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Introduction

In the last decade and before the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the tourism industry faced the threatening phenomenon of overtourism. UNWTO (2018) defines overtourism as "the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors experiences in a negative way." Overtourism is mostly perceived as the condition when there are too many visitors to a destination. It is a subjective term and varies accordingly to the destination's carrying capacity, the management strategies, tourists' behaviors and local residents' perceptions (Milano, 2017). Researchers (Goodwin, 2017; Wood, 2017) and nonprofits such as CREST, STI, and others are amassing evidence that too much tourism can be a bad outcome for a community. Tourism has been known to cause negative impacts to a destination environmentally, socially and economically (Ap, 1992). When a destination reaches overtourism status, the negative impacts are much more obvious and severe, even to the point that it may destroy the destination.

Though the coronavirus pandemic has brought the tourism industry to almost a standstill, overtourism remains a concern since tourism is historically a resilient industry and is expected to thrive strongly again post pandemic (Prayag, 2020). Addressing overtourism is necessary but complicated since it is best handled with input from different stakeholders and with tourism system thinking. This study examines the sustainable tourism plan of a popular destination in the Southwest U.S., one of the growing numbers of destinations concerned with and addressing overtourism. Specifically, the process of planning and implementing a sustainable plan with a focus on stakeholders' involvement is the focus of this research.

Literature Review

Overtourism

In the early 2010s, overtourism started to receive attention from the media, in social media, and by academics, mostly following residents' protests and resistance against tourism in many global cities (Goldwin, 2017). Many current studies focused on defining and critically reviewing overtourism concepts, impacts, anti-tourist movements, causes, solutions, and local residents' attitudes. The common ground of these forums is that finding solutions to overtourism is challenging. There is no "one size fit all" solution as overtourism is contextual; every destination is different in terms of causes and impacts (Koens, Postma & Papp, 2018). Many innovative solutions have been tried by destinations. One solution to the number of tourists is by capping travel permissions and visas for inbound tourist numbers (Nyaupane & Timothy, 2010). Another solution is to apply a de-marketing approach to select tourist segments that are more economically stable and environment-friendly (Schiff & Becken, 2011). Other strategies aim to improve tourists' behaviors through soft interventions that promote tourists' awareness about appropriate behaviors and hard interventions that come in forms of rules and regulations (Benner, 2019). Ultimately, tackling overtourism should be strategic which can be achieved through a planning and managed implementation process (Goldwin, 2017). The literature lacks studies that examine how overtourism can be addressed systematically by a destination through tourism planning and plan actuation. This study will aim to bridge the gap.

Stakeholders' involvement in tourism

Stakeholders in tourism are "any entity that is influenced by, or that may influence, the achievement of the destination management activities" (Sheehan & Ritchie, 2005, p. 9). Main groups of stakeholders include tourists, businesses, local community, government, special interest groups, and educational institutions (Butler, 1999; Markwick, 2000). Stakeholders influence different aspects of the industry including tourism supply and demand, regulation, management, human resources, and research (Hieu & Rašovská, 2017). The sustainable tourism development cannot be separated from stakeholders' participation (Liu & Ma, 2017).

Waligo, Clarke and Hawkins (2013) proposed a multi-stakeholders involvement management framework (MSIM) in sustainable tourism. The framework contains of six stages: (1) scene-setting to enhance awareness of sustainable tourism, (2) recognizing stakeholder capacity (3) managing stakeholder relationship (4) managing stakeholder adaptability (5) influencing implementation capacity through training, and (6) monitoring stakeholder involvement. There is a need for studies to apply this framework in different context of tourism destinations to support its generalizability and usefulness. This study will examine how the MSIM framework fits the planning, implementing, and monitoring of sustainable tourism plan at a popular destination.
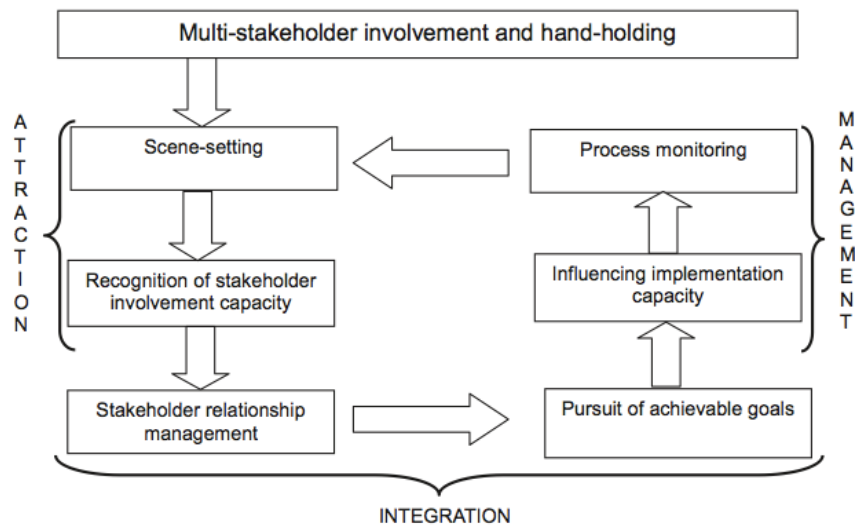

Figure 1. A cyclical representation of the MSIM framework
(Waligo, Clarke & Hawkins, 2013).

