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Evaluating tourism potential: A SWOT analysis of the Western Negev, Israel

Abstract

SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis is a widely used method of evaluation employed in the business and planning worlds, including tourism planning, but there is little documentation on SWOT analysis in the academic tourism or geography literature. In this study SWOT analysis was applied more systematically in these areas, and rules for using it are suggested. The objective of this research is to show how SWOT analysis can be made more attractive, useful and accurate in research. This paper examines the current status and the potential of ecotourism in the Western Negev, in Southern Israel. The evaluation was conducted at the national, regional, and local levels using SWOT analysis. Data was gathered through field observation, interviews with decisions makers, and questionnaires distributed to the local population between the years 2000-2006. The findings relate to both the use of the SWOT technique as a research method and an evaluation concerning the tourism potential of the Western Negev. The findings relate to both the use of the SWOT technique as a research method and an evaluation concerning the tourism potential of the Western Negev. A simple diagram of the components of an enhanced SWOT analysis framework was developed, presented and used. It is suggested that this framework has wide applicability. The tourism industry is only in its infancy in the Western Negev, and thus this analysis can assist local decision makers by estimating the potential benefits and threats to their development. It is hoped that both academics and practioners would use the recommendations offered in the article for future research and for future development of the area.

Keywords:

tourism; SWOT analysis; rural tourism; ecotourism; Western Negev; Israel

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to extend the utility of SWOT analysis as a useful means of undertaking both academic research and practical work, and to illustrate its application through an assessment of the current status of tourism in a specific region in Israel- the Western Negev.

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Thus, the research objective is to use a case-study approach in order to produce specific recommendations for the area under investigation and also to generate broadly applicable results and strategies that may allow other communities and destinations elsewhere to benefit from rural and ecological tourism. The research is also intended, by extension, to contribute to the growing body of literature on aspects of tourism and ecotourism, and how they can be evaluated.

Following a review of relevant concepts and literature, brief discussions of tourism in Israel, more particularly in the Western Negev, are provided as context for the case study. In this paper the focus is on rural tourism and ecotourism, thus these are introduced briefly prior to discussion of the methods used in the case study and the study results. Conclusions are presented concerning ecotourism in the Western Negev and the application of SWOT analysis including its limitations and biases. Recommendations for future research and development will be presented at the end.

SWOT analysis

SWOT analysis (the evaluation of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) is not a new technique, but has been developed to assess the status and prospects of businesses. Strengths and weaknesses are internal to the entity under evaluation whereas opportunities and threats refer to the broad context or environment in which the entity operates (Lawhead, Veglak & Thomas, 1992). The former are more likely to be under the control of the entity than the latter, although the latter are no less important than the former in influencing the well-being of the enterprise. Judgment is exercised in assigning a particular phenomenon to an analytical category.

The SWOT procedure has been used in many planning and development situations as a tool for organizing and interpreting information. It is widely utilized by consultants but seldom by academics. Only limited related literature is to be found in academic tourism publications. Examples of such use in tourism research include Wall's (2002) SWOT analysis in Baoting, China, Mansfeld, Ron and Gev's (2000) analysis of Muslim tourism to Israel, and Rahmat's (2000) work on the status of ecotourism in the Togean Islands in Indonesia.

The novel aspect of the study reported here is that it is a three-level SWOT analysis: it will begin on the national level, and then will move to the regional level, and will conclude at a selected site. A further methodological refinement is that indicators are allocated to different defined categories.

