

**TOURISM POLICY AND PRACTICE IN REGIONAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA:
PERSPECTIVES OF DESTINATION STAKEHOLDERS**

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Short Abstract

Tourism has been identified as one of Australia's five critical sectors (Deloitte 2013) and regional tourism is an important part of the sector. Despite this, there has been little research into what makes regional tourism successful or how tourism policy and practices are undertaken. This research contributes to filling this gap by examining where such policy is generated and where it is implemented. Tourism policy-related documents were examined and in-depth interviews with key informants were analysed using the Leximancer program to explore themes and the concepts contributing to them. The results are analysed to capture interviewees' "*lived experiences*" in planning, managing, and measuring tourism, and suggested tourism destinations have characteristics that are determined by tourism's importance to the destination, e.g., the economic climate and its impact on corporate and leisure travel, and this determines policy direction that has unique managerial implications for each destination.

Keywords: tourism, policy, stakeholders.

Introduction and Research Aim

The state tourism policy development process in Western Australia (WA) encompasses many stakeholders including political parties, state government agencies, local government authorities, community interest groups, and tourism industries. It draws together both public and political socialisation (Sabatier, 1991). As a result, the tourism policy development process cannot be undertaken without considering the view, aims and actions of numerous actors. Sabatier (1999, p.146) notes the importance of technical-scientific, and legal issues, suggesting that stakeholders each pursue their own objectives, and propagate their specific “spin” on events”.

To assist in understanding this complex environment Sabatier (1999) proposed the use of the *Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF)*, which enhances understanding of how (political) conflicts evolve. The ACF is derived from three policy models, progressivism, interest organisation competition, and ideological conflict. that explain the dynamic mechanisms underlying social policy (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier 1994). The model suggests that, when people focus on any policy issue, a subsystem is formed that gives rise to multiple advocacy coalitions. The research aim of this study was:

To examine tourism policy and strategy and to measure their impact in some better-known WA coastal tourism destinations

We address two research questions in line with this aim:

RQ1: How do stakeholders feel the processes of planning, managing, and measuring contribute to formulating and implementing tourism policy?

RQ2: How do stakeholders feel about using tourism policy to create a positive tourism destination environment?

RQ3: How do stakeholders feel tourism supply planning impacts such areas as policy and strategy, collaboration, conflicts of interest, and the creation of a better tourism destination?

RQ4: What attributes do stakeholders feel are important to the creation of a successful tourism destination?

Background

This multiple case study examined five coastal tourism destinations in WA. Each destination had special stories to tell in terms of attributes, characteristics, and success as tourism destinations, past and present. Relevant documents and qualitative interviews with different groups were used to better understand the policy process and to see how policy was practised and the effects such policies had on destination success. For completeness, four identical participant groups were formed in each destination for the within-case data collection and analysis and multiple data categorisations were used in the cross-case analysis (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007, Yin 2014). The stakeholder groups interviewed included state and local government, local business associations, local tourism agents and tourism business owners and managers.

Methodology

A multiple case study approach was seen as essential because data were required to answer the *how* and *why* questions about such policies (Miles and Huberman 1984) and the boundaries between the phenomena and the context of interests were not clear (Baxter & Jack 2008). Examining the “lived experience” of participants was seen as an appropriate way to find meanings in their perceptions, assumptions, judgments, and suppositions (Van Manen 1977). Multiple data sources, namely interviews, documents, and observation, were used to ensure

triangulation (Patton 1990, Yin 2003, 2014) and the interview protocol and the data search were undertaken at national, state, and regional or local levels (Yin 2009), with interviews being conducted in the interviewees' own spaces (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007) wherever possible.

Results and discussion

The analysis suggested the State Government had made people aware of the need to develop tourism across the State and that the government and non-government organisations interviewed felt tourism policy was essential but that this was and should be a State Government responsibility. However, there was little understanding in any of the destinations about the State Government's tourism policy and strategy, the policy-making processes that had led to these outcomes, the policy's content and/or the possible effects these policies and strategies might have on their destinations. Destination stakeholders were often unaware of who was responsible for tourism in their destinations and there were varying perceptions about policy priorities that seemed to be related to a particular destination's lifecycle development stage.

Government groups valued policies and strategies that benefitted the community and felt tourism needed more status in local government, while non-government groups valued policies that benefitted the tourism industry itself. These outcomes suggested there is a need for the State Government to consider institutional innovation and a deeper analysis of policy environments to enable successful policy transfer and interpretation at a destination level. The case studies also highlighted a need for local government to fully engage with tourism and to manage destination tourism in ways that engaged stakeholders in meaningful dialogue and support such dialogue with workable plans and tourism policies.

Implications for theory and practice

State Governments are temporal, but tourism planning requires a distant horizon. A change of government and changes within government departments and agencies often leads to staff changes that inhibit government initiatives and reduces their ability to undertake long-term planning. An incoming government could counteract short-termism by appointing a dedicated tourism body that focuses on long-term regional tourism planning and development. Such a department would need to have the appropriate expertise and an ability to direct strategic high-level tourism projects to be positioned for success, with the department overseeing relevant projects and obtaining the support of the networks that are needed to ensure regional destination success.

The high level of support tourism requires means local governments also need to accept they must manage tourism in their destinations by facilitating, marketing, and monitoring tourism activity. Political leadership is critical to the success of regional destination tourism, and this means local governments must engage with their destination's tourism industries, businesses, and residential communities to ensure State tourism policies for their destination are successful. This means they must develop workable "local" plans from which tourism stakeholders can develop their businesses and undertake appropriate activities. Such an approach will help avoid the ambiguity State tourism policies have experienced in the tourism destinations examined in this study, as such local government management would improve certainty about their destinations' direction and help obtain clarity and consensus among destination tourism stakeholders.

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