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Embedding stakeholders in sustainable tourism strategies

Introduction

The significance of involving stakeholders in sustainable tourism (ST) initiatives is increasingly acknowledged and recommended within both academia and practice. This appreciation stems from the nature of tourism destinations as networks of interdependent stakeholders (Cooper, Scott, & Baggio, 2009; d'Angella & Go, 2009) and emerging ST practices that rely on stakeholder partnerships (Gossling, Hall, & Weaver, 2009). However, there are reports of failures of ST strategies associated with ineffective stakeholder involvement (e.g. Dodds & Butler, 2010; Getz & Timur, 2005; Ryan, 2002) and of scepticism in the capability of some stakeholders to contribute meaningfully to tourism processes (Hamilton & Alexander, 2013). Through the Traffic Light Routes Framework (TLRF), this research note shows how stakeholders can be better involved in ST. The TLRF emerged from case study data on the Cornwall Sustainable (CoaST) Project, located in South West England, UK.

Embedding stakeholders in sustainable tourism strategies

CoaST is a small social enterprise situated in Cornwall with members collaborating under the 'One Planet Tourism' network from more than 50 counties in the UK and 75 countries worldwide (CoaST, 2015). CoaST's remit is to achieve social, economic and environmental inspired change through tourism (www.coastproject.co.uk). On its establishment, CoaST initiated a "Building on Distinction" programme with 23 tourism businesses as "CoaST Ambassadors" (CoaST, 2005). These ambassadors launched the "CoaST network" and facilitated CoaST's national recognition for ST practice (e.g. Sustainable Development Commission, UK (SDC), 2007; VisitBritain, 2010) and internationally (e.g. Virgin Holidays Responsible Tourism Awards, 2009; World Travel Awards, 2008). Such recognition is indicative of an influential and information rich case (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2009).

Three focus groups and forty semi-structured interviews were conducted across eight stakeholder types [businesses, residents, government, special interest groups, employees, board of directors, educational institutions and visitors]. Constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of stakeholder perceptions of CoaST's ST strategy revealed CoaST's achievement as summed up by one government representative:

I think given the small resource it [CoaST] has in terms of staff and co-funding it has had a huge influence on the tourism sector more so than I can think...it's managed to genuinely network businesses and act as a facilitator...VisitEngland for example will take great notice of what people of CoaST do and how. It has an influence beyond Cornwall.

CoaST's ST strategy embeds stakeholder involvement management processes to influence positively ST initiatives.

The Traffic Light Routes Framework (TLRF)

Based on the ‘traffic lights’ analogy, the TLRF resulted from the analysis of stakeholders’ perceptions of CoaST’s ST strategy and its impact on ST initiatives. Respectively, one CoaST employee and one hotel owner explained:

Early days was very targeting, kind of getting businesses on board and showcasing that work...but we work across the board...that inclusive approach has allowed the messages to go through to other areas.

Anyone can be a member of CoaST, there is no test... all benefiting in various ways. The great thing about CoaST, it takes everybody’s ideas and they are there for you to learn from, go with, reject, argue with, whatever.

The TLRF depicts two ST strategies (one with a ‘stakeholder imperative’ and another without) leading to one of two outcomes (Effective and Ineffective ST implementation) through three potential routes (Green, Amber and Red) underpinned by connecting relationships (Fig. 1).

The “ST strategy with a stakeholder imperative” represents CoaST’s ST strategy. Labelled the Green Route, this strategy treats stakeholders as instrumental to achieving sustainability objectives and beneficiaries of ST initiatives. The stakeholder involvement process is not left to chance but actively directed through managerial intervention in the adhoc relationship between stakeholders and the stakeholder involvement process (see Fig. 1). As such, stakeholders are deliberately embedded in the ST strategy through a “stakeholder involvement management” process that seeks to understand who they are (stakeholder identification), what they want (stakeholder interests) and how they get what they want (stakeholder influence strategies) (Frooman, 1999; Sheehan & Ritchie, 2005). Table 1 summarises the main arguments for the Green Route.

