

Enhancing destination competitiveness through the use of a strategic visioning approach to tourism planning

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Abstract

The growing number of destinations in the global tourism marketplace has placed considerable emphasis on the notion of destination competitiveness. While, competitiveness has often been viewed in economic terms, the issue of sustainability has highlighted the fact that market share cannot be pursued at the expense of the environmental and social resources of the destination. One such planning approach to overcome these issues is strategic visioning. By adopting a strategic visioning approach to tourism planning it is proposed that a destination's competitiveness can be enhanced due to the processes' integration of sustainable development principles; the emphasis on the future; the requirement for collaboration between destination stakeholders; and the flexibility the process provides for changing environmental conditions.

Keywords

Destination competitiveness, strategic visioning, sustainability, stakeholder collaboration, tourism planning.

Resumo

O crescente número de destinos no mercado global de turismo tem vindo a colocar uma ênfase considerável no conceito de competitividade dos destinos. Enquanto a competitividade tem sido frequentemente analisada sob o ponto de vista económico, a questão da sustentabilidade tem vindo a realçar o facto de que as quotas de mercado não podem ser atingidas à custa dos recursos ambientais e sociais do destino. Uma das abordagens de planeamento que pretendem ultrapassar esta questão é a visão estratégica. Ao se adoptar esta abordagem para o planeamento em turismo é argumentado que a competitividade de um destino pode ser melhorada através da integração de princípios de desenvolvimento sustentável nos processos; da ênfase no futuro; da necessidade de colaboração entre os *stakeholders* do destino; e da flexibilidade que o processo oferece em modificar as condições ambientais.

Palavras-chave

Competitividade dos destinos, visão estratégica, sustentabilidade, colaboração entre *stakeholders*, planeamento em turismo.

1 Introduction

In today's global tourism marketplace, with so many destinations contending for the tourist dollar, a destination's competitive ability has become a key management consideration. While, competitiveness is often equated with economic returns, market share cannot be pursued at the expense of the environmental and social resources of the destination. Therefore a truly competitive destination not only incorporates economic considerations, but also appreciates that the environmental and social sustainability of the destination is just as crucial for long-term competitiveness. This has highlighted the need for tourism destinations to proactively and strategically plan for future developments in order to secure, both the long-term sustainability of the destination and continuing market competitiveness. This requires tourism planning and development decisions to adopt longer-term perspectives, as the cumulative effects of today's development decisions will have impacts well beyond the lifetimes of those making the decisions (Ritchie, 1999).

While it has been relatively easy for tourism destinations to maintain market share to date, the growth in the total market size as more destinations emerge to compete has required the establishment of a more strategic focus to ensure this share is maintained in the future (Faulkner, 2003; Ritchie and Crouch, 2000). As Ritchie (1999) finds, "the growing level of international competition in the tourism marketplace, and the length of lead times for developing the major facilities necessary to meet this competition, have made strategic level planning increasingly imperative" (p. 273). A critical early stage in the strategic planning process is the formulation of a destination vision – a statement that provides an inspirational portrait of a desired future for the destination. The development of a destination vision places considerable emphasis on determining appropriate forms of development, which is consistent with the desires of the destination stakeholders, while taking into account the opportunities and constraints of the market.

This paper will examine the potential of a strategic visioning approach to tourism planning as a means of enhancing the long-term sustainability of tourism destinations and ultimately their future competitiveness. It is proposed that the adoption of a strategic visioning approach to tourism planning can enhance the competitiveness of a destination due to the processes' integration of sustainable development principles; the emphasis on

the future; the requirement for collaboration between destination stakeholders; and the flexibility the process provides for changing environmental conditions.

