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Transforming tourism governance: Futures thinking for destination community well-being

Elena Konovalov, Gianna Moscardo and Laurie Murphy

Abstract

There have been growing calls for greater community engagement in tourism planning and governance. These are often accompanied by arguments for the use of more futures thinking to deal with the complex problems that tourism faces. This suggests that there is a need for different approaches to engaging destination communities in tourism planning. The aim of the present research was to evaluate such a different approach using futures thinking techniques focussed on destination community wellbeing (DCW) as the primary tourism planning goal. The outcomes of a series of community workshops that used the new futures thinking DCW approach were compared to the strategies described in relevant traditional tourism planning documents. This evaluation revealed that the residents in the futures and community wellbeing workshops generated more varied, specific, innovative and sustainable tourism futures than the traditional tourism planning processes. Tourism governance needs to focus more on empowering destination residents and on making specific links between aspects of tourism and changes in aspects of DCW.

Keywords:

Destination community wellbeing, destination resident QoL, tourism planning, tourism governance, futures thinking, community engagement

Introduction

A common inspirational quote in many contemporary social media feeds is that small changes can make big differences. Tourism has always been a dynamic phenomenon and in recent years changing global tourism systems and rising concerns about sustainability have radically altered power structures in tourism. This chapter argues that two critical changes in tourism governance have the potential to transform tourism allowing for more effective responses to the dynamic conditions it operates under. The first change is explicitly shifting the primary goal of tourism planning from increasing tourist numbers and expenditure to using tourism as a tool to develop destination community well-being (DCW). The second change is the implementation of futures thinking in destination community engagement in tourism governance. The chapter reports on an evaluation of a DCW approach using futures thinking to examine tourism governance in three regional destinations in Australia. The proposed new process involved a focus on community well-being and the use of futures thinking in a series of activities with community stakeholders designed to generate new tourism futures.

The chapter begins by briefly reviewing recent innovations in public participation in planning, integrating futures thinking into planning and using a DCW approach to tourism planning. It then describes the futures thinking DCW strategy used in three Australian destinations to generate ideas for tourism development and governance. After an overview of the evaluation methodology, the outcomes of the strategy were compared to ideas generated by the relevant destination marketing/management organizations (DMO) through traditional tourism planning processes. The resulting differences demonstrate the transformations possible through this new approach and how these can improve tourism flexibility to respond to various dynamic forces.

Challenges to transforming tourism governance for destination communities

In the years prior to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic there were increasing discussions about the need to radically rethink the nature of tourism. There have also been calls for tourism to focus more seriously on

its relationship to both sustainability in general, and the wellbeing of destinations in particular (Dwyer, 2018). These calls reflect concerns from destination residents about tourism's negative impacts, issues with tourism's contributions to global carbon emissions and criticism of outdated, overly simplistic approaches to tourism governance. Two common themes in these calls for new paradigms are:

- the need for a stronger focus on destination resident engagement and empowerment in tourism planning and governance, and
- a shift in the goals of tourism planning from increasing tourist numbers and tourism business success, to generating benefits and value to destination communities (Dangi & Jamal, 2016; Dwyer, 2018; Moscardo & Murphy, 2014; Saarinen et al., 2017).

An examination of the wider literature on planning in general, and community development planning more specifically, identified five key trends:

- The rise of citizen power and a shift towards planning being primarily about citizen empowerment;
- The increasing use of new technologies to allow for the expression of that citizen power;
- A shift from technical, rationalist planning paradigms to more ethical and value-based frameworks that reflect this rise in citizen power;
- Greater flexibility, creativity and diversity in techniques for engaging with stakeholders; and
- Recognition of the need to understand cultural differences in attitudes towards governance (Gaynor, 2013; Glackin & Dioniso, 2016; Green & Haines, 2012; Groves et al., 2013; Howlett et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2016; Moscardo, 2019; Munster et al., 2017).

Moscardo (2019) argues that these trends are not evident in the tourism planning and development literature. Studies of destination resident engagement in tourism planning continue to report that it is rarely included in tourism planning practice (Bello et al., 2016; Idziak et al., 2015; Mak et al., 2017; Pforr & Brueckner, 2016). On those few occasions when destination residents are included in the process it is mostly at the lower levels of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of community participation. These efforts exist in the token consultation and non-participative information