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Ferreira, Bruno S., "From Farm-to-Fork to Fork-to-Farmer: advancing Permatourism in North Carolina" (2018). *Travel and Tourism Research Association: Advancing Tourism Research Globally*. 7.
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From Farm-to-Fork to Fork-to-Farmer: advancing Permatourism in North Carolina

Introduction

North Carolina was not immune to a wave of deindustrialization that swept America towards the end of the 20th century. Out of a sudden, people who had relied on job stability and upward mobility prospects in vertically integrated public corporations found themselves either unemployed or underemployed (Davis, 2013). Conventional wisdom suggests that globalization and automation are the main culprits in the loss of manufacturing jobs (Anderson, Schulman, & Wood, 2014). Others have blamed the shareholder value movement and its lean and mean philosophy (Goldstein, 2012), and the financialization of the country that diverted capital away from manufacturing (Fligstein & Habinek, 2014). Regardless of who the real culprits were, almost 5,000 North Carolinians lost their jobs following the closure of Pillowtex Mills in Kannapolis in July 2003, about one-sixth of the city's entire population, which "knocked [it] to its knees" (Minchin, 2009). Not long ago, the state ranked the eighth largest in the nation in manufacturing, with over 22% of all jobs being factory jobs. The loss of this jobs as well as of employer-provided health care affect workers and their families enormously had a devastating impact in communities all over the state.

At the same time North Carolina was being plagued by widespread job loss in manufacturing, another economic calamity was about to befall, this time affecting the state's flagship crop. Accordingly, the same neo-liberal agenda that transformed manufacturing, also permitted tobacco companies to invest in leaf production in the developing world, who sought to maximize profits by purchasing cheaper foreign leaf (Benson, 2008). For some decades government subsidies artificially kept domestic tobacco farming viable, but when the same government decided to put an end to protectionist measures on domestic leaf, U.S. leaf output was cut by over 50 percent from 1998 to 2004, creating financial hardships for farmers and dropping the number of tobacco farms about 40 percent. The result was that many farmers were forced to sell their farms for development, while a few have managed to switch to alternative crops.

Theoretical background

Top-down vs. Bottom up tourism development

The erosion of opportunities afforded by hard-core economic engines like manufacturing and agriculture in NC has lead county officials to ponder tourism, which often becomes an imperative rather than a possibility, when lacking an alternative economic development plan (Rich, 2007). Communities struggling to emerge from the collapse of agriculture or manufacturing struggle to *tertiarize* their economy around the provision of leisure services to visitors. As a result, tourism development usually follows top-down approaches that include very limited local participation (Wang & Wall, 2007). Often, private organizations external to the community and with control over tourism distribution systems often "drop-in" with investment capital, access to markets, and with a vision on how they are going to profit from those communities' tourism appeal (Davis & Morais, 2004). In these contexts, local people are

frequently relegated to the “sidelines of the tourism economy, informally or even illegally gleaned bits of income not worthwhile to the formal industry” (Morais, Ferreira, Nazariadli, & Ghahramani, 2017, p.74).

Conversely, grassroots tourism development models have been shown to engender consciousness-raising, entrepreneurial networking, and self-efficacy (McGehee, Kline, & Knollenberg, 2014), as well as the creation of locally owned and operated tourism microenterprises (Morais, Ferreira, & Wallace, 2017). However, Tosun (2000) cautions that actual local participation is largely constrained by socio-political, legal, administrative and economic structures. In addition, (Harrison, 1996) argues that communities are heterogeneous, which makes it difficult to unify local wishes and expectations to offer a practical guide to tourism development.

Permatourism

Brothers, Morais, & Wallace (2017) propose a hybrid approach to tourism development, Permatourism, defined as a tourism planning and management process that pursues the complementarity between formal private and public actors and local microentrepreneurs and grassroots community social structures. Permatourism expects the formal tourism sector to embrace the socio-cultural characteristics of the host community to make the local tourism experience more unique and competitive while at the same time ensuring that local residents are better equipped to become involved tourism. Additionally, Permatourism, requires the creation of a grassroots business development strategy that aligns local entrepreneurs with expected business opportunities generated by existing or upcoming big tourism investments in the region or large scope social movements and trends with high impact at the macroeconomic level.

