

The Why and How of Community-Led Tourism Development

Introduction

Communities are a crucial element of the tourism product – as hosts in a destination they have a role within the development and delivery of the tourism product. However, much of what happens at community level is ad-hoc and informal. This article discusses crucial aspects of tourism development that will be useful for tourism practitioners in all sectors, public, private and voluntary, as potential leaders, contributors or funders of tourism projects. The article will consider the concept of 'community' within tourism development, assessing the barriers and opportunities that exist to maximize and support the community's contributions to the tourism destination. This community entrepreneurship, which can make a real difference to the local economy, social cohesion and community pride, is a valuable commodity that the industry at large needs to nurture, support and grow. Some useful suggestions and guidelines will be provided, drawn from a range of experience and appreciating the role everyone has to play in bottom-up approaches to tourism development. As Fiertag (1999) identifies, 'the *development of tourism* [for any] *community*, regardless of size, should not be the sole responsibility of convention bureaus, chambers of commerce or city councils. All members of the business *community* need to participate, especially hotels. After all, it is just good business sense to do so'.

Community Participation

All members of the community are affected by the positive and negative impacts of tourism as an intrinsic part of both the local culture and the offer of hospitality. Community tourism products and services are generally comprised of small enterprises and which survive alone, but which together create a destination. 'These small businesses are the essence of the community tourism experience. They give numerous communities the opportunity to be involved in the industry and enable the benefits of tourism to be distributed throughout the community' (Chambers, 2004: 326, cf. Hayle, 2005). This provides a unique opportunity to develop and enhance the tourism product. It is 'a type of tourism run by and for the local community. It may be alternative in character ... or may cater for larger numbers and have more in common with aspects of mass tourism [it can even] be associated with organised packages and even coach travel' (France, 1997: 16).

Whilst businesses benefit from tourism, residents often associate it with the negative impacts: congestion; litter; overcrowding; high prices. Even where the industry is accepted as a necessary component of the local economy the tourists may still be resented. This fragile balance highlights the need for communities to play an active role in tourism development. This has been studied many times before and Jones and Manyara (2007: 637) come up with a useful working definition for the concept of community-led tourism development, 'that it is a sustainable, community-owned and community-based tourism initiative that enhances conservation and in which the local community is fully involved throughout its development and management and are the main beneficiaries through community development'.

Barriers to Participation

Whilst the practical application of the ideas around community tourism are relatively recent, research into community participation dates back to the mid-1980s, and the past 20 years have revealed some interesting issues that may limit stakeholder involvement. These are explained under the headings



offered by Beech and Chadwick (2006: 349), a definitive list of the conclusions reached by a range of researchers:

- 1. Nature of Politics:** a large part of the population lacks political literacy and fails to understand how political processes work. Additionally there is a tendency to voice opinions at public meetings or by attending public sector-led events, but a reluctance to become actively involved.
- 2. Perception and Nature of Tourism:** concern about the impacts of tourism, coupled with a failure to understand the industry and its relationship with the local economy means communities are not engaged in a long-term view or acknowledgement that management rather than prevention is needed.
- 3. History of involvement in Tourism:** where communities have played a strong role, or form part of the historical commodity on view they tend to be more tolerant and accepting. Examples include re-enactment societies, local festival and events.
- 4. Attitudes of media:** when all is good, media plays a key role in promoting tourism, selling positive stories and strengthening reputation. It is effective at raising support for charities and events in the sector. However, one negative feature about new developments or negative research damages the reputation of the sector.
- 5. Apathy amongst citizens:** communities often feel there is little they can do to change a situation so are reluctant to become involved in local politics or projects.
- 6. Cost in relation to time and money:** often an underpinning factor in apathy, successful participation requires time, energy, commitment and maybe even money!
- 7. Decision making takes longer with community involvement:** sometimes it can take longer to make a decision, but this is primarily a perception that exists because of beliefs about planning processes and political systems, again leading to apathy and a failure to understand politics.
- 8. Ensuring fair opportunities for representation from the whole community:** this is hard to achieve for any organization, be it public, private or voluntary sector.
- 9. Lack of understanding of complex planning issues and processes:** many people do not understand what decision makers do. They have views often expressed as 'the Council' and 'them in their ivory towers' and are unwilling to participate except to oppose change.

