Research Paper

Residents' engagement and local tourism governance in maturing beach destinations. Evidence from an Italian case study

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A B S T R A C T

In academia as well as in practice there is increasing interest in governing the complex relationships within destinations. Nevertheless, a gap persists in knowledge on how to engage the local community in the tourism development process. This paper analyzes residents' perceptions, attitudes, and involvement related to tourism development in a mature Italian "Sun, Sea and Sand" tourism destination. Exploratory factor analysis followed by cluster analysis revealed four groups of residents representing different levels of interest towards tourism ranging from euphoria to apathy. The findings and conclusions are useful for tourism policymakers in Italy and elsewhere where there is a critical need for stakeholder management and other strategic management approaches in the public realm.

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1. Introduction

The main goals of tourism governance and development are generally predicated on beliefs that tourism increases economic benefits, improves community infrastructure and superstructure systems, and enhances the community quality of life. To ensure that these benefits occur and are sustainable requires planning that is sensitive to community's needs and attitudes towards tourism development (Fredline & Faulkner, 2000). Broadly speaking, tourism sustainability requires a collaborative policymaking between local authorities, government agencies, businesses and host communities, who must all work together to plan and regulate tourism development (Vernon, Essex, Pinder, & Curry, 2005). When studying the sustainability of a tourism destination, it is important to understand the degree to which the views of stakeholders who most influence local tourism development converge with each other and whether they are compatible with those of local residents (Del Chiappa, 2012).

Lankford (2001) suggests a need for base research on community tourism objectives from which plans can be developed to address local concerns and issues. This type of research can be used to develop resident involvement in decisions on issues such as scope, density, and rate of tourism development. Therefore, research on resident attitudes and perceptions towards tourism is an essential point of departure for tourism planning, aimed at the provision of an enjoyable tourism product for both tourists and residents.

Positive attitude from local residents can help boost tourists' satisfaction level and also contribute to "word-of-mouth" promotion of the destination by the satisfied tourists. According to social exchange theory, if locals perceive that the benefits of tourism development are greater than the costs, they are more inclined to support its further expansion (Ap, 1992). However, to gain or maintain local support for tourism projects and initiatives requires policymakers to first be informed about resident perceptions of tourism and potential directions of new development.

A growing number of studies offer segmentation approaches to analyze local resident perceptions and attitudes. The analysis of community perception towards tourism impacts through segmentation techniques creates valuable information for policymakers and tourism managers for strategy formulation, product development, and service delivery (Oviedo-Garcia, Castellanos-Verdugo, & Martin-Ruiz, 2008). Among the various techniques, cluster analysis is commonly used to divide respondents into heterogeneous groups and to identify clusters of people within the community that are more concerned about (or opposed to) tourism development (Lankford, 2001).

The increasing importance given to these studies is also confirmed for the Italian context, where several authors

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(VanderBorg, Costa, & Gotti, 1996; Figini, Castellani, & Vici, 2009; Brida, Osti, & Barquet, 2010; Brida, Osti, & Faccioli, 2011; Del Chiappa, 2012; Brida, Del Chiappa, Meleddu, & Pulina, 2012a, 2012b; Pulina, Meleddu, & Del Chiappa, 2013) have analyzed and segmented the opinions of residents. Several Italian destinations (most of them in the South) are in a maturing stage of development and have failed to revitalize their product which is still tied to elements that are now mostly obsolete (Trunfio, Petruzzellis, & Nigro, 2006), and at the same time, struggle to have a clear priority in the local socio-political agenda.

This paper provides insight to one such destination by exploring resident perceptions and attitudes towards tourism development. It investigates factors influencing residents' behavior and uses cluster analysis to identify coherent groups with common perceptions of tourism. The aim is to highlight the factors that most influence the behavior of the residents towards tourism and discuss the differing attitudes and characteristics of the groups identified. The study discusses the importance of the analysis and the engagement of residents in the destination governance processes in general. More specifically, the focus on Southern Italy allows for the identification of several peculiarities relevant to this context. In this regard, the study provides a more in-depth critique of the tourism competitiveness and attractiveness of this part of Italy. Therefore the results are also useful to Italian tourism practitioners.

2. Opportunities and threats to Southern Italian tourism: The case of the city of Termoli

In recent years, Italy has experienced an overall loss of tourism competitiveness relative to both historical competitors and emerging destinations. The result has been a worrying blur of the brand 'Italy', which is still the major asset for an overall repositioning of tourism (Cracolicia & Nijkamp, 2009).

