Understanding the historical institutional context by using content analysis of local policy and planning documents: Assessing the interactions between tourism and landscape on the Island of Terschelling in the Wadden Sea Region

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Understanding the historical and institutional context can help local policymakers.
- Content analysis is a valuable tool to identify the changing dynamics of policy.
- The orientation of policy and plans (e.g. re landscape and tourism) fluctuates.
- Acknowledging synergies has historically been limited in policy and plans.
- There should be greater focus on the synergies between tourism and landscape.

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ABSTRACT

Content analysis is a valuable tool to identify changes in policy. By analysing historical documents, policymakers and planners can improve their understanding of the institutional context in which decisions were made. Using the Island of Terschelling in the UNESCO World Heritage Wadden region of the northern Netherlands as our example, we show how content analysis can be used to understand the historical institutional context. We analysed policy and planning documents from 1945 to 2015, which was supported by semi-structured interviews with local key informants. We specifically considered tourism–landscape interactions. Although there were fluctuations between socio-economic development and nature protection over time, we found that there has been an increasing awareness of synergy. Synergies are crucial to balance nature protection with socio-economic development and to increase the social-ecological resilience of regions. We conclude that, by using content analysis, local documents can be used as a proxy for the institutional context.

1. Introduction

For policymakers and planners to understand the current situation better and to improve future policies and plans about tourism and landscape, a better appreciation of the institutional context, past and present, is necessary. The institutional context is where planning and policy making occurs, but it has received little attention in the tourism literature (Hall & Page, 2006). This institutional context is influenced by past decision-making processes and therefore exploring the historical relationship between society and the environment is an essential part of understanding this context (González, Montes, Rodriguez, & Tapia, 2008; Parra & Moulaert, 2016). Walker et al. (2002) showed that an analysis of the historical context can reveal a great deal about the present situation and how it might respond to future changes. A methodological problem is that it is often hard to establish the historical institutional context. The specific focus of this paper, therefore, is to demonstrate how the institutional context (and how it has changed over time) can be assessed.

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We show how content analysis of local documents can be used to understand the historical institutional context. Understanding the past can be achieved by analysing how issues are represented in policy and planning documents at the local level and how they change over time. These local documents can be used as a proxy for the institutional context. We use content analysis to analyse these documents to consider the changing dynamics in policy. In our example, we specifically consider tourism–landscape interactions regarding the Island of Terschelling in the northern Netherlands for the period 1945 to 2015. Our analysis is supported by semi-structured interviews with local experts and other key stakeholders.

2. Synergies in tourism–landscape interactions

Tourism and landscape interact in many ways (Liburd & Becken, 2017; Terkenli, 2004). Nature-based tourism, for example, is not just a socio-economic activity that provides income and other benefits to local communities, it also plays an important role in facilitating understanding of natural heritage, gaining public support and raising funding for conservation (Libosada, 2009; McCool & Spenceley, 2014). However, tourism (in general and nature-based tourism) has often had negative impacts on the landscape (Buckley, 2011; Saarinen, 2006) and on host communities (King, Pizam, & Milman, 1993; McCombes, Vanclay, & Evers, 2015). Tourism is highly dependent on aesthetic landscapes to remain attractive to tourists (Liu et al., 2007). The finding of synergies between tourism and landscape is essential to cope with future social and ecological change. Synergies can be described as situations in which the interactions between elements of a system catalytically combine in ways that result in a greater sum-total outcome than would have been achieved otherwise, with benefits across the full range of social, economic and ecological dimensions (Persha et al., 2011).

