

# Towards a destination tourism disaster management framework: Long-term lessons from a forest fire disaster

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## Abstract

This article is a follow-up study investigating the long-term experience of a tourism industry affected by a major forest fire disaster that occurred during the summer of 2003 near Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada. The original study determined the preparedness, responses, and recovery methods of the local tourism industry from interviews with 104 local tourism businesses, and a review of relevant government, media, and organizational reports. This article summarizes a follow-up study undertaken to investigate what the local tourism industry experienced over the long-term after the disaster, what recovery strategies were initiated, the impacts that remained, and how tourism disaster management has changed. The follow-up study includes repeat interviews with 60 of the original 104 businesses, two and a half years after the disaster. A number of surveys conducted by relevant tourism agencies, 1 year after the disaster, are also examined to provide information on intermediate impacts. The aim of this paper is to contribute to what is recognized as a shortage of research investigating the long-term experiences of tourism industries after disasters. The lack of disaster management in tourism is also addressed and a framework proposed to increase tourism disaster management at the destination level.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper reports on a follow-up study undertaken two and a half years after a major forest fire severely affected the local tourism industry in Kelowna, British Columbia (BC), Canada. An earlier study by Hystad and Keller (2005) reported how prepared the local tourism industry was for this major disaster, determined and examined the affects on the local tourism industry. They also examined the immediate recovery strategies that were put in place and highlighted the lessons learned by the local tourism industry directly following the disaster. The objectives of this follow-up study were: (i) to examine whether the lessons learned had actually been translated into a permanent change within the tourism disaster management practices and behaviours in Kelowna; (ii) to determine the long-term impacts the fire had on the destination and on tourists' behaviours, and (iii) to examine how information

gained from the local tourism industry two and a half years after the fire may provide information on long-term tourism recovery practices following disasters. In this case study long-term is considered to be the amount of time it takes for a local tourism industry to completely recover from a disaster. For this event long-term was considered to be approximately 2 years.

First, the need for long-term studies exploring tourism and disasters is examined followed by a brief summary of the original study, including an introduction to Kelowna's tourism industry and the 2003 forest fire disaster. Next, the intermediate disaster impacts, as identified from local tourism surveys in 2004, are summarized. The findings of the long-term survey are then reported which leads to the introduction of a tourism disaster management framework for destinations. The framework outlines stakeholder involvement throughout the different stages of a disaster and documents general stakeholder roles, responsibilities, and communication channels. In its generic form, the framework should be applicable to any tourism destination crisis or disaster.

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## 2. The need for long-term disaster impact studies

Disasters and crises are becoming more frequent, intense, and geographically diverse (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2006). This may be due in part to modern communications bringing even the most distance disasters to our attention, and to a more complex and interconnected world. Irrespective, disasters and crises are a frequent occurrence and require management, preparedness and response. The tourism industry is not immune to these events, as clearly demonstrated by September 11th, SARS, the Iraq War, and Hurricane Katrina.

Despite the increasing negative impacts disasters and crises are having on tourism, there appears to be minimal proactive planning within the industry (Drabek, 1995; Faulkner, 2001; Glaesser, 2003; Hystad & Keller, 2005; Kash & Darling, 1998; Ritchie, 2004). It is generally recognized that prepared businesses are in a more competitive and advantageous position to react to negative events, and that decisions made before a crisis or disaster will enable a quicker and more organized response by providing a clear direction to follow. This is important considering the challenges faced when making decisions during the chaos of a disaster or crisis (Burnett, 1998; Heath, 1998; Kash & Darling, 1998; Ritchie, 2004).

Several authors have attempted to define and clarify the distinction between crises and disasters (Faulkner, 2001; Pauchant & Mitroff, 1992; Santana, 1999). The research reported here focuses on a natural disaster, yet the purpose of this study is to examine how a tourism industry is affected by negative events in general, and how to better prepare for future occurrences. For clarity, this paper will use the term disaster to represent a major negative event that has the potential to affect a tourism industry.

Case studies that investigate tourism industries during and immediately after a disaster provide valuable information to assist tourism planning for, and recovery from, disasters (Cioccio & Michael, 2007; Drabek, 1994; Faulkner & Vikulov, 2001; Miller & Ritchie, 2003; Murphy & Bayley, 1989). Exploring a tourism destination's long-term response to a major disaster has the potential to build off these initial studies by examining the long-term impacts, recovery and experience of the tourism industry affected. This is important to inform planning for long-term recovery (Faulkner & Vikulov, 2001; Ritchie, 2004).

The growing number of tourism case studies focused on disasters reflects the importance of developing tourism disaster management plans (Beirman, 2003; Cassedy, 1991; Cioccio & Michael, 2007; Faulkner, 2001; Faulkner & Vikulov, 2001; Glaesser, 2003; Hystad & Keller, 2005; Lee & Harrald, 1999; Ritchie, 2004; Santana, 1999). Few case studies, however, have reported on long-term impacts, recovery, and lessons learned from the perspective of a tourism industry following a major disaster. The lack of long-term follow-up studies is surprising considering

disasters have been recognized and treated as extended events as far back as 1986 (Fink, 1986).

Examining the long-term impacts and revival of a tourism industry affected by a disaster can bring obvious benefits when preparing tourism industries for future events. Major disasters usually imply a temporary shift in the image of a tourism destination that can last for an extended period of time, or become permanent. Behaviours of tourists towards the affected destination may then change as the result of a disaster. For instance, the 2001 foot and mouth disease outbreak in the United Kingdom did not have an impact on physical tourism infrastructure, yet a negative image of rural tourism emerged that affected tourism over the long-term (Miller & Ritchie, 2003). When tourism infrastructure is destroyed, recovery is linked to infrastructure restoration, to the ability to rebuild major tourism attractions that were damaged or destroyed, and to a strategic long-term effort to restore or shift the tourism destination's image through marketing (Faulkner, 2001; Ritchie, 2004). Research investigating the long-term impacts and responses of a tourism industry following a disaster may provide insights into: (i) how a major disaster has temporarily or permanently shifted the nature and quality of the tourism product; (ii) how the behaviour of tourists may have changed; (iii) what strategic management actions and policy changes have yielded success; and (iv) what changed in terms of the preparedness of the local tourism industry.

## 3. The original study

Kelowna, a city of 96,000, is located in the Okanagan Valley of BC, Canada and is the central community for the Valley's agricultural, industrial, and tourism activities. Kelowna and the Okanagan Valley have a growing tourism industry that focuses on its lake and mountain surroundings by offering agricultural and wine tourism, music and the arts, and golf and recreation activities. Motivations frequently reported by tourists visiting the area include beautiful landscape and scenery (68%), good climate (65%), and the vineyards and wineries (23%) (Tourism BC, 2004).

During the summer of 2003, Kelowna experienced an unusually severe forest fire. What has become known as the Okanagan Mountain Park Forest Fire (OMPF) was started by a lightning strike on August 16 th. Lasting for nearly a month, the fire forced the evacuation of 26,000 residents and destroyed 238 private homes and a substantial part of the regional tourism infrastructure. Most notably, the Kettle Valley Railway national heritage site, which attracted tourists from all over the world, was destroyed. The cost of reconstruction of the trestles alone was estimated at \$15 million (Cdn). The fire also occurred during the peak tourism season, therefore severely affecting the region's tourism economy.

Three months after the disaster a survey of 104 local tourism businesses was conducted to assess how prepared

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