The analysis of the Italian tourism system reveals that it is almost exclusively organized around the "Sun, Sea and Sand" (3S) model despite a rich diversity of other tourism products. The result is a concentration of tourism demand mainly in the summer period, and a predominance of the domestic market (57 percent of all nights) (OECD, 2011). Several parameters highlight the persistence of a strong imbalance between the North and South of Italy, and show how tourism has been more widely exploited in the Northern regions of the country than in the South. The analysis of tourism in Italy shows that the South accounts for nearly one in five domestic nights (17.7 percent), and represents less than one in ten (7.4 percent) of total inbound nights, highlighting the discrepancy in attractiveness between the North and South for inbound visitors (OECD, 2011). The North of the Country is well served by an intricate network of roads and rails, whereas infrastructure in the South remains less developed and of lower quality (OECD, 2011). In the South of Italy, accommodation facilities are approximately 21 percent of the total and represent about the 33 percent of the total beds.

The lower level of development in the South represents a weakness but at the same time an opportunity if it is possible to capitalize on significant underdeveloped natural and cultural resources that are of growing interest to the international tourism market (Formica & Uysal, 1996).

The review of the Southern Italian tourism system highlights the predominance of community-defined destinations, i.e., destinations consisting of a system of fragmented services delivered by many actors (numerous SMEs) (Murphy, 1985), and where the local community (physically and culturally) usually is an integral part of the visitor experience. This presents a great opportunity to capitalize on the growing interest in experiences that permit tourists to rediscover the sense of identity of places through traditions and direct contact with the local people. However, this opportunity is jeopardized if community members adopt a hostile attitude towards tourism. This hostile attitude can have a very deleterious effect on the local tourism industry and damage the destination's reputation especially in relation to experiencing its 'people' and 'culture' (Leiper, 2004).

A typical example of the community-type destinations of Southern Italy is the city of Termoli, a beach destination located on the Adriatic coast. With approximately 35,000 inhabitants, the economy is based on manufacturing, agri-food industries and, to a lesser extent, on tourism. The tourism industry is highly seasonal with the peak being driven by mass beach tourism in the summer. Termoli hosts approximately 200,000 arrivals per year (Termoli Office of Tourism, 2012). The accommodation capacity consists of about 2000 beds, spread among a few small hotels and several non-hotel accommodations, such as bed and breakfasts and residences.

Termoli's strategic location, the proximity to important national markets (primarily, Rome and the surrounding region) and the provision of tourism infrastructure, have allowed it to enjoy significant benefits from tourism. However, there are growing concerns over the ability to maintain market share given that the destination is very dependent on the sun, sea and sand product which concentrates visitation in the months of July and August. Based on Butler's model of tourism evolution, the destination appears to be in the stagnation stage (Presenza & Sheehan, forthcoming). The city is at a crucial fork in the path of developing tourism – to continue to offer a relatively generic beach tourism product or to differentiate itself from other Southern Italian tourism destinations with the creation of new products and services.

3. Theoretical background

Over the last decade, researchers and practitioners concerned with destination governance have directed their attention towards analyzing the relationships that are established between government, businesses and the local community (Del Chiappa & Presenza, 2011, 2013). For example, Bramwell and Lane (2011, p. 412), state that "the processes of tourism governance are likely to involve various mechanisms for governing, steering, regulating and mobilizing action, such as institutions, decision-making rules and established practices". They continue arguing also that the concept of governance is seen as broader than that of government, in recognition that often it is not just the formal agencies of government that are involved in governance tasks because other actors (such as those in the business, community and voluntary sectors) can also be involved by virtue of their ability to direct their own resources and to influence the actions of others.

Recognition of the complex interplay of stakeholders in destination governance supports the notion that the performance of a tourism destination depends not only on the intrinsic characteristics of the destination (March & Wilkinson, 2009), but also on the level of cohesion among the various actors present in the destination. The recognition of actors is further extended to residents by Ritchie and Inkari (2006) who advocate that the perceptions and attitudes of residents towards the impacts of any proposed model of tourism development should be considered in the creation of tourism policies and plans. Furthermore, Moscardo (2011, p. 423), p. 423 affirms that "giving more power to resident communities to develop and present their own social representations of tourism itself is a necessary prerequisite for the governance of more sustainable approaches to tourism".

Despite this growing acknowledgement in the literature, in practice the local community is often one of the stakeholders