

Practice Article

Exploring the future of tourism and quality of life

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism and quality of life

Few studies to date have examined the impact of tourism on quality of life (QoL) as conventional research has tended to focus, instead, on resident attitudes towards tourism and tourism's impacts in particular (Smith, 1977; 1989). Even less research has addressed whether tourism can drive or facilitate sustainable development (Miller and Twining-Ward, 2005) or whether tourism can contribute to the subjective well-being of those involved in travel and tourism. Impact studies generally ask residents to agree or disagree with statements regarding perceived impacts from tourism on their community. By contrast, QoL research aims to understand how these impacts are internalised and influence an individual's overall life satisfaction (Andereck *et al*, 2007). With terms used interchangeably QoL, happiness and well-being refer to one's satisfaction with life, and feelings of contentment or fulfilment with one's experiences in the world (*ibid.*). Whether tourism as phenomena and practice may support the growing body of evidence that demonstrates a positive relationship between existential factors such as life purpose/meaning, personal growth and well-being (Vella-Brodrick, 2007) was the topic of intense debate during the 2008 Business Enterprises for Sustainable Travel Education Network (BEST EN) Think Tank VIII.

BEST EN is an international consortium of educators committed to furthering the development and dissemination of knowledge in the field of sustainable tourism. The main objectives of BEST EN think tanks are to generate information that can be used to identify research agendas for areas related to sustainable tourism, develop industry case studies and to assist in the development of educational materials for tourism courses. BEST EN think tanks are annual 3-day events that are typically held in the summer at a university where sustainable tourism is taught and researched. Addressing a particular theme each year, the 2008 think tank was entitled *Sustaining Quality*

of Life through Tourism that set out to identify knowledge gaps, provide vision and cutting-edge insight to the topic of sustainable tourism and QoL. 'Cutting edge' does not imply *avant garde* – or where someone has to bleed as propounded by Zalman Stern – but reflects a structured, collaborative thinking process by think tank participants, which will be further elaborated below. This paper will first report on the methodology and overall process and then present the range of topics raised through the workshops conducted at the BEST EN Think Tank VIII, which hopefully will inspire new ways of thinking, knowing and doing.

Futures wheels and backcasting

Research can be driven by many motives, but arguably a common goal of most researchers is to develop an understanding of some phenomenon or system in order to predict or influence some future state of that system. It follows then that a balanced research approach looks both backwards in order to critically analyse the past and forwards in order to think about how that knowledge can be used to influence the future (Mermet, 2008). However, in tourism research the bulk of the published material looks primarily to the past with little attention paid to the generation and analysis of future scenarios (Benckendorff, 2007). This may be due, in part, to a widespread misconception that futures research is solely about predicting the exact nature of the future (Moscardo *et al*, 2000). Not surprisingly, there is considerable scepticism about the reliability and validity of efforts to achieve this kind of goal (Slaughter, 1996). Instead, overall futures research is much more concerned with thinking about the future in order to understand the present and to inform current planning and decision-making (List, 2004).

The process of generating and exploring possible futures can assist researchers to identify key current trends and important relationships (List, 2004) and the process of generating and exploring desirable futures allows us to consider the potential consequences of current decisions

(Benckendorff, 2007). Futures research has been described as having a particular value in encouraging people to develop their systems thinking abilities (Kohtala, 2008) and to improve understanding of networks (List, 2004). According to Benckendorff (2007) these features make futures methods particularly appropriate to research into sustainability.

In the area of futures research there are many different analytical techniques that can be used, but one that is generating increasing interest is that of the Futures Wheel (List, 2004; Kohtala, 2008). The Futures Wheel is a structured mind-mapping technique developed by Glenn in 1971 (Glenn, 2003). Its most common use is as a graphical tool to explore the impacts or consequences of trends, events or decisions (Deal, 2002). The wheel organises these impacts or consequences as a series of concentric rings or circles centred on the specific trend, event or decision being explored (Glenn, 2003). In the first or innermost ring are the most immediate or primary consequences. Leading on from each of these are secondary consequences arranged in a second ring, with a third ring of tertiary consequences (Glenn, 2003).

The three key strengths of the Futures Wheel technique are:

- the production of a visual or graphic representation that allows for both the sequencing of events/actions across time and the display of complex relationships,
- its flexibility and ease of use, and
- the encouragement of systems thinking among the participants in the exercise (List, 2004; Benckendorff, 2007).

