Sustainability and tourism visions

Chris Cooper

INTRODUCTION

It can be argued that the destination is the most important element of the tourism system, motivating visitation, delivering visitor experiences and contributing to enduring memories of the tourism experience. Yet, the increased growth of demand for tourism, coupled to the changing nature of the tourism consumer, means that destinations are under pressure to be both competitive and sustainable. For this to be realised, effective management and planning of tourism destinations is critical if tourism is to become a mature and acceptable sector. Indeed, it is also essential for the maintenance of a profitable and sustainable tourism sector at any particular destination. In this respect, concern for sustainability is central to the management of both markets and the destination. This view is echoed by De Kadt (1992) who states that sustainability has become the organising concept for tourism policy; a concept which has demonstrable advantages for the tourism sector as a whole (Bramwell and Lane, 1993; Bramwell et al, 1996; World Tourism Organisation [WTO], 1993):

In tourism the adoption of sustainability has been evidenced by a changing perspective away from the short term to the long term planning horizon (Ritchie, 1999). This in turn has seen the adoption of a strategic approach to both markets and destination management, a strategic approach which is now evolving into the concept of ‘destination visioning’. There is a clear synergy here between the adoption of sustainable tourism principles and the disciplined, longer-term perspective provided by the strategic planning and visioning of destinations (Cooper, 1995). It is the aim of this paper to explore the key relationship between sustainable destinations and new models of strategic planning.

STRATEGIC APPROACHES AND THE DESTINATION LIFE CYCLE

For any strategic plan or vision it is important to understand the dynamics of change and development in a destination. Here there is a continuing debate relating to the value of the life cycle approach as an analytical technique for the management of destinations. By integrating the long-term perspective provided by the life cycle with the concept of strategic planning, it is possible to devise appropriate management strategies for destinations as they reach various stages of the life cycle. In other words, by careful management, sustainable tourism can be achieved for destinations at each stage of the cycle. Butler (1992) argues that this long-term perspective provides control and responsibility to prevent the destination exceeding capacity and the inevitable decline in visitation which follows. This view is supported by Bramwell and Lane (1993) who identify a key element of sustainability as the idea of holistic planning and strategy formation. In other words, as Farrell (1992) says, the destination formula is constantly reviewed and adjusted with differing strategies appropriate to particular stages of the destination life cycle. It could therefore be argued that sustainability demands a strategic planning perspective which takes account of all variables at a destination.

Kotler (1986) provides a clear definition of strategic planning as:

‘the managerial process of developing and maintaining a strategic fit between the organisation's goals and capabilities and its changing marketing opportunities’ (p. 58).

Weitz and Wensley (1984) summarise the essential difference between tactical and strategic planning by distinguishing the level and importance of the decisions taken; time horizons and frequency of the decisions; and the nature of the problem and data required. Haywood (1990) views the strategic
planning approach as an extension of the one dimensional marketing and planning approaches so often adopted in the short term by destinations. Strategic planning integrates these two approaches into a higher-order, formalised planning approach. In other words, the defining characteristics of the strategic planning approach are:

- The adoption of a long term perspective;

- The development of an holistic and integrated plan which controls the process of change through the formation of goals; and

- A formalised decision process focused on the deployment of resources which commit the destination to a future course of action (Brownlie, 1994; Weitz and Wensley, 1984).

Brownlie (1994) sees strategic planning as the sequence of choices and decisions taken about the deployment of resources committing a destination to a future course of action. It represents a deliberate, integrative plan, which essentially recognises the need for formalised higher-order planning to coordinate and control change through a process of goal setting. In this way the destination puts into place a functioning system that can adapt quickly to changing situations and establishes information, planning and control systems to monitor and respond to change (Kotler, et al, 1993). In terms of the adoption of sustainable tourism principles, the benefits of the strategic approach to the destination are clear (Cooper, 1995). The process of goal setting provides a common sense of ownership and direction for the myriad stake-holders, whilst at the same time sharpening the guiding objectives of the destination. The coherence provided by the approach provides a framework for joint initiatives between the commercial and public sectors and demands the clear identification of roles and responsibilities. Finally, the approach delivers a range of performance indicators against which the destination’s performance can be judged. In other words, strategic planning offers an integrated approach to the sustainable management of the destination and provides a sense of ownership for the stakeholders.