Purpose

The purpose of this research project is to identify and critique major bottom up manifestations of tourism in the literature, that have somewhat emerged as alternatives to top-down tourism development, such as community-based ecotourism (Garrod, 2003), eco-tourism (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1998), People-First tourism (Morais, Ferreira, Wang, & Hoogendoorn, 2016), agritourism (Barbieri & Mshenga, 2008), or pro-poor tourism (Ashley, Boyd, & Goodwin, 2000), exploring arguments for only modest commercial success, limited synergies with the broad tourism industry, and even ethical concerns. Then, I will propose Permatourism as a solution to tourism development, that supports grassroots initiatives but does not overlook outstanding opportunities afforded by corporate-driven development. It focuses on long-term nurturing of the destination socio-economic fabric for a permanent high-quality tourism product, by way of consolidation before the carrying capacity threshold is reached and control is lost to outside investors and companies with strong links to tourism retail.

Permatourism is results-driven, as any legitimate and intellectually honest program should be. It can rely on expenditure assessed through hard-data from credit card usage, self-reported occupancy rates, number of tickets sold at the region’s most popular attractions, or visitor’s overall satisfaction assessed through intercept interviews. But, it gives equal importance to the empowerment of residents as effective stakeholders in the regional tourism development process (Boley, McGehee, Perdue, & Long, 2014), the self-efficacy of local entrepreneurs

(Ferreira, Morais, Pollack, & Bunds, 2017), or the extent to which they feel accurately portrayed in the destination brand (Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005). It can make use of cross sectional online survey data, and focus groups with key stakeholders, but it puts effort in longitudinal and participatory methods to ensure that all voices in the community are heard (Aitchison, 2001) and that changes in locals' attitudes are perceived in due time.

Method

I intend to explore the Permatourism model in the context of a tourism and community development initiative in North Carolina that follows some of the guidelines and recommendations of Permatourism. Namely, Fork to Farmer leverages the worldwide popularity of the Farm to Table movement and the high visibility of its many celebrated chefs (Weiss, 2012) to enhance the viability of small farms through new direct to consumer income from product sales and farm visit sales (Morais, Lelekacs, Jakes, & Bowen, 2017). Whereas under the Farm to Table paradigm farmers are often relegated to a secondary and often invisible position, with chefs receiving most accolades and media attention, in the Fork to Farmer project, farmers are de-anonymized and brought in to the front stage, as providers of legitimate, genuine and intimate experiences within the context of the broader touristic offer at the destination.

Cognizant that data is necessary to support any claims concerning the feasibility, relevance, and distinctiveness of Permatourism, I will be conducting an evaluation of the impact of Fork to Farmer project among small scale farmers in rural North Carolina. Accordingly, in addition to hard-data comprising number of visitors, farm experiences revenue, and direct sales to visitors, I will also be looking at changes in indicators linked to successful entrepreneurial behaviour, namely entrepreneurial self-efficacy, social capital and human agency that may accrue from partnering with fairly successful chefs.

It should be reiterated that Permatourism entails a mutualistic relationship between two or more economic actors, meaning that each individual actor benefits from the activity of the other. Hence, given the observed power differential between farmers and chefs, invariably leaning towards the latter, one might wonder what entices successful chefs to endorse farm experiences. For that, I will look into the non-economic assets that chefs obtain from farmers, namely the enhanced level of transparency (Bhaduri & Ha-Brookshire, 2011) that it brings to the restaurant's practices, and the alignment with important core values that enable economic rent.

Expected outcomes

Judging Permatourism, at the macro-level, the food service industry will benefit from an increased variety of services at the selected destinations that go beyond the usual consumption of food or beverages. Hence, off-the-beaten path authentic encounters with genuine local farmers will certainly contribute to a much richer experience for the visitor, which in turn increases the overall perceived quality of the destination. The variety of possible products and services offered through chef-farmer partnerships will render the North Carolina tourism product more nuanced, rich and authentic; in the end, making it a more competitive destination at the national level.

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