

TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: THE VOLKSBLAD TOURISM TOWN OF THE YEAR COMPETITION

J. HATTINGH AND D. KOKT

Abstract

Sustainability is a global concern for any organisation seeking to remain relevant and in business. In a developing country like South Africa, tourism has the potential to stimulate the economy and create jobs. The Free State and Northern Cape provinces are generally not at the top of the list for national and international tourists, although they are regions of great natural beauty and splendour. These provinces have many small towns and farming communities and thus extensive areas of rural land. This paper interrogates the sustainability issues related to tourism and reflect on the Volksblad Tourism Town of the Year Competition as a means of stimulating sustainable tourism in Free State and Northern Cape provinces.

Keywords: tourism development

1. INTRODUCTION

The economic meltdown in the first decade of the 21st century and the ensuing recession had a detrimental effect on the global tourism industry. A mitigating factor for the South African tourism industry was the hosting of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. It is reported (Eybers, 2011) that the tourism industry benefitted most from the World Cup, and it is estimated that the number of international tourists visiting South Africa increased in 2010 by 15% to eight million, of which 3% (or 300 000) attended the soccer matches. It is safe to say that the FIFA World Cup put South Africa on the map as a tourist destination, with Cape Town voted as the best city to visit.

Holding a competition to find the town of the year is not a new idea, and a similar competition has been running since 2004, hosted by Media24 and KykNet. This competition is aimed at towns in South Africa and Namibia, and voting takes place by means of sms. The Volksblad Tourism Town of the Year Competition, on the other hand, focuses only on towns in the Free State and Northern Cape regions, giving them the opportunity to showcase their attractions through media coverage, e.g. regular articles in the local press. The competition also has the potential to consolidate residents, creating a sense of pride and fostering better co-operation between local government and tourist organisations.

Managing a competition of this nature has inherent challenges. This could include getting towns on board to participate, establishing the criteria according to which they will be judged, as well as selecting the adjudicators and energising the townsfolk to be actively involved. With the notion of creating sustainable tourism for the Free State and Northern Cape, the Volksblad Tourism Town of the Year presents an excellent opportunity for towns to showcase their attractions.

2. SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ISSUES

The term 'sustainable tourism' has evolved from the sustainable development concept that had its inception in the late 19th century, mainly due to environmental and economic challenges that arose. Sustainable development is concerned with meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the needs of future generations (WCED, 1987:8). It has also been referred to as intergenerational equality by Nealer and Naude (2011:108).

This naturally includes the management of resources in such a way that the economic, social and aesthetic needs of tourists are met while maintaining ecological processes, as well as biological and cultural diversity (Liu, 2003:460). There is consensus that sustainable development has an environmental, social and economic dimension.

The environmental dimensions of sustainable development consist of land, water, atmospheric issues, micro-organisms, animal or plant life or a combination of these factors. It further includes the physical, chemical, aesthetic and cultural issues of human health and well-being. The social dimensions include issues like personal well-being, social equality, equal opportunities and the needs of present and future communities. The economical dimensions involve economic growth, foreign exchange, direct foreign investment, exchange rates, inflation and the like (Nealer & Naude, 2011:109).

It is imperative that none of these aspects should dominate, but that 'balance' and co-ordination should prevail. This corresponds with the key organising ideas behind the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and the World Tourism Organisation (UNTWO) declaration that economic, social and environmental factors should be the major concern of sustainable tourism (Hall, 2011).

The term 'sustainable tourism' is well established (although there are various viewpoints on the definition thereof) and debated, and it could generally be explained as the transferring of sustainable development principles into the context of tourism needs (Hardy & Beeton, 2001:170).

Hardy and Beeton (2001) suggested that sustainable tourism should enhance the economic health of cities and towns, the generation of wealth for local inhabitants, the preservation of natural resources and tourism sites, the establishment of a tourism culture, and the satisfaction of the needs of tourists and the community.

There is contention in the literature (Carter, 1995; Hunter, 2002) on whether there can really be a balance between economic, social and environmental factors, as economic growth through tourism could have a negative impact on the environment. According to Hall (2011), this co-called 'balanced' approach usually involves economic growth, while Harvey (2010) noted that this corresponds with a capitalistic view of making a profit.

