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Stakeholder perceptions of Da Nang, Vietnam as a tourism gateway city

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Introduction

Vietnam is the second-fastest growing economy in Asia behind China (The Economist, 2016), averaging 6.4% growth per year (World Bank, 2017) with good stability in the local currency. Although still a mixed economy, Vietnam's transition to a market-based economy is spurring this growth (Le et al., 2018). This strong economic climate has been positive for the Vietnamese tourism industry with Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Da Nang (Hildebrandt & Isaac, 2015) taking advantage of their positions as regional centers (Le et al., 2018).

Da Nang, because of its centralized location in the region, is widely acknowledged as a tourism gateway city (ESRT, 2015; Nguyen & Gallan, 2013). International arrivals fly into Da Nang International Airport but generally spend their time in regional destinations, such as the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Sites of Hoi An Ancient Town, My Son Sanctuary, and the Complex of Hue Monuments (Nguyen & Gallan, 2013). Research, however, indicates visitors tend to see Da Nang and the UNESCO World Heritage Sites as one single destination with the city of Da Nang as the entry point into the region (ESRT, 2015).

Despite this awareness of Da Nang's functionality as a tourism gateway city, there is little information about Da Nang's strategic placement as a tourism gateway city and regional hub via its international airport. The purpose of this case study is to examine Da Nang as a gateway city and an air travel hub, as well as local interest in an increase in direct international flights to the city. This research deepens and refines previous research about Da Nang (Holladay et al., 2018) that identified beach resort tourism, Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Events (MICE) and cultural/heritage tourism as Da Nang's primary tourism assets. This paper focuses on stakeholders' perceptions of how the previously mentioned assets might be

further developed through the capitalization of Da Nang's current position as a tourism gateway city, its status as the hub into the region and an increase in the number of direct international flights into the city.

Literature review

Gateway cities

Gateway cities are major entry/exit points into or out of a national or regional system and usually serve as transportation connections between the local area and the outside world (Burghardt, 1971; Pearce, 2001). Dredge (1999) suggested that gateway cities should be given distinct consideration in destination planning. Gateway cities are usually adjacent to major attractions or national parks (Mules, 2005; Snepenger et al., 2007) and sometimes serve as a synonym for metropolitan city areas (Bowden, 2006; Pearce, 2001) or visitors' travel patterns and itineraries (Lohmann & Perce, 2010).

Government policy involvement is critical in supporting the role of tourism gateway cities (Hall, 2000), as is creating local business networks, marketing and promotion (Lohmann & Pearce, 2012). Gateway cities have the capacity to generate tremendous economic impacts to the local region (Hall, 2000; Snepenger et al., 2007) and economic resilience to proximal destinations (Powell et al., 2017). Gateway cities should be considered tourism niches (Hampton & Clifton, 2017) and need a diversity of tourism products and services (Lohmann & Pearce, 2012), which will likely increase the duration of tourists' visits in the local area (Staden & Marais, 2005). In some cases, however, the attractiveness of gateway cities leads to rapid growth, wherein economic interests supersede local values, environmental protection and resident quality of life (Howe et al., 1997).

Hubs

Coupled to the concept of gateway city is the term hub, which is a transportation center through which traffic passes within a transfer network (Lohmann & Duval, 2011). Further, gateway cities and hubs “are in a position to attract connecting passengers to visit and discover the destination features they have to offer” (Lohmann & Duval, 2011 p. 9). Research on tourism gateway cities has focused on transportation hub systems (Fleming & Hayuth, 1994) and developing successful tourism gateway city destinations by strengthening the role of the destination as a transportation hub (Lohmann et al, 2009).

The creation and maintenance of hubs, in air travel for example, is driven by the airline industry, economic incentives and should have a strong regulatory environment (Costa et al., 2010). Further, air transportation hub-and-spoke systems (one central airport, or hub, with many routes or spokes) must have good network connectivity to thrive and be useful (Dennis, 1994). Past research highlighted the importance of enhancing and reinforcing transport links in the development of successful gateway cities (Lohmann et al., 2009).

