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Research paper

Exploring clustering as a destination development strategy for rural communities: The case of La Brea, Trinidad

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ABSTRACT

The tourism industry in the rural community of La Brea in Trinidad and Tobago has primarily focused on exploiting its main attraction: the Pitch Lake. This study argues that cluster theory provides an innovative means of conceptualising destination development in the study area. Synthesising Porter's cluster theory with practitioner case studies, this research builds and tests a theoretical model to assess the study area's clustering potential. The study focuses on the triangulation of qualitative data from site visits, document analysis, and interviews. The findings from the research reveal that several critical factors for tourism cluster development are absent in La Brea. Thus, it is evident that clustering is not the most feasible destination development strategy. Consequently, this research posits that destination development in rural communities such as La Brea should focus on developing local assets and building the capacity of local people. It also suggests cluster development approaches should be context-specific.

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1. Introduction

The rural community of La Brea on Trinidad's south-western peninsular possesses a resource of immense tourism potential (the Pitch Lake) that is at the centre of its tourism development efforts. However, the commercial exploitation of the Pitch Lake (mining, refining, manufacturing and distribution of materials for road works, and other asphalt products by Lake Asphalt of Trinidad and Tobago (1978) Ltd is the primary driver of economic development in La Brea. Despite the presence of these industries, La Brea remains a depressed community. In dealing with such issues, the Ministry of Tourism (2010) has, through its National Tourism Policy, articulated the role of tourism in fostering community-level socioeconomic growth. This study therefore seeks to analyse the context for destination development in La Brea.

Rural tourism destinations are complex systems characterised by non-linear processes and linkages among a variety of actors, activities and resources (Saxena, Clark, Oliver, & Ilbery, 2007). Tourism development in these communities poses a multiplicity of challenges and constraints. Rural areas are typically at a disadvantage with respect to the commercial, economic and logistical issues such as product quality, accessibility, availability of skills and investment opportunities, on which tourism development depend (Holland, Burian, & Dixey, 2003). In a study of rural

tourism in Australia's countryside, Jackson and Murphy (2002) determined that since tourism products are supplied by a range of different types of businesses, co-ordination and management at the destination level is difficult. This is because each firm possesses its own individual agendas and priorities. Additionally, As Liu (2006) observed in the case of Kedah, Malaysia, rural tourism in developing countries can prove particularly challenging when there has been a lack of local capacity building and when tourism is not integrated into the country's overall rural development strategies.

It is imperative that the development of tourism destinations in rural areas occurs in accordance with an appropriate strategy that takes into consideration the specific demands of the host environment. The need for integration and co-ordination in rural tourism destination development lends itself to the principles of clustering. Thus, cluster theory is selected in this study as a strategy to foster integration in attempting to develop La Brea into a tourism destination.

It is against this background that this study calls for a re-evaluation of the current tourism model and examines the applicability of tourism cluster theory to the study area. The research seeks to explore the possibility of developing a La Brea tourism cluster that includes the Pitch Lake as a key attraction. More specifically, the study seeks firstly to determine whether or not the study area possesses the conditions necessary for the development of a tourism cluster. Secondly, barriers to tourism clustering in the study area will be identified. Thirdly, various approaches are recommended to encourage tourism cluster development in rural communities.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Integration in rural tourism development

Several authors (e.g. Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004; Cawley & Gillmor, 2008; Panyik, Costa, & Rátz, 2011; Saxena et al., 2007; Saxena & Ilbery, 2008) have called for an integrated approach in addressing the challenges of rural tourism development. As Saxena and Ilbery (2008) indicate, the concept of Integrated Rural Tourism (IRT) 'is proposed as a means of thinking critically and comprehensively about the actors, resources, and relationships involved in this notoriously fragmented industry' (p. 234).

According to Saxena et al. (2007), IRT can be viewed as:

a web of networks of local and external actors, in which endogenous and embedded resources are mobilised in order to develop the assets and capabilities of rural communities and empower them to participate in, influence and hold accountable the actors and institutions that affect their lives (p. 358).

This concept encapsulates the multidimensionality of rural tourism and dictates that through the collaborative management of touristic resources, value can be added to the destination's tourism product. Additionally, IRT is geared towards contributing to the sustainability of the rural tourism system while empowering the host community (Cawley & Gillmor, 2008). A key component in fostering integration and stimulating economic development in rural destinations is, according to (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004), the clustering of activities and attractions.