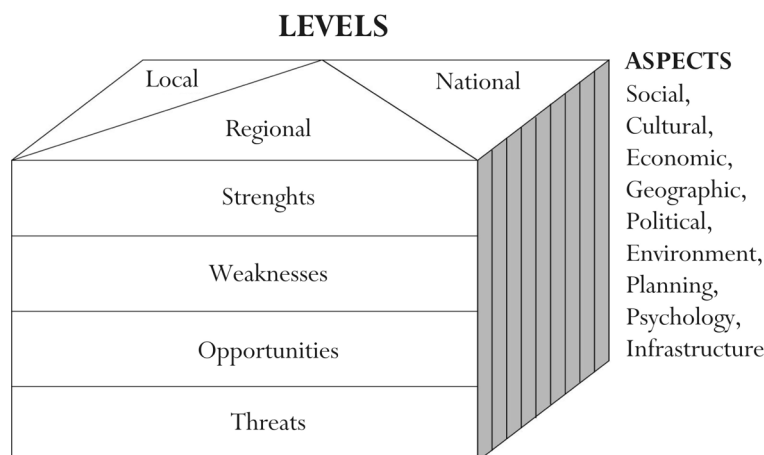
These modifications are introduced to make SWOT analysis more systematic, hence more attractive, useful and accurate. The refined framework can be presented as a three-dimensional diagram (Figure 1):

Dimension 1: SWOT: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

Dimension 2: Level of research: local, regional, national.

Dimension 3: The different aspects: social, cultural, economic, geographical, political, environmental, planning, psychological, and infrastructural.

Figure 1
FRAMEWORK FOR SWOT ANALYSIS



Note that SWOT is a method of organizing information (Wall, 2002). It is simple and useful, especially for preliminary research and as a basis for more applied and theoretical work. One advantage, as well as a disadvantage of SWOT analysis, is the fact that it is an evaluation method. The emphasis on evaluation makes the work more applied than theoretical. On the other hand, SWOT is a holistic method, including a multiplicity of dimensions, particularly when expanded as indicated in the three-dimensional framework described above.

To carry out a SWOT analysis, the following questions should be asked:

Strengths: What are your advantages? What do you do well? What do other people see as your strengths?

Weaknesses: What do you do badly? What could you improve? What should you avoid?

Opportunities: Where are the opportunities before you? What are the interesting trends you are aware of? Are there changes in markets on both a broad and narrow scale (ecotourism) or in government policy related to your field or in social patterns, population profiles, lifestyle changes, etc.?

Threats: What obstacles do you face? What is your competition doing (Locally and in other areas)? Are the required specifications for your type of tourism changing? Are changing trends threatening your position?

Rural tourism and ecotourism

Tourism has become an important and, in some cases a dominant factor in the rural economies of Western countries (Robinson, 1990), and is often considered extremely important for the social and economic regeneration of declining rural areas. The decline in the ability of farm agriculture to generate sufficient income has caused many farmers to diversify their enterprise and to seek new sources of income. Initiative for development can also come from governments in the form of rural development policies and subsidies, and from the demand side as growing urban populations seek new experiences in alternative environments (Fleischer & Engel, 1997).

Rural tourism enterprises do not differ significantly from tourism enterprises in general, in that the consumer requires accommodation, catering, and entertainment facilities. However, such enterprises are typically small in scale, often owner-operated, and they may be found at locations that are difficult to reach. Yet their individuality may be part of their attraction, contributing to the creation of rural ambience and a distinctive sense of place (Clarke, 1995).

Nature-based tourism, which occurs in both rural and more remote locations, has been the subject of much attention in both developed and developing countries, and in economically impoverished regions around the world. Although nature-based tourism currently constitutes a relatively small proportion of tourism globally, it is recognized as one of the fastest expanding markets (Eagles, 1998, 2001). Ecotourism is a sub-market of nature-based tourism that has received much attention. It has been linked to sustainable development and initiatives in many places (Wall, 1997). At its simplest it is commonly thought to mean travel to natural environments (Eagles, 1998). Others include more restrictive caveats, for example, it must be environmentally and socially responsible travel, it should support conservation efforts, and it should improve the welfare of host communities (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). It can be viewed as a philosophy, a strategy, a product, a marketing ploy, or a form of travel. With terms such as sustainable tourism, ecotourism, green tourism, community-based tourism, and alternative tourism vying for attention, the confusion runs even deeper. Nevertheless, ecotourism is a confusing term and no widely accepted definition exists (Weaver, 1998, 2001).