These issues are summarized well in a book by Mathieson and Wall (2006: 307), identifying that 'communities are not homogenous, there are uneven power distributions, a multiplicity of stakeholders that are involved, different degrees of experience and tourism, a lack of desire to be involved..., a political and administrative history ... that is not conducive to such processes'. These barriers should not, however, be treated as a cause for concern but the *raison-d'être* to try harder to consult and talk to communities. Securing engagement, trust and enthusiasm now will pay dividends in future, does a great deal to improve perceptions of the public sector, the tourism industry and tourists.

Case Studies of Community-Led Tourism

Wirksworth, Derbyshire

Wirksworth, a small historic quarrying community on the edges of the National Park had, in 2004, employed a regeneration officer as part of the NOW project (New Opportunities Wirksworth) to focus on development of Arts Projects and Community Events. This was a response to the decline and the loss of traditional industries and the opportunity to develop a growing community of artists.

However, the overall tourist offer was not socially or geographically cohesive. Facilities and attractions included an annual arts festival, a small but underused and difficult to access heritage centre in the town centre, a small but developing heritage railway, down a long hill, and some important but overlooked historic buildings. Wirksworth has notable literary connections, was the childhood home of yachtswoman Ellen MacArthur and is close to the High Peak Trail, Derwent Valley Heritage Corridor (a UNESCO World Heritage Site) and The National Stone Centre.



The question posed in 2004 was, quite simply, how? How could this small, industrial community attract visitors? How could the shops and cafés maximize the potential of visitors to the Heritage Centre and Railway? How could niche market attractions, such as the Church and Arts Festival,

become a cohesive whole? How ultimately could visitors be attracted to visit the town, to stay in the local area and to spend more money?

The focus of the Wirksworth Tourism Cluster Project was to encourage the different stakeholders to work together, to share marketing costs and promotional activity and to create a product that was successful because it could become a holistic destination rather than a collection of disparate attractions.

The process was initiated through a community consultation event, which brought together key stakeholders and community representatives, local authorities, funding bodies and the University of Derby, whose innovative 'mystery shopper' approach to researching the community highlighted the weaknesses in the tourism product.

As a result, over a series of meetings a Tourism Strategy was developed, community projects and events initiated, and the local authority was able to work more closely with the community. Other local funded projects worked with NOW to provide training, local food projects and events. As a result other tourism clusters developed: churches to link communities (architecture, heritage and genealogy themes); trails around the town and locality; links between Wirksworth and other historic quarrying and mining communities.

What emerged was a multi-layered approach to community-led development allowing enthusiasts to develop small projects whilst having the support of the wider community to develop a holistic product. Other projects mooted by the stakeholders included a community owned and managed hotel, although this never came to fruition as a change in funding and personnel eventually led in 2006 to the demise and disintegration of some of the good work that had been done in Wirksworth. This highlights the need for consistency of personnel and perhaps proves that the project, although community participatory, was really led by funded project officers rather than community leaders.

An International Perspective: Andaman Discoveries, Indonesia

This flagship project, part of the North Andaman Tsunami Relief, has implemented over 120 projects in 12 Tsunami-affected communities. Bodhi Garrett started the project after he lost his home, job and friends as a result of the 2004 Tsunami, and it has developed through voluntary donations, networks of friends and volunteers. The project has been instrumental in helping develop successful community-based tourism including:

- Community-based tourism development and marketing;
- Making local products and crafts;
- Youth-led conservation work and environmental education;
- Traditional Thai music lessons;
- Waste management and recycling;
- Community centre to coordinate activities.

(<http://www.andamandiscoveries.com>)

A UK Perspective: The Inverclyde Tourist Group, Scotland

This community tourism project started as the result of a vision for an informal community group to become involved in the tourism product in Inverclyde. The project was initiated with an advert for participants in the local paper, which received a very strong response, and through an increasing membership of the group ultimately secured funding from the National Lottery, Scottish Enterprise Renfrewshire and Inverclyde Council. As a result the group has:

- Taken part in local coach tours;



- Undertaken training;
- Worked in partnership with the Greenock Ocean Terminal;
- Hosted a conference on cruise tourism 'Cruise Communities – Opportunities and Challenges';
- Developed the 'be a tourist in your own town' programme.

