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Planning a Slow Food Tourism Corridor in a Suburban Town in the United States

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has halted international travel (Gössling, Scott and Hall, 2020). While the continued disruption and regulatory policies imposed by different countries (such as COVID-19 test prior to arrival and quarantine on arrival) have had a direct impact on the travel and tourism industry, evidence shows that the industry can be reasonably resilient to pandemics and chaotic events (Ioannides and Gyimóthy, 2020). As the new normal continues, transformational thinking with a focus on sustainable and responsible development of alternative forms of tourism is taking roots. For instance, slow food tourism is gaining attention. It has emerged from the slow food tourism movement, initiated by Cittaslow in Italy (Lowry and Lee 2016; Pink 2008). The idea of slow tourism involves experiencing a place or food at a slow pace at a destination. It refers to a leisurely, unrushed and immersive journey. This is in contrast to trips, where tourists try to see as much as possible within a short period of time, without really taking time to absorb anything deeply. Slow tourism, therefore, is opening up new horizons for the tourism industry and its numerous local stakeholders, particularly the host community and the travelers.

Interest in slow tourism is surging in the pandemic times due to the growing demand for immersive experiences as consumers seek self-enrichment. Besides being slow paced, many scholars state that it promotes safe and ethical travel, and offers ecological and culturally sensitive experiences (Conway & Timms, 2010; Hall 2006; Timms & Conway 2012). In a nutshell, slow tourism is a conceptual model that involves people traveling to destinations longer on land and less travel, using options of local transportation, taking the time to learn local culture and history, and thereby supporting the environment (Dickinson et al. 2010). The slow traveler moves and experiences the journey in a different way, immersing himself or herself in ‘other’ cultures, interacting with locals, gaining new experiences, and living like locals (Irving 2008; Lowry and Lee, 2016). Restricting mobility, reducing travel, consumption of “slower” transportation and food also form the fundamental concepts of sustainable consumption of tourism in general (Lipman and Murphy, 2012). Slow travel involves getting to know the local community. Travelers get an authentic experience, and while traveling in this way, they learn more about the local traditions, language and food (Woehler, 2004).

Based on review of limited literature, this study develops a slow tourism model with a predetermined set of indicators modified to make them location specific. These indicators relate to three broad dimensions from the slow food tourism model: authenticity, equity and social capital. These dimensions are identified from discussion with the destination marketing organization. Authenticity refers to perceptions, authenticating markers, sources used for endorsement (historical, WOM, familial/traditional) at heritage food tourism destinations. Equity in this study refers to equitable local partnerships at different levels of the food supply chain. It focuses on collaborations with local businesses and fair partnerships. Social capital refers to social bonding between local businesses and hosts and visitors. In summary, this study examines slow tourism in a suburban town of Arizona (United States). It also aims to suggest a slow tourism corridor to promote locally-grown produce and authentic heritage. In summary two research questions guide the purpose of this study:

1. To what extent the food experiences at the purposeful selection of restaurants and farms in Gilbert can be labeled as slow tourism offerings?

2. What is the potential for a slow food tourism corridor in the Greater Phoenix region

METHOD

Data is anchored in ten restaurants, a farm, and a farmers market. These are recognized by the office of Economic Development (at Gilbert) as representing local or ethnic produce and heritage. A mixed methods approach is used. Data is being collected in three phases. In the first step, themes that describe the restaurant, farms, and the farmers market are being gleaned with the help of content analysis. Traditionally, content analysis is based on written or visual material, including web pages, brochures, advertisements, booklets, magazines, newspapers, films, videotapes, photographs, and white papers (Jenkins, 1999). First, the a priori coding method is used. This method focuses on previously identified topics (Weber, 1990). The content of the online review is researched based on these topics. The list of authenticating markers is taken from the literature (Chhabra et al., 2013; Sims 2009). As Perdue (2001) points out, the performance of a website depends on several factors such as speed and accessibility, ease of navigation, graphical / graphical appeal (pleasing to the eye) and quality of content. All items are being rated on a three point scale with 1 = “not mentioned”, 2 = “somewhat mentioned” and 3 = “mentioned”. “Yes” and “No” will be used to encode the presence or absence of coding criteria, respectively. For example, one of the coding criteria relates to the presence of “Traditional menu items”. The company's web pages and words such as "menu", "Mexican", or texts related to menu will be noted. These will be matched with the slow tourism constructs to obtain insights into the manner in which they relate to any component of the model.

In the second phase, the participation observation technique will be used. The businesses will be visited and the tangible and intangible aspects of the site will be examined. Atmospheric and services capes-based themes will be identified to determine if they adhere to the slow tourism dimensions of the model and resonate with the online descriptions (traces of representative dissonance will be flagged). In the third phase, semi-structured interview of organization managers will be conducted. In the third phase, managers of the organizations are interviewed using semi-structured interviews on site, by email or by phone. The aim is to gain an understanding of the efforts and perspectives of restaurant managers regarding local produce and their perspective of the authenticity dimensions displayed. Considering the fact that food is an important factor for travelers, the following elements will be identified: “Agricultural, touristic and artisan policies,” Policies for hospitality, awareness and training” and “Partnerships” (How to Become, n.d.). Based on the results, it will be determined what kind of slow experiences are offered in the town. A slow food tourism corridor with strategic visitor touchpoints will be suggested. Slow tourism should be “a centrally supported, public-private sector partnership that promotes a competitive identity of quality offerings which are sustainable alternatives to mass-tourism” (Conway & Timms 2010, p. 12). Finally, a list of potential stakeholders for the corridor will be identified and a unified theme will be suggested to connect different touch points.

FINDINGS

This study is part of my practicum work and is in progress. I have designed the slow tourism model and will be testing it in the next two months. Based on the results, a slow food tourism corridor with strategic visitor touchpoints will be suggested.

CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

This study was initiated based on the need identified by the management of the Department of Economic Development in Gilbert. A list of food places was selected by the management. Evidently, slow food tourism and the concept of a slow food corridor are lucrative projects for the town to examine and plan. This study will, therefore, make an important contribution to the industry and towards scholarship. Slow food tourism, centered on ethical behavior of guests, can be considered at the growth stage across the world and only a handful of places have been certified as slow food tourism destinations in the United States (Lowry & Lee 2016). More and more destinations are showing interest in examining its potential, both in terms of sustainability and collaborative opportunities. Based on the study results, a slow food corridor will suggest a sustainable tourism trail with heritage touch points that can hold tremendous potential to promote cooperation between the various stakeholders of slow food tourism. Suggestions will be given on how different role players in the supply chain can sustain authenticity and localness and social embeddedness across the corridor using a unified theme. The intent is to offer insights on how interest can be transformed into effective cooperation through the creation of a common logo and promotion, the organization of cultural events, and the exchange of experience. As pointed out by Conway & Timms, “it can be better planned and comanaged at the community level, and can be pro-poor, participatory and ‘bottom-up’, rather than ‘top-down’ in its organizational forms” (2010, p. 12).

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