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REGIONAL TOURISM SYSTEMS AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF INNOVATIVE BEHAVIOUR

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ABSTRACT

The viability of regional and rural communities depends on embracing new and innovative solutions to development strategies to build social, cultural, political and economic capital. Tourism is often touted as an industry that can serve this purpose. In this paper we outline some of the issues facing researchers and policy makers in this context along with some of the lessons learned about the tourism system in regional areas. Innovation in tourism development relies on and can contribute to social, political and cultural capital (SPCC) while improving the economic base of the area.

Keywords: regional tourism, innovation, social capital, planning, policy

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is but one of many industries that might contribute to the economic, social, cultural and environmental health of a regional community. Our research shows that regional communities need to think about their readiness to undertake tourism development and that they should make decisions about what, if any, development is appropriate, feasible and of net benefit. If the regional community approaches tourism, as with any development strategy, in an open, rational and critical manner then development decisions can be made that contribute to the wellbeing of the community and its overall health - implicit in this assertion is the need for thorough and thoughtful use of knowledge and the potential for innovation. Further, as a community begins an assessment and planning process, it is embarking on a journey that can itself contribute to community development but it is a process that takes time; there are no quick fixes. This paper is important as an overview of these complex issues.

Underlying our analysis is a framework of innovation that includes 10 elements: Economic Competence; A leading role of Local Government; Institutional Infrastructure; Clustering of Resources; The existence of Networks; The presence of productive Development Blocks; Entrepreneurial activity; An effective Critical Mass of resources; The Production and Distribution of Knowledge; The quality of SPCC, social, political and cultural capital.

ISSUES IN DOING REGIONAL RESEARCH

Those who live and/or work in regional contexts understand that tourism planning faces a number of difficulties that, while not unique to regions, are in many cases exacerbated by regional conditions. Along with the general problems of regional and rural decline consider:

Tourism data is a bit ‘thin on the ground’. Statistical information on many aspects of local and even regional Australia is not only hard to get but is often of dubious quality and accuracy. While Census data is comprehensive and invaluable in tourism planning, actual data on visitation, tourism and so-called tourism satellite business activities and tourism employment is almost non-existent in some areas.

Tourism is both a system itself but it is also part of wider systems of activity. Tourism activity of any sort cannot be seen in isolation from other activities of the regional area as they often take place in and amongst the day-to-day activities of residents and in many cases use the same infrastructure.

Tourists or visitors? There is often an attempt to separate the activities of day-trippers and/or those involved in business and other non-leisure activities from tourists but we assume that the fact of visitation is more important for thinking about tourism development than making the distinction above.

Corporate memory. This term is used here to refer generally to the knowledge stored about the region within both the minds and memory of people but also the archival records. Where there is a stable and active community then the personal corporate memory of citizens will go a long way in tourism policy and planning for development.

Depressed? Many regional areas in Australia, as in other developed countries, are economically depressed and, in fact, that is why many are turning to tourism as a development strategy. However, as important is that regional decline can also leave a community without the ‘energy’ to look for new alternatives or even to see the potential in alternatives; it is almost as if the psyche of the community is depressed.

LESSONS ABOUT THE TOURISM SYSTEM

While tourism can itself be seen as a system, it is a mistake to see the tourism system in isolation from other systems and, in particular, non-tourism infrastructure (government agencies; local parklands; local heritage society; etc). With that fundamental point in mind, there are some specific issues about tourism systems to keep in mind.

Tourism systems are open systems: The implications are simple: tourism is not independent of other developments and events at the local, regional, state, national or global level. In tourism it is important to think local but it is just as important to think global.

Systems are sets of complex relationships. Not only is the tourism system itself complex but the relationship to other systems is complex. For example, the relationship between the tourism system and the transport system (roads, rail and air) is complex and absolutely central to tourism assessment, policy and planning at a regional level.

TGR to TDR. The notion that there is a direct and obvious relationship between the generating and destination regions should be used with caution in looking at regional tourism. For example, some settlements lie between the two regions yet must follow and/or face the policy and planning environments of a tourist destination region.

Control of infrastructure. Anyone who lives and works in a regional area knows that the institutional infrastructure is not controlled within the region. In some cases, even local government may be out of the hands of the region due to the size of the local authority. The power of outside agencies to foster or thwart tourism initiatives within a region is a factor to take into account.

Many actors? Not always. In regional tourism there are often a few actors undertaking numerous roles, trying to fulfill the needs of different constituencies. A good example is the frequent local government situation where the Chamber of Commerce is also the main tourism lobby group, or Local Tourism Authority (LTA). This situation may be functional or it may be dysfunctional so the important thing is for those doing tourism assessment, policy and planning to be aware of these relationships.

The core tourism system. The core tourism system of a region can be viewed in a number of ways. It is on the one hand a temporal system, defined by who is doing what and when and for how long, while on the other it can be defined as a spatial system and thus bounded by geographic or political boundaries. In whatever way the core tourism system is defined and operationalised, for it to have substance and ‘clout’ it has to have a critical mass of tourism related activities, infrastructure or potential.

INNOVATION

Our work in regional tourism suggested a number of comments about innovation in the context of regional tourism assessment, planning and development.

Believe in the incremental. In regional community development, even small changes can make a difference and accepting this premise reinforces the notion that incremental change is important to a region. This requires patience but also a strategic view of the way ahead, with tactical decisions informing the creation of these incremental changes.

Disequilibrium isn't all bad! In fact, disequilibrium can ‘get things moving’. We make changes when our equilibrium is upset and, likewise, regions can make innovation work when the right amount of adversity spawns activity. But, this is a delicate balance as too much disequilibrium can also lead to inaction and often in such cases some form of outside assistance is needed to overcome this larger adversity.

Knowledge management. The ability of a region to use knowledge to develop better solutions and to innovate is crucial. Knowledge management means, among other things, having effective systems of obtaining, recording, storing and retrieving information so that it can be put to use. It also requires that we understand the reliability and validity of the knowledge (or data), its weaknesses and the gaps when it is incomplete.

Institutional and physical infrastructure. Agencies, corporations, community groups and individuals all vie for some control over the infrastructure that limits or facilitates their ability to innovate. The control of infrastructure tends to weaken the lower down the political hierarchy we move, that is local government has less control than state government and so on.

The importance of local government. Notwithstanding the discussion of a lack of control of infrastructure, local government is still one of the keys, if not the key, stakeholder in regional tourism assessment and planning. The importance of local government in the way in which tourism has developed or is developing (or not) in regions is quite clear. In some cases this means a number of local authorities have worked together for innovation while in other cases local government has taken up the challenge posed by work done by others.

SPCC – social, political and cultural capital. The very nature of social capital, its cohesiveness, its sense of the ‘in group’, has to be tempered with a willingness to bring in new stakeholders and new knowledge. We have argued at length elsewhere (Macbeth, Carson and Northcote: 2004) however, that tourism not only relies on strong SPCC to foster innovation but that tourism development appropriate to the region can itself foster and strengthen SPCC.

This paper resulted from a large regional project reported in detail in *Regional Tourism Cases: Innovation in Regional Tourism* (Carson and Macbeth 2005). A case study methodology was used in the eleven cases, although each used various methods and the result is a rich tapestry of regional tourism insights.

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