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## Research Paper

## Maintaining sustainable island destinations in Scotland: The role of the transport–tourism relationship

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## ABSTRACT

The reliance on tourism as an economic generator has become increasingly important in island communities following a decline in traditional industries. The flow of visitors to these areas impacts upon a variety of sectors and service provisions, adds to job creation, and evokes vibrancy in areas with low and dispersed populations. The mercurial and interdependent nature of tourism is both supported and challenged by the input of numerous stakeholders with a heavy private sector advocacy. In comparison, whilst some entrepreneurial transport provision is evident, geographical distance and low population density contributes to subsidisation and public sector governance of transport systems to curb service irregularity and ensure infrastructure investment. This article investigates the feasibility of cross-sectoral interaction between transport and tourism stakeholders and their perceptions and experiences of working together to manage destinations. Exploratory research involving in-depth interviews with multiple stakeholders identified a growing awareness of the benefits and necessity of collaboration between sectors to increase the attractiveness, accessibility and in turn sustainability of island destinations. Analysis suggests that the extent to which joint working occurs is dependent upon collaborative capacity; leadership; and the cohesion, strength and scope of local governance.

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore the scope, role and nature of relationship between tourism and transport stakeholders in island communities in Scotland and the influence this has on local economic development and destination sustainability. Accessibility and the requirement of good transport links to reach remote regions are pivotal and reflect the feasibility of tourism development in archipelagos. A reliance on transport is heightened in island areas since visitors are unable to reach these peripheral destinations by land. In Scottish islands this has meant that, for the most part, tourism is contingent on public transport availability where distances between Mainland Scotland and Scottish island destinations can be lengthy. Transport provisions tend to serve, first and foremost the island communities who inhabit these regions thus they are a service critical not only to tourism but also for the sustainability of the local population and subsidised services are a commonality. The consequential benefit this has on tourism is in the higher frequency and lower fares than would be

available without government support. However in some cases, albeit few and often those passing an attraction or en route to a port or airport, the relationship is reciprocated as the footfall visitors provide can help to sustain the provision of some operations which might not otherwise have the local usage to justify continuation.

Economically, the opportunity for access and a fluidity of movement to and from an area are intrinsic to its sustainable growth, and mobility has a significant effect on a region's competitiveness and prosperity (Duvall, 2007; Page, 2009a). Access also has a remit in enabling social development within communities by diminishing isolation and enabling people to gain access to employment, healthcare, education and social activities. While isolation can be prohibitive to the movement of local people out of an area it can also curb the arrival of visitors thus impacting upon the potential to develop a tourism market and in turn a source of local income (Payet, 2010). The lucrative opportunity that tourism provides in generating revenue within islands is reliant on the multiple parties involved in providing a range of services and products consumed by tourists. The extent to which this can be exploited will be dictated by the degree of engagement between stakeholders to create a product which is well designed and attractive to its consumers (Jamal & Stronza, 2009; Selin & Chavez, 1995).

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Further constraints exist for island areas in the form of financial and political resources; whilst they may enjoy supremacy in terms of environmental assets, the jurisdiction they hold is dependent on the extent and effectiveness of local governance (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Dredge, Ford, & Whitford, 2011). Remote areas are disparate to their urban counterparts inasmuch as they are removed from city centres where the majority of decision making takes place. This distance is apparent not just in terms of supply and physical connections but also when it comes to policy and funding allocation. A demonstration of unity in peripheral areas and consensus in decision making helps to deliver a clear message from a strong voice ensuring outer lying areas are not overlooked (Kauppila, Saarinen, & Leinonen, 2009). A local governance approach, where policy-making involves the input of public, private and third sector members has been considered effective in influencing change in the policy domain; in providing ownership and empowerment of local policy actions and initiatives; and in generating sustainability by way of holistic and inclusive consideration (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010; Vernon, Essex, Pinder, & Curry, 2005).

## 2. Literature review

The tourism industry is a complex environment involving many components and participants which contribute to the tourism product and experience. Gunn (2004, p. 34) conjectures that 'every part of tourism is related to every other part' which highlights the need for a multi-stakeholder and multi-sectoral approach to developing and managing tourism destinations. Effective transport systems are fundamental to destination development and therefore the ability to generate sustainable visitor markets (Gossling, Hall, & Weaver, 2009; Page & Connell, 2009; Prideaux, 2000). Some would argue that they demonstrate the most important component of tourism since they facilitate the necessary movement of people. Similarly the hefty dependence that visitors to island destinations have on public transport services accentuates the tourism industry as a significant contributor to transport markets. The fluctuating relationship between transport systems and tourism markets is therefore reciprocal in nature since together they will reinforce and influence each other and the actions and effectiveness of one party will directly affect the other.