Like any form of tourism, ecotourism can induce a variety of both positive and negative environmental, cultural, and socioeconomic impacts at a destination. Operating in its ideal form, ecotourism provides the tourist with a quality nature experience, generates funds and support for conservation efforts, has minimal environment impact, and provides socioeconomic benefits for local host communities. While there is evidence that ecotourism's espoused benefits can be realized, there are equally as many cases where ecotourism has fallen short of its proposed objectives (Ross & Wall, 1999). Indeed, the effects of ecotourism have been highly variable.

The net result of two decades of discussion and experience is that there continues to be little agreement over what exactly ecotourism is. Outside academia the terminology is of less concern. It is the actual manifestation of tourism on the grounds that must be managed, regardless of its specific originally intended form (mass tourism, community, ecotourism). Successful ecotourism will not materialize automatically. Careful planning and management are needed if ecotourism is to develop in a beneficial manner at a destination (Boo, 1990). Boo highlights the importance of "preplanning", where various government representatives, the private sector, the communities, and conservation groups assess the potential for ecotourism and its likely outcomes.

In sum, rural tourism and ecotourism are two different but overlapping concepts. Even though ecotourism is often an important component of rural tourism, the latter is not limited only to ecotourism, which, in turn, is not restricted to rural settings though it always involves interaction with natural features.

Methodology

The methodological discussion consists of two main parts. First, the study area will be described briefly in several of its aspects. In the first part, to provide a context for the case study, tourism in Israel, particularly rural tourism, is discussed. Next the focus

centers on the Western Negev, particularly Kibbutz Gvulot, the specific case-study location. The second part of the methodology section describes the specific procedures used to gather data for the SWOT analysis.

THE STUDY AREA

Israel being a world center for the three main monotheistic religions, its tourism product is different from that of other countries. A large proportion of its inbound tourist flow is based on two distinctive market segments: pilgrimage and cultural tourism. Throughout the past five decades Israel has faced a persistent need to diversify its economy and achieve economic growth, while overcoming the problems of a negative balance of payments. Tourism development could have been a major contribution to achieving this end (Mansfeld, 2001). However, despite its strong tourism potential, this country is far from its optimal exploitation of its tourism resources. Some of the reasons for this lack of effective exploitation lie in factors beyond the control of the local tourism industry. For example, the current security situation in the Middle East discourages international tourist flows (Mansfeld, 1996).

Tourism in Israel entered its initial stage immediately after the establishment of the state in 1948. Over the years Israeli tourism expanded and developed other regions in addition to the traditional urban tourism centers of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. In 1972 the government resolved to prepare a national plan for tourism development in Israel up to 1985. It was supposed to provide guidelines for tourism development in the entire country, but most of the actual development until 1976 took place only in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Only in the late 1980s did a shift towards peripheral destinations mark the end of a highly concentrated tourism strategy, which put substantial pressure on the infrastructure in the two metropolitan centers but did not contribute to the economic and social development of Israel's periphery (Mansfeld, 2001). In 1987 a new and updated national plan was introduced. Even so, no detailed planning of tourism in the Negev, the largely desert region in the south of the country, was offered.

