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Coping with Tourism: The Case of Sitka, Alaska

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ABSTRACT

In this case study, resident coping strategies for dealing with the proposed development of a cruise style dock in the community of Sitka, AK are examined. Tourism literature is surprisingly devoid of research examining coping behaviors; therefore a definition developed by Folkman and Lazarus (1980) is utilized. This research shows that the tourism planning process is an example of coping behavior, although certain elements of community dynamics prevented coping strategies from being particularly successful.

Keywords: tourism planning, coping, case study.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism planning and development often forces residents of host communities to evaluate their perceptions of community and examine their role within them, as well as consider the balance of quality of life and economic development. An anticipated increase (or decrease) in tourism demand can change the landscape of a community for better or worse. There has been extensive research examining the attitudes of community residents toward tourism development. A variety of studies have found that attitudes toward and support for tourism development are interrelated with dependence upon tourism for income, perceived of impacts of tourism, and level of economic development within the community, thus amplifying their relationship (Andereck & Vogt, 2000; Johnson, Snepenger & Akis, 1993; Perdue, Allen & Long, 1990). Actual changes in resident behaviors within host communities from tourism development and contact with tourists have been empirically studied to a lesser extent.

In this research, coping behaviors of community residents in response to the proposed development of a cruise dock in the community of Sitka, AK were explored. Sitka is an island community in SE Alaska, populated by slightly less than 9,000 residents as of the turn of the millennium, making it the fourth largest city in Alaska (Mazza & Kruger, 2005). The cruise industry is an important part of the economy in Sitka, and the community accommodates around

250,000 cruise passengers every year, resulting in a ratio of 1 resident to 25 cruise passengers per annum.

Despite the sizeable number of cruise passengers arriving in Sitka annually, the community lacks a docking pier, resulting in passengers being lightered to and from cruise ships from their deep water anchoring. A cruise style dock and staging area has been proposed and voted on several times, but the majority of residents have not supported the proposal. These outcomes have been attributed to the majority of residents not desiring a further commercialized community and greater number of tourists. Within the community, there are differing opinions on the cruise industry and the need for a cruise style dock, sometimes resulting in friction between hosts and guests, as well as between hosts and hosts (i.e., selected residents vs. government, commercial fisherman vs. recreational fisherman, business owners vs. non business owners). Over the past several years, the community undertook two separate tourism planning processes, resulting in working documents that were vastly different. The tourism planning process was deemed to be complex by those involved as well as the authors of this paper. Without support and intent to adopt by the majority of community stakeholders and the local government, the process was severely hindered and lacked appropriate adoption.

This research examines how community residents have coped with a proposed development of a cruise style dock and the threat of additional tourism development. Tourism planning, as defined by Gunn (2002), involves not only the planning of physical elements like transportation infrastructure and amenities, but also the planning of social and economic elements. These three elements of tourism planning are particularly relevant in this case, as Sitka residents were not only concerned with the proposed dock, but also the implications that an increase in tourism demand or change in type of tourist would have on their community socially, economically and environmentally. This paper seeks to accomplish three goals: First, review research from the psychology and tourism bodies of literature; second, examine the tourism planning process in Sitka as a coping strategy; and third, discuss lessons learned from the planning process and provide suggestions for those looking to undertake similar planning processes in the future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conflict between hosts and guests within the tourism domain is a well-documented phenomenon, yet a deeper examination of community response through the tourism planning process is often overlooked in empirical research. Doxey's (1975) Irridex Model has been used in describing conflicts between hosts and guests. This model proposes four-stages that as the number of tourists increases, host populations' react to their presence in an increasingly unfriendly manner. This model runs parallel to Butler's (2006) tourism area life cycle, in which tourism destinations develop along a curve. Butler's (2006) curve starts with a small number of tourists and high level of resident support and involvement, and eventually reaches a stagnation point. At the point of stagnation, destinations can rejuvenate themselves via rebranding, find new markets, or go into decline. Sitka shows evidence of a community situated on the top of Butler's curve. The number of cruise passengers has remained constant for several years with slight decreases with economic downturns. There is uncertainty about which direction the community will develop in the future. Some elements of the community (i.e., those economically dependent on tourism for a living) hope for rejuvenation, while others (i.e., those concerned with community degradation) hope to remain at current levels or fewer cruise tourists.