2 Destination competitiveness

Nations, states, cities and regional areas now take their role as tourist destinations very seriously, committing considerable funds towards enhancing their touristic image and attractiveness (Ritchie and Crouch, 2000). With so many destinations competing for the tourist dollar, both on an international and domestic level, competition is fierce and destinations are looking to capitalize on all of their assets to differentiate themselves from their competitors. According to Dwyer and Kim (2003) destination competitiveness relates to the ability of a destination to deliver goods and services that perform better than other destinations on those aspects of the tourism experience considered to be important by tourists. However Buhalis (2000) adopts a different perspective and defines destination competitiveness as including "the sustainability of local resources for ensuring the maintenance of long-term success as well as the achievement of equitable returns-on-resources utilized to satisfy all stakeholders" (p.106). The inclusion of sustainability into the concept of destination competitiveness is vital, as market position cannot be pursued at the expense of all else, particularly when the natural and social assets of the destination are exploited for the sake of tourism development and economic growth. Mihali? (2000) finds that tourism planners and managers have generally only been willing to incorporate environmental measures into management strategies if they resulted in lower costs and/or higher profits. However, consumers increasing environmental consciousness and demands for better quality products, coupled with increased competition have seen environmental and social issues become an important management consideration (Mihali?, 2000).

Therefore, when planning for the current and future development of the destination, the principles of sustainable tourism must be adopted, so that only those options which satisfy the needs of all destination stakeholders including residents and visitors, as well as preserve the natural and cultural assets of the region, and are economically viable should be considered (Faulkner, 2003; Ritchie, 1999; Inskeep, 1991). Therefore to be competitive, tourism development must be economically, ecologically, socially, culturally and politically sustainable (Crouch and Ritchie, 1999). Fletcher and Cooper (1996) reinforce

this point by stating that, "any tourism strategy should be designed to develop tourism optimally (in terms of local income/employment generation and maintaining local control), while minimising the negative effects of tourism development on the environment and the social fabric of the community" (p. 188).

3 Strategic planning

While tourism can deliver considerable economic benefits to countries, states and regions, it is well acknowledged that it cannot be allowed to develop in an ad hoc manner without an overall guiding framework for management and planning (Hall, 1998). Destinations with carefully planned developments are likely to experience the most success in terms of high tourist satisfaction level, positive economic benefits, and minimal negative impacts on the local social, economic and physical environments (Timothy, 1999). The need for planned development is particularly evident when reflecting on the growth of international tourism following World War II, where the unprecedented numbers of tourists and the resulting uncontrolled development adversely affected many destinations. Destinations that gained rapid popularity during this period often did not have adequate tourism planning and management strategies in place, and many of these destinations eventually experienced wide scale environmental and social degradation and have since lost market share and economic advantages to new, better managed destinations. These declining destinations are then forced into using a strategic approach to secure their futures through the implementation of expensive regeneration programs to revitalise their infrastructure, tourist products and market image.

The ever-increasing competition in the tourism marketplace has made proactive strategic planning imperative for tourism destinations. As Chon and Olsen (1990) state, "today's tourism environment is increasingly competitive and complex... and tourism organisations at national, state and local levels must make estimates about the what is likely to happen in the future and... decide how to adjust to future events" (p. 213). In the 21st century the world tourism environment is not only competitive and complex it is also politically unstable and continuously changing, and in order to make better estimates of future events and sound management decisions, the strategic planning process should be formally incorporated into the structure of operations (Chon and Olsen, 1990). Similarly, Faulkner (1994) notes that, "in any country, the emergence and continuation of tourism

as a dynamic and viable industry is dependent upon the adoption of a strategic approach to planning and marketing. The hallmark of such an approach is the inclusion of a systematic and structured analysis of broader environmental factors affecting tourism demand as an integral part of the planning process" (p. 231).