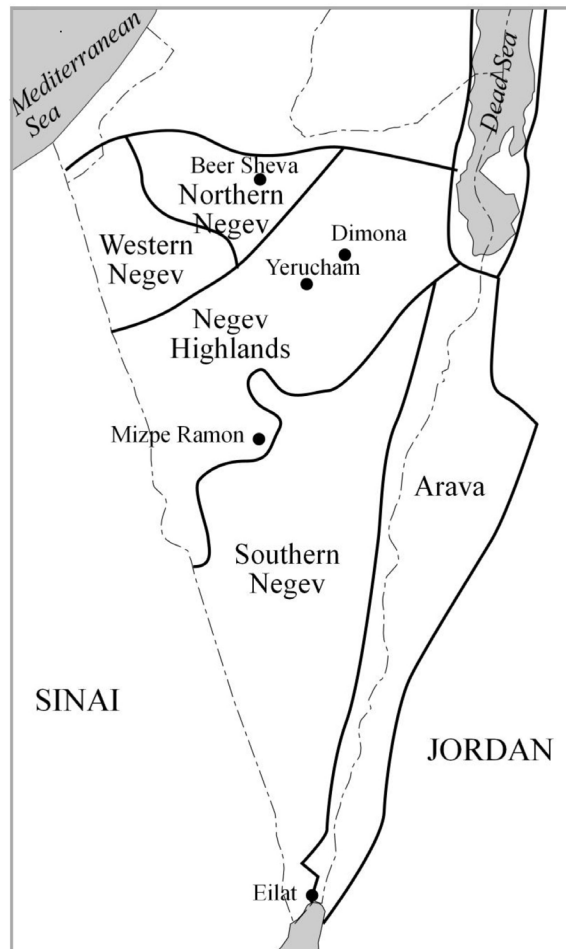
The leisure, recreation, and consumption habits of Israelis have changed in the past and will continue to change. The tendencies are a growth of the amount of leisure and recreation consumed per person and in the awareness of the attractiveness of nature and the rural environment. Dynamic leisure, which includes activity and mobility instead of convalescence and rest and a mix of activities, for example; shopping as a fun activity combined with other expressions of leisure.

Rural tourism is the most rapidly growing type of domestic tourism in Israel (Fleischer, Biran & Nitzav, 1994). Rural tourism is developing rapidly not only in the number of services and sites, but also in size and capacity, in the variety and diversity of activities offered, and in the organization and promotion of the industry. The rural sector in Israel started developing businesses in tourism in the 1980s, at the time of a crisis in agriculture (Fleischer, Banin & Kahana, 1991). Real income in agriculture was then declining, and many residents of rural settlements in Israel, who were engaged mainly in agriculture, began to look for alternative sources of income. One such alternative activity was tourism.

Rural tourism in Israel is based on natural amenities and the rural way of life. Little data exist that represent all aspects of the development of the rural tourism product in Israel, reflecting the difficulty in collecting data on all the components of the product. However, data are available on bed and breakfast operations, which are the leading component of rural tourism and to which other activities developed in response.

Other entrepreneurs responded accordingly and established restaurants and different types of tourism and recreation attractions. Workshops and seminars, health and leisure weekend packages such as naturalism, vegetarianism, and alternative medicines were organized. Many villages also opened and operated heritage sites, especially ones connected to their own settlement history, such as the reconstruction of the settlements. Shops, artists' studios and galleries, and festivals devoted to different subjects, such as the Classical Music Festival, the Nature Festival, or the Genesis Festival also became common (Fleischer et al., 1994; Fleischer et al., 1991). Farms of different animals, petting corners, riding trips of different types, water activities, and flora and fauna watching establishments multiplied. Most of the businesses that were established are very small, on average employing two or three people. Most of the sites are located in Galilee. The rest of rural tourism is widely dispersed all over the country. Most sites function for 80 to 120 days annually, usually in the summer and statutory holidays. On the other days of the year many facilities are closed and the capacity is very low. As a result, the yearly income is low, so it is usually a supplement to the main income. Most visitors are Israelis, families and single people. Only a very small part of the industry serves organized incoming tourists from abroad. The rapid development of small businesses in tourism is continuing. It has not leveled off, as many had expected (Fleischer & Engel, 1997).

Figure 2
A MAP OF THE NEGEV. ISRAEL (1:2.000.000)



The Negev desert (Figure 2) in Southern Israel is a remarkable, arid region. It is part of the great Sahara-Arabian desert belt extending from the Atlantic seaboard in the West of Africa, across the Sahara and the Arabian Desert, to Sinai and India in the East. The Western Negev has had an intriguing history of settlers, occupiers, and passers-through, including Nabateans, Romans, Byzantines, Ottomans, British, Bedouin, and Israelis. This rich socio-historical tapestry is linked to a landscape that is endowed with historic sites, sublime scenery, and robust and varied fauna and flora. The main attractions are the Bsr River and the national park of Eshkol with a scenic trail, archaeological sites, historical sites such as the old Gvulot outpost (the first Jewish settlement in the Negev), and nature and attractive views. The area is also a recognized bird-watching vantage point.