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Following Doxey's (1975) and Butler's (2006) model, coping emerged as a key behavioral response to uncertainty. In their seminal work on coping strategies, Folkman and Lazarus (1980) identified two major types of coping focus: problem and emotion. "Problem-focused coping includes efforts to manage the stressor and change the person-environment relationship causing the stress, while emotion-focused coping regulates emotional distress" (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, p223) (Table 1). Subsequent research has shown those coping with stressful situations almost always utilize both problem and emotion-focused coping, as individuals cope with both the stressful situation and their emotional response (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Generally speaking, those who are dealing with stressors they see as controllable engage in problem-focused coping, while those who are dealing with stressors that seem uncontrollable engage in emotion-focused coping. Thoits (1995) corroborated the findings of Folkman and Lazarus and found that most research on coping has found that individuals generally utilize multiple coping strategies within both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies.

Table 1. Definition and Examples of Problem and Emotion-focused Coping Behaviors

	Problem-Focused Coping	Emotion-focused Coping
Definition	Efforts to manage the stressor and change the person-environment relationship causing the stress.	The regulation of stressful emotions.
Examples	Confronting the stressor, seeking social support, problem solving	Distancing, self controlling, accepting responsibility, escape/avoidance, positive reappraisal

Source: Folkman & Lazarus, 1985

Within the tourism realm, coping has only peripherally been addressed. A continuum of strategies developed by Ap and Crompton (1993) outlines strategies utilized by residents dealing with domestic tourists. The authors suggested residents adopted four strategies for dealing with tourists: embracement, tolerance, adjustment, and withdrawal. This model is more suited for residents dealing with tourism impacts, and the authors identify that cultural differences between hosts and guests used to develop their model were not all that different. Their sample was residents in Texas tourism destination that attracted nearby residents.

METHODS

Social scientists from the USDA Forest Service selected Sitka, AK as a case study for examining tourism and recreation planning and development. In spring and summer 2010, researchers conducted 22 in-depth qualitative interviews with key informants and resident stakeholders from the Sitka community who were involved in either one or both of the planning processes the community undertook. Interviewees were asked to describe their involvement in tourism planning and discuss how they thought the planning processes affected themselves and the community. Content analysis of minutes from local government meetings that took place during the planning processes was done in order to provide a frame of reference for the researchers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We posit that the tourism planning process is a form of problem-focused coping. Using information obtained from analysis of in-depth interviews we aim to show that community residents were seeking to change the person-environment relationship and therefore mitigate the stress caused by the proposed tourism dock. Additionally, we offer evidence of emotion-focused coping undertaken by community residents during the tourism planning process. Quotes provided in this section are paraphrased from notes taken by the researchers during in-depth interviews.

In 1994, the Sitka Pulp Mill closed its doors for operation, leaving the town without one its largest employers. At that time, according to one resident, there was a community forum in order to explore options for the community to sustain the employment of its population. According to one resident:

“Tourism planning started with a public forum in 1994 when the pulp mill was closing. Initial efforts focused on improving lightering and the waterfront facilities for the visitor industry. There was an overall sentiment that they were losing one economic sector while gaining in another – and that their decisions regarding community and/or tourism development needed to be more strategic or well thought out.”

As a result of increasing demand from citizens for a community document that could guide governance into the future, the Sitka commissioned a comprehensive plan in 1999. The comprehensive plan resulted in several spin off plans addressing issues deemed important by residents of the community. The first and second plans addressed municipal waste and affordable housing in the community, while the third addressed tourism. According to local government meeting minutes, the tourism planning process began in 2005, when Sitka residents sought a response to the proposed construction of a cruise dock (Version1 of the tourism plan). A community member involved in the Version1 plan described its beginnings:

“The third effort [of the long range planning commission] was directed at tourism and they tried a collaborative approach because of the conflicts (i.e., cruise ship and dock, commercial and charter fishing, taxes, infrastructure) evident in the community. At the time there were plans to build a dock in town for the cruise ships. It was supported by the Assembly and those working in the tourism industry, but many residents were against a dock.”

The plan utilized a participatory model developed by Chrislip and Larson (1994), where organized community meetings served as open space for residents to discuss issues they thought were important. Version1 began as a ‘bottom-up’ expression of a problem many citizens saw as affecting their community – many were worried that the construction of a cruise style dock in their community could allow the cruise industry to increase the number of ships servicing Sitka, and tourism in their community would “get out of control” and be undesirable to the majority of residents if there were not a guiding document for the community to follow.

The participatory model was mediated by a local citizen, and welcomed any and all residents, businesses and organizations to express their opinions on a variety of issues related to tourism in

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Sitka. The participatory nature of the Version1 planning process allowed residents' freedom of expression and provided a platform for public input on an issue that would affect the entire community. The participatory nature of this planning process, however, resulted in a process that lasted more than a year, leading some resident, business, and organizational stakeholders to drop out of the process. At the conclusion of the Version1 planning process, the Sitka Assembly failed to adopt the plan citing that all interests and concerns about tourism were not present or supported in the document, and the majority of the recommendations contained therein were largely ignored.

