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Research Paper

A chaos theory perspective on destination crisis management: Evidence from Mexico

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ABSTRACT

It is recognised that tourism destinations are vulnerable to some form of crisis or disaster. Consequently, attention has long been paid to the nature and consequences of tourism crises and disasters, whilst, more recently, a number of tourism crisis management models have been proposed in the literature. Such models may, however, be criticised for their structured, linear and prescriptive approach to the management of crises, which tend to be unpredictable in their occurrence and evolution. Therefore, identifying the limitations of contemporary crisis management models, this paper proposes an alternative, chaos theory-based approach to crisis management. This is then considered within the context of the AH1N1 influenza crisis in Mexico. The research revealing not only that the unfolding of the crisis followed many of the tenets of chaos theory, but also that chaos theory provides a viable framework for the management of tourism crises.

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1. Introduction

For tourism destinations, a key success factor is the ability to provide a safe, predictable and secure environment for visitors (Volo, 2007). Tourists are typically risk averse and, thus, any actual or perceived threat to their health, safety or security is likely to influence their decision to visit a particular destination (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998; Lepp & Gibson, 2003). Indeed, it has long been recognised that tourism is highly susceptible to political, environmental, economic and other influences. As Prideaux, Laws and Faulkner (2003, p. 475) note, tourism flows 'are subject to disruption by a range of events that may occur in the destination itself, in competing destinations, origin markets, or they may be remote from either.' Irrespective of the source of such events, however, the subsequent reduction in tourist arrivals may have significant economic and social consequences both for the destination and the wider economy (Santana, 2003; Ritchie, 2008).

Of course, the 'tourism crisis' is not a new phenomenon. The history of modern tourism is replete with well- (and lesser) known examples of natural disasters, economic downturns, political turmoil, health scares, terrorist activity and other events that have impacted negatively on the volume and direction of tourism flows. Moreover, as tourism has continued to grow in both scope and scale, such events appear, perhaps inevitably, to occur with increasing frequency, to the extent that 'tourism destinations in every corner of

the globe face the virtual certainty of experiencing a disaster of one form or another at some point in their history' (Faulkner, 2001, p. 142). It is not surprising, therefore, that the susceptibility of tourism destinations to crises and disasters is widely addressed within the literature, albeit with a predominant focus on economic and financial crises (Hall, 2010). At the same time, and following the publication of Faulkner's (2001) seminal work on the subject, increasing academic attention has been paid in particular to the management of tourism crises and disasters (for example, Glaesser, 2006; Hystad & Keller, 2008; Ritchie, 2004, 2009).

Nevertheless, despite the growing body of research related to tourism crisis management it has been observed that many tourism destinations and organisations remain unprepared for a crisis situation (Beirman, 2003; Ritchie, 2009). That is, there has been an apparent reluctance or failure on the part of the much of the tourism sector to adopt the crisis management models or strategies proposed in the literature. On the one hand, this may reflect a challenge facing the tourism academy more generally, namely, the need for a more effective articulation between tourism academic research and the needs of the tourism sector (Sharpley, 2011). On the other hand, and as this paper suggests, it may reflect the limitations of these proposed models and strategies as practical responses to potential or actual crises that tourism destinations may experience. In other words, the extent to which contemporary models of crisis management may deliver satisfactory solutions to the challenges presented by tourism crises or disasters remains questionable. Drawing as they do on theories of risk and crisis management within the business organisation, these models in general propose a linear, prescriptive framework from prediction through to post-event recovery as a

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universally applicable response to tourism crises and disasters. However, such is the variety of circumstances unique to each crisis or disaster that a 'one size fits all' model is unlikely to account for differences in the scale, intensity and impacts of crises, or in the availability skills and resources necessary to respond to them.

More specifically, and of particular relevance to this paper, crisis management models typically follow a logical, step-by-step format that is unable to embrace the complex and frequently chaotic characteristics of tourism crises and disasters which, by their very nature, often do not proceed as might be expected. Tourism has more generally been described as 'an inherently non-linear, complex and dynamic system that is well described within the chaos paradigm' (Faulkner & Russell, 1997; McKercher, 1999, p. 425; Zahra & Ryan, 2007). That is, in contrast to the widely-held perception that it is a linear, deterministic and predictable activity and, hence, amenable to planning and control, tourism is unpredictable, complex, difficult to manage effectively and, according to McKercher (1999), best considered from the perspective of chaos theory. Moreover, a crisis or disaster may be the trigger that tips the tourism system into chaos. Consequently, it has been suggested that 'chaos theory may provide some insights into crisis and disaster management for organisations in the tourism industry' (Ritchie, 2004, p. 672). However, its relevance to the effective management of tourism crises has yet to be fully explored.