The main objectives of becoming involved in tourism, as stated by both local officials and activists, are to promote and develop the economy of the region and to solve the problem of employment, which is a dominant feature in the agriculture sector in Israel today.

Kibbutz Gvulot, situated in the Bsr region in the Western Negev, was established in 1943 as an agricultural outpost (the first of three lookouts in the Negev). The distance from Tel Aviv, the largest city in Israel, is about 120 kilometers (80 minutes' drive approximately). The population is now 300. Gvulot presently survives mainly through agriculture: field crops (potato, peanut, carrot, and wheat), dairy, chickens, and amaryllis flower bulbs. The kibbutz also operates a factory.

Tourism focuses on the historical site "Mitzpe ('Lookout' in Hebrew) Gvulot", situated next to the kibbutz. The site offers a trip back in time to the first Jewish settlement in the Negev in modern times. The Mitzpe was founded in 1943 as an agricultural research station to test the practicability of founding agricultural settlements in the Negev. The buildings are of mud and straw bricks, and have recently undergone a process of reconstruction and renovation to adapt the site as an activity center for visitors. The center offers the visitor the opportunity to experience the everyday life of the settlement, but it is not a museum.

The kibbutz provides the "Mitzpe Guest Rooms" for bed and breakfast accommodation. Additional services include a heated swimming pool for year-round use, a pub-disco, a children's playground, barbecue facilities, a shop, a small sports hall, sports equipment, tennis and basketball courts, a clubhouse, and music practice rooms.

DATA ACQUISITION AND ANALYTICAL PROCEDURES

The Western Negev and the site of Kibbutz Gvulot were evaluated through the application of SWOT analysis. The chosen research procedure is similar to rapid rural appraisal. This was defined by Beebe as "...a study used as the starting point for understanding a local situation; carried out by a multi-disciplinary team; lasting at least four days but not more than three weeks and based on information collected in advance, direct observation and interviews where it is assumed that all relevant questions cannot be identified in advance". (Beebe, 1985, p. 2)

The approach is meant to ensure the collection of data as quickly as possible, and by interactions with local people in their own surroundings. For the purpose of this evaluation the first author visited the Western Negev for five days every year between

2000 and 2006. Different types of methods were practiced during these visits: information was obtained through interviews with 20 tourist managers in a variety of management positions every year during the years of 2000-2006. Field visits were made to all of the tourist sites and facilities in the area. The visits usually took place in the company of local managers and formal and informal interviews were held with local managers, decision makers and local population. Tourism brochures and publications on the Western Negev were collected and analyzed and visits were paid in the company of local people to local villages: kibbutzim such as Nir Yitshak, Zeelim, Orim, and Gvulot, and to villages (*moshavim*) such as Patish, Sde Nissan, and Ein Habsor. The weaknesses and limitations of these methods will be discussed in the discussion section.

Findings

The findings pertain to the status and potential of ecotourism at national, regional, and local levels. Each finding is discussed using SWOT analysis as described in the framework described earlier.

THE NATIONAL LEVEL

Strengths: Israel has good resources for tourism, more especially ecotourism, because of the diverse environment. Infrastructure and planning are in place. There is a national tourism development plan. Mass accommodation and basic infrastructure that could suit different tourist activities are present. Accessibility and transportation are good. Israel can be reached by air from many places worldwide. Tourism is well developed and attention has been paid to what tourists will actually do when staying in an area. There is a strong wish to develop more tourism, largely for economic reasons. Many ethnic groups live in Israel. (The ecotourism working group, pointed out in 1995 that the availability of indigenous culture is one of the five major criteria for assessing ecotourism potential).