Strategic planning for a tourism destination is not dissimilar to that of the private sector, where a sequence of choices and decisions are made about the deployment of resources to commit a destination to an agreed agenda regarding future development and management (Keane, Ó Cinnéide and Cunningham, 1996). As with the private sector, strategic planning for tourism destinations is deliberate and integrative, allows for formalised higher order planning and will permit the destination to adapt quickly to changing situations and develop information, planning and control systems to monitor and respond to change (Cooper, 1995). The strategic planning process requires the identification of relevant stakeholders, the formulation of a vision, mission statement and objectives, and agreeing on a timeframe for the completion of the various planning stages (Keane, Ó Cinnéide and Cunningham, 1996). However, tourism is a broad and diverse sector with a range of stakeholders and constituents to consider in setting a strategic direction, all of whom have legitimate interests in the future of the destination. Therefore strategic planning for a tourism destination must not only be proactive, but it must also be responsive to stakeholder needs including the often overlooked community residents.

The need to be responsive to stakeholder needs is an important caveat to strategic planning for tourism destinations, as the strategic direction set for a destination will have far greater repercussions than simply maximising return to company shareholders, as is the case in the private sector. The destination community encompasses a diverse and often diametrically opposed range of stakeholders, including: the government (national, regional and local government); governments departments with links to tourism; national, regional and local tourism organizations; tourism developers and entrepreneurs, tourism industry operators; non-tourism business practitioners, and the community including local community groups, indigenous people's groups and local residents (Freeman 1984; Ritchie, 1993; Roberts and Simpson, 2000). For strategic planning to be effective, stakeholder cooperation and collaboration is necessary to lead to agreement and ownership of planning directions and goals, which in turn increases the likelihood of success

and long-term level of support required for tourism management programs (Hall and McArthur, 1998). As destination areas grow and the associated problems with this increase, government leaders, resource planners and entrepreneurs will be incapable of dealing with the problem if each acts in isolation (Parker, 1999). Therefore, collaborative approaches to destination planning have been advocated as a means of achieving a reasonable degree of consensus on desired directions for tourism development. Stakeholder consensus and support for tourism development is considered an important ingredient for the long-term success of the destination, and if a destination can overcome its traditional hindrances of fragmentation and un-coordination it will greatly increase its ability to compete more effectively in the tourism marketplace (Jamal and Getz, 1995; Minca and Getz, 1995; Ritchie, 1999; Ritchie and Crouch, 1993). One possible means of overcoming stakeholder fragmentation that is receiving increasing attention in the literature is the concept of strategic visioning.

4 Strategic visioning

The concept of strategic visioning has emerged as a means of operationalising collaborative, strategic planning for tourism destinations. While the process is relatively common in the organizational context and more recently as a concept for empowering local communities, its potential for bringing together the views of the many organisations and individuals of both the industry and the community through collaborative processes has seen the process adopted for tourism destinations. In this context, strategic visioning is an extension of the more common process of strategic tourism planning (Ritchie, 1993). Even though the direction for tourism development is implicit in strategic planning, strategic visioning has a stronger emphasis on nurturing appropriate forms of development, through a publicly driven process based on stakeholder values and consensus, as opposed to a more private "expert-driven" process based solely on market forces (Ritchie and Crouch, 2000).

Ritchie (1993) draws on the work of Mintzberg to distinguish between strategic planning and strategic visioning. At one end of the spectrum is the traditional prescriptive model of strategic planning, referred to in the management literature as the design school. This form of planning is mechanical, formal, highly structured, logical, controlled and mechanical exercise for which the chief executive is ultimately responsible. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the concept of crafting strategy from a

shared strategic vision. This is seen as a dynamic, evolving process in which strategies develop over a period of time as a result of an ongoing and iterative process of thinking and acting, where one idea leads to another until a pattern forms. As Mintzberg (1994) states, "the visionary approach is a more flexible way to deal with an uncertain world. Vision sets the broad outlines of a strategy, while leaving the specific details to be worked out. In other words, the broad perspective may be deliberate but the specific position can emerge. So when the unexpected happens, assuming the vision is sufficiently robust, the organization can adapt- it learns. Certain change is thus easily accommodated" (p. 209).

In the destination context, a strategic vision is described by Faulkner (2003) as "a succinct statement of the essential ingredients of the preferred future of the destination" (p.55). The vision for the preferred future of the destination is then supplemented by a series of more detailed statements (strategic plans), which articulate the benchmarks for specific issues such as infrastructure development and marketing.