There has been a growing sense of societal awareness surrounding issues of sustainable development in tourism, while the evidence of continued growth in the sector shows that policy applications have not always been successful. This highlights the fact that the existence of policies does not necessarily transcend into sustainability.

The role of the tourism industry in global warming and climate change has also fuelled the sustainability debate and in a sense refutes the 'balance' promulgated by UNEP and UNTWO (Scott, 2011). UNWTO has organised two specialised conferences tackling these issues and has even suggested that climate responsiveness should be added to the economic, social and environmental factors (Weaver, 2011).

From the review of the literature, the following aspects emerged as crucial in considering sustainable tourism: good governance, marketing, and the need for a database of products and service providers. These aspects will be related to the current realities of the Free State and Northern Cape regions.

2.1 Good governance

Sustainable tourism is only possible with good governance (Bramwell, 2011:459). The term 'governance' relates to how societies are governed and ruled and involves the inputs of the authorities in allocating resources and exercising control and co-ordination (Rhodes, 1996:653). Governance cannot be understood in isolation from its relationship to society. Atkinson (2003:103) declared that governance is aimed at achieving social order by formulating appropriate goals and policies and providing services (also see Bramwell & Lane, 2011:412).

Governance should thus be viewed in a broader context than government (which involves the formal structuring of the state), since it relates to the contributions from non-state actors like business and industry, assisting local government in creating a sustainable environment.

Maintaining sustainable tourism is not centred within one domain or sector, but cuts across diverse spheres and may include planning, transport, issues relating to climate change and pollution, employment opportunities, regional development and the like.

It is thus imperative that sustainable tourism policies are integrated into the social, economic and environmental frameworks of each local area, reiterating the important role played by local government in this regard. These relationships are likely to face a magnitude of obstacles due to different domains and varying policies that stem from other policy domains (Bramwell & Lane, 2011:412), emphasising the fact that sustainable tourism does not reside in one locality, but requires a collective effort from local government and community stakeholders.

In South Africa, tourism development has been a crucial focus of national government policy since 2004, mainly due to its potential to stimulate the economy and create jobs (Visser & Kotze, 2006:88). The areas given the most attention are the Western Cape Province, particularly the greater Cape Town area, as well as the Garden Route, the Gauteng Province, the game parks and reserves of the Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces, and the Kwazulu-Natal coast, with little emphasis on the Free State and Northern Cape.

Hill, Trotter and Nel (2003) noted that de-industrialisation severely affected traditional manufacturing in the Western world. This situation also applies to Africa and specifically South Africa, where a decline in traditional industries like manufacturing, mining, coal production and the textile industry severely compromised job opportunities. Globalisation has particularly affected South Africa, as a magnitude of cheap foreign goods are imported, making it impossible for local manufacturers to sustain their livelihoods.

This trend is also replicated in the Free State Province where, although there has been petro-chemical development in the Sasolburg area, mining and manufacturing have shown a severe decline (Nel, Rogerson & Marais, 2006:48). Needless to say, the smaller towns are the worst affected. Hill et al. (2003) cite Mooi Rivier in Kwazulu-Natal as an example, where the closing down of a textile factory acutely affected the town's economy. Tourism could thus represent an alternative viable means for towns to boost and sustain their economies.

The Free State town of Clarens is a good example of a town where tourism is being successfully exploited to sustain economic growth and job creation. Contrary to this, Halseth and Meiklejohn (2009) found that the town of Fouriesburg (situated only about 30 kilometres from Clarens) is in dire need of policy and planning support to assist in developing its potential. It is safe to say that the latter applies more prominently than the former to towns in the Free State and Northern Cape.

It should also be emphasised that a sense of ethical and moral responsibility should be cultivated amongst the various 'actors' (Bramwell, Lane, McCabe, Mosedale & Scarles, 2008:253). Actors may include tourists, government, politicians, hospitality staff and product owners, who must all realise that sustainability is only possible by means of a collective effort. Using tourism as a means to revitalise the economy of small towns is nothing new and there are many small towns and villages in the European and American context that have been restructured both economically and socially in order to invigorate their economies (Porter, 2004).

2.2 Marketing

Marketing a rural town can be a daunting task for tourism product owners (namely guest houses, bed-and-breakfast establishments, curio shops and the like). It should also be noted that product owners in small towns might not have specialised marketing knowledge that one might expect from the operators of larger guesthouses or hotel groups. Visser and Kotze (2006:93) found in their investigation of the Free State tourism economy that marketing is problematic in many towns and inadequate to attract sufficient numbers of tourists.