The purpose of this paper is to address this gap in the literature. In particular, it considers tourism crisis and disaster management within the framework of chaos theory, in so doing proposing an alternative perspective on destination crisis management. Based upon research in Mexico, it then explores the limitations of extant models and the applicability of a chaos theory approach to destination crisis management in the context of the impacts of and responses to the 2009 AH1N1 influenza ('swine flu') crisis within the Mexican tourism sector. For this purpose, 'destination' refers to Mexico as a whole, rather than specific resorts. The first task, however, is to identify the limitations of contemporary models and to review briefly chaos theory as an alternative perspective on destination crisis management.

2. Managing tourism crises and disasters: Towards an alternative approach

Although there has been a marked increase in academic attention paid to tourism crisis and disaster management over the last decade or so, it is by no means a new field of study. As early as 1980, Arbel and Barur developed a planning model for crisis management within the tourism industry and, subsequently, a number of commentators explored a variety of related issues (D'Amore & Anuza, 1986; Lehrman, 1986; Scott, 1988; Pottorff & Neal, 1994; Drabek, 1995; Pizam & Mansfield, 1996; Sönmez, 1998). However, the publication of Faulkner's (2001) framework for tourism disaster management undoubtedly stimulated wider interest in the subject, whilst a number of major events in the early 2000s, including '9/11', the SARS outbreak, the Bali bombings, the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak in the UK and the Indian Ocean tsunami, served as foci for research into the management of tourism crises and disasters.

A review of the relevant literature as a whole is beyond the scope of this paper (but, see Pforr, 2006). Generally, however, the literature comprises a dialogue that explores the nature of crises and disasters, why these events occur, the effects that such situations have upon the destination economy and society, and the methods that can be utilised to nullify the negative impacts before, during and after the event. Thus, a number of attempts have been made to develop models for the management of tourism crises and disasters. Key contributions are summarised in Fig. 1.

As noted above, Faulkner's (2001) framework was influential in the development of subsequent tourism crisis and disaster management models and has been applied to a number of tourism crises. These include the Bali night club bombings (Henderson, 2002), several crises affecting the Australian tourism sector (Prideaux, 2003) and the impact of SARS crisis on hotels in Singapore (Henderson & Ng, 2004). Moreover, a number of the models summarised in Fig. 1 build upon Faulkner's framework which, thus, may be considered to epitomise contemporary models of tourism crisis and disaster management.

Criticising the lack of theoretical and conceptual frameworks within the tourism crisis management field, Faulkner proposes a generic tourism disaster management framework in an attempt to provide guidance to tourism organisations. He identifies six phases in the disaster process or lifecycle, namely, pre-event, prodromal, emergency, intermediate, long-term (recovery) and resolution, with appropriate responses suggested for each phase. As a generic, linear and prescriptive approach, however, Faulkner's framework suffers a number of weaknesses, discussed in the following section, that apply equally to other, similar tourism crisis and disaster management models.

3. Contemporary crisis management models: Limitations

The purpose of crisis and disaster management models is, evidently, to provide guidance to destination and business managers and planners prior to, during and after a crisis event. In specific circumstances, this objective has been achieved. However, the extent to which these models more generally represent realistic, practical responses to crisis situations is limited by a number of factors.

3.1. The unpredictability of tourism crises and disasters

Pre-disaster preparedness is considered by many to be a vital ingredient of tourism crisis and disaster management. Being in a state of readiness can help reduce the impact of an event when it happens (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1995; Heath, 1995). Consequently, preparation is a fundamental element of many contemporary tourism crisis management models, with an emphasis on not only planning but on staff training and organisational culture (Pforr & Hosie, 2007). Specifically, many models propose that risk assessments should be undertaken and that, on the basis of scenario analysis, contingency plans should be developed in accordance with those situations considered likely to occur. However, with exception of certain events, such as hurricanes in the Caribbean, tourism crises are unpredictable in their occurrence, evolution and impact. The identification of potential or predictable crises is problematic and, thus, scenario planning may be expensive, time consuming and, ultimately, fruitless (de Sausmarez, 2003). Indeed, it is suggested that contingency planning may lead to complacency and paralysis when an unexpected event occurs (Evans & Elphick, 2005). Thus, although broad categories of crisis, such as a terrorist attack, might be anticipated and established protocols need to be in place to deal with such events, the evidence suggests that risk assessment and scenario planning may ultimately be futile given the unpredictable nature of most crises.

3.2. Limitations of prescriptive/linear models

Many models are based on the assumption that a crisis passes through a number of consecutive phases, in essence following a lifecycle. In reality, however, crises and disasters often occur without warning and a destination can immediately enter the 'emergency' phase, by-passing the 'pre-event' and 'prodromal' phase and requiring a rapid reaction. Indeed, the alarm caused by the dramatic

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