then called the Tapestry region, but since renamed the Geographe region) from 2000 to 2003, before being handed over to the regional community for self-management. At the heart of the project was the 'tourism futures simulator' (TFS) developed by the CSIRO to aid regional planners in their understanding of potential tourism impacts across a variety of spheres, and first implemented in Port Douglas, North Queensland (Walker *et al*, 1998). The simulator aimed to encourage a broader systems perspective within the community as it illustrates relational dependencies between sectors that many may not traditionally associate with tourism, for example health and security services. The key aims of the TTFP were:

1. To explore and educate the tourism community about the notion of a 'systems' approach to sustainable tourism;
2. To develop a timely, reliable and useful data set unique to regional requirements (namely, up-to-date visitor data); and
3. To make available a locally specific computer simulation model that could provide trend information for planners and policy makers in response to 'what-if' scenarios.

Empowering the community through capacity-building and meaningful involvement in the project was also an important objective. The project relied on a top-down knowledge-based injection into a bottom-up request for input. In other words, the community presented the questions and a group of experts provided the tools for finding the answers. A series of workshops were held with regional representatives that mapped the relationships between the various components of

the 'tourism' system. This knowledge formed the basis of the TFS. Visitor surveys undertaken by tourism providers produced the raw data that was fed into the simulator, and once analysed was provided back to the providers in the form of tourism reports.

In April 2003 management of those tools passed from the experts to the region, with the team of national experts replaced by a university team located at ECU Bunbury, and the State and national funding bodies replaced by the six local governments in the region, who committed to the project for a further three years. However, in 2006 the project was discontinued (not long after the evaluation was completed) after the regional Shires that were funding the program felt that it was no longer in their interests to continue. This paper will focus on the community placement phase, and the advantages and disadvantages of its implementation in the context of sustainable community development – an explicit objective of the TTFP. It situates the evaluation findings in the overall context of sustainable tourism planning, particularly concerning collaboration in community tourism planning and suitable governance structures. Given the ongoing interest in community-based approaches such as those employed in the TTFP (for example, their potential application in the Ningaloo Cluster project, in which the TTFP architects have been involved in planning), the findings of the evaluation are felt to be relevant and timely.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE AND CONCEPTUAL APPROACH

Participatory approaches and other consensus frameworks are becoming a widespread feature of recent discourse in tourism planning, which borrows heavily from community development principles and notions of regional sustainability (Bramwell & Lane, 1993). The position taken by advocates of these approaches is that communities are in a better position to understand their needs and govern programs effectively, and that failure to involve local stakeholders in the decision-making process can lead to misunderstandings, lack of local interest, or even outright

resistance (Jamal & Getz, 1999). Community-based approaches are said to constitute adaptive management structures that are more responsive to changes in the tourism system than institutional arrangements (Reed, 1999) and provide communities with a sense of ownership that ensures local level support for initiatives.

However, a number of obstacles to local involvement have also been highlighted in the academic literature, including lack of resources and funding, lack of local expertise, and the influence of local politics and divisions (Tosun, 2006). Although advocating participatory approaches, Hall (1999) makes the point that community based approaches have a particular struggle in the area of tourism destination management because of the diffuse nature of the tourism product itself, which spans the divides of society, the economy and the physical environment. In other words, the multi-faceted nature of tourism which provides the impetus for sustainable management is the very factor that makes sustainability difficult to manage – problems that are often amplified in the community context.

‘Collaborative’ approaches attempt to overcome these potential obstacles by having well resourced experts and external agencies work closely with local communities to implement regional initiatives (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Selin, 1999). However, too often such collaborations struggle to last the distance for much the same reasons that participatory based approaches often do – fragmentation of interest, disagreement over objectives, insecure funding arrangements, political inequalities and lack of stable leadership (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Parker, 1999; Vernon et al, 2005). The reality is that non-institutionalised approaches tend to struggle to maintain momentum. The Tapestry project, at the time of the evaluation, had appeared to be the exception, but upon closer inspection it too was showing inefficiencies that were eventually to see it discontinued.

METHOD & RESULTS

The evaluation was carried out in 2005, and consisted of interviews with community participants in the TTFP, which included local government personnel, operators, visitor centre staff, representatives from the regional development commission, chamber of commerce and industry, and a TTFP implementation officer. The majority of data collected during this research was through personal interviews. A group of 72 potential respondents were identified through the purposive sampling technique, with 50 people agreeing to participate in the study. The interviews were carried out from July to September 2005, not long before the TTFP was discontinued. A further set of interviews were carried out after the termination of the project to confirm the factors that led to its demise.

Respondents in the initial evaluation were asked to provide their level of agreement with the statement that the benefit they had gained from the visitor survey was worth the time/cost of their contribution to collecting the data. Almost two-thirds of the interviewees (64.7%) felt that the benefits of collecting the data set outweighed the costs to them, with less than 8% finding the imposition of data collection to be higher than the reimbursement. Yet, lack of participation was considered by far the most pronounced difficulty of the TTFP in respondents' views. Lack of participation included: lack of participation by operators, which was highlighted by local government personnel and visitor centre staff, and lack of participation of visitors, a concern raised by operators administering the surveys. 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 the perceived difficulties of the TTFP, which was poorly managed by the university team based in the region. The data was also put forward as a difficult aspect, mainly by operators and local government personnel. Respondents stated that they considered the data to be skewed, unreliable and inaccurate due to low numbers participating in each survey round.

Lack of resources, both financial and human, was cited as a further constraint of the project.

There were many positive aspects identified in the evaluation, but the lack of effective coordination (including from the university section providing the feedback to operators) meant that inefficiencies in some parts of the process had a carry-over effect to the process as a whole. The follow-up evaluation confirmed that the Tapestry project simply lost momentum, with key stakeholders (namely local governments) coming to view the project as a poor return on investment, in the sense that it was not meeting the needs of the community through effective management, and did not involve a fair partnership among local government contributors.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The TTFP ultimately struggled in the face of an ineffective management structure, which failed to ensure the ongoing effectiveness and relevance of the project to stakeholders. Management issues such as these are all-too-familiar to regional initiatives, and they point to the importance of establishing viable governance frameworks. It is proposed that local adaptive management mechanisms need not be thought of as in opposition to more institutionalised arrangements that can ensure the continuity of programs when local management conditions break down. It is suggested that many of the problems encountered in the Tapestry project could have been overcome through a continued close partnership between State and national agencies and other external stakeholders with the regional community.

Unfortunately, having successfully steered the project during the development phase, the external agencies stepped back after the community handover to such a degree that they were not in a position to assist when difficulties in the local management process began to emerge. What are required to make initiatives like the Tapestry Tourism Futures Project viable are flexible institutional arrangements that can offer support to the implementation process at different levels of governance

and in ways that support, rather than supersede or completely step back from, participatory processes at the community level.

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