Involving Stakeholders in Tourism Planning

Sooner or later stakeholders dealing with tourism, if medium and long-term oriented, understand that their "capital" is not only their investment and infrastructures, but also the natural and cultural environment. Therefore, they start considering tourism development in a more sustainable way. (United Nations Environment Programme, 2009)

Tourism can deliver short and long term economic, environmental and socio-cultural effects on a destination. Careful consideration needs to be given to the decisions made throughout the planning process, and there are many advantages, and disadvantages, of involving a broad range of stakeholders during the decision-making process. These decisions can lead to both positive and negative effects, determined largely by the effectiveness of research, and the level of efficiency employed in the implementation, management and ongoing monitoring of tourism-based projects.

Engaging with the general community during the research process, and reporting back to them, even in part, with the initial findings, prompts people to "begin thinking about issues before the active participation stage of the project". Macbeth (1997) demonstrates that one of the advantages of community consultation for the researchers and planners is that it can stimulate interest, encourage debate and create enthusiasm for a project. It can also "identify more clearly the values and beliefs that underpin [a] community, to question them and then to suggest how to protect the values and beliefs that are worth protecting" (Macbeth, 1997).

Research in to whether collaboration in local tourism policy-making is inclusionary, has highlighted that "resource allocations, policy ideas and institutional practices embedded within society may often restrict the influence of particular stakeholders" (Bramwell, 1999). Certain stakeholders may simply not have the time, or the inclination, to be involved in any collaborative efforts based around tourism in their community. That is not to say that tourism will not affect them, but that they will intentionally remain detached from the decision-making process and quite probably, more accepting of any negative resulting effects. Bramwell (1999) also suggests that the power of stakeholders is often unequal, and points out that "power governs the interaction of individuals,organisations and agencies influencing, or trying to influence, the formulation of tourism policy and the manner in which it is implemented" (Hall, 1994 cited in Bramwell, 1999)

Specific stakeholders may have the financial or political basis to exercise more power over certain planning stages of a project, and provide more input when certain decisions are being made. "Carefully planned developments are likely to experience a high rate of success in terms of tourist satisfaction levels, economical benefits, and minimal negative impacts on the local social, economic, and physical environments" (Yigitcanlar, 2009), though planners need to remain mindful that collaboration between stakeholders is handled in an egalitarian manner during the decision-making processes. "In many parts the world, residents of tourism destinations have little, if any, voice in the developmental process of the tourism functions, as a result they cannot do much in preventing unpleasant consequences" (Yigitcanlar, 2009).

Many stakeholders might not initially identify themselves, or be identified by planners, as stakeholders whatsoever.

Macbeth (1997) differentiates between "obvious" and "less obvious" stakeholders, including the following in the latter; farmers, women, the unwaged, the unemployed, the retired, school teachers,

shire employees and contractors, employees and owners of non-tourist businesses, etc. "The benefits of community participation in tourism development can include greater project sustainability and social acceptability, greater resource mobilization, and more equitable distribution of project benefits" (Milne, n.d.).

A level of transparency exists around projects that become a part of the local community, and this will help to mitigate any negative effects by increasing awareness of the risks of development from the outset. Milne lists delays in project start-up, staff increases, pressure to raise the level or range of services, and community frustration, suspicion, & opposition as the disadvantages of community participation. The process of identifying who the stakeholders are in a project is an important one, as it will also help to identify who may be directly or indirectly affected by a project.

Typical stakeholders in a tourism planning process are demonstrated in the following figure:
[Figure : Stakeholders in tourism planning process (Yigitcanlar, 2009)]

An eco-tourism resort, including a four-star plus accommodation facility and adjoining recreational vehicle site, has been proposed at Lakes Beach, near Budgiwoi in New South Wales. Wyong Shire Council (WSC) is considering the proposal, which is being opposed by local environmental groups despite eco-resorts or similar facilities being developed in sensitive and pristine areas throughout Australia and across the world. At its Ordinary Meeting in June 2011, it was suggested that the proposal provides a significant opportunity to demonstrate how leading practice on coastal zone development sites can be undertaken in order to minimise and mitigate the impacts of both severe storm events, and the likely impacts of climate change.

The proposal is intended "to be fully sustainable, be transportable, with no bricks or mortar to be used and thereby capable of being removed from the site in a short period of time, should the need arise" (WSC, 2011), and the buildings will be placed strategically to maximise retention of vegetation. Pathways will be constructed of crushed sandstone, and small vehicles such as golf carts will be used for transportation purposes. Due to the sensitive nature of such a development, negative reactions can be expected from conservation and environmental groups, though the project will deliver "important maintenance and rehabilitation works to retained environmental lands and include a proposal to construct an "interpretive centre" on the site" (WSC, 2011).

Macbeth's obvious stakeholders in this project would include the council and its residents, and local businesses that provide tourism-related services such as transport and hospitality, and local law enforcement and emergency service providers. These individuals and groups would be directly impacted upon by an increase in visitation to the area, and it is vital for the project planners to communicate all aspects of the development to these stakeholders.

Some less obvious groups that will be affected, and who have endorsed the preliminary concept, include the Campervan and Motor Home Club, The Lakes Surf Club, Regional Development Australia, Central CoastTourism, Greater Toukley Vision and the business sector in general (WSC, 2011). The council is a primary stakeholder in the Lakes Beach project, as ultimately the decision lies with this group to give the necessary permissions for the project to proceed. The council will bear the heaviest level of responsibility if the project fails to meet its aims, or deliver as promised by the project developers and financiers. Local residents will incur the most direct impact of the project, both from a negative and a positive perspective. Benefits brought about by the project's success will deliver new investment and infrastructure to the community, whilst downsides arising from any project-related failures have the converse potential to take resources and facilities away from the community.

The park will also provide accommodation for the disabled to complement a disabled precinct that has recently been created at the Lakes Beach (WSC,2011).

Entire destinations in the United States and certain countries throughout Europe cater wholly and solely to the disabled tourist market, and this is an area where Australia is on the wane. Whilst most tourism developments cater for disabled visitors to a certain degree, developments that seek to improve the choices for disabled tourists can be seen as a direct benefit to a niche target market, and this introduces a considerable stakeholder to the Lakes Beach project.

The Lakes Beach project presents an opportunity to provide employment,generate wealth within a community and provide a diverse funding stream for local environmental projects and works (WSC, 2011). As with any new tourism development, it stands to benefit immensely from close consultation with all of its stakeholders, and from engaging as many of those individuals and groups who stand to be affected by the project in collaborative planning and decision-making, at each stage of the project.

Tourism planners who maintain open and transparent lines of communication, with as broad a range of stakeholders as possible, stand to gain from local advice and to benefit from local acceptance, leading to more effective and sustainable tourism development.

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