The whole experience has been described by the group as 'marvellous... totally worthwhile meeting and helping visitors enjoy their visit here and showing the local community the wonderful buildings and architecture on their own doorstep... although a small voluntary group we find we are now consulted on plans to exploit our rich heritage and to bid for major maritime events'.

(<http://www.inverclydetouristgroup.co.uk>)

How to Make Community-led Tourism Work

Personal experience and consideration of the projects discussed here prove it is entirely possible for a community to come up with ideas, work with other stakeholders and end up with a positive tourism product that really does improve the quality of life for the community. The following checklist is a good starting point for anyone involved in community tourism:

- What is the goal for the community, regardless of the lead organization? Where does the community want and need to be in 2, 5 and 10 years time? Thinking about a long-term vision will help to engage others in the overall plan and may help the development of a strategy or business plan, which will be useful if you plan to attract funding or need a long-term goal to focus achievement.
- Who will achieve this – the local authority, the local community, the private sector? If everyone is working together who is responsible for what aspects of the project, and what is the balance of power? Ensuring there is a clear set of roles and responsibilities, or an operational plan will help to reduce the risk of conflict. Consider the relationships that exist between different stakeholders.
- Who should hold the power and decision-making authority? Local authorities should be confident in handing over projects to local communities, it frees up time, reduces bureaucracy and the project may be achieved more quickly. However, where money is involved it may be necessary to work with an organization such as a university or local authority so that the money can be managed by a neutral organization on behalf of the project. Any project workers can then be appointed through these organizations.
- There is support and potential funding available from a variety of sources. Anyone considering these projects should certainly talk to Business Link (<http://www.businesslink.gov.uk>), the Academy for Sustainable Communities (<http://www.ascskills.org.uk>) and their local authorities. Some projects may also be eligible for support from the Heritage Lottery Fund (<http://www.hlf.org.uk>). It is also worth carrying out some research and sharing best practice, talking to groups who have been through this process.
- Tourism Concern (cf. Shaw and Williams, 2004:182) suggest tourism should:
 - 'Be run with the involvement and consent of local communities, which of course links directly with the ideas of community participation';
 - 'Be in a position to share profits "fairly" with the local community';
 - 'Involve communities rather than individuals'.
- Promotional activity is essential, but do not be put off by a perception of what this may cost. Resources can be pooled to develop a surprisingly effective budget, but consider also that 'tourism promotions can be developed for any size *community*, with very little or practically no budget....all that is needed is some local organization willing to put in the time and effort to draw in other local entities, along with a lot of volunteer support' (Fiertag, 1999).
- Consultation events are a good compromise as long as they take place over different days and at times when the community is at home, so weekends and evenings. To deliver a successful event takes time and planning but the end result is worthwhile. Often it is the dissenters of the good ideas who will be the first to complain and to attend public meetings – it is, therefore,



difficult to find and get support from those who are in favour of new ideas. Use an event as an opportunity to share the vision and the benefits? Shaw and Williams (2004: 180–181) suggest:

- Shared commonality or consensus, suggesting that a search for similarities of responses can provide a basis for community problem solving in tourism-related conflicts;
- A network of shared experiences, beliefs, values and explanations of tourism impacts binds together a community. Social representations are conceptualized as systems of related attitudes and values’;
- A need to understand how different beliefs and attitudes are interrelated, which re-emphasizes the importance of complex networks or beliefs about tourism;
- Jones and Manyara *et al.* (2006: 630) suggest that:
 - The initiative is community-owned;
 - Communities must be fully involved in the development and management of the initiative;
 - Communities should be the main beneficiaries of the initiative.
- Wall and Mathieson (2006: 322) suggest, ‘Opportunities should be provided for local participation in tourism, both directly through investment in and employment in tourist businesses as well as in supporting activities such as agriculture and craft industries’.

For any community participation to be effective, Shaw and Williams (2004: 182) highlight it is essential to integrate ‘local community needs and ways of life with tourism developments to avoid the problems and conflicts associated with erosion of local cultures’. These ideals of community tourism ‘are increasingly part of the state and NGO agenda’s billed under “community tourism” or “sustainable tourism”’. Having established the issues and outlined some potential resolutions, it is worth talking to local communities and actively engaging with them. The end result will be progressive, exciting and informative and may well result in some exciting project developments!

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