

The Learning Tourism Destination: The potential of a learning organisation approach for improving the sustainability of tourism destinations

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Received 30 May 2006; accepted 30 January 2007

Abstract

Globalisation, increasing complexity, and the need to address triple-bottom line sustainability have seen the proliferation of Learning Organisations (LO) who, by definition, have the capacity to anticipate environmental changes and economic opportunities and adapt accordingly. Such organisations use system dynamics modelling (SDM) for both strategic planning and the promotion of organisational learning. Although SDM has been applied in the context of tourism destination management for predictive reasons, the current literature does not analyse or recognise how this could be used as a foundation for an LO. This study introduces the concept of the Learning Tourism Destinations (LTD) and discusses, on the basis of a review of six case studies, the potential of SDM as a tool for the implementation and enhancement of collective learning processes. The results reveal that SDM is capable of promoting communication between stakeholders and stimulating organisational learning. It is suggested that the LTD approach be further utilised and explored. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Learning organisation; Learning Tourism Destination; Organisational learning; Systems thinking; System dynamics modelling

1. Introduction

Over the past decade a significant amount of research has been devoted to sustainable tourism management and development. Tourism researchers from all over the world have provided many useful insights that have helped to advance the concept of sustainability for the industry. We now know that sustainability must be conceived as a transition and learning process (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2005), and as a “moving” rather than a static goal (Lee, 2001). These findings are especially important with respect to the tourism industry, because “tourism is an inherently non-linear, complex and dynamic system” (McKercher, 1999) that cannot be predicted with sufficient accuracy, and therefore has to be managed adaptively (Farrell &

Twining-Ward, 2005). Adaptive management (AM) approaches are based on continuous and collective learning concepts that acknowledge uncertainties, and allow for timely adjustment of planning and management strategies (Holling, 1978). This implies that in order to advance sustainability in the tourism industry, approaches are needed that promote stakeholder collaboration and learning on an organisational as well as destination or regional level. Learning on a destination or regional level is necessary to ensure that sustainable development issues, beyond the scope and responsibility of private organisations and/or local authorities, are incorporated.

This study proposes a framework for a Learning Tourism Destination (LTD) based on the concept of the Learning Organisation (LO) (Senge, 1990), which uses systems thinking and system dynamics modelling (SDM) approaches to implement and foster collective learning processes. Although SDM has been applied in the context of tourism destination management for strategic planning

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and impact prediction (Holling, 1978; van den Bergh, 1991; Walker, Greiner, McDonald, & Lyne, 1999; Wiranatha, 2001), the current literature does not systematically evaluate the value of the tool for organisational learning. SDM, a computer-based methodology to support systems thinking by simulating the dynamics of complex systems, is often used to quantify the effects of the interconnections and time delays and to run “what if” simulations to test certain policies (Forrester, 1971; Meadows, Randers, & Meadows, 2004; Sterman, 2000; van den Belt, 2004). The main value of SDM, however, is not to predict the future, but to show that complex economic, environmental, and social systems are unpredictable, that it is important to learn to live with uncertainties, and that it is necessary to adapt to the unexpected (Holling, 1978).

LOs have been little discussed in tourism literature, although there have been evaluations of the concept in hotels in Turkey (Bayraktaroglu & Kutanis, 2003) and Taiwan (Yang, 2004). Application of LO on destination level, however, has not yet been examined. Saxena (2005) conceptualised tourism destinations as “learning regions,” a concept that has been fostered by international organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and UNESCO (Cooke, 1997; OECD, 2001), but did not evaluate the effectiveness of SDM as a tool in the implementation of organisational learning.

An LTD framework needs to take into account that tourism destinations differ considerably from those organisations where the LO concept has been implemented with demonstrable success (Flood, 1999; Senge, 1990; Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994). The authors therefore begin by establishing the basic elements of an LTD and use these basic elements to analyse six case studies of system dynamic models constructed for tourism destinations. In the process the study reconceives SDM as a tool for the implementation and enhancement of collective learning by sustaining systemic awareness. The results of this analysis indicate that the effectiveness of SDM for sustainability assessment may be increased through its incorporation in the foundation of the LTD.

2. Conceptualising the implementation of the LTD

2.1. Defining the LTD

The LO concept puts tourism sustainability in a different context to most conventional approaches which focus on problem solving. These approaches require problems to be clearly defined and isolated and this may be difficult in the case of tourism due to complexities at all levels (e.g. stakeholders, site diversity, etc.). The application of the LO concept would alleviate this need to focus on problem solution and allow tourism stakeholders to concentrate on applying and testing theories, methods, and tools with the

aim of increasing their own skills. Thus, a shared understanding of:

- how the tourism destinations function,
- how market possibilities can be enhanced,
- the requirements for adaptation to changing environments,
- how to promote collective awareness of eventual economic, social, and environmental risks and impacts, and
- how risks can be minimised and/or countered

can be developed. In other words, the goal has changed from achieving sustainable tourism destinations to creating tourism organisations within a destination which are adaptive to change and capable of learning how to improve sustainability continuously.

Although the goals and benefits of LO and learning regions are largely described in the current literature, definitions of the concepts remain vague and broad, and do not provide an adequate basis for the deduction of a practical implementation framework.

Senge (1990, p. 3) for instance defined LOs as “organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.” More recently, LOs have been described as organisations that continually expand their capacity to create their own future (Flood, 1999; Senge et al., 1999). The application of this definition to tourism destinations, although possible, does not lead to a workable LTD concept. Boekema, Morgan, Bakkers, and Rutten (2000) argue that the LO applied to a region is too complex an issue to be captured in one phrase. Geenhuizen and Nijkamp (2000, p. 39) describe it in two parts: “First, it refers to areas which have a body of knowledge (incorporated in research institutes and laboratories, higher education facilities) through which they can augment their productivity. Secondly, the concept refers to areas which use this body of knowledge to try to achieve a better performance through active and comprehensive learning.” These two descriptions highlight that it is important to define the possible bodies of knowledge, the areas where learning occurs, and the areas where knowledge will be applied.

In order to find a workable definition of an LTD, Geenhuizen and Nijkamp’s description of a learning region has to be tempered by the need to acknowledge that organisational, community, and individual learning are highly interlinked and must be viewed in the context of each other (Marsick & Watkins, 1999) (Fig. 1). The self-development of an individual, for example, occurs in the context of working in organisations and living in a community. This plays a major role in the definition and implementation of the LTD.

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