

The economic, social and socio-environmental impact of public sector mediated tourism coopetition

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Objectives | Coopetition in the tourism industry is not a new phenomenon and has been shown to create social and other forms of value (Chim-Miki, da Costa & Oliveira-Ribeiro, 2023a; 2023b). At the same time, paradoxical tensions that exist when competitors attempt to collaborate may inhibit value creation. Formal institution agents (Monticelli et al., 2022) may promote coopetition among competitors, while facilitating value creation for society and tourism businesses. The primary objective of this study was to investigate social and socio-environmental (Volschenk, Ungerer & Smit, 2016) impact of tourism coopetition, and how public sector promotion (mediation) of coopetition through structures and procedures contribute to value creation or destruction (Chim-Miki & Batista-Canino, 2017).

Methodology | Despite recent work by the collaborating researchers focusing on the creation of social value in tourism, the role of mediation on coopetition had not been extensively explored, and this remained a nascent area for exploration. The research contrasted two cases (diving destinations), namely Sodwana Bay in South Africa and Ponta Malongane in Mozambique. While the dive operators in Sodwana operate mostly independently with limited cooperation, the government-owned scuba-diving operation in Ponta Malongane provides structures that require dive operators to cooperate and even collaborate. The Ponta Malongane Diving Centre is a very successful and popular scuba-diving operation in an underdeveloped region of Southern Mozambique. Given that the research was nascent in nature (Edmondson & McManus, 2007) and that the research required consideration of the contrasting contexts in the two tourism destinations, the research could best be described as exploratory. The interviews were conducted using a discussion guide. Data collection consisted of face-to-face (online and in-person) and telephonic in-depth interviews to deliver rich text for thematic analysis. Interviewees were selected based on their ability to inform the research question and therefore consisted of diving operators, divers, and other stakeholders, such as the staff at the Ponta Malongane Diving Centre. Most of the diving operators know each other and were listed as scuba-dive operators at the different

destinations. Such directories served as a sampling frame. The researchers therefore started from a large base of operators and selected interviewees that reflected different characteristics (small vs large, market segment they targeted, etc.). Two important filtering requirements were that operators and divers should have experienced the diving contexts at both destinations, and divers should have done more than 10 dives at each destination. Data analysis of the transcripts was conducted using Atlas.TI, based on predefined themes.

Main results and contributions | In Sodwana Bay, very little formal collaboration happens between operators. In contrast, at the Ponta Malongane Diving Centre, there is more cooperation and collaboration between dive operators. Unlike Sodwana, which operates on a relatively pure competitive environment, the Ponta Malongane Diving Centre allows many different diving operators to deliver services to their customers alongside other operators and with very little conflict or friction. In short, the coordination of diving in a central location creates a network effect. Structures that encourage collaboration include the availability of shared infrastructure (boats, space for diving gear, communal kitchen and eating area, communal bar area, a notice board for fish, shark, and other sightings, a dive scheduling board), procedures (open bidding for seats on scheduled dives at 17:00 every day) and policies. Furthermore, because there are more dive operators than boats, it is common to use different dive masters from different operators, meaning dive operators share the time and cost associated with hosting a group of divers. In Sodwana, dive operators usually would launch one boat for a maximum of twice per day, and in off peak season, boats may have as few as 2-4 divers on them. Each boat requires a skipper and a dive master for each dive. Yet, the operators would seldom join forces to launch groups together on a single boat. Divers would often be limited by the number of dives they can do and the reefs that they can choose from on the day. Public sector coordination at Ponta Malongane resulted in better coordination, cost reduction through greater efficiency, and a better tourist experience (more dive options and opportunities per day). This ultimately led to a more attractive diving destination and subsequent socio-economic (public) value. Arguably, the central coordination of diving and diver numbers could provide a mechanism to protect the natural resources against over-exploitation, resulting in socio-environmental value. Interestingly, the central coordination of diving activities comes at a cost to the community. Fewer overall dives per day means fewer skippers, dive masters and other helpers are required.

Limitations | The study was done through qualitative interviews. The study did not attempt to quantify the different forms of value in monetary terms. The data also did not allow for formal testing of quantitative relationships. The study intentionally contrasted on two destinations that are very close to each other but function very differently. This should be considered as a limitation. The results in this paper are still exploratory, with further data collection planned in 2024.

Conclusions | The study compared how mediated competition at a tourism destination impacts the economic, social and socio-environmental value that is created. While there are clear examples of structures and procedures that provide dive operators and divers with economic (lower cost through efficiency) and other (a better experience, greater choice) benefits, early results indicate that it may come at the cost to the community (less employment).

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