Research questions

The research questions of this study are:
Q1. How can a destination address overtourism through a sustainable tourism plan?
Q2. To what extent does stakeholders' involvement in a sustainable tourism plan fit the MSIM framework?
Q3. What modifications could be made to the MSIM framework based on a single case study?
Q4. What are the challenges in managing stakeholders' involvement in a sustainable tourism plan?

Methodology

Case study

The study employed a case study method. It is an intensive and systematic investigation of a complex phenomenon in its natural setting to understand how the phenomenon actually occurs (Creswell, 2013). Case study research features different methods of data collection and several sources of data, both primary and secondary. Therefore, the findings are triangulated and strengthened to sufficiently explain the complexity of the phenomenon. Parts of this case study and research are completed, but additional research on the process is ongoing.

Research site

Sedona is a world famous destination in Arizona, U.S. It is well known for stunning red rock scenery, pristine national forests, trails, and Native American heritage sites. Before the coronavirus pandemic, Sedona attracted around three million visitors annually, which made tourism critically important to the local economy. However, there were concerns that Sedona was experiencing overtourism. The influx of tourists created problems such as traffic congestion, increased cost of living, and interrupted community cohesion.

Envisioning a long-term management of the destination, the chamber of commerce and visitor bureau recognized the need for a sustainable tourism development strategic plan. In 2017, the Chamber contracted with a research team from a local university and a travel consulting company (hereby called Consultancy team) forming the sustainable tourism project to develop a five-year plan, from 2018 to 2023. The plan involved different stakeholders and was created based on the community's vision for tourism, the market potential for tourism growth, and a sustainable tourism development approach with a focus to diagnose overtourism and develop solutions.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected using different qualitative methods. During the year 2017 and 2018 when the sustainable tourism plan was developed, field trip and participant observation were applied. With these methods, the researcher immersed in the reality of the situation, gained knowledge about it by seeing, hearing, and taking notes (Orcher, 2014). The researcher attended different activities such as events, trainings, and stakeholder collaborative meetings.

In 2020, the researcher reviewed and analyzed documents of the sustainable tourism project to gain understanding of the process to develop the plan and identify content related to overtourism and stakeholders involvement. Analyzed documents include the call for proposals by the Chamber, the research and consulting contract, the working plan, meeting minutes, announcements, the completed Sedona sustainable tourism plan, and reports of implementation and monitoring.

Since early 2021, the researcher has been conducting in-depth unstructured interviews with key informants and key decision makers of the project. The interviews aim to generate deeper insight into the planning process and to clarify the contents found in the project documents. The interviewees have been purposely selected based on their roles in the plan, including representatives from the Chamber, the consultancy team, city management, and the tourism

advisory group. The interviewees have been asked about their roles in the sustainable tourism plan as a stakeholder, how their involvement fit or did not fit into the MSIM framework, and their perspectives about the challenges in sustainable tourism planning and implementation including how the coronavirus pandemic is affecting stakeholders' involvement. The interviews will continue to be conducted until saturation is reached which is when the research finds no new information and theme emerging (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Each set of data collected through different qualitative methods will be analyzed separately and then compared and integrated with each other through triangulation process to answer the research questions. For the interviews, deductive coding will be applied to identify themes related to six steps of MSIM framework. Themes that do not fit in the framework would indicate that the framework might need to be modified or extended.

Contribution to practices and literature

Findings from the study will be useful to destination management organizations to solve overtourism systematically through planning. Managers can learn from the case study the overall community-based tourism system and related processes to develop, implement, monitor, and measure outcomes of the plan; specific tactics to solve overtourism; engagement strategies to involve and manage stakeholders; and revealing challenges that the destination may face during the entire process. Academically, the study has the potential to contribute to literature in more than one way. This is the first study that examine how a destination that is experiencing early symptoms of overtourism responded to the situation through sustainable tourism planning. Additionally, this research is one of the few studies that examine the fit of the MSIM framework to reality and therefore could help to enhance the framework.

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