The geographical context of this study allows an analysis to be made within the definable space an island presents. Many of the world's islands depend on tourism to a greater extent than their mainland counterparts. Briguglio and Briguglio (2005) suggest that this intensifies for smaller islands as tourism is very often their main source of economic generation. While tourism outcomes can contribute to a wider sustainability of peripheral destinations such as through social and cultural elements, they are primarily motivated by the economic imperative. There is little doubt that one of the industry's key benefits is the ability to generate a substantial multiplier effect, thus stimulating local economies to a broad extent. The discussion around an economic dependence on tourism in islands is relentless and one of the few ubiquitous characteristics amongst them regardless of their warm water or cold water status (Hamzah & Hampton, 2013; Moyle, Glen Croy, & Weiler, 2010). Despite this, the literature on tourism in small islands is limited (Shareef & McAleer, 2005; Warrington & Milne, 2007). The extent to which tourism is recognised for the support it provides to economies is likely to be reflected in the level of political attention it receives and thus the propensity for a joined up approach when it comes to destination management. The separateness of islands has led in some instances to generous devolution agreements in terms of jurisdictional arrangements. However the success of island destinations with high levels of autonomy will be dependent upon effective governance mechanisms at a local

level which give consideration to aligned planning and policy objectives that support rather than undermine each other.

### 2.1. The economic impacts of tourism in rural areas

Following the decline of traditional rural industries, tourism has provided a diversification mechanism to stimulate economies, boost local employment and discourage leakage (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). The generation of fiscal benefits through tourism has been a significant driver for its use in rural areas and the incorporation of it in economic strategies throughout the world. This is predominantly because tourism can provide financial returns and social benefits without a huge initial outlay or investment (Wong, Mistilis, & Dwyer, 2011). Its recognised advantage is that it provides a way in which to generate profit through the utilisation of natural resources that are inherent to rural areas in the form of remote landscapes, peace and tranquillity and flora and fauna (George, Mair, & Reid, 2009). This is further emphasised in island tourism where the romanticised perception associated with the isolation of these peripheral destinations is a key visitor motivation in seeking a contrast to urban life (Graci & Dodds, 2010; Hall, 2010). However there have also been concerns raised around an over-reliance on tourism in rural areas and the perception of it as a panacea regardless of the impacts that seasonality and carrying capacities can have on sustainability (Phelan & Sharpley, 2010). Responsible management has emphasised the need for a collaborative approach to achieve a holistic and comprehensive overview of such a fragmented industry (Baggio, Scott, & Cooper, 2010; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Kauppila et al., 2009).

The growth of accessibility and in turn the flow of visitors to natural environments has motivated an increasing number of Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) to use the activity as a basis for business development in rural areas. Tourism related service industries allow individuals to enter the market place in a way which can be introduced reasonably independently in comparison to many alternatives and with little capital expenditure. As such, rural locations are increasingly moving away from a sole dependency on traditional industries as the main source of income generation and are establishing enterprises which can function alongside them (Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ilbery, 2007). European studies estimate that over 50% of farmers now engage in alternative methods of rural development such as agritourism in order to achieve economic sustainability (Marsden, 2009). Garrod, Wornell and Youell (2006) and Lane (2009) report that tourism in the UK is now more financially valuable than farming in many rural areas providing an economic comparison which emphasises the significance of support tourism provides to remote destinations. However the multi-faceted nature of the tourism industry and its ability to infiltrate a variety of activities and markets adds a level of ambiguity which makes a statistical definition of the tourism value difficult to deduce. The boundaries surrounding who and what pertain to tourism are blurred which leaves it as a phenomenon difficult to accurately quantify. This is further amplified in island areas where seasonality can disturb a consistent flow of visitors and it is therefore often the case for islanders to play a temporary role in the tourism industry or to juggle more than one job (Baldacchino, 2006; Okech, 2010). Regardless, the potential scope of economic influence the tourism industry has on island communities expounds reason for an expansive number of people to hold a keen interest in its robustness and a purpose for desiring input in the decision-making process (Moyle et al., 2010).

### 2.2. Tourism—A fragmented industry and collective experience

The acknowledgement of tourism as a linkage of mutually dependent components dictates the potential for collective success in the

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