“The collaborative plan attempted to heal some of these differences. There were lots of people brought into the collaborative process, but the group didn't get the businesses because there were too many anti-dock participants. The pro-growth pulled out of the process because they saw the plan as “controlling” tourism volume.”

The Version1 planning process represents a case of problem-focused coping, where residents coped by being engaged in the collaborative planning process. Engaging the community in this collaborative planning process is a form of confronting the stressor, and indeed likely represents one of the most civil methods of confrontation. Utilization of the collaborative planning process allowed residents to problem solve while also garnering social support, with individuals learning about others perspectives and even occasionally changing their opinions as a result of the collaborative process meetings.

“The collaborative process, for people that stuck it out – and had different opinions – they had a better understanding of each other's perspective.”

Emotion-focused coping also occurred over the course of the Version1 planning process. Despite their early enthusiasm about being engaged in the planning process, as the process dragged on, many residents (It is important to note here that business owners and members of governmental organizations are also residents) began to feel frustration with the process itself, and distance themselves from its activities. Some felt withdrew from the process:

“Everyone was invited to the table during the planning process, but it narrowed down to antigrowth folks. Business owners and charter fishing operations felt alienated and left the table.”

While others felt those who left the table lacked the longevity to see it through:

“These parties did not have the patience or the faith to see the collaborative process through to the end – or felt their interest and perspectives would not be honored by the process. There was an abrupt defection with all parties defecting at once.”

Finally, when the Assembly voted to not adopt the plan (Version1), resident stakeholders felt disappointment and sadness, and many stated that they would no longer participate in community planning activities or government processes.

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Shortly after Version1, a second tourism planning process (Version2) was mandated by the Mayor and Assembly of Sitka, and funding was provided by the local government to hire a consultant to guide the process and write the plan. This planning process was viewed as a 'top down' approach to tourism planning where an outside consultant with tourism planning experience was brought in to lead the planning process.

While local residents were invited to attend all the Version2 planning meetings, many chose not to. A select few residents from the Version1 planning process attended meetings and attempted to express their opinions and concerns. While a small number of residents were a part of the Version2 planning process, the majority of local businesses and organizations were involved, as they were strongly encouraged to do so by local political figures.

“A consultant was hired to “fill in the blanks” from Version1– or voids where some segments of the community were not represented. There was a “reverse alienation” of Version1 folks.”

The Version2 planning process was much shorter in time schedule and therefore most involved at the beginning of the process were present at the end. The Version2 tourism planning process was immediately ratified and adopted by the Assembly; however, it is still unclear as to how many of the recommendations have been implemented.

The Version2 planning process was not so much a case of resident problem-focused coping as it was an impetus for other problem-focused coping behaviors. Some residents who were involved in one or both planning processes were pushed to become involved in other community based tourism organizations. Other community residents decided to shift their political backing, or even run for local office themselves:

“The community was in a “bad spot” for quite a long time. The Version2 group focused attention on the division within the community. The current Assembly is working to get past divisions.”

Emotion-focused coping was also evident in aftermath of the Version2 planning process. The lack of resident involvement in the Version2 planning process led many residents to feel disconnected or isolated from their community, and withdrawal from many activities and community processes:

“The trust with the residents was broken. Version2 stakeholder group was skewed. Version2 did some harm in the community, the city just wanted to get the tourism planning over.”

CONCLUSION

This case showed how the tourism planning process can be used as a method of coping with a stressor such as a projected increase in tourism demand. The Version1 planning process is an example of a distinctly problem-focused coping behavior, where residents attempted to manage their stressor and change the relationship with their environment by taking control of the situation. While the Version2 planning process wasn't problem-focused coping in and of itself, it was an impetus for problem-focused coping behavior like running for political office. Both

tourism planning processes involved emotion-focused coping, with certain parties distancing themselves from and avoiding interaction at different stages during both planning processes.

We conclude that while the tourism planning process was a coping strategy for residents facing the proposal of the development of a cruise dock, it was not a particularly successful one because divisions in the community remain and a lack of local government support was evident during vital stages of the planning process. This research shows that, when considering tourism and tourism development, it is important to engage community residents before they perceive tourism as a stressor. These drawn out tourism planning processes resulted in no significant decisions for or against the introduction of a cruise docking pier, and Sitka remains a community at a crossroads in a destination life cycle.

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