Weaknesses: The political situation in Israel is uncertain. The image of a distant, peripheral, and unsafe state is evidently held by many potential visitors. Israel is peripherally located according to the main markets of North America and Europe. Careful planning and management of ecotourism in Israel as a whole are lacking.

Opportunities: Ecotourism is its infancy in Israel and in the region and globally, ecotourism is a growth sector. Israel possesses all the raw materials needed to develop it and ecotourism with a strong emphasis on the spirituality of the Holy Land could be a unique product in the world tourism market.

Threats: The political situation is a major unpredictable factor affecting the tourism system in the Mediterranean region. The growth of ecotourism in other countries which are closer to tourist sources and larger than Israel, and have more to offer in the way of wilderness travel, is also a threat.

THE REGIONAL LEVEL

Strengths: The area has good resources for ecotourism because of the natural and virgin environment. It has a unique desert and rural landscape, a unique agricultural system, and open spaces. The crisis in agriculture is bringing together stakeholders from all sectors and there is a strong desire to try new ventures. It is also a new tourism destination. The whole region of the Western Negev is a relatively new destination and therefore could be a novel attraction to ecotourists.

There is strong community organization in the region, unity of purpose, a strong sense of place, and good ecological knowledge. The local people cooperate, new approaches are being taken, and there is willingness to learn new ways. Many historical and archeological sites are to be found in the area (e.g., Tel Sharuchan). The Northwestern Negev lies on the main path of a major global route for birds migrating between Africa and Europe or Asia.

Weaknesses: The Northwestern Negev is a peripheral location in Israel and in the Negev region itself. There is barely any accommodation in the area, presently only in four kibbutzim and a few private houses in the *moshavim* (villages). All the current accommodation is similar in character and serves the same markets. For example, all the bed and breakfast rooms in the kibbutzim target the same market segment of families or people who are domiciled at the army bases in the area. All the sites are competitive instead of complementary. There are few dining facilities in the area. Although there are several types of population centers (towns, villages, and kibbutzim), no obvious or distinct ethnic groups are to be found in the region. There are no cultural attractions. Tourism is not well developed and insufficient attention has been given to what tourists will actually do while staying in the region. The focus has been on accommodation, while the total tourism experience has been neglected. Ecotourism in the Western Negev is not carefully planned or managed, and no regional tourism development plan or definition of priorities exists for the area. No direct highway runs to the Western Negev. Though it is close to the major cities in Israel, the area is less accessible than are many of its competitors. The region may be perceived as unsafe because of its location near the Gaza strip. It has a negative image of being a dull place. A strong and attractive image through which the region can promote itself is lacking.

Opportunities: The Western Negev has all the raw materials necessary to develop these aspects of agri-tourism and rural tourism because it specializes in desert agriculture. As both ecotourism and agritourism are both relatively new products, Israel and the area could be pioneers. Its very isolation could well constitute the area's allure.

Threats: Expansion of ecotourism in the Galilee region results in more and more competition between the different localities. The political situation is a major unpredictable factor affecting the tourism system, and in particular, creates a threatening image because of its location near the Palestinian Authority territory.

THE LOCAL LEVEL: KIBBUTZ GVULOT

Strengths: The kibbutz has good resources for tourism, especially ecotourism, because of the natural and virgin environment. It has a special blend of desert and rural landscape. The kibbutz community is strong, well organized, and united, with a good sense of place and ecological knowledge. Motivation is high, and people want to try new ventures. Fresh new approaches are being adopted in the kibbutz itself. The kibbutz has rooms for accommodation and basic infrastructure facilities that could be made suitable for various tourist activities. The kibbutz is peripherally located and thus could be suitable for tourists in search of quiet and solitude. The kibbutz itself carefully plans and manages tourism, even though the term and definitions of ecotourism are not in use. Several visitors have stated that they like to visit the kibbutz because of its isolated location. They want to escape the crowd and enjoy the desert calm and the isolation. The kibbutz provides a relatively new type of destination and therefore could be an attraction for ecotourists.

