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Research Paper

Destination management: The tourists' perspective

Douglas G. Pearce^{a,*}, Heike A. Schänzel^b^a School of Management, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington 6011, New Zealand^b School of Hospitality and Tourism, AUT University, Auckland, New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Although tourists are frequently cited as the central focus of much destination management activity little is known about how they regard destination management. Through a series of focus groups with guests at youth hostels in three locations in New Zealand, this study provides empirical evidence as to whether tourists consider destinations need to be managed, why destination management is needed, what it should involve and what differentiates good destinations from poor ones. The tourists' responses endorse the need for destination management and show a broad appreciation of why destinations should be managed. The participants see a need for destination marketing, value the provision of information and acknowledge the importance of visitor management. However they strongly expressed the view that destinations should not be over-managed, raising the question of where the boundaries lie between effective destination management and over-management. The factors which differentiate good destinations from poor ones might be grouped under two broad themes: those associated with tourists' motivations and expectations and those related to a range of destination attributes.

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1. Introduction

With the growth and maturity of destinations in recent decades the literature on tourism development has been complemented by a growing body of research on destination management. Some researchers emphasize the need for destination management in order for destinations to be competitive and sustainable and discuss the activities that need to be undertaken to achieve these goals (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999; Dwyer & Kim, 2003; Merinero Rodríguez, 2008; Presenza, Sheehan, & Ritchie, 2005). Others are concerned with the structures and processes required to manage destinations effectively (Bieger, Beritelli, & Laesser, 2009; Bodega, Cioccarelli, & Denicolai, 2004; Sainaghi, 2006). A third group focuses on the stakeholders that need to be taken into account in managing destinations (Bornhorst, Ritchie, & Sheehan, 2010; Fuchs & Weiermair, 2004; Wang, 2011; Zehrer, Pechlaner, & Hölzl, 2005).

As is common with other rapidly growing literatures, research in this field is characterized by varying definitions, concepts and perspectives on what constitutes destination management. How we define, conceptualize and frame destination management is critical as it will determine the focus of our research and influence who or what is to be managed, how and by whom. It may also suggest where management priorities should lie and where

solutions might be found. While this is true of all aspects of destination management, how we frame our research and approach destination management is especially important with regard to consideration of the stakeholders involved. In some cases a fairly inclusive approach is taken (Bornhorst et al., 2010; Buhalis, 2000; Wang, 2011). Wang (2011, p. 2), for example, follows the DMAI to suggest:

'...destination marketing and management can be defined as a proactive, visitor-centred approach to the economic and cultural development of a destination that balances and integrates the interests of visitors, service providers and the community.'

Others place the focus squarely on the tourist:

'...the fundamental goal of destination management is to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of the product, facilities, services and programs that altogether provide memorable tourism experiences for visitors...(Fuchs & Weiermair, 2004, p. 212)

Destination management and marketing is the consistent orientation of tourist services and service providers towards the needs of potential guests...The guest's subjective feeling, his expectations and experiences during his journey and his stay make his satisfaction a vital factor of competence of a destination management. (Zehrer et al., 2005, p. 148).

Given this recognition of the importance of tourists, either as one group among several sets of stakeholders or as the dominant focus of destination management activity, it is rather surprising

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +64 4 4635715; fax: +64 4 463 5180.
E-mail address: douglas.pearce@vuw.ac.nz (D.G. Pearce).

that there is relatively little empirical research examining their perspective on destination management.

The work undertaken in this area has tended to deal either with particular problems such as perceptions of carrying capacity and overcrowding or with issues of satisfaction, often using some form of quality assessment or importance/performance analysis (Butler, 2010; Griffin & Edwards, 2012; Litvin & Sharon Ng Sok, 2001; López-Toro, Díaz-Muñoz & Pérez-Moreno, 2010; Wade & Eagles, 2003). Such work contributes to a better understanding of what in particular needs to be managed at given destinations although as Griffin and Edwards (2012) note with regard to the complexity of urban destinations, managers may exert only a limited control over some attributes.

However, the tourists' voice has generally been absent in terms of how destinations might be managed. Much of the recent research in this domain concentrates on organizational and resourcing matters, frequently with a focus on the roles and activities of destination management organizations (DMOs) (d'Angella & Go, 2009; Presenza et al., 2005; Sainaghi, 2006; Sheehan & Ritchie, 2005; Singal & Uysal, 2009; Wang, 2011). Sainaghi (2006), p. 1054 goes so far as to argue that the key question 'is not *what* to do, so much as *how* to do it.' While the views of a variety of stakeholders might be included here the emphasis is generally on the coordination and collaboration of a range of different providers and developing organizational structures and processes to facilitate this.

