

The sustainability of island destinations: Tourism area life cycle and teleological perspectives. The case of Tenerife

Juan Ramón Oreja Rodríguez*, Eduardo Parra-López, Vanessa Yanes-Estévez

Departamento de Economía y Dirección de Empresas, Universidad de La Laguna, Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales, Campus de Guajara, 38071-La Laguna (Tenerife), Islas Canarias, Spain

Received 5 April 2006; received in revised form 29 March 2007; accepted 10 April 2007

Abstract

Tourist destinations are in a state of continuous change. This development is more intense in the case of island destinations due to their geographic limitations. This paper considers the use of the tourism area life cycle model [Butler, R.W. (1980). The concept of a tourism area cycle of evolution: Implications for the management of resources. *Canadian Geographer*, 24, 5–12.] alongside a teleological model to explain the movement towards sustainability of an island destination in its maturity stage. The proposed model leads us to demonstrate how integrating strategic aspects of the teleological approaches can help to overcome some limitations of the life cycle model.

Ensuring the sustainability of natural, cultural, human and infrastructure resources is considered as a strategic objective. To achieve this aim, it is necessary to combine strategic decisions that are both internal and external to the island destinations.

The case study presented in this research is Tenerife (Canary Islands, Spain). Along with an analysis of the life cycle of this island destination, two types of strategic decisions are considered: the political–legal decisions of the regional government to regulate tourism activity and the decisions to regrade supply, developed by the administrative institutions related to tourism activity in Tenerife.

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Keywords: Sustainability; Insular coastal destinations; Life cycle model; Teleological perspectives; Canary Islands; Tenerife

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, the tourism area or destination life cycle model (Butler, 1980) has let researchers and governments analyse the historical path and expected future development trends of coastal tourist destinations. However, the institutions involved are beginning to react to the social pressure that tourist crowding is causing (as illustrated by congested places, construction of infrastructures that damage natural resources, and the misuse of scarce resources like water) and many are now considering sustainability strategies to overcome these difficulties.

The purpose of this paper is to define a conceptual framework to integrate strategic plans for promoting the sustainability of island tourist destinations on the one hand, with, on the other, utilising the life cycle paradigm as

a descriptive model projecting the destinations' expected future evolution. In this way, an explanatory model of change in these destinations is proposed and the theoretical basis of this model will be described in the next section.

That model is then applied to a case study: the island of Tenerife (Canary Islands, Spain). The current situation was analysed by reference to the life cycle model (Butler, 1980). The current status is the result of changes in the destination, particularly those occurring during the past 15 years. Complementary to this model and in order to include strategic perspectives, political–legal decisions were also considered. In particular, plans from two levels of government have been included in the analysis: the regional level (Canary Islands region)—decisions to regulate tourism on the islands, and the island level (Island Council of Tenerife)—direct measures to reorientate¹ the tourism supply.

*Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: joreja@ull.es (J.R. Oreja Rodríguez), eparra@ull.es (E. Parra-López), vayanes@ull.es (V. Yanes-Estévez).

¹The reorientation of tourism is defined in the Planning of the Insular Territory of Tenerife (<http://www.cabtfes.es/PIOT/memoria/116.asp>) as

2. Research objectives

This study attempts to explain the development towards sustainability of an insular coastal destination based on the previous theoretical literature. Most of the research explains tourist destination evolution through the application of the tourism area life cycle model (Butler, 1980). This perspective highlights the importance of long term planning and control to maintain the competitiveness of the destination but it is essentially a descriptive model. To overcome this limitation, others approaches are needed as discussed below.

This paper has the following specific objectives:

1. To propose and develop an integrated model to enable sustainability as a strategic plan or decision making process in a mature destination.
2. To use the example of one of the leading tourist destinations in Europe, Tenerife (Canary Islands) to illustrate the applicability of the proposed model.

3. Evolutionary models of coastal destinations

3.1. The life cycle model (Butler, 1980)

The evolution of island coastal tourist destinations can be explained using bench-marking analysis and, thus comparing destinations with others as well as with its own situation in earlier periods allows an interpretation of their development. In this context, and following Van de Ven and Poole (1995), the change will be discussed using empirically observed differences in form, quality or conditions over time.

Several models have been used to describe the evolution of tourism destinations. One of the first was presented by Christaller (1963) with a model of artists as people finding quiet new areas for inspiration. Plog (1973) identified three kinds of tourists (allocentric, midcentric and psychocentric) whose psychology and preferences conditioned the rise and fall of destinations. However, the most widely accepted and discussed model was proposed in 1980 by Butler which represented an adaptation of the life cycle model to the destination context. In the longitudinal analysis, changes in tourist destinations have been considered as elements of the different stages they pass through in time. The life cycle model (Butler, 1980) proposed a hypothetical evolution of a tourist area, and suggested that destinations pass through six stages (Exploration, Involvement, Development, Consolidation, Stagnation, Decline and Rejuvenation), each with specific characteristics.

(footnote continued)

the need to move from a conventional mass tourism offer based on the sun and beach product to the diversification of the supply (for example, by promoting health and beauty tourism, golf tourism, cultural tourism and wine tourism). At the same time these new offerings should be characterised by high quality. This global quality of the destination is the core objective in all the tourism measures, planning and strategies.

Many of the case studies in which the model has been applied can be characterised as mature destinations, and predicably the stagnation phase has received the most attention (Lundtorp & Wanhill, 2001). Because of the wish to avoid the fatalistic path shown by the model, restructuring and rejuvenation strategies have also been the focus of some papers. For example, Agarwal (1997) discussed the links between the life cycle (Butler, 1980) and the restructuring thesis. The premise that decline will continue until corrective measures are developed is implicit in both constructs (Agarwal, 1997). While the life cycle describes the features and problems to be solved at this stage, the restructuring perspective presents a sum of strategic options to overcome the difficulties of stagnating visitation rates.

Two decades later, Butler (2000) revisited his model and highlighted aspects about it that could explain its continued relevance since 1980. He argued that because of a focus on detail in many studies some key aspects and the overall validity of the model had sometimes been overlooked. In order to explain the growth, change, limits and intervention in a tourism area, the model is based in eight elements (Butler, 2000):

- *Dynamism*: one of the most characteristic features of tourism activity.
- *Process*: the change in tourism areas is a process of development that could be modelled.
- *Capacity or limits to growth*: the model is based on the idea that if visitors exceed the capacity of the destination, the quality of visitor experience would decline. The difficulty in measuring the capacity has attracted many criticisms (Weaver, 2000).
- *Triggers*: factors which cause change in the destination such as innovations.
- *Management*: emphasised in terms of its importance for the destination as a whole because many destinations are not managed although individual resources and facilities often are.
- *Long term viewpoint*: it is crucial to avoid decline by looking forward from the beginning.
- *Spatial components*: the proposition was that as development at a specific destination stagnated, there would be a spatial shift of development to a new nearby location and a new destination begun.
- *Universal applicability*: the model was designed to be applicable to all tourist destinations.

Over time, this model has attracted many theoretical and applied examinations (Butler 2006a, b, Cooper, 1990, 1992a, b, 1994; Digance 1997; Tooman, 1997) as well as being subject to constant revision and critique (Agarwal, 1997, 1998; Oppermann 1995, 1998). Lundtorp and Wanhill (2001) formulated a demand-generated explanation of the life cycle model and the mathematical processes and this model support Butler's (1980) theory and (along

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