The key challenge in using the Futures Wheel is the need for discipline on the part of the

facilitator to ensure that the primary, secondary and tertiary levels are clearly maintained and that the suggestions provided by participants are linked directly to the items already identified in the wheel. Without such discipline the wheel can become too complex to be useful (Benckendorff, 2007).

According to List (2004) the combination of the Futures Wheel technique and another futures tool, Backcasting, is particularly useful for the development of complex scenario networks. Backcasting can be defined as a technique that takes a desirable future and then analyses how that future can be achieved (Andersen, 2001). That is, the objective is for the image of the future to empower and guide actions in the present. The technique assumes that once a group has identified a 'strategic objective in a particular future, it would be possible to work backwards to determine what policy measures should be implemented' in the present in order to reach the objective (Quist and Vergragt, 2006, p. 1029).

List (2004) argues that it is the scenario networks, developed from combining a Futures Wheel with Backcasting, that are most useful for the analysis and planning of real world systems. This combination of the two techniques involves a process of conducting a Futures Wheel in reverse (List, 2004). The central hub of the wheel is the desired or ideal end state or future, and the first ring of the wheel contains the actions that must happen immediately before in order to reach that desired end state. The second ring of the Futures Wheel then becomes that action of conditions that must precede those identified in the first ring and so on, working outwards to the conditions that must exist, or the actions that must be taken in the present. The combination of the Futures Wheel and Backcasting techniques not only allows for such information to be generated but also provides an opportunity to explore policy and management actions and to develop more detailed systems models relevant to understanding the relationships between tourism and sustainability.

Table 1: Quality of life dimensions

Standard of living	Achieving in life
Health	Relationships
Safety	Future security
Community connectedness	Spirituality

Table 2: Full list of desirable futures for tourism and QoL

Desirable futures

1. *Taking more proactive action to improve returns across a range of areas for host communities*
 - To be a role model for other industries in promoting social and environmental change (13)
 - Development in communities to be the result of consensus between developers and the community (7)
 - Industry to be recognised as a provider of social capital (5)
 - All stakeholders to behave in a responsible manner (4)
 - Demonstrate its ability to provide cross-cultural understanding (3)
 - More tourists and tourists to be less noticeable (1)
 - To contribute to a reduction in conflict (1)
 - To improve indigenous community's well-being and preservation of culture (7)
 - To be environmentally friendly, support local economies and financially affordable (9)
 - All destinations to have community tourism and land-use plan developed through a whole stakeholder approach (7)
 - Majority of tourism-based resources to be sourced locally (10)
 - Vertically integrated tourism will be required to contribute 30 per cent of income to local economies
 - Preserve destinations' uniqueness and originality (5)
 - To contribute genuinely to social change positively as described by local people (6)

2. *Enhancing working conditions for tourism staff*
 - To be number one career choice for people in developed and developing countries (14)
 - To see the end of expat employees in developing countries
 - Lead the way in family-friendly practices and become the preferred employer (5)
 - Workers will earn a minimum monthly income equal to four times the average rent of a two-bed apartment
 - Workers will work 40 hours per week
 - All tourism organisations to have Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and employee volunteer programme (3)

3. *Improving environmental performance*
 - Reduce its environmental footprint by 50 per cent (2)
 - Offer climate/carbon neutral products
 - Provide education and support for tourism enterprises to provide environmentally friendly places (1)
 - Tourism to be placed equally alongside other resource intensive industries (3)
 - All tourism to be green tourism (1)
 - Have international agreements on climate change mitigation (2)
 - To be carbon neutral (3)

4. *Improving education or management practice*
 - Rigorous tourism education for ministers of tourism (2)
 - To be more inclusive for all groups of potential tourists (3)
 - Incoming tourists to be provided with booklets of responsible tourism (3)
 - To be a core subject at high school and international trip compulsorily
 - Recognition of tourism's concerns cannot be addressed independently of a whole industry approach (1)
 - 80 per cent of all tourism employees to have a tourism degree
 - To embrace best practice technology to inform tourism decisions
 - Develop national strategic tourism plans (2)
 - Tourism managers, workers, educators and students to undertake short happiness courses based on solid scientific literature and to apply their learning to personal and professional lives (3)

**Table 2:** Continued*Desirable futures*5. *Miscellaneous*

- End of racism within tourism
- End of child-sex tourism (1)
- End to visa restrictions
- Educate tourists to be friendly to workers (2)
- Make hospitality about humanity
- To define what is quality within tourism

The think tank process

As with previous think tanks a framing paper was presented to form the basis for discussion in the ensuing workshops and Futures Wheel with Backcasting. Professor Robert Cummins, Head of the Australian Centre for Quality of Life presented his paper 'The Influence of Tourism on the Subjective Wellbeing of Host Communities' and identified eight QoL dimensions listed in Table 1.