It is interesting to note that Singh reported as far back as 1997 that the Asia Pacific regions (Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Hong Kong and the Philippines) embarked on an aggressive marketing strategy to promote their tourist attractions. This proved fruitful as these areas have experienced immense tourism growth in the last decade. Supporting this was these countries' pro-active market reforms, their export-oriented industries, stable economies, infrastructure development and the attraction of foreign capital, which shows that tourism development needs to be driven at a strategic governmental level.

Tourism marketing positioning is necessary to create a distinctive place in the minds of tourists about a particular destination. Like any other marketing endeavor it is crucial that market segmentation and the target market should be considered. Market segmentation is based on the notion that different destinations appeals to different tourists. It is thus imperative that the target market of a particular destination should be identified before customers are enticed to visit it.

The positioning of tourism products is largely intangible (like the mountains, beaches or historic sites of a particular destination). As the tangible products and services (like accommodation, meals and transportation) are necessary to make this happen abstract realities need to be manipulated by the tangible clues (Harsha & Chacko, 1997: 2). This could be particularly valuable to towns to acquaint themselves with what they have to offer and the types of tourists they want to attract.

2.3 Information on tourism products and providers

It is vital that baseline data is available on the tourism products and providers in specific localities (Visser & Kotze, 2006:88). This may include information on: 1) tourist accommodation; 2) food services; 3) tourism products and attractions (including adventure activities, buildings and sites of historical and cultural significance, nature reserves, parks, museums, specialist shops and the like); and 4) information on locating the local marketing offices and tourism information centres.

3. CHALLENGES OF HOSTING THE VOLKSBLAD TOURISM TOWN OF THE YEAR COMPETITION

As already mentioned, Media24 and Kyknet runs a similar competition on an annual basis, with the votes being cast via sms and the town with the most votes being deemed the winner. As the competition includes all South African and Namibian towns, three finalists are selected from each province, from which the final winner is then announced. A number of national sponsors contribute prizes to the value of more than R500 000, making it worthwhile for towns to enter.

The Volksblad Tourism Town of the Year Competition operates on a different basis. The winning town is not chosen according to the number of votes cast via sms, but rather according to a set of criteria against which the towns are evaluated (Table 1). It presents an opportunity for towns and their product owners throughout the distribution area of the Volksblad, to market their goods and services to a wider audience.

The preliminary planning for the launch of the Volksblad Tourism Town of the Year Competition commenced in early 2009 when a group of role players in the Free State tourism industry got together with the aim of launching a competition aimed at encouraging towns in the Free State and Northern Cape to showcase what they have to offer. As this coincided with the national planning efforts for the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup, it was anticipated that soccer tourists might also visit the smaller towns in these two provinces.

Due to the decision that the competition would be known as Town of the Year, it automatically excluded cities and large towns like Bloemfontein and Kroonstad. The role players included the Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT), First National Bank (FNB), Afrikaanse Handelsinstituut (AHI), PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) as the auditors, and the Volksblad newspaper. Volksblad also published a weekly supplement, Kontrei, featuring a variety of small towns in the Free State and Northern Cape. Prize money was also pledged by the role players, amounting to a weekly amount of R200. This prize money was awarded to participants who sent in sms nominations. The winner was drawn randomly from all the entrants for a particular week.

The sponsors formed an evaluation committee that comprised of one representative from each, meaning that the adjudicating panel consisted of five individuals. Once the competition had opened, a period of six weeks was allowed for initial voting (via sms) – the only time sms votes were employed. From those sms votes, 10 finalists were selected. Each week, the town with the most votes was featured in Kontrei, along with a weekly barometer tallying the votes so as to allow readers to follow the progress of the competition.

Once the 10 finalists had been announced, it was expected of them to make a PowerPoint presentation to the adjudication panel. This method was deemed fair, as it afforded each finalist the opportunity to compete on an equal footing. CUT, as the academic partner for the competition, was responsible for a series of newspaper articles dealing with the aims and rationale of the competition.

It also presented justification for the criteria against which towns would be adjudicated, as well as some information on how marketing should be approached by the product owners in the towns. The 25 criteria according to which the towns were judged are reflected in Table 1. Marks were allocated on a four point licket scale.

