

The Implementation of Tourism Strategies: A Critical Analysis of two New Zealand Case Studies

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Abstract

This thesis examines the implementation of tourism strategies in a rural community context. Applying public policy implementation theory to tourism research, this study investigates questions related to connections and collaborations between stakeholders, decision-making and inducing action, and the relation between objectives in a strategy document and actual outcomes of a policy process. Two tourism planning strategies in rural peripheral communities of New Zealand's South Island are investigated adopting a case study approach. While these strategies have in common their geographical and content foci, they differ in terms of commissioning agencies, stakeholder and community involvement, age, resource allocation, and planning and implementation approaches. The strategies are four and ten years old. One is a top-down strategy by a government agency, the other is the result of a community bottom-up process.

Using a pragmatic methodical approach and applying a framework that incorporates the implementation environment including stakeholders and decisive events during strategy making, this research assesses the two cases individually and comparatively. Thus applying a non-linear framework and examining strategies that allow for an investigation of longer implementation timeframes, this study overcomes long-standing issues in this type of research. It fills a gap in the literature as it is the first comprehensive analysis of tourism plan implementation to employ public policy implementation theory in one coherent case study approach.

The methods applied in this study include content analysis of strategy and policy documents, internal documents such as minutes of meetings and newspaper articles as well as semi-structured interviews. Starting with strategy makers and 'key implementers', a snowballing process was used to identify further interviewees and to also follow the policy process as perceived by the main actors in it. This combination of methods allowed for a discovery of the policy story; it assists a process-oriented investigation of tourism plan implementation while at the same time providing factual information and verifying stakeholder statements through triangulating interview results with the content analysis of documents.

Overall, for both the top-down and the bottom-up planning case, implementation was found to be dynamic and highly dependent on the actors at the grassroots level. Many critical stakeholders are volunteer community members who have little or no experience in tourism planning. Most actors are tourism operators or are otherwise involved with the industry. However, as some actors are not actively involved in the tourism industry but represent interests related to the protection of the social and natural environment, their views and actions have the potential to be anti-tourism development and therefore they evoke conflict.

The two planning approaches do not differ significantly in terms of bureaucratic control and political guidance. Institutions such as, for example, district councils or economic development agencies, mainly impact on the availability of resources to plan and implement strategy goals. Whether or not

goals are achieved therefore ultimately depends on the commitment and interest of all stakeholders involved. Other important factors for policy success are the stability of stakeholder relationships and the level of information and knowledge held by those stakeholders, particularly in situations where there is little support from agencies. This is evident where a stakeholder's previous experience in community work and relevant know-how is considered an asset among the volunteers who are responsible for many of the projects. The potential for conflict and the necessity for implementers to 'make do' with the funding, knowledge and information they have, accounts for high volatility of priorities and goals during implementation.

Key findings that relate to both the tourism planning and the public policy literature refer to the similarities of implementation processes for top-down and bottom-up strategies at a grassroots level, the significant role and decisive influence that inexperienced volunteer implementers have in such settings, and the high degree to which policy change takes place during such processes.

Profile

After three years as a consultant and research associate for a German governmental research institute I was looking forward to three worry-free years of research on an Otago University Postgraduate Scholarship. Having an academic background in geography and political studies, I wanted to carry out research on a related topic and I investigated tourism planning and policy implementation in New Zealand. Hoping to become an academic after that I knew I also needed more teaching experience to achieve this. The Department of Tourism was really supportive and did not only provide an inspiring research environment but also the opportunity to teach and employed me first as a Tutor and then as an Assistant Lecturer.

With plenty of teaching experience and an Otago PhD nearly finished, job hunting was a breeze. By then I had decided to stay in New Zealand and I accepted a position as a Lecturer in Tourism Management at the Victoria Management School, Victoria University of Wellington, even before graduating with my PhD in May 2009! Now happily settled in Wellington and I'm teaching courses on Visitor Management, Tourism in New Zealand and Tourism Research Methods. For someone with research interests in tourism management, governance and planning, Wellington is the ideal place to be and it's fair to say that my time at Otago put me in a great position to land my dream job.