Next, a series of workshops were conducted with 43 educators, researchers and practitioners attending the conference. These delegates came from Australia, Austria, Canada, China, Denmark, France, Ireland, Slovenia, Turkey, the United Kingdom and the United States and included individuals with both a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds (including geography, psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics and management) and a wider range of tourism experiences and interests. The workshops were broken into two main stages – the generation of potential desirable futures for tourism and its contribution to QoL and the use of the combined Futures Wheel and Backcasting techniques to identify pathways to achieving these futures.

Stage 1: Generating ideal futures

The first stage consisted of three activities – an introduction, a creativity exercise and an unstructured brainstorming session. The introduction involved a short presentation of futures research, the techniques of Futures Wheels and Backcasting and the aims of the exercise overall to all participants of Think Tank VIII. This was followed by a creativity exercise aimed at encouraging

participants to practice some more flexible thinking about tourism to help prepare them for the following sessions. The exercise was adapted from Miller's (2007) Make it Fail exercise. This activity required participants to suggest ways to make sure that tourism failed in the future at both the international and domestic level. The exercise generated a number of suggestions including ideas linked to poor business practice, including human resource management, issues related to safety and actions designed to increase the negative impacts of tourism. These responses were particularly useful in encouraging participants to begin thinking more broadly about the range of potential interactions between tourism and the QoL of various stakeholders.

The creativity exercise established a good starting point for the brainstorming session to develop ideal futures for tourism as a contributor to QoL. The brainstorming session was conducted according to the guidelines outlined by Marin *et al* (2007) and focused on identifying ways in which tourism could contribute to improving any aspects of QoL. The time frame set for the ideal futures was 15–20 years. This is consistent with suggestions from several researchers in this area (Tompkins *et al*, 2000; Westhoek *et al*, 2005; Hojer *et al*, 2008).

The brainstorming session identified a number of ideal futures and these are listed in Table 2 under five main themes.

As the number of think tank delegates allowed for two simultaneous Futures Wheel exercises to be conducted, the final action in this first stage involved selecting two desirable futures from all those generated by the

Table 3: Futures Wheels first-round outcomes and selected focus topics

Workshop 1: In 15–20 years tourism will be a role model for other industries in promoting positive social and environmental change

<i>Futures Wheel first-round outcomes</i>	<i>Selected topics for more detailed focus</i>
Tourism development fits with global trends	Build connections between tourism, health and well-being
Greater stakeholder responsibility ^a	Enhancing economic viability of tourism development
Empowered destination communities and greater community ownership of tourism	Improving tourism's contribution to public infrastructure
Tourism respects indigenous cultures	More effective integrated resource management for tourism
Fair economic returns from tourism for stakeholders	
Strong connections between tourism and health	
Effective use of Environmental and Social Impact Assessment in tourism management	
Tourism uses best practice for safety issues	
Sound legislation governing tourism	
Integrated resource management for tourism	
Continuing positive contributions from tourism to destination conservation	
Tourism is a leader in climate change mitigation	
Communities play a stronger role in the tourism supply chain	
Improved economic viability for tourism	
Tourism makes a positive contribution to reducing social inequality	
Changed paradigms for tourism planning and management	
Improved tourism knowledge management and tourism contributes to better intercultural exchange	
Tourism places a greater value on human resources	
Tourism makes a positive contribution to public infrastructure	
Industry wide support for the proposed ideal future	
Develop tourism champions/leaders	
<i>Workshop 2: In 15–20 years tourism will be the number one career choice in developed and developing countries</i>	
Entrepreneurial opportunities ^a	Good working conditions
Recognised career paths	High job satisfaction
Leader in technology	Social responsible employers
High status	
Relatively well paid	
Socially responsible employers	
High growth potential	
High job satisfaction	
Good working conditions	
Accessible tourism	
International potential	
Job security	
Profitable sector ^a	
Professional development ^a	

^aThese actions were developed further before the workshop participants decided to refocus on the topics.