As originally developed in a corporate context (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson & Preston, 1995), stakeholder theory asserts that an organization should take account of all of its stakeholders, a stakeholder being defined as 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives' (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). Furthermore, the interests of all stakeholders are of intrinsic value. Effective stakeholder management involves identifying stakeholders and their stakes and establishing processes to manage relationships and transactions with and between them. Given the multi-faceted nature of tourism and the range of interested or affected parties implicated in its development, it is not surprising that stakeholder theory has been widely applied to destinations and issues of tourism development and planning (Currie, Seaton, & Wesley, 2009; d'Angella & Go, 2009; Hardy & Beeton, 2001; Kimbu & Ngoasong, 2013; Morrison, 2013; Sautter & Leisen, 1999; Sheehan & Ritchie, 2005). While some of these studies incorporate tourists (Hardy & Beeton, 2001; Sautter & Leisen, 1999), those concerned with destination management commonly do not or their results show that tourists are not considered particularly salient by destination managers. Sheehan and Ritchie's (2005) analysis of the most salient stakeholders identified by CEOs of DMOs in North America showed tourists were considered of very negligible importance.

In terms of destination management, it is argued here that tourists are a very salient stakeholder group. Their salience relates not only to the tourist-centred focus of destination management outlined above but also to the need to manage the impacts tourists generate. While such issues have been dealt with in the large but rather fragmented body of work relating to satisfaction, quality evaluation and impact assessment, there appears to have been little or no attempt as yet to address the broader question of what tourists actually think about destination management per se and no parallels to recent studies that have considered the views of supply side stakeholders (Bornhorst et al., 2010). Incorporating the tourists' perspective will contribute to a more informed understanding of what destination management might involve and how it might be carried out. Moreover, understanding tourists' attitudes to destination management and why such management is necessary may also contribute to the achievement of destination management goals. Where tourists are known to share the same

values as other stakeholders, for instance with regard to sustainability, then they are likely to respond better to the policies and practices put in place, particularly where an effort is made to inform them of why a destination is being managed in this way (Stanford, 2006). Where their views differ, they should also be taken into account and attempts made to reconcile them with those of other stakeholders.

In short, tourists are frequently cited as the central focus of destination management but little is known about how they themselves regard the issue. It is in this context that this exploratory study examines the tourists' perspective on destination management. Through a series of focus groups with guests at youth hostels in three locations in New Zealand the study provides empirical evidence of how tourists view destination management per se and discusses the implications of incorporating their perspective in research and in practice. In particular, their views are sought on whether destinations need to be managed, why destination management is needed, what it should involve and what differentiates good destinations from poor ones.

2. Methodology

Focus groups were selected as the means of studying the tourists' perspective due to the exploratory nature of the research and the search for insight into the ways in which tourists think about and express their ideas about destination management. Focus groups encourage openness and interaction, factors which were seen as particularly helpful in generating discussion about the nature of destination management. As Gibbs (1997), citing Kitzinger (1994, 1995), observes: 'interaction between participants highlights their view of the world, the language they use about an issue and their values and beliefs about a situation'. Similarly, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2006, p. 199) suggest that the narrative produced by focus groups is 'extremely useful for identifying the language, definitions and concepts that the research participants find meaningful'. Focus groups also provide the facilitator with opportunities to probe further, to follow up on and clarify emerging ideas and issues, another key advantage when exploring a topic such as this.

Recent studies have used focus groups to explore a range of destination management issues from the perspective of various stakeholder groups, particularly residents, providers and managers (Haukeland, Daugstad, & Vistad, 2011; Mackenzie, 2012; Salk, Schneider, & McAvoy, 2010; Singal & Uysal, 2009) and, in the case of sustainable tourism in Daintree (Australia), also tourists (Hardy & Beeton, 2001). Focus groups have also been used in other studies of tourists. Sharpley and Jepson (2011), for example, used this technique to examine whether visitors to England's Lake District considered rural tourism a spiritual experience.

In terms of research design, inter-related decisions to be made about undertaking focus groups are: who is to be included; how many focus groups will be held and where; how will the focus groups be structured; how will the material be recorded; and how will the material obtained be analysed?

One of the challenges of carrying out focus groups with tourists, compared with local residents or providers, is that they are a mobile population and bringing groups of them together for an hour or more in a suitable setting requires careful consideration. This is particularly the case in New Zealand where much tourism, especially international tourism, involves circuit travel including overnight stays at multiple locations in both the North and South Islands. To address this, the decision was taken to limit the study to hostel guests, an important segment of tourists in New Zealand, as the hostels they use provide good opportunities to recruit participants and hold meetings (Becken, 2007). Meeting

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