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Community Based Strategic Planning for Sustainable Regional Tourism Development in New Zealand

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Kenneth George Munro Simpson

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the processes involved in the determination of tourism policies and development plans, at a sub-national level in New Zealand. In particular, it pursues a broad goal which aims:

To investigate the validity of stakeholder participation and strategic orientation as significant contributors to sub-national tourism planning effectiveness in New Zealand.

The thesis builds upon the premise that attention to these two foundation issues, at the outset of the planning process, creates a secure base for future planning activity, and that the additional effort required by this approach is rewarded by enhanced support for the development direction subsequently chosen. Within this context, five specific research objectives are established:

1. Describe the structural arrangements that have been established to guide tourism planning activities in New Zealand.
2. Ascertain the methods used by national, regional, and local agencies to determine tourism development strategies at a national, regional and local level.
3. Evaluate the extent to which sub-national tourism development strategies incorporate the principles of stakeholder participation and strategic orientation.
4. Establish quantitative levels of local resident support for a cross-section sample of sub-national tourism development strategies.
5. Evaluate the implications of stakeholder participation and strategic orientation in terms of subsequent levels of local resident support for sub-national tourism development strategies.

This research was conceptualised as a challenge to what are argued to be two key assumptions in the tourism literature, assumptions which are essentially unsupported by empirical evidence. Firstly, there is a commonly accepted suggestion that multiple stakeholder participation throughout a planning process will generate enhanced levels of support for the subsequent planning outcomes; and secondly there is parallel advocacy of a strategic planning model as the most appropriate framework for developmental effectiveness. Research into the validity of these two propositions was considered to be vital, in terms of refining our understanding of long-term tourism development at a sub-national level.

Objective 1 was addressed through a secondary data search which assessed the extent to which New Zealand's political system allocates strategic tourism planning responsibility to individual agencies. Objective 2 used a mail census, of all 116 tourism policy and planning institutions in New Zealand, to measure the extent of their involvement and to obtain a copy of their current tourism plan. Objective 3 required the construction of an evaluative checklist to objectively assess the planning processes used, and to establish a rank order of plans by quality of stakeholder involvement and strategic orientation.

Objective 4 required the selection of three plans, taken from the top, middle and bottom of the rank order. These three examples were then re-formatted to reflect a common presentation style, and a random mail sample of 400 adult residents in each of the three chosen areas was invited to complete a written evaluation of their own tourism plan. A total of 185 useable responses was eventually received, and these were statistically analysed to satisfy the requirements of Objective 5.

The results showed that tourism policy and planning responsibilities are not well defined in the New Zealand legislation and that, as a result, they are progressively delegated from national to
regional government, regional to local government, and local government to joint public/private sector tourism organisations. Though there is some evidence of the acceptance of stakeholder participation and strategic orientation as desirable components of the tourism planning process, levels of enthusiasm for these concepts are variable, and it was not possible to find a planning process which could be described as an excellent example of either element.

Local stakeholder evaluations were moderately favourable in each of the three study sites, and there was some support for the suggestion that stakeholder participation and strategic orientation makes a useful contribution to resident approval for the resultant tourism plan. However, conclusive identification of positive relationships was hampered by the absence of an excellent example; and by a potentially substantial element of demographic bias in the available data set of resident evaluations.

These results indicate that stakeholder participation and strategic orientation remain superficially attractive, but empirically unproven, as essential components of an optimum sub-national tourism planning process. In this respect, the contribution to knowledge made by this research could be perceived as negative rather than positive. However, there is some evidence to suggest that further research into the relationships examined by this thesis could prove to be profitable. In particular, it would be valuable to sponsor the implementation of a specific sub-national tourism planning process which consciously adopts all of the elements defined as desirable during the current research, and to measure the levels of stakeholder support engendered by such an approach. The planning process assessment instrument, included as a central component of this thesis, is presented as a useful model by which such research efforts might be guided.
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Policy and Planning Interviewees

Bev Abbott, Policy Analyst, New Zealand Tourism Board
Andrew Bignell, Manager External Relations, Department of Conservation
The Hon. Mark Burton, Minister of Tourism
Jennie Darby, Personal Assistant to the Hon. Mark Burton
George Hickton, CEO, New Zealand Tourism Board
Nigel Parrott, Principal Policy Analyst, Department of Conservation

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