Weaknesses: The kibbutz is peripherally located even in the peripherally located region of the Negev desert. Accessibility and transportation are problematic, even in the broader area of the Western Negev. The kibbutz may be perceived as unsafe because of its location near the Gaza Strip. It is also perceived as being remote and located in an unattractive region. A powerful and attractive image by which the kibbutz could promote itself is absent.

Opportunities: Gvulot thrives mainly on agriculture: field crops (potato, peanut, carrot, and wheat), dairy, poultry, and amaryllis flower bulbs. Globally, agritourism is a growth sector (Wall, 2002) and the kibbutz has all the raw materials with which to develop this aspect of rural tourism. The remoteness and the isolation of the kibbutz could make it attractive to extreme ecotourists. Kibbutz Gvulot could be one of the leading sites in desert ecotourism, which is in its infancy as a new product.

Threats: There is some expansion and growth of ecotourism in other regions in Israel (e.g. Galilee) and also the sites in the area itself are competitive rather than complementary. The political situation affects every settlement in the area even though the kibbutz is not as close to the border as other villages.

Discussion

Two aspects will be discussed in this part according to the research aims. The first one is the utility of SWOT analysis as a useful tool. The second one is the illustration of its application through an assessment of the current status of tourism in the Western Negev in order to produce specific recommendations for the area. By discussing these two aspects, the paper contributes to the growing body of literature on aspects of tourism and ecotourism, and how they can be evaluated.

It was pointed out earlier by Lawhead et al. (1992) that strengths and weaknesses are internal to the entity under evaluation and on the other hand, opportunities and threats refer to the broad context or environment in which the entity operates. As such, the former are more likely to be under the control of the entity than the latter, although the latter are no less important than the former in influencing the well-being of the enterprise. For example, in the case study of Israel, a crucial external factor is the unstable political situation. The ensuing discussion comments upon the Western Negev according to internal and external factors.

The strength of the Western Negev is based on the combination of its natural and human-made resources. The area provides an opportunity to escape from the noise, crowding, pollution, and environmental deterioration and everyday life in the big cities. The region is at an early stage of development from a tourism perspective and there is an opportunity to use and protect the natural environment in a sustainable manner for the benefit of future generations. Rural tourism specializing in desert ecotourism and agritourism seems to have development potential. However, accommodation and basic infrastructure that could suit different tourist activities exist in only a few villages. For example, at Kibbutz Gvulot tourism has been developed, and attention is paid to what the tourists will actually do when staying there. The focus is on the total tourism experience, not merely the accommodation. Thus, the overall weakness of the region, which has little accommodation, could be considered as strength for the few specific sites. But there are many obstacles to developing the full potential of tourism in the Western Negev. First, there is little to attract visitors: no natural, cultural, or ethnic focal attractions. Historic routes exist but are problematic to develop for tourism. The most significant weakness is the political situation in Israel in general and in the Western Negev in particular.

Agritourism and desert ecotourism were found to be potentially the most important opportunities for development in the area. They follow the global trend toward increased travel to natural areas and growing global awareness of environmental quality. Factors that could facilitate development in the area are enhanced support from government and effective private sector involvement. However, it is important to establish an appropriate strategic planning process for future development. This could focus on sustainable utilization of the region's natural resources, provision of economic opportunities for local residents, and empowerment of local communities to plan and implement appropriate programs and activities.

The main market for the Western Negev currently is domestic tourism, in keeping with the growth of rural tourism in Israel in the past few years and the problematic political situation in the Mediterranean region. In the future, desert ecotourism, which currently is not a draw for tourists, may be fostered as an international niche market. However, ecotourism in the Western Negev can be threatened by an unstable political situation, when precisely political stability is a key requirement for the establishment and maintenance of a sustainable tourism sector. Other difficulties include a lack of government support. Even though much of the population is keen to develop supplementary sources of income, the political situation and the lack of attractions, both natural (except for bird watching) and cultural, are the main barriers.