A key benefit of strategic visioning is the emphasis on the future. Generating a vision for a destination is seen to be important, because it demands a future perspective, the development of goals and objectives, and it is from that platform the strategic plans are modeled (Korac-Kakabadse and Kakabadse, 1998; Vogel and Swanson, 1988). As strategic visioning places considerable emphasis on determining "appropriate" forms of development, the outcome of the process should be a framework that sets the guidelines as to the kinds of major facilities, events and programs that the stakeholders desire for the destination, or as Ritchie (1993) finds, are most consistent with stakeholders values and aspirations for the long-term development and well being of their community.

As Getz and Jamal (1994) find, any type of development requires a plan, which clearly delineates the type and pace of tourism development, capacity and growth management policies, socio-cultural and environmental considerations as well as supply/demand parameters. A strategic vision for a tourism destination aims to address these issues by determining the nature of long-term major developments. Major developments such as resort infrastructures are often irreversible, so the choice of vision is absolutely critical, as it will set in motion the development of the destination for many years to come, not to mention the nature of the destination product (Ritchie, 1993). Therefore, the destination vision should ideally be identified before development is permitted to

occur and should be the first step in the development of a destination strategic plan (Ritchie, 1999; Ryan, 2002). A strategic visioning approach to planning addresses this issue by proactively looking to the future through the development of a vision and identifying the desired states of the destination before developing strategies to achieve those desired states.

As discussed previously, strategic visioning places considerable emphasis on the concept of stakeholder collaboration and participation in determining the future of the destination. The strategic visioning process is founded on collaboration and cooperation between stakeholders to develop a shared vision of the desired future of the destination. Even though there may be varying opinions on the destination's future, the objective of the process is for all stakeholders to be involved in determining appropriate forms of development, through a publicly driven process based on stakeholder values and consensus (Faulkner and Noakes, 2002). A well-articulated vision that has been constructed in a manner that ensures it represents consensus among stakeholders can provide a focus for the strategic planning process and act as a vehicle for mobilizing cooperative action (Faulkner, 2003). The ability for destination stakeholders to collaborate is considered an important ingredient for the long-term success of the destination and its ability to compete more effectively in the tourism marketplace (Jamal and Getz, 1995; Minca and Getz, 1995; Ritchie, 1999; Ritchie and Crouch, 1993).

Although authors are increasingly claiming that visioning is an important process for strategic tourism planning (Jamal and Getz, 1995; Ritchie, 1999; Ritchie and Crouch, 2000; Ryan, 2002) there have been few reported cases where the visioning process has been applied to tourism destinations. One case is the strategic visioning process undertaken for the Gold Coast in Queensland, Australia. The Gold Coast is one of Australia's most popular international and domestic tourism destinations and the primary aim of the visioning project was to examine the impacts and opportunities of sustainable tourism for the Gold Coast community, while creating a more strategic perspective towards tourism policy, planning, development and marketing (Figure 1). The Gold Coast tourism visioning project sought to: "...articulate a set of core values and principles that underpin a preferred future for the sustainable prosperity of Australia's leading tourism destination in the medium to longer term (10 to 20 years). It challenges destination Gold Coast to move from a past ad hoc approach to tourism to one that integrates economic, social and environmental dimensions to

evolve new patterns of managing and growing tourism in a more systematic and dynamic way in this new century. Tourism is a key component of the inevitable transition to sustainable development strategies in advanced western democracies such as Australia" (Faulkner and Noakes, 2002, i).

The project's objectives are further articulated in Table 1.

