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Research Paper

Examining stakeholder group specificity: An innovative sustainable tourism approach

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ABSTRACT

It is now widely accepted that stakeholder consultation is necessary for sustainable tourism development to occur and that a variety of stakeholder groups occur. In tourism, these groups are often referred to as locals, operators, community members and those in regulatory positions. However, a divide exists within the literature. One cluster of literature suggests that individual stakeholders possess attitudes that are specific to their group. Another cluster of research suggests that individual stakeholders' attitudes do not always align with their stakeholder groups. This paper responds to this dichotomy and utilises the Q methodology to assess the attitudes of stakeholders in the Tarkine region of Tasmania, Australia. The research highlights that individual stakeholders' attitudes do not always align to their stakeholder group when considering sustainable tourism development and that responsive methods are required to ensure adequate stakeholder involvement. In doing so, it challenges the long-held notion of stakeholder group specificity.

1. Introduction

Stakeholders have been defined as 'any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of an organisation's objectives' (Freeman, 1984, p. 46). The identification and involvement of stakeholders in tourism management decisions is now widely encouraged within tourism literature (Cheng, Hu, Fox, & Zhang, 2012; Hardy & Beeton, 2001; Jamal & Getz, 1999; Sautter & Leisen, 1999; Yuksel, Bramwell, & Yuksel, 1999). Traditionally, stakeholder groups have been identified as behavioural groups of people within the broader tourism system, such as operators, tourists, residents, those in regulatory positions and tourists. A large amount of research into stakeholder groups' attitudes towards tourism exists, often consisting of studies that explore one stakeholder group at a time (Hardy & Beeton, 2001). However, when comparisons of stakeholders groups' attitudes have been made, there is a dichotomy evident within the literature. One body of literature suggests that different stakeholders possess attitudes that are specific to their group (Byrd, Bosley, & Dronberger, 2009; Timur & Getz, 2009; Hardy, 2005). Another body of recent research suggests that stakeholder identities do not necessarily conform to the same clusters of attitudes (Hunter, 2013). This paper aims to critique the alignment of individual stakeholders' attitudes with their traditionally defined stakeholder groups, with respect to sustainable tourism development. The objectives of this paper are to:

1. Present a pictorial Q method analysis in the Tarkine region of Tasmania, Australia, in order to critically assess whether stakeholders' attitudes align with their traditionally defined groups in relation to sustainable tourism development;
2. Contribute to theory regarding the identification of stakeholder groups and the alignment of individual stakeholders' attitudes with their traditionally defined stakeholder groups, and the role of stakeholder involvement in planning for sustainable tourism;
3. Identify the key factors that concern stakeholders, in relation to future tourism development in the Tarkine region of Australia.

2. Stakeholder theory

Stakeholder theory and its practical application in management is now a readily accepted approach for managing businesses, regional development and ensuring that tourism is developed in a responsive and appropriate manner (Bornhorst, Ritchie & Sheehan, 2010; Byrd & Gutske, 2007; Clarkson, 1995; Grimble & Wellard, 1997; Hunter, 2013; Jamal & Getz, 1999). Within tourism, Byrd (2007) and Hardy and Beeton (2001) argue that the assumption that all stakeholders have a right to participate if they have an interest in an organisation or an issue, is essential. Both posit that stakeholder involvement must begin with recognition of stakeholders and make allowance for them to make informed and conscious decisions about the

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development of tourism at a specific destination. However, the reality is that stakeholders are not always recognised and their perspectives are not always taken into account by managers (Byrd et al., 2009; Currie, Seaton, and Wesley, 2009). Arguably there is a greater need to understand the barriers and opportunities for stakeholder involvement (Woodland and Acott, 2007). This requires consultation of a wide range of stakeholders in an in-depth manner, which is time-consuming and expensive (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Clarkson, 1995; Hardy & Beeton, 2001; Yuksel et al., 1999) but is a process that will ultimately reduce the potential for conflicts, reduce power imbalances and is more politically legitimate. Arguably, stakeholder recognition involves several elements, including deciding who is may be defined as a stakeholder, identifying stakeholders' power and influence, and deciphering stakeholders' needs. Regarding the first point, there has been much discussion over who a stakeholder is with two emergent approaches (Byrd, 2007). The first is a normative moral approach, akin to that proposed by Donaldson and Preston (1995) whereby consideration is given to all tourism stakeholder groups without one being given priority over the other. This furthers broad definitions of the term by authors such as Freeman (1984). The second approach considered by Byrd (2007) has synergies with the classical notion of stakeholder management, where a central agency assesses the interests of stakeholders, then decides who shall be consulted with and develops policy based upon their power (see Clarkson, 1995; and Grimble & Wellard, 1997). This approach has been robustly criticised as favouring the 'traditional stakeholder elite' (Wesley & Pforr, 2010). They argue for more transparent and inclusive processes and practices that will ensure that traditionally excluded stakeholders are involved in a meaningful way.

