

# Chaos, crises and disasters: a strategic approach to crisis management in the tourism industry

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## Abstract

This paper outlines and discusses a strategic and holistic approach to crisis management for the tourism industry. It notes the growing importance of crisis and disaster management for the tourism industry before exploring the definitions and nature of crises and disasters. The paper then proposes a strategic approach to their management from proactive pre-crisis planning through strategic implementation and finally evaluation and feedback. A discussion of crisis and disaster management literature and studies conducted in the tourism field are also introduced. It notes that although crises and disasters cannot be stopped their impacts can be limited by both public and private sector managers. The paper concludes that the understanding and subsequent management of such incidents can be vastly improved through the extension and application of crisis and disaster management theory and concepts from other disciplines, coupled with the development of specific tourism crisis management research and frameworks.

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## 1. Introduction

Faulkner (2001) notes an increasing number of disasters and crises which affect the tourism industry, ranging from natural to human influenced incidents. In recent years the global tourism industry has experienced many crises and disasters including terrorist attacks, political instability, economic recession, biosecurity threats and natural disasters. Lee and Harrald (1999, p. 184) state that “natural disasters can disrupt the supply and distribution chains for even the best prepared businesses... service businesses are increasingly vulnerable to electrical, communication and other critical infrastructure failures.” This vulnerability can also be exposed through human induced behaviour most evident by September 11, 2001 and the Bali Bomb Attack, which dramatically impacted upon the tourism and travel industry. Faulkner (2001) argues that there is a lack of research on crisis or disaster phenomena in the

tourism industry, on the impacts of such events on both the industry and specific organisations, and the responses of the tourism industry to such incidents. This lack of interest and research is somewhat surprising considering that crisis management, disaster recovery and organisational continuity are important competencies for managers in both the public and private sector (Lee & Harrald, 1999, p. 184).

This paper aims to address these deficiencies and explore crisis and disaster management for the tourism industry by considering a strategic and holistic approach to crisis and disaster management. However, the article also notes the difficulty in responding to chaotic situations, which are often unpredictable and difficult to control. Nevertheless, this article stresses that chaos and change are an important part of public and private sector management which should be embraced and considered in modern tourism management. The paper begins by defining crises and disasters to improve our understanding of these phenomena before outlining the desire for management control over these incidents. The paper then suggests that a strategic approach to crisis management can be beneficial and proposes such an

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approach for the tourism and travel industry. The paper outlines key aspects of a strategic and holistic approach drawing on the crisis management literature and previous research in the tourism field. Finally the paper discusses future research avenues which could contribute to better understanding, planning and management of crises and disasters in an increasingly complex and disaster prone world.

## 2. Importance of crisis/disaster management for tourism

According to some authors the current state of the world is directly responsible for an increase in disasters and crises (Brammer, 1990; Blaikie, Cannon, Davis, & Wisner, 1994; Berke, 1998). As Richardson (1994) notes our environment has become a more crowded world and as the population increases pressures such as urbanisation, the extension of human settlement, and the greater use and dependence on technology have perhaps led to an increase in disasters and crises. The globalisation of the tourism industry has led to a rapid expansion of tourism businesses on an international scale in order to expand their market share and profitability. However, this process has also opened businesses up to a wider set of 'global risks' involved in running businesses at such a scale, as globalisation is often seen as complex and chaotic (Jessop, 1999). Greater exposure to political, economic, social and technological change in countries often removed from the bases of tourism companies requires tourism managers to effectively deal with crises and disasters (often located a substantial distance away). The world is also becoming more interdependent and connected so that small-scale crises in one part of the world can have a significant impact on other parts of the world. Political instability, or the outbreak of war in one part of the world can dramatically reduce tourist travel patterns to other parts of the world as experienced by the Gulf War of 1991 and the Iraq conflict in 2003. Tourism is therefore highly susceptible to external factors and pressures in the wider operating environment.

However, tourism is also an important economic sector for many countries and many destinations are dependent upon tourism for their growth and survival. This puts increasing pressure on managers and planners concerned with tourism to consider the impact of crises and disasters on the industry and develop strategies to deal with the impacts to protect tourism business and society in general. There is a need to understand such incidents and examine strategies that can be used to stop or limit their impacts on a growing and important industry sector. Crisis and disaster management should be a core competency for tourism destination managers as well as business managers. This paper proposes that understanding the nature of crises and disasters is a first

step in considering how to manage and reduce the impacts of such incidents.

## 3. Understanding crises and disasters

A number of authors have attempted to understand crises and disasters by first defining crises and disasters, explaining the nature of crises and disaster and their lifecycle or anatomy to help improve our understanding of such phenomena, and finally, by stressing the complexity and chaotic nature of incidents which pose challenges in managing or preventing crises or disasters.

### 3.1. Definitions

A number of authors have attempted to define a crisis to help improve their understanding of this phenomenon. Pauchant and Mitroff (1992, p. 15) believe that a crisis is a "disruption that physically affects a system as a whole and threatens its basic assumptions, its subjective sense of self, its existential core." Selbst (1978 in Faulkner 2001, p. 136) defines a crisis as "any action or failure to act that interferes with an organisation's ongoing functions, the acceptable attainment of its objectives, its viability or survival, or that has a detrimental personal effect as perceived by the majority of its employees, clients or constituents." Selbst's focus on perceptions implies that if an organisation's publics or stakeholders perceive a crisis, a real crisis could evolve from this misconception, illustrating that perception management is an important consideration in managing crises.

Faulkner (2001) considers the principal distinction between what can be termed a 'crisis' and a 'disaster' to be the extent to which the situation is attributable to the organisation itself, or can be described as originating from outside the organisation. Thus, a 'crisis' describes a situation "where the root cause of an event is, to some extent, self-inflicted through such problems as inept management structures and practices or a failure to adapt to change", while a "disaster can be defined as "where an enterprise...is confronted with sudden unpredictable catastrophic changes over which it has little control" (Faulkner, 2001, p. 136).

### 3.2. Nature and anatomy of crises and disasters

Crises can range, according to Coombs (1999) from small-scale organisational issues ranging from staff illness, staff challenges/breakdowns, malevolence and organisational misdeeds to external factors such as natural disasters (earthquakes, floods and fires) and terrorist incidents. However, for the purposes of this paper focus will be made on large-scale crises or

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