Direct flights

More direct flights will generally lead to more international arrivals, which in some cases is a high volume of travelers (Cetin et al., 2016). The consequence of more direct flights leading to more international arrivals will have a major impact on the development of a tourism destination in terms of competitive advantage (Murel & O’Connell, 2011). These advantages would include a decrease in travel costs, improvements in the efficiency of the transport system because of direct flights (Prideaux, 2004) and there is a general travel motivation among travelers for shorter travel routes (Cetin et al., 2016).

That said, however, there must be sufficient economic incentives in revenue generation for airlines to increase non-stop direct flights to destinations (Koo et al., 2017a). Consequently,

if a government is interested in tourism development, policy should be designed to enable increases in direct flights (Koo et al., 2017a).

Stakeholder theory

A stakeholder is defined as an individual or identifiable group that can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholders in tourism destinations include governments, tourism businesses, tourists, host communities, and other sectors (Swarbrooke, 2001). Stakeholder theory has been widely used in tourism to assess stakeholder participation in tourism planning (Jamal & Getz, 1995).

Stakeholder involvement and participation, as one of the six main principles associated with the conceptualization of World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2004) for sustainable tourism, is associated with multiple benefits. Some of the benefits include helping policy makers with informed decision-making, reducing conflicts between tourists and host communities (Swarbrooke, 1999), increasing project efficiency, optimizing resource allocation, establishing equitable relationships among different stakeholder groups, and gaining community support for future development efforts (Nicholas et al., 2009).

While each group of stakeholders plays an important role in the development of tourism, some stakeholders are more important than others in determining the success of activities (Cooper et al., 2006). To be meaningfully involved in successful tourism planning, stakeholders must understand the tourism concepts and issues being discussed (Farrell & Twinning-Ward, 2004) and have the resources and skills in order to participate (Jamal & Getz, 1995). Many acknowledge the difficulties with involving different tourism stakeholders in the development process especially in developing countries (Reddy, 2008; Timur & Getz, 2008; Ho et al., 2017). Research to date tends to focus on the perceptions from one stakeholder's group (i.e., residents),

ignoring other stakeholder groups such as business operators, government agencies, and NGOs (Ho et al., 2017).

There are, however, some studies that include tourism stakeholders other than residents. For example, Dabphet (2012) examined tourism experts (e.g., tourism organizations, local councils, government departments) and tourism suppliers (e.g., local community organizations) to implement sustainable tourism development in Thailand. Hardy and Beeton (2001) interviewed tourist operators, regulators, and tourists and found that different stakeholders may have different emphases in their perceptions of tourism development outcomes. In addition, governments are particularly concerned with issues relating to tourism infrastructure (e.g., transportation, accommodation) while tourism businesses are generally more concerned with issues directly affecting their business (e.g., tourism product, marketing, tourist satisfaction; Hardy & Beeton, 2001).

Methods

Study Site

Da Nang is a coastal Vietnamese city that is south of Hanoi to the north and north of Ho Chi Minh City (Figure 1) with a population of approximately 1.3 million people (ESRT, 2015). Da Nang is characterized as having a tropical climate with an average temperature of 25.6 degrees Celsius (78 degrees Fahrenheit) with an average humidity of 84.3 %. Their main tourist season occurs after the rainy season (August through December) and typically runs from January through August, referred to as the dry season. This climate promotes a long hot summers on their rivers, lagoons, and tropical beaches. Da Nang is located close to several UNESCO world heritage sites, including Hoi An Ancient City, My Son Sanctuary, the Complex of Hue

Monuments, the former imperial capital of Hue in Thua Thien-Hue Province, and Cham Island in Quang Nam.



Figure 1. The location of Da Nang, Vietnam is represented by the star. The star was included by the authors. Source: US State Department.