Policymakers and planners often struggle to find synergies in their attempts to balance socio-economic development and nature protection. The inadequate preparation of policies and plans, and/or a one-sided approach that is exclusively focused on either nature protection or socio-economic development, hinders the development of synergies between tourism and landscape. For example, in locations where the focus lies only on socio-economic development, degradation of nature will likely occur. Conversely, a focus only on nature protection may lead to suboptimal economic development. In most rural areas, there usually is a focus on either nature protection or socio-economic development – tourism, however, mainly takes place at the intersection of these trajectories (Hartman & de Roo, 2013). This means that tourism does not always fit the ways institutions and landscapes are traditionally structured (Hartman & de Roo, 2013). Because of this, opportunities for synergies between landscapes and tourism are underexplored (Cumming et al., 2015; Hartman, 2015; Heslinga, Groote, & Vanclay, 2017).

The interactivity between tourism and landscape, and the potential synergies between them, can be understood in terms of socio-ecological systems (SES) thinking. A SES perspective presumes an integrated system including human society and ecosystems, with reciprocal feedback loops and interdependencies (Berkes, 2007; Levin et al., 2012). Traditional ecology, however, has typically excluded humans from the system, while traditional social science has typically under-prioritised the ecological consequences of human action (Berkes, 2007; Folke, Hahn, Olsson, & Norberg, 2005). The advantage of using the SES approach is that both ecological and social research have to consider human and ecological components (Liu et al., 2007). In such a way of thinking, the distinction between social and natural systems is considered to be minimal. In SES thinking, institutions provide a linking mechanism between social and ecological systems, and are therefore important in managing social-ecological interactions.

If the potential synergies between tourism and landscape are recognised and regional development options that find a balance between tourism and landscape are selected, then tourism could be an opportunity to increase the social-ecological resilience of a region (Buckley, 2011; Heslinga et al., 2017). Resilience is a characteristic of a social-ecological system and can be considered as the ability to continuously change, adapt and transform in response to present and future stresses and tensions (Carpenter, Westley, & Turner, 2005; Imperiale & Vanclay, 2016). Resilience is a key concept in SES thinking (Anderies et al., 2004; Folke et al., 2010). In the tourism literature, resilience has mainly been discussed as a theoretical concept with little application to the real world (Lew, 2014). To stimulate the identification and facilitation of synergies and to increase resilience of tourism destinations, we analyse the institutional context in which social-ecological systems operate. To understand the changing dynamics of the tourism–landscape interactions in policy, there is need for a historical and contextual approach (González et al., 2008; Parra & Moulaert, 2016).

3. Data and methods

The main contribution of this paper is to demonstrate a method by which it becomes possible to understand the historical institutional context. We articulate how content analysis can be used for this purpose. We applied content analysis to local documents from 1945 to 2015 in order to identify fluctuations and shifts in the focus of these documents. This content analysis was augmented with semi-structured interviews with local experts and other key stakeholders.

We consider that all coding of raw data is qualitative, because all reading of texts is in essence qualitative, even when they are converted into numbers which can be counted (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). However, quantitative techniques can be used to analyse the frequencies of coded data. Such a hybrid approach is in line with what Drisko and Maschi (2015) call 'basic content analysis'.

3.1. Content analysis of local policy and planning documents

To identify the changing foci of local policies, plans and strategies over time and how this has influenced the current situation, a content analysis of 12 key local documents from 1945 to 2015 was undertaken (listed in Appendix A). Our research sought to identify the changes in the interactions between tourism and landscape over time. Krippendorff (2013) defined content analysis as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts and other materials to understand the institutional and other contexts in which those media are used. In the field of tourism studies, content analysis is widely used, especially in relation to destination image representations (Choi, Lehto, & Morrison, 2007). However, based on the literature review we conducted, it would appear that content analysis has not yet been applied to the study of tourism–landscape policy interactions. Using content analysis to analyse historical documents to consider changes in policy and planning makes sense because: (a) the analysis can be done for any time period, well beyond the availability of live people to interview; (b) there are likely to be changes in the perceptions and reflections of key informants over the course of their lifetime. Therefore, content analysis can be argued as having high reliability and validity (Krippendorff, 2013).

In this paper, the focus of the analysis is the municipal level