However, the introduction of a longer-term strategic planning perspective by tourist destinations can be problematic. Simply, the adoption of strategic planning at the destination is not as straightforward as in a commercial organisation where responsibilities and reporting lines are well defined. In this respect, both Haywood (1990) and Pigram (1992) identify a number of implementation gaps in the adoption of strategic planning at tourist destinations:

1. Destinations are comprised of a constantly shifting mosaic of stakeholders and value systems. Each of these groups has a different view of the role and future of tourism at their destination and therefore the adoption of strategies becomes a political process of conflict resolution and consensus, all set within a local legislative context and where power brokers have a disproportionate influence (Farrell, 1992; Jamal and Getz, 1995). The influence of the political process should not be underestimated. Politics influences who is responsible for the planning process and lack of political support commonly leads to the failure, or non-implementation, of plans.

2. In addition, the tourist sector at destinations is characterised by fragmentation and a dominance of small businesses, who often trade seasonally. This has led to a lack of management expertise at destinations, a divergence of aims between the commercial and public sectors and a short-term planning horizon which in part is driven by public-sector, twelve-monthly budgeting cycles, but also by the tactical operating horizon of small businesses (Athiyaman, 1995).
3. The stage of the destination in the life cycle also influences the acceptability of a
destination-wide planning exercise. In the early stages of the life cycle for example, success
often obscures the long term view, whilst in the later stages, particularly when a destination is in
decline, opposition to long term planning exercises may be rationalised on the basis of cost.

4. Finally, the performance indicators adopted in such exercises can be controversial as tourist
volume is the traditional, and politically acceptable, measure of success in many destinations.
From the point of view of sustainability such measures are more likely to be the less tangible
ones of environmental and social impacts. In other words, the tourism industry is often reluctant
to make the tradeoff between present and future needs when success is judged by short-term
profitability and volume growth.

A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABILITY

As noted above, there is a debate as to the effectiveness of utilising a life cycle framework for strategic
planning at the destination. Some argue that the use of life cycle stage to determine strategy can be
problematic as strategic actions are both a cause and effect of the cycle and that resulting strategies
affect performance in later stages (Kotler, 1986). However, these cautions are more appropriate to
strategies for consumer products and this author maintains that the approach adopted for destinations
will be dependent upon the destination's stage on the life cycle. In particular the destination's point in
the evolution of its development, combined with its competitive position, will determine the strategic
options available to deliver a sustainable destination. This is known as life cycle analysis (Jain, 1985;
Knowles, 1996). Jain (1985) has developed a matrix which summarises the key dimensions of this
approach - an evolutionary element of life cycle stages from embryonic to ageing, and a competitive
position from dominant to weak (Table 1). Within the matrix, appropriate strategic responses can
therefore be identified on the basis of a destination's stage in the life cycle and competitive position.
The key issue then becomes calibration of the two dimensions of the matrix:

1. Life Cycle Stage Whilst many destinations may intuitively know their position within the life
cycle, this is more difficult to quantify. Here, Knowles (1996) identifies eight factors which can
assist in identifying the life cycle stage: market growth rate; growth potential; range of product
lines; number of competitors; distribution of market share amongst competitors; customer
loyalty; entry barriers; and technology. Another approach is to consider growth indicators
(Cooper, 1992) such as: rates of volume growth; ratio of repeat to first-time visitors; length of
stay; visitor profiles; expenditure per head; and visit arrangement (package/independent).

2. Competitive Position For the competitive dimension on the matrix, Porter's (1980) classic
analysis of competitive forces assists in the identification of a destination’s competitive
position:

- The entry of new competitors;
- The threat of substitutes;
- Bargaining power of suppliers;
- Marketing power of suppliers; and
- Rivalry amongst existing competitors.

Quite simply, at each stage of the life cycle, the mix of evolutionary and competitive forces differs and
thus, strategies to deliver a sustainable destination should be distinctive at each life cycle stage. By adopting Jain's (1985) approach to life cycle analysis and combining it with Butler's (1980)categorisation of life cycle phases, it is possible to define the strategic options available for destinations and to outline the destination's characteristics and possible responses to be taken. By adopting this rigorous framework, the link between sustainability and the strategic planning process can be highlighted and exploited.