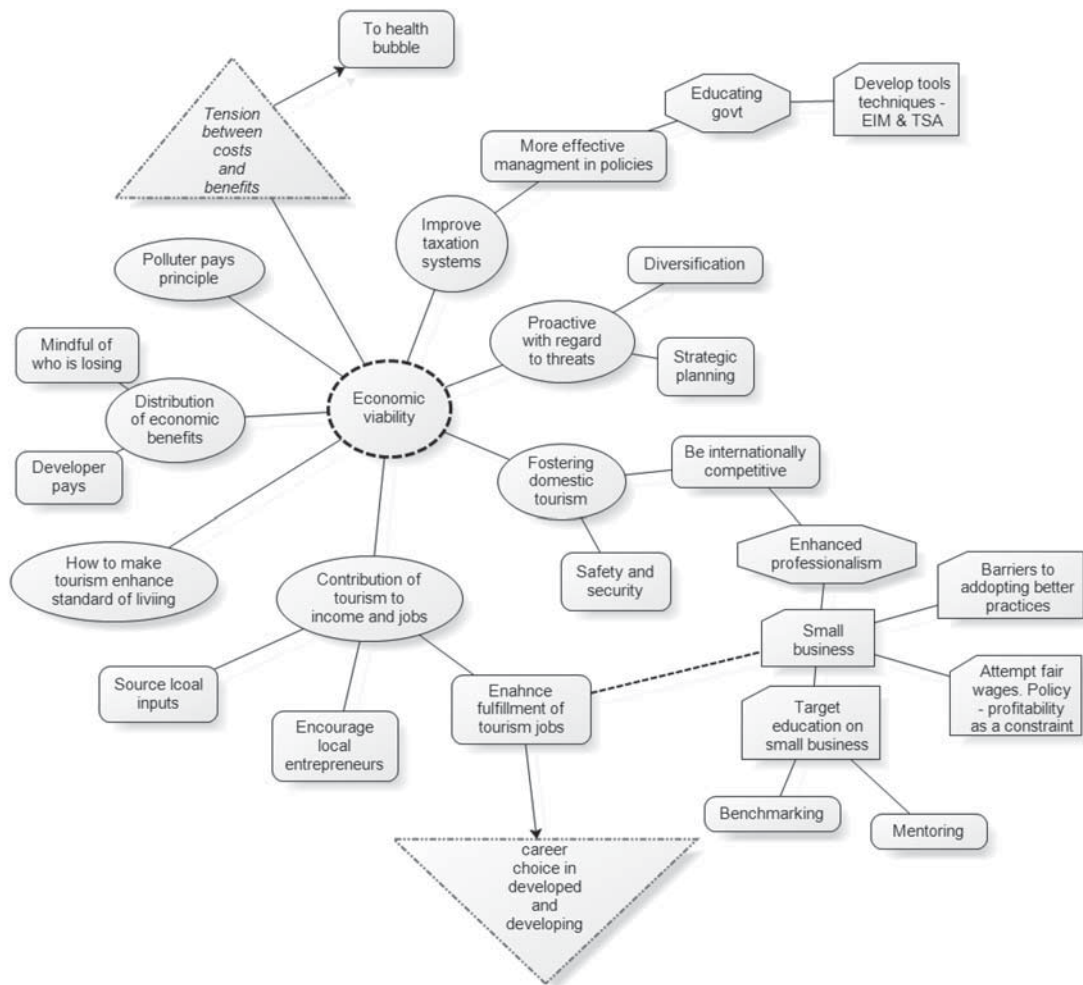


Figure 5: Economic viability of tourism development.

discussion of tourism management practices. Further, at the mid-workshop break a number of participants suggested that the actions being proposed were not new and so the exercise was in some places reinventing what was already known. These concerns resulted in a break in the Futures Wheel activity to discuss how it could be refocused. It was decided to re-examine the actions placed in the first rings of both Futures Wheels and select a smaller group of these to use in more focussed Futures Wheels. Each group independently chose to filter the first round actions according to three criteria: relevance to the QoL dimensions identified in the framing session (see Table 1 for a

list of these); areas where little work had been conducted in tourism; and/or areas where the group perceived the presence of greater barriers to change. Using these criteria each group identified a smaller set of actions (see Table 3) that were then used as hubs for more focussed Futures Wheel exercises.

Conclusions

Over a 3-day period the Futures Wheel approach generates substantial information. The aim of this paper has been to demonstrate the range of topics generated by a think tank on QoL as it applies to tourism.