This study therefore agrees with Saxena and Ilbery (2008, p. 234) that 'the idea of IRT encourages a holistic conceptualization of tourism, which in turn suggests a research methodology that engages with the multiple actors involved in its constitution.' As Saxena et al. (2007, p. 355) in citing Amin and Thrift (1994) underscored, the premise of IRT development is that 'areas can specialise around local clusters of economic activity, exploit comparative advantages, and even outshine urban regions, especially those that lack the requisite advantages and institutional thickness.' Thus, in accordance with the work of Jackson and Murphy (2006), Porter's (1990a, 1998a, 1998b) cluster theory can be adapted to a rural tourism context as a means of developing social capital, stimulating economic development and enhancing the attraction and development of the destination.

2.2. Industrial cluster theory

The foundation of cluster theory can be credited to Marshall's 'industrial district' of 1890 (Porter, 1998b). Marshall's discourse argues that geographic proximity results in agglomeration effects that generate positive externalities and economies of scale and contribute to the overall productivity of the region (Kim & Wicks, 2010). According to Porter (1998a), clusters are defined as 'geographic concentrations of interconnected companies and institutions in a particular field' (p. 78) which may include suppliers, customers, and manufacturers of complementary products, and governmental institutions that perhaps provide training, research, and technical support. Thus, according to Porter (1998a), clusters represent a novel way of conceptualising the significance of location- from being a source of comparative advantage to a key driver of competitive success, and a new configuration for companies and institutions. The central premise of Porter's (1998a, 1998b) cluster theory is that co-location stimulates enhanced performance of companies which in turn leads to increased competitiveness of the geographical locale.

Clusters have been identified as a potentially critical component in economic development strategy as a result of the benefits

that can be derived from spatial proximity and collaboration (Ketels, Lindqvist, & Sölvell, 2006; Ketels & Memedovic, 2008; Nordin, 2003). Porter (1998a) identifies three main benefits of clustering: increased productivity of companies within the cluster, heightened innovation and stimulation of new business formation. Kuah (2002) highlights the opportunity for positive externalities as a result of industrial clustering. To Novelli, Schmitz, and Spencer (2006), clusters are a means of enabling participants to exploit the synergies and complementarities between outputs, especially when operating at the SME level, thus allowing for regional development through increased productivity, performance, innovation, and the critical mass of local businesses. The experiences of a successful industrial cluster such as 'Silicon Valley' have, according to Thierstein and Wilhelm (2001, cited in Dümmler and Thierstein, 2003), often stimulated a desire in economically depressed regions to achieve positive change that relate to regional development, regional innovation networks, technological change, competitiveness and structural change, and the upgrading of regional or local labour markets. Consequently, clusters are thought of as an avenue towards pro-poor growth in the developing world (Nadvi & Barrientos, 2004; United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), 2010).

Despite the popularity of industrial cluster theory in academic discourse it has received much criticism from Martin and Sunley (2001) because:

The multidimensionality and vague character of the concept pose problems of theoretical and empirical definition, as well as methodological investigation. Not only are clusters vague in geographical scale and internal economic dynamics, so that they are hard to identify with precision, different analysts use the idea in different ways to suit their own purposes (p. 12).

The challenges of industrial cluster theory also stem from its role as a developmental tool in developing countries. A UNIDO (2005) study deemed most cluster initiatives in developing countries to be underperforming. Wares and Hadley (2008) identify the presence of anecdotes about cluster strategies in the developing world but believe that despite the shortage of conclusive evidence either supporting or disproving their effectiveness, 'cluster development remains an option (albeit still experimental) for stimulating growth in developing countries' (p. 1).

2.3. Tourism clustering

The traditional conceptualisation of clustering mainly considered its applications in the context of the manufacturing industry. However, the global services industry is a key driver of economic development. In light of this, authors such as Pandit, Cook, and Swann (2001) have attempted to draw similarities between clustering patterns in high technology manufacturing and the services industry, i.e. the British financial services industry. Porter (1990b), however, noted the presence of clustering in tourism-related businesses. His subsequent work (Porter, 1998a, 1998b), though not extensively, highlights the mutual dependence of businesses within a tourism destination. Additionally, several researchers including Jackson and Murphy (2002, 2006), Nordin (2003), Miller and Gibson (2005), Jackson (2006), and Lade (2006) have noted the suitability of cluster theory in tourism development.

In light of the conceptual similarities between tourism destinations and industrial clusters, tourism clustering has emerged within the literature and in practice as a paradigm for contemporary tourism destination development. As Michael (2008) posits, clustering theory has a critical role in tourism development especially for communities that intend to build or enhance a

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