Officials from the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism in Da Nang informed the researchers that—at the time of the study—there were 478 hotels (13 were 5-star, 15 were 4-star, and 60 were 3-star), 17671 rooms, 198 travel agencies, 1779 tour guides, 20 restaurants and 16 shopping malls, seven beaches, nine major tourist attractions, 25 tourist boats and 23 international direct flights—nine regular and 14 charter—from cities located China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, and Malaysia. In 2014, Da Nang received 2.7 million visitors with about 650,000—or 25%—of tourist visitation from international visitors (ESRT, 2015). In 2015, those numbers grew to nearly 4 million with nearly 1 million international visitors (VNAT, 2015). Visitation grew to 5.6 million in 2016 and by 2017 those numbers had grown to 6.6 million with 2.3 million international visitors, a growth of 36.8% in foreign travelers from 2016 (VNAT, 2017; 2018). Further, in 2017 Da Nang earned US \$853.90 million, which was an increase of 20.6% from 2016 (VNAT, 2017). Da Nang’s impressive growth percentages are continuing to thrive and they are quickly climbing in the ranks of the Top 10 holiday destinations in Asia (Nguyen, 2016).

Research design and methodological approach

Understanding tourism stakeholders’ perceptions is critical as their involvement is fundamental to successful sustainable tourism development (Xu et al., 2016). This research uses a case study approach (Yin, 2017), which involves data collection, evaluation, analysis and context (Gillham, 2010), and is a way to report research that has been studied in-depth (Wolcott, 2008). This case study builds upon previous research (Holladay et al, 2018), wherein interviews were conducted with 16 key stakeholders from the government and private sectors (Table 1). The basis of that research (Holladay et al., 2018) was to identify Da Nang’s tourism assets and perceptions of sustainable tourism development. A semi-structured interview script was utilized

with each interviewee (Table 2). The selection was based on the network of professionals that were deemed most knowledgeable about the tourism industry of Da Nang. The decision for the participants was based largely on the recommendations of the tourism faculty at the Vietnamese university in Da Nang that participated in this research.

Table 1

Interviewees (n = 16) by organizational type

Type	n	% of sample
Travel agency	4	25
Academia	4	25
Ministry of Culture, Sport & Tourism	3	19
Resort	2	13
National museum	2	13
Destination Marketing Organization (Da Nang city)	1	5

This paper builds that data, namely the described tourism assets of beaches, MICE and culture/heritage (see Holladay et al., 2018 for more details), to describe stakeholders' perceptions of how these assets might be further developed through framing Da Nang as a gateway city and air hub, as well through an increase of direct flights to the city. Each interview was conducted in the interviewee's office or place of business by a team of three researchers. With the exception of one case where three interviewees were present, there was only one interviewee per session. One research team member led the interviews, the other two interviewers added occasional follow-up question and took notes. The interviews were conducted in English and the Vietnamese research team member translated as necessary. Interviews were conducted for 30 to 45 minutes.

Table 2

Semi-structured interview questions

	Private and public sector perspectives	Domain
1.	What tourism assets, attractions or places do you think should be tourism centerpieces in Da Nang?	Tourism Assets
2.	What kind of tourism do you think should be developed first?	Tourism Assets
3.	What do you think the current “image” for tourism in Da Nang is?	Tourism Assets
4.	What do you think would be the best “image” for tourism in Da Nang?	Tourism Assets
5.	What is your opinion about the current tourism market in Da Nang?	Economics
6.	Who should be the target markets for tourism customers?	Economics
7.	What type of marketing is being used now to promote tourism in Da Nang?	Economics
8.	What type of marketing do you need to promote tourism in Da Nang?	Economics
9.	Where should the major financing for tourism development in Da Nang come from?	Economics
10.	Do you see any environmental or social impacts from tourism development in Da Nang?	Impacts
11.	How do you define sustainable tourism? What is needed for sustainable tourism development in Da Nang?	Sustainability

All interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder following permission from the interviewee(s). The interviews were then digitized and transcribed. Data were coded—i.e. assigned labels (e.g. “flights”)—using NVivo 11 software. Three nodes—references to code text—were created; flights, hub and gateway. Ease of analysis, consistency and completeness were ensured by using the coding stripes tool within NVivo (Johnston, 2005). The nodes and associated text were then used as a framework for more in-depth analysis of stakeholders’ perceptions (Babbie, 2013). The lead researcher conducted all coding. This analysis was then reviewed by the other two researchers (who participated in all of the interviews) in order to achieve consensus.

Reliability and validity (Golafshani, 2003), were addressed by the researchers through comparisons among interviewee answers (i.e. how did respondents who mentioned flights, hub and/or gateway compare to each other in the way they spoke about these topics); Golafshani (2003) posited that reliability and validity in qualitative research are underpinned by rigor and quality. Maxwell (2012), stated the comparisons of the ways the interviewees addressed the interview questions is a measure of validity. Validity is also ensured through the development of the interview script, the iterative process of coding, and a review of relevant literature (Richards & Morse, 2007).

These qualitative data were further protected by bias and reactivity (Maxwell, 2012) through triangulation (Goffman, 1989). For this research, triangulation comprised interview coding and analysis, a review of documents such as government reports and direct observation in the field (Babbie, 2013). Further, informal conversations (unrecorded) provided information not spoken during formal interviews that helped support the analysis (Turner III, 2010).

Results

During the interviews stakeholders described 17 different tourism assets in Da Nang, with beach resort tourism, MICE and cultural/heritage tourism being the three most frequent (see Holladay et al., 2018 for more details). Specifically to this research, results presented here center on how those previously described top-three assets could be developed through, 1) Da Nang as a gateway city, 2) Da Nang as a transportation hub and 3) increase in direct international flights into Da Nang (Table 3). Each of these three dimensions are reported here using direct quotes from the interviewees. Quotes are presented here in a manner to illustrate the opinions of the tourism stakeholders.

Table 3

Summary of responses that mentioned flights, hub or gateway (n = 16 interviewees)

Responses	Frequency (n)	Percentage (n)	References
1. Flights	7	44	15
2. Hub (including “center” or “central”)	5	31	5
3. Gateway	4	25	8

Da Nang as a tourism gateway city

Among respondents, there was an awareness of the position of Da Nang as a gateway city. One respondent from Da Nang’s Destination Management Organization (DMO) said, ‘We always say that we are the gateway to the [UNESCO World Heritage Sites].’ The mention of gateways here is important. As one General Manager of a resort said, ‘when you have Da Nang as a gateway city for central Vietnam, then you are talking about something very special. It’s a gateway city for everything else that exists here.’ This was also recognized by a member of academia who said, ‘Da Nang is close to [UNESCO World Heritage Sites], which is an advantage for economic [development].’

Broader reactions to Da Nang’s gateway position focused on the city’s relationship with international visitors. For example, one travel agency director said, ‘Tourists don’t stay [in Da Nang]. Foreign tourists only love [UNESCO World Heritage Sites]. Da Nang is only for transportation and the airport.’ The UNESCO sites, however, were also considered an asset in a regional context. An official from the Ministry said, ‘It is important that we are central to the UNESCO sites...in terms of attracting people by our gateway. We always say that we rely on the beach and [Da Nang’s position as] the gateway to the World Heritage sites.’

These thoughts were supported by a resort general manager who said, ‘Because singularly, Da Nang is not enough, but when you have Da Nang as a gateway city for central

Vietnam, then you are talking about something very special. It's a gateway city for everything else that exists here.' This positive notion of Da Nang as a gateway city was echoed across the interviews. For example, another travel agency staffer said, 'Da Nang has many connections because Da Nang [is not only central] in Vietnam but also in Asia. Da Nang is very easy to come to as the gateway of Asia because it is in the heart of Vietnam.' Another resort general manager said, 'Being a gateway city...It's a privilege to be called a gateway city.' This interviewee also said, 'We think we are the center for tourism in Vietnam.'