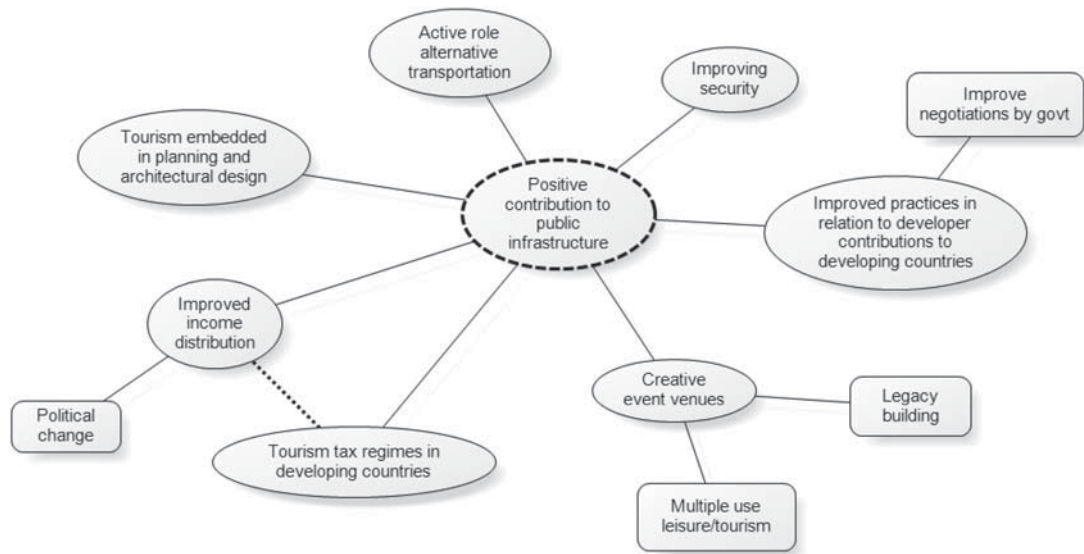


Figure 6: Tourism’s contribution to public infrastructure.

Table 4: Research topics identified in the workshops

<i>Specific actions identified</i>	<i>Recurring/densely connected topics</i>	<i>New concepts</i>
Identify perceptions of tourism by other sectors	Role of grassroots organisations in tourism	Intelligent tourism
Research into tourism asset management	Enhancing stakeholder responsibility in tourism	Links between tourism and health
Stronger social impact assessment methodology	Ensure/enhance economic viability/profitability of tourism	Slow tourism
Research to better understand what comprises cultural heritage	Encourage socially responsible entrepreneurs	
More cross-disciplinary research in tourism		
Develop tools to better measure economic impacts		
Research into technology		
Improve and expand use of scenarios in planning		

Figure 1 shows the state of the Futures Wheel in Workshop 1 at the point just before a break was taken and the activity refocussed on a smaller set of actions. Figure 2 shows the Futures Wheels completed for Workshop 2. Figures 3–6 show the Futures Wheels for the refocussed smaller set of actions arising from Workshop 1. In their entirety, Figures 1–6

present all the actions identified from the Futures Wheel/Backcasting exercises.

Both the first-round actions and the more focussed actions identified in each workshop are listed in Table 3. It is important to note that the actions listed in the second column of Table 3 are those that participants saw as being closely related to the challenge of tourism,

improving QoL and as either not being currently addressed and/or facing major barriers to change.

Overall, three major themes could be identified as running through both workshops discussions:

- the need for tourism to be better integrated with other social and economic activities,
- a perception that tourism was not as proactive as some other sectors in terms of embracing concepts related to corporate social responsibility, and
- a strong emphasis on identifying and working better with key stakeholders.

Integration, coordination and cooperation with other sectors and economic and social activities were frequently mentioned actions at a number of levels, especially in Workshop 1. It appeared that many participants saw tourism as operating too much in isolation from other areas, resulting in lost opportunities for communities and ineffective coordination and management of resource use. In particular, the lack of research on tourism's potential impacts on health, well-being and the social aspects of sustainability. This isolation was also related to perceptions that tourism had lagged behind other sectors and activities in terms of acting in a proactive fashion and adopting a wider range of practices focussed on sustainable development. Tourism's role as a responsible employer and user of public resources was also called into question.

The aim of the think tank exercise was to generate research issues and topics, and this is shown in Table 4. The first column of Table 4 lists actions identified that directly refer to research needs. The second column of Table 4 was developed by analysing the Futures Wheels to identify areas that could be used to indirectly suggest research needs. This was done by listing areas that were mentioned in multiple places in the workshops and/or that had multiple links to other actions and areas that were specifically noted as new concepts for tourism management (third column of Table 4).

Achieving the right outcomes to realise QoL through tourism will require an engaged tourism sector that is proactive in lobbying respective governments for desired outcomes. To be successful in this approach will require evidence from solid research. We hope the research topics identified above will encourage researchers to explore tourism's potential contribution to QoL and provide the kind of evidence necessary to change policy and practice.

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