The reason for doing a three-dimension analysis is to make it more systematic and accurate and to show that scale is of great importance in SWOT as the weakness of a region could be the strength of a site. For example, if tourism is not well developed and insufficient attention has been paid to what tourists will actually do when staying in the area; this would be considered as a weakness for the region. But it might be strength and advantageous for the one specific site that has been developed there. Furthermore, the same phenomenon may occur in more than one category because its implications may be simultaneously positive and negative. For example, a remote location may be a disadvantage because of difficulty of access, but that very remoteness may be a positive attribute for those wishing to get off the beaten track and experience a pristine environment.

In sum, findings for the national, regional, and the local levels suggest that both internal and external factors shape the present status of tourism in the Western Negev. Some factors are only found at the regional level, others only at the local level. For example, the political situation in Israel has had a negative influence on the number of international tourists visiting Israel since 2000, but has exerted a more limited influence on domestic tourism so that the overall number of visitors has remained constant.

The Western Negev benefits little from the 'tourism strength' that Israel possesses in general; although Israel has good resources for cultural and religious tourism, the Western Negev does not enjoy these advantages. On the other hand, there is some specific strength in the region that is not reflected in the country as a whole. For example, the rural landscape and desert may provide the resource base for rural tourism and ecotourism based in the kibbutzim and villages. Desert ecotourism and agritourism are both undeveloped in Israel but are growth areas globally. Desert ecotourism could be the equivalent of polar ecotourism, which is attracting more and more attention with special ice hotels, dog sledding and dog sled races in Nunavut, and voyages to Greenland and Antarctica. By the same rule, desert ecotourism could include bird watching, viewing desert agriculture and eating its products, and wilderness treks.

Because of the current (2006) political situation in Israel, it is recommended that only domestic tourism will be developed in the Western Negev. In an era of peace, the market for desert ecotourism would be larger, consisting of those whom Plog calls 'seekers' or 'allocentrics' (Plog, 1991), who are looking for novel activities in distinctive environments, like the ones mentioned above.

The limitations of the study were found to be equivalent to the limitations of other qualitative methods which include a family of attitudes, assumptions, and concepts and there is no established methodology capable of generalized application for interpretive analysis. One limitation was that the researchers were the only adjudicators of the case study and therefore, the research was affected by their culture, gender, status, nationality, and worldview. Another limitation was the several interpretations that were available for each category of analysis at the SWOT investigation, and the fact that different readers could offer different interpretations. One solution could be that a SWOT analysis would be carried by different decision makers and not by a single person. These limitations of subjectivity, lack of a strict methodology, existence of several interpretations by different researchers or even by the same one were found to be the main limitations of this research, but could also be described as its advantages, according to the qualitative researchers.

Conclusions

The status and potential of tourism, particularly rural tourism and ecotourism, in the Western Negev, Israel, for which there are barely any statistics, information, or data, were assessed using a modified SWOT analysis. The SWOT analysis facilitated the integration of existing data with primary data obtained in the field and made it possible to identify future development directions. It was demonstrated that SWOT analysis is an effective way of identifying the strengths and weaknesses, and of examining the opportunities and threats, pertaining to tourism developments.

Furthermore, the utility of SWOT analysis can be enhanced by means of assessments made on different scales, and by the systematic identification of factors to be considered in the analysis. A simple diagram of the components of an enhanced SWOT analysis framework was developed, presented and used. It is suggested that this framework has wide applicability. The analysis is undertaken on the three levels just noted because it is important to evaluate a specific site as part of the region as a whole, and in the context of the larger system in which it is embedded. The tourism industry is only in its infancy in the Western Negev, and thus this analysis can assist local decision makers by estimating the potential benefits and threats to their development. It is hoped that both academics and practitioners would use the recommendations offered in the article for future research and for future development of the area.

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