While there is no one "right" way to formulate a vision and undertake a strategic visioning process, the outcome of the process should ultimately be agreement amongst destination stakeholders that the final vision statement provides a meaningful and operational picture of the future of their destination; while reflecting the values of the destination stakeholders and appreciating the realities and constraints of the marketplace (Ritchie and Crouch, 2000; Ritchie, 1993). This is a difficulty faced by tourism destination, remaining competitive in an increasingly competitive and turbulent environment, while at the same time ensuring that the management of tourism is consistent with the principles of sustainable tourism development (Faulkner, 2003). Strategic visioning offers a means for addressing these competing demands.

5 Discussion

In the modern tourism marketplace the truly competitive destination will not solely focus on economic measures as an indicator of success. While financial returns are obviously important, such a narrow view will not contribute to the long-term and sustainable competitiveness of tourism destinations. This has been seen in destinations such as the Mediterranean where a lack of planning for development and an overemphasis on the economic benefits to be acquired from tourism saw the destination experience social and environmental degradation, and eventually, declining market share. Buhalis (2000) describes this "high-volume-low-profit" as jeopardizing resource sustainability and ultimately the competitiveness of the destination. Therefore one possible mechanism for enhancing the long-term competitiveness of destinations is the adoption of strategic planning and visioning based on the principles of sustainable tourism and stakeholder collaboration, in conjunction with economic policies to increase the financial benefits of tourism. As has been discussed, the concept of strategic visioning is emerging as a precursor to the more general practice of strategic planning undertaken for tourism destinations. This "strategic approach" has been advocated for two primary reasons. Firstly, it provides a broad framework for

the future development of the destination, and secondly; the destination stakeholders are the key decision-makers in determining the size and scope of future development. This is opposed to: ad hoc decision-making and planning; private sector interests driving development; stakeholder interests (particularly the local residents) being overlooked and a general apathy towards the destination's future competitiveness and long-term sustainability. From this discussion a number of key issues are proposed regarding the benefits of adopting a strategic approach and how this process can enhance destination competitiveness. The proposed benefits include:

- the integration of sustainable development principles;
- an emphasis on the future;
- collaboration between destination stakeholders;
- the flexibility to adapt to changing environmental conditions.

Strategic visioning and planning for tourism is based on the philosophy of sustainability, which as discussed, is as a key factor in achieving long-term competitiveness. With the inescapable problems of pollution and degradation of resources, the issue of sustainability has not only become a key policy concern, but a necessary consideration in sustaining the assets of the destination, which attract visitors, and thus make the destination economically viable. As has been discussed, resource degradation often results in visitors seeking new, better managed destinations. Therefore, Crouch and Ritchie (1999) find that to be competitive, tourism development must be economically, ecologically, socially, culturally and politically sustainable. Sustainable development refers to economic development which safeguards the economic possibilities of future generations by, for example, preventing or controlling the adverse impacts which often accompany economic development, such as long-term resource depletion; environmental degradation, cultural disruption and social instability (Hall, 1998). This will lead to sustained productivity over the longer-term to benefit future generations and their ability to be competitive. Therefore a strategic perspective can assist in ensuring that the destination remains competitive while incorporating the principles of sustainability.

One of the primary reasons for implementing a strategic visioning program identified in the literature is to set a framework for the future development of the destination. Strategic visioning demands a future perspective in order to make better estimates of the prospective development needs of the destination so that the necessary services and infrastructure to cater to the future tourist

needs of the destination can be met. This strategic perspective is vital to ensure that the destination is competitive in the tourism marketplace (Ritchie, 1999). It is unrealistic to expect that a destination can be competitive in the long-term if proactive, strategic decisions are not made to determine the future development needs of the destination. Strategic visioning encompasses this issue by proactively looking to the future through the development of a vision and identifying the desired states of the destination before developing strategies to achieve those desired states. It avoids the ad hoc decision making which has been so prevalent in tourism destinations, and which compromises the ability for a destination to be successful in the long-term if there is no clear pathway to achieve lasting competitiveness.