The second element of stakeholder recognition involves deciphering stakeholders' power and influence. While power and predictability predictors matrixes have been developed (see Markwick, 2000; Newcombe, 2003), these models have been criticised as being inherently static and unable to acknowledge that stakeholder groups can suddenly become influential (Hardy, Wickham, & Gretzel, 2013; Vernon, Essex, Pinder, & Curry, 2005). Today, this is primarily a result of new technologies such as social media, which can facilitate communication and support the empowerment of neglected stakeholder groups (Hardy et al., 2013). This issue was also raised, prior to the rise of internet, by Healey (1997), who argued that 'stakeholder analysis needs to be conducted in an explicit, dynamic and revisable way as stakeholders may change over time in their concerns'.

The third element of stakeholder recognition involves understanding stakeholders' needs. It is now commonly argued that stakeholders must be active participants in the tourism planning process (Byrd, 2007; Southgate & Sharpley, 2002). Advocates suggest that understanding stakeholders' subjectivities can anticipate support or opposition for tourism development, that may then be incorporated into tourism planning and policy (Hunter, 2013; Kuvan and Akan, 2013; Phi, Dredge, & Whitford, 2014). In reality, this can prove problematic as tourism is highly dynamic and its stakeholders have marked differences in opinions that stem from shared resources, conflicting opinions, and differentiating interests (Kuvan and Akan, 2013). Moreover, overlooking stakeholders in the first instance, or underestimating their power and interests can result in their needs being overlooked. Yet, despite these challenges, the desire to understand stakeholders' needs in tourism is a crucial component in achieving tourism that is sustainable in the long term.

2.1. Stakeholder groups' attitudes

Within stakeholder literature, the extent to which attitudes that are specific to stakeholder's behavioural group remains contentious. Some authors suggest that stakeholder attitudes are bound by their behavioural group. Illustrating this assumption, Byrd et al., (2009, p. 694), argued that there are four significant tourism stakeholder perspectives: tourists, residents, business operators and local government representatives. To other researchers, there is uncertainty. Getz and Timur (2005) suggested that while '…each stakeholder group has different goals and interests regarding [sustainable tourism development], there are some goals they share'. Similarly, Kuvan and Akan (2013) reported stakeholder groups sharing attitudes towards regarding the positive effects of tourism, along with wide discrepancies of attitudes across the groups, in relation to other issues. Other authors have explored his issue from the alternate angle: Ryan (2002) categorised stakeholders according to how they felt affected by tour operators, thus transcending the notion that attitudes are bound by stakeholders' behavioural group. Similarly, Hunter (2013) argued that stakeholder identities do not necessarily confirm to the same clusters of subjectivity.

In terms of achieving sustainable tourism, what remains largely uncontested is that if agreement between stakeholders groups occurs, there is an increased likelihood for collaboration (Andriotis, 2005; Sautter & Leisen, 1999). Consequently, synergies and collaboration between stakeholder groups may be considered an indicator for the existence of sustainable tourism (Hardy & Beeton, 2001; Hunter, 2013). However this process takes time and the challenges of achieving this when there are time constraints in place, has been noted (Phi et al., 2014). Moreover, if stakeholder groups have differing goals, conflict is likely to occur (Byrd et al., 2009) with situations such as 'dialogs of the deaf' arising, where stakeholders talk past one another and the focus shifts to their differences, rendering consensus even more difficult to achieve (Bohm, 1990; Van Eeten, 1999). The challenge for researchers whose goal is to work towards sustainable outcomes is to choose research methods that will sensitively draw out stakeholders groups' goals, concerns and expectations.

2.2. The relationship between stakeholders and sustainable tourism

Following the definition of sustainable development by the Bruntdland Commission (World Commission on Environment & Development, 1987, p. 43) as that which 'meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet with own needs', Driml (1996) described the phenomenon of Sustainable Activity X, whereby industries worked on the policy and definitional applications of the concept in their own sectors. In the years following early definitions, Moskwa, Higgins-Desbiolles, and Gifford (2015) and Hardy (2005) argued that much sustainability discourse gave unequal attention to ecological imperatives. More recently, focus has been on socio-cultural aspects. This has led to suggestions that stakeholder management has numerous synergies with the notion of sustainable tourism. Sustainable tourism requires management of multiple issues, such as environmental preservation; economic health; ensuring guests are satisfied; and facilitating community wellbeing (Muller, 1994). Consequently, grassroots engagement with multiple stakeholders who represent these groups is posited as the first step towards sustainable tourism development (Dodds, 2007; Getz & Timur, 2005; Hall, 2007; Hardy & Beeton, 2001; Hardy, Beeton, & Pearson, 2002; McCool, Moisey, & Nickerson, 2001; Waligo, Clarke, & Hawkins, 2013). However the practice of stakeholder involvement as a catalyst for achieving sustainable tourism is inherently problematic. The core tenets of sustainable tourism (e.g. economic wealth vs environmental conservation) and those who advocate them are arguably in conflict over resource use. The challenge therefore, is for researchers to find the common ground amongst these groups in order to progress towards sustainable tourism.

Within tourism literature, stakeholders have been traditionally identified groups such as the community, government departments, the private sector, the public sector (Hall & Page, 1999) and, in later work, visitors (Hardy, 2005). Surprisingly, a literature review reveals that research that seeks to identify common ground across stakeholder groups is rare. Rather there is a trend in tourism research design to focus on the attitudes of only one individual stakeholder group at a time. Consequently, there has been much research into residents' attitudes towards tourism development (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005;