TABLE 1: Criteria for the Free State Tourism Town of the Year Competition

1. Availability and quality of signage on the roads leading to the town
2. Availability and quality of signage indicating tourist attractions in the town
3. Existence of a tourism information office
4. Availability of tourism information after hours
5. Quality of the infrastructure
6. Quality of information available on local tourist attractions
7. Cleanliness of the town
8. Availability of quality accommodation
9. Availability of graded accommodation
10. Availability of transport to larger cities and towns
11. Operating hours of restaurants, bars and shops
12. Existence of a tourism forum
13. Existence of a chamber of commerce
14. Level of service delivery by local restaurants, bars and shops
15. Availability of a website
16. Appearance of parks and open areas
17. Availability and quality of traffic signs
18. Quality of traffic circles
19. Level of accessibility for disabled persons
20. Availability of public services like police, medical and emergency services
21. Quality of exhibitions during the annual tourism conference
22. Knowledge and enthusiasm of staff at the tourism information office
23. Participation of the townsfolk
24. Participation of the municipality and private sector
25. Quality and availability of brochures and other marketing material

Adjudication was done strictly according to the 25 criteria, and it was imperative that each criterion be addressed. Once this process had been finalised, three semi-finalists were identified. The adjudicators then visited those three finalists, after which the overall winner was announced. The competition had the support of the provincial governments of both provinces, and the winning town received extensive media coverage in Volksblad and even on national television. The prize money was awarded at a special function and the winning town also received a billboard to be erected at the main entrance to the town, identifying it as the winner of the Volksblad Tourism Town of the Year Competition.

3.1 Lessons learnt from hosting the competition

Hosting a competition of this magnitude is no easy task, and it is therefore important to reflect on the challenges faced by the competition organisers. After critically reviewing comments and feedback from participants in the competition, the following can be deduced:

- The criteria applied to identify the winner includes aspects over which only local government has control, such as the condition of the roads, road markings, signage and so forth. As this affects the overall appearance of a town, it could lead to certain towns being disqualified from the competition. It is therefore imperative that local government is involved in a competition of this nature. This observation corresponds with the challenges identified in the literature (Visser & Kotze, 2006).
- The finalists have to travel to Bloemfontein for a presentation, meaning that there are costs involved. As small towns usually suffer from dwindling economies, this could place an extra burden on resources.
- As there is a general lack of tourism awareness and community tourism organisations in such towns, it may mean that not enough support is being generated from the side of the townsfolk. It has been found that a community that actively supports the competition, and a person or persons driving the process, play a major role in mobilising support for a particular town. This was evident in the case of some of the previous winners (like Marquard and Garijepdam), where the support and enthusiasm of the townsfolk ensured victory.
- The marketing of towns is problematic. This is also supported by authors such as Visser and Kotze (2006), who found marketing to be inadequate, especially in the Free State.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Expanding globalisation and a decline in industries like mining and manufacturing have necessitated the investigation of alternative means of economic growth. The Free State and Northern Cape provinces have been severely affected by the closing down of mines and other manufacturing firms. These provinces also have large rural areas and farming communities that need to be sustained and tourism could be a viable option in achieving this.

Studies in sustainability were initially prompted by mainly environmental issues and the need to have an environment that can sustain the generations to come. Sustainability issues were, however, expanded to other domains as the magnitude of the sustainability issues became more pronounced. The term 'sustainable tourism' thus narrates the importance of sustainability in the tourism sector.

This paper related the importance of tourism for South Africa and specifically for the Free State and Northern Cape provinces. These provinces do not attract many national and international tourists, although they have spectacular scenery and sites to visit. The Volksblad Tourism Town of the Year Competition is but one attempt to showcase what the Free State and Northern Cape have to offer and could be seen as a deliberate effort to expose (via the local media) what towns have to offer. As this happens through the local and national media, locals also become more informed about what the towns have to offer, which could enhance the prevalence of national tourism.

There is generally a lack of comprehensive studies dealing with the structures, dynamics and opportunities for tourism development in the Free State and Northern Cape. As this directly affects sustainable tourism in the provinces, it is clear that much research is still to be done. It is, however, encouraging that some attempts, like the Tourism Town of the Year Competition, are being made to showcase what the Free State and Northern Cape provinces have to offer.

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