

## **Terrorism, Tourism, and the Issue Attention Cycle. An Exploratory and Longitudinal Investigation of Student Perceptions of Travel to the US Post September 11.**

**Andrea Valentin – *Graduated 2003***

### **Abstract**

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States (US) the vulnerabilities of the tourism industry to changes in perception as to travel safety and security. The events of September 11 and subsequent policy measures confirmed that an act of terrorism, although not a new phenomenon, may have a substantial impact on a destination's image. Nevertheless, just as significant as the actual terrorist attack is the role of the media in reporting the event and therefore influencing public and political perceptions of the relative safety of travel and of destinations. Despite the broad recognition of the role of the media in influencing tourist and destination images, the extent to which media shapes tourism images in the context of terrorism is relatively underrepresented in the literature. However, Hall (2002) suggested that the notion of an 'issue attention cycle' (Downs 1972) could be applied to explain public policy and travel behaviour over time in the post September 11 environment. Therefore, this thesis seeks to establish whether the 'issue attention cycle' is applicable to opinions and perceptions of the US as a tourist destination considering the substantial implications of the September 11 attacks. The objectives of this thesis are to examine students' perceptions on the events of September 11 in the US upon future career and travel plans and, at the same time, to investigate the perceived image of the US as a tourist destination. Moreover, media reports relating to September 11 and tourism were content analysed in order to study the applicability of the 'issue attention cycle'.

To meet the aims of the research, exploratory research was conducted. First, a questionnaire was administered to students enrolled in tourism papers at the University of Otago; second, a content analysis was undertaken of the local Dunedin newspaper, the Otago Daily Times, to illustrate the relevance of the 'issue attention cycle'. Results were compared to data collected shortly after the terrorist attacks in 2001 in a similar student survey by Duval and Hall (2002). While some parallels could be drawn between the results, respondents held statistically different perceptions of the terrorist attacks only one year after. In general, respondents in 2002 did not appear too concerned about the terrorist attacks and its impacts upon future career or travel plans as opposed to findings from 2001. This may have been caused by the increased timeline to the events as well as decreasing media reports. Analysis of newspaper coverage illustrated that the application of the 'issue attention cycle' is well grounded.

Arguing from the premise that the issue of terrorism, and accordingly tourism, has followed cyclical attention in the print media, empirical results support the assumption that the media should not be underestimated in influencing tourist behaviour and the image of a destination. A distinct need for further research on interrelations between the media and tourism is suggested to comprehend travellers' and members of the tourism industries' response to crisis over time.

Downs, A. 1972, 'Up and down with ecology - the issue attention cycle', *The Public Interest*, vol.28, 38-50

Duval, D. and Hall, C.M. 2002, 'People may finally realise just how important we are" New Zealand Student Perceptions of Future Career Opportunities in the Tourism Industry Following the Events of September 11, 2001', *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Education*, vol.1, no.2, na.

Hall, C.M. 2002, 'Travel safety, terrorism and the media: the significance of the issue-attention cycle', *Current Issues in Tourism*, vol.5, no.5, 458-466