Da Nang as a transportation hub

Respondents indicated that many tourists fly into Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City and then change planes and take a flight from these cities to Da Nang. As a travel agent said, 'Da Nang is still not the main hub for [international tourist arrivals to] Vietnam. Many international travelers go to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City first.' The sentiment among respondents was that a shift away from the airports in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City to Da Nang as the air hub was important for tourism development in Da Nang.

One travel agent said, 'Da Nang is very good for tourists because it is [centrally located]. It just takes one hour to fly from Da Nang to Hanoi and one hour to fly Ho Chi Minh City. It's more convenient [for the tourist].' Another travel agent said, 'Da Nang is becoming a new hub for Vietnam.' Other interviewees noted this potential rise of Da Nang as a hub. One resort general manager said, 'Now, if you look at Da Nang, you got an emerging Asian hub if you like a commercial city, shipping, manufacturing...and the most beautiful beaches and a beautiful clean sea.'

Increased direct international flights to Da Nang

A number of interviewees had an interest in the growth of air travel. There was quite a lot of emphasis on increasing international direct and charter flights to Da Nang. As one travel agent said, 'It is very difficult for the government and the resorts because many direct flights from other countries go to Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh City first and you have to transfer and change flights. It is very difficult.' Another travel agent said, 'First we must have direct flights. If we do not have direct flight to [Da Nang] we cannot do anything'. As one manager of a travel agency said, 'It's very hard to develop tourism if the airport does not have direct flights [to Da Nang].'

This interest in tourism development through direct flights led many interviewees to discuss nearby markets for these flights. One resort general manager said, 'We have daily flights from Tokyo now...it's a start with five or six daily flights now. We also look at South Korea as a massive market. And China of course, you can't ignore it.' Another resort general manager said, 'when we started [marketing direct flights several] years ago, there were about 20 international flights a week, now there were over 120 international flights coming into Da Nang a week. About half of these are Chinese charters, visitors coming for the casino, but it helps us to put Da Nang on the map...to become established as a destination.'

Ministry officials also discussed international direct flights and said, 'Our top markets are China, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Singapore, and Malaysia. We are interested in growing the American market, the European market and especially the Australian market. The government has approved free visas from five countries, which are the UK, German, France, Italy, and Austria. We hope this will attract more tourists from this market to our city.'

Discussion

The impetus for this case study was to build on the research of Holladay et al. (2018), which identified stakeholder perceptions of tourism assets in Da Nang. This paper takes that work one step further to examine the nature of stakeholder perceptions of the city's current position as a tourism gateway city, the notion of Da Nang as a hub into the region, as well as the interest in an increase in the number of direct international flights into the city. The perspectives of stakeholders are salient to tourism planning as they are a windows into viewpoints on tourism development (Jamal & Getz, 1995).

As stated, this research focused on stakeholder perceptions of the role of Da Nang as a gateway city, an air travel hub, and an increase in direct international flights. In general, interviewees perceived Da Nang's gateway city status in its most positive connotation. This has implications for the city's officials, policy makers, tourism entities and other stakeholders who are interested in increasing Da Nang's role as a gateway city. Hildebrant and Isaac (2015) highlighted Da Nang as a gateway city from a marketing perspective and previous research suggests destinations like Da Nang can benefit from its position as a gateway city (Hall, 2000; Snepenger et al., 2007).