The Amber Route illustrates the possibility of stakeholders embracing ST initiatives and getting involved without management intervention. Inevitably, stakeholders become engaged in ST as a response to strategies that have an impact on them, either positively or negatively. Stakeholders may have been informed for example through leaflets, a website or other on-going sustainability campaigns. In contrast to the Green Route, the stakeholder involvement process is not managed actively. Stakeholders choose to collaborate, oppose or ignore ST initiatives, and hence may or may not opt for engagement in ST. This makes the Amber Route potentially risky as it may suffer from a lack of, or inconsistent, stakeholder support.

The Red Route highlights that ignoring stakeholder involvement management is high-risk and could lead to the failure of ST initiatives. When stakeholders choose to oppose or ignore ST, they present a barrier to its realisation. This absence of stakeholder buy-in can be tackled through stakeholder involvement management strategies that seek to ensure that stakeholder interests are aligned with sustainability objectives. However, unless organisational strategies are stakeholder-centric or focused on organisation-stakeholder relations (Friedman & Miles, 2006) stakeholders are neither recognised nor their interests considered.

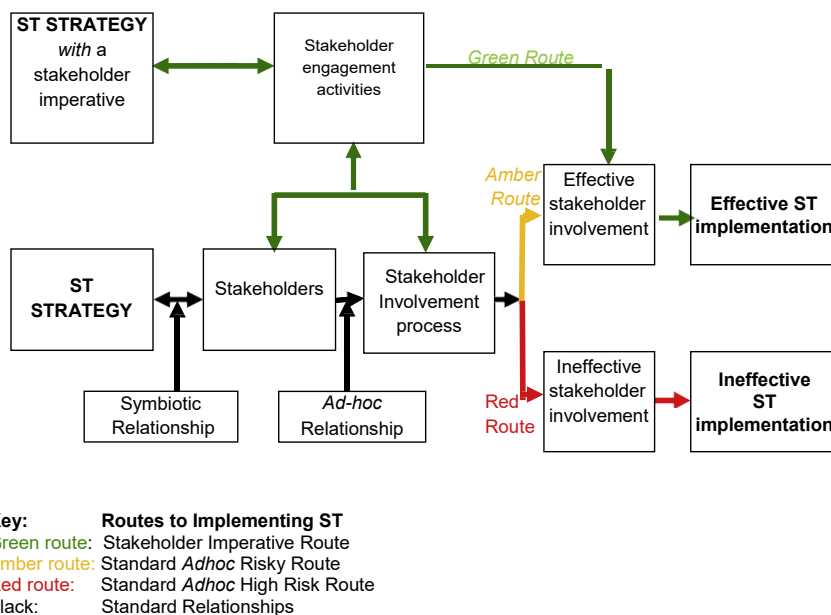


Fig. 1. The Traffic Light Routes Framework (TLRF). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

Table 1

Main arguments for the Green Route and stakeholder involvement management.

- ✓ Stakeholders' interests may conflict with each other and/or with ST objectives; intervention and negotiation are necessary
- ✓ ST is complicated and contextual circumstances vary; understanding it needs facilitation
- ✓ Initiating cooperation is necessary as responsibility for ST rests with multiple stakeholders
- ✓ Stakeholders inevitably become involved in ST issues as they are likely to be affected by ST processes and outcomes - the symbiotic and adhoc relationships
- ✓ Adhoc stakeholder involvement is risky as it affects both the quality of involvement and implementation outcomes
- ✓ Stakeholder involvement management allows issues that concern stakeholders to be identified and resolved

This research note proposes ST strategies that embed stakeholder involvement processes from the outset—the Green Route of the TLRF. Although arguments for stakeholder participation in tourism strategies are well documented in the literature, the impact of good or ill of adhoc involvement is not appreciated. The failure to recognise the centrality of stakeholders is common. A conscious decision to acknowledge and involve stakeholders in ST initiatives from the start establishes a virtuous circle between stakeholder interest in ST, stakeholder participation and more effective ST implementation. This stakeholder-imperative is underscored if stakeholder partnerships are to enhance the achievement of ST objectives. However, the challenges, patterns and characteristics of ineffective stakeholder participation in ST implementation remain under-researched and offer future research directions. Furthermore, given the contextual circumstances of this study, the findings and applicability of the Traffic Light Routes Framework could be extended to different ST scenarios or non-UK cultural contexts.

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