DESTINATION VISIONING

Strategic planning takes many forms and has evolved over the years (Mintzberg, 1994a). These approaches range from the traditional and more formalised 'rational model' or 'planning school' approach to the evolutionary approach of Mintzberg (1994a) and on to Ritchie's (1994) concept of 'destination visioning'. Given the nature of destinations, and the problems identified above when attempting to ‘force’ a more formalised process onto a destination, it is becoming clear that the ‘visioning’ approach is well suited to strategic destination planning.

Destination visioning is a community-based strategic planning approach, effectively placing the future of the destination in the hands of the local community, government and industry. As Ritchie (1993) says:

‘residents of communities and regions affected by tourism are demanding to be involved in the decisions affecting their development’ (p379).

Of course, this involvement and control is also a key element of delivering a sustainable destination. Whilst the concept of community involvement in planning is well known, it is the ‘process’ of visioning that is so well suited to destinations. Ritchie (1993) identifies three key elements of the process as:

1. The vision must bring together the views of the whole community and all tourism stakeholders;
2. The vision must reach consensus and endorsement of the future; and
3. The vision defines the long term development of the destination.

Through the disciplined process of involving the community in the future development of tourism, destination visions are crafted. It is clear from the sequence of stages that visioning projects commonly adopt, that the approach is simply a further evolution of strategic planning. For example, a tourism visioning project beginning in 2002 for the Tweed local authority region of Northern New South Wales, Australia is adopting the following stages:

**Stage 1 : Destination Audit.** This involves the commissioning of research reports to provide a clear picture of supply, demand and organisation of tourism in the region to lay a sound basis for the vision.

**Stage 2: Position Statements.** Drawing on the destination audit, a number of position statements will be written and distributed, based upon key aspects of tourism in the Tweed – market, investment, environment, etc.

**Stage 3 : Visioning Workshops.** This is the core of the visioning project, comprising of workshops held around the region and run by a professional facilitator to draw out community views as to the future of tourism in the region, based upon the position
Statements.

Stage 4: Development of the Vision. This stage involves collating the results from the workshops into a set of future scenarios to drive the vision forward.

Stage 5: Implementation. It is at this stage that many plans fail. It is essential to have agreement of the roles, timelines and activities that will be put in place to secure the vision. Equally important is the need for a monitoring system of key variables to ensure that the achievement of the vision can be tracked.

Despite the logical sequence of the visioning stages, and the increasing adoption of visioning across many destinations in the world (Ritchie, 1999), there are some potential problems with the approach (see Helling, 1998; Ritchie, 1993). These include:

- The difficulty of obtaining representation across the community;
- The difficulty of obtaining consensus on controversial issues;
- The difficulty of recognising and avoiding ‘tokenism’;
- For tourism visioning exercises, other economic sectors must be integrated – this is often overlooked; and
- The difficulty of implementing the vision.

Nonetheless, destination visioning is becoming the new tool for sustainable and strategic tourism planning for tourism destinations, as tourism catches up with the imperative of community involvement and embraces the need to manage change.

CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated the synergy between sustainability and the strategic process of destination visioning. The paper has also argued for a rigorous framework to be developed to inform such exercises – a framework based upon the competitive position and life cycle stage of a destination. In this way, sustainable destinations can be delivered by considering differing strategic options at various stages of the destination life cycle. Destination visioning has the twin advantages of adopting the long-term approach whilst also engineering strong community involvement and ‘buy in’ of the future of the destination. Only by moving in this direction can we truly adopt a sustainable approach, not only because visioning takes into account the complex relationships within a destination, but also it recognizes the impact of decisions upon the future generations of those living in the community (Ritchie and Crouch, 2000). It is essential that tourism adopts these cutting edge approaches, after all if the destination is the most important element of the tourism system, then its effective management and planning is critical if tourism is to become a mature, sustainable and acceptable sector.

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TABLE 1 Jain's (1985) Guide to Strategic Thrust Options

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Source: Jain (1985)

**BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

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