Interestingly, market research has indicated that visitors see the three destinations of Da Nang and the two closest UNESCO World Heritage sites—the Complex of Hue Monuments and Hoi An Ancient City—as a single region (ESRT, 2015). UNESCO World Heritage Sites have shown positive impacts on local economies, employment opportunities and revenue streams (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). Further, UNESCO World Heritage Sites have created positive increases in visitation and director visitor spending (VanBlarcom & Kayahan, 2011)

generally from “heritage tourists” (Mariani et al., 2020; Pulido-Fernandez et al., 2019), which has implications for Da Nang and its nearby UNESCO sites.

In this study, respondents from government, marketing, travel agencies and resorts supported Da Nang’s location as a gateway, saw its position as unique or special, a way to attract international visitation and a complement to tourist interest in the nearby UNESCO World Heritage Sites—the proximity to attractions such as these is often a precondition to being a gateway city (Snepenger et al., 2007). The contrast between the study respondents’ perceptions and previous marketing research findings also supports the importance of engaging knowledgeable tourism stakeholders in the development process to help tourism planners make informed decisions, as suggested by previous literature (Farrell & Twinning-Ward, 2004). As Hampton and Clifton (2017) pointed out, developing niche tourism at tourism gateway cities helps increase the attractiveness of the area and the duration of tourists’ visits in the local area which could lead to economic growth.

It is also important to involve the locals as they know the area the most (Duarte Alonso & Nyanjom, 2017) and to encourage the cooperation among different tourism related businesses (Yang, 2018). These tourism businesses can develop different packages to enhance the city’s attractiveness and increase people’s length of stay while they are in the city (Marcoz, Mauri, Maggioni, & Cantu, 2016). Doing so also help increase the community’s bridging and bonding social capital which is closely associated with the success of tourism development (McGehee, Lee, O’Bannon, & Perdue, 2010).

The idea of a gateway city and its transportation connections to points of interest in the region is a major consideration for tourism development efforts (Pearce, 2001). From a planning perspective (Dredge, 1999), Da Nang’s ability to serve as the gateway city to Central

Vietnam will balance the desire among some interviewees to make Da Nang the hub for Vietnam, the region, and extra-regional day-trips to UNESCO sites outside the city. The interviewees noted that a shift to Da Nang as the hub would be advantageous to tourism development in Da Nang and would be better for tourists from international destinations. There would be an important direct link (Cattaneo et al., 2017; Malighetti et al., 2008) to Da Nang and would allow visitors to explore Da Nang more easily, which is attractive to tourists (Lohmann & Duval, 2011).

They also noted this would change the transportation model so that Da Nang would be the international arrival point. Then tourists would have the option of short flights to Hanoi or Ho Chi Minh if they desired. The strengthening of Da Nang in this way could help the city become a more successful tourism destination (Spasojevic et al., 2018) and create growth in air travel. This continued development in the air travel would be bolstered by more direct and charter flights coming in the Da Nang airport. This would certainly increase the volume of visitation to Da Nang, which could be an economic benefit (Koo et al., 2017b) and a competitive advantage over other destinations (Christidis, 2016). A higher number of direct flights in the region would also connect Da Nang to more markets in the region and further abroad (e.g. European markets)—something many study respondents were interested in.

Conclusion

This case study discussed stakeholder perceptions of the role of Da Nang as a gateway city, the positioning of Da Nang as a hub and the interest of more direct international flights to the city, all of which were deemed important to development. Gateway cities have the capacity to generate tremendous economic impacts to the local region.

This study concludes that local tourism stakeholders embrace Da Nang's position as a gateway city and hub into Vietnam. Limitations to this research included only interviewing local tourism stakeholders and, although sufficient to support and draw conclusions, there were a limited number of interviews from interviewees largely from the private and governmental sectors. The findings in this research, however, helped to establish a baseline of stakeholder's perceptions.

Sustainable tourism development is contextual (Dabphet, 2012), what is perceived as sustainable practices in one location may differ significantly when compared to another. Future research should also consider involving other members of the community, stakeholders from outside of Vietnam, international and domestic tourism and local industry employees

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