

# Tourism Area Life Cycle

**R.W. Butler**

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## About the author

**Professor Richard Butler** is Emeritus Professor in the Strathclyde Business School of the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland.

He has published widely in tourism journals, and produced eleven books on tourism and many chapters in other books. His main fields of interest are the development process of tourist destinations and the subsequent impacts of tourism, issues of carrying capacity and sustainability, and tourism in remote areas and islands. He is currently editor Emeritus of 'The Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Research'.

## Introduction

It is now three decades since the original Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC) article first appeared (Butler 1980), and rather surprisingly the model proposed in that article is still being cited and used in tourism research. That fact alone makes the TALC somewhat extraordinary, as most models have a short life span before they are relegated to at best a passing reference in current text books or articles. The reason for the longevity of the TALC is not entirely clear. It is very much a classic academic model (Griere 2004), in other words “a representation, usually on a smaller scale, of a device, structure etc.” (Collins:1988, 730), intended to aid in the discussion of, and research on, the development of resorts. It attempts to portray a common pattern of the development of tourist resorts, a pattern which it argues is common to many resorts throughout the world. Such an argument may well be thought to be presumptuous and arrogant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, given the variety and range of tourist destinations that have been developed, in particular over the last few decades. This range reflects the massive changes which have occurred in transportation, politics, economics and societies over that period, which have seen destinations appear in what might have been envisaged as hostile or unwelcoming environments and communities a few years earlier.

Political changes such as the disappearance of the Iron Curtain and the demise of communism, the end of Apartheid, the opening up of China, Vietnam and other countries to tourism (Butler and Suntikul 2010) combined with the development of budget airlines, the world wide web (WWW) and a generally increased affluence in the world at large, have all contributed to create a very different face to global tourism over the past three decades. Indeed, one might well argue that tourism has changed more in the last three decades than at almost any other comparable time period. The two world wars, the Great Depression and the Oil Crisis of the 1970s have all had significant effects on tourism, mostly in terms of delaying expansion rather than fundamentally changing the geography, economics and social character of the phenomenon. Thus one may well anticipate that models developed in the decades before the late 1980s would have become redundant and outmoded because of subsequent events. Somewhat to the contrary, the TALC model has continued to be used in attempts to describe and understand the process of the development of tourist destinations in a wide variety of settings. This review briefly examines the origin of the model, its early utilisation, its criticisms and modifications, and its current relevance in tourism research. In conclusion it examines some of the basic assumptions of the model and its suitability in the present day and speculates on why the model has continued to be used in such a rapidly changing world.

## Development of the Field

Research on tourist destinations and resorts in particular has a relatively long history, although much of the early literature published was essentially descriptive and based on specific case studies (e.g. Hobs 1913; Webster 1914). Gilbert (1939) was one of the first authors to discuss in more general and theoretical terms the development of resorts, albeit only in the context of England. It is not really until post World War Two that what might be seen as the real beginnings of research on resorts, particularly their morphology and development, begins (see for example Barrett 1958; Christaller 1963; Plog 1972, 1973; Stansfield 1972). The influence of these early researchers was significant in the development of the TALC model, as noted by Butler

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