The third identified benefit of adopting a strategic approach is the collaboration which the process requires between destination stakeholders. One of the major appeals of strategic visioning is the emphasis the process places on stakeholder collaboration and participation in decision making to determine the future development of the destination. While the process of broader based decision-making has often been impeded by traditional decision-makers who see it as a threat to their power, incorporating participation by the various destination stakeholders can lead to greater acceptance of tourism development. Also, Hardy, Beeton and Pearson (2002) find that, involving the local residents of the destination lessens the likelihood that the community will feel alienated and oppose tourism development, thus negative impacts will be minimized and economies may be revitalized. The importance of stakeholders in destination decision-making and planning is often overlooked, yet stakeholder support for tourism development is widely advocated as a prerequisite for the destination to be able to compete more effectively in the tourism marketplace (Jamal and Getz, 1995; Minca and Getz, 1995; Ritchie, 1999; Ritchie and Crouch, 1993). A strategic visioning approach to destination planning provides a practical framework for facilitating stakeholder collaboration.

Finally, a strategic visioning approach provides the destination with the flexibility to adapt to changing environmental conditions. As opposed to the more static approaches of master plans and other planning approaches, strategic visioning and planning provides a more flexible way to deal with the uncertainties of the future. As Mintzberg (1994) found, "vision sets the broad outlines of the strategy while leaving the specific details to be worked out...so when the unexpected hap-

pens...the organization can adapt" (p. 209). Similarly, Moutinho (2000, 15) states that essentially the whole process of tourism strategic planning boils down to planning on uncertainty, and a strategic vision is one such means to cope with the uncertainties of the future and the ever changing conditions of the global tourism marketplace.

6 Conclusion

Economic growth as a sole measurement of success is increasingly becoming outdated. In the modern tourism marketplace successful destinations are those that not only incorporate economic considerations, but also appreciate that the environmental and social sustainability of the destination is just as crucial for long-term competitiveness. To achieve this balance tourism destinations must proactively and strategically plan for future developments in order to secure, both the long-term sustainability of the destination and continuing market competitiveness. The strategic visioning and planning process places considerable emphasis on determining appropriate forms of development from the perspective of destination stakeholders, while taking into account the opportunities and constraints of the marketplace. The adoption of such an approach can enhance the competitiveness of a tourism destination due to the processes' integration of sustainable development principles; the emphasis on the future; the requirement for collaboration between destination stakeholders; and the flexibility the process provides for adapting to changing market conditions.

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Table 1 – Objectives of the Gold Coast Visioning Project

- To provide a systematic and comprehensive overview of the current status of Gold Coast tourism, covering such considerations as
 - market position and competitiveness, and
 - environmental, economic and social impacts;
- To develop scenarios for future global, national and local socio-economic, technological and environmental conditions, and assess the implications of these trends at the Gold Coast destination level;
- To combine insights from the above with the principles of sustainable tourism development to produce a shared vision for the Gold Coast's tourism future;
- To utilize the shared vision as a framework for generating a set of issues, core values and principles for evaluating future development options;
- To identify options for tourism development in the context of future scenarios, and evaluate these in terms of the vision and associated core values and principles;
- To arrive at a consensus on preferred tourism development options consistent with the vision and the actions/approaches necessary for this to become a reality.

Source: Faulkner (2003)

Figure 1 – The Gold Coast Vision Statement

In summary, the Destination Vision as articulated by stakeholders participating in the Gold Coast Tourism Futures and Tourism Vision Workshops is:

"The Gold Coast will become one of the great leisure and lifestyle destinations of the world. The region will be renowned for the sustainable management of its natural and built environment, its sense of self-confidence, the vibrancy and depth of its service economy, the continuing well being of its community and its unique sense of place as a thriving and dynamic resort city.

The destination will be safe, clean, well serviced and uniquely Gold Coast in style. The region will have leading edge organisational, management and marketing structures, which will be underpinned by new partnerships between business, community and government. It will have developed a brand and market awareness which positions destination Gold Coast as a market leader in targeted domestic and international markets. The Gold Coast will set the pace as the lifestyle and leisure capital of the Pacific Rim."

Source: Faulkner and Noakes (2002)