

## The Wine Islands, British Columbia: An Exploration of Wine Tourism Network Relationships

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### Abstract

Despite recognition of the potential benefits of wine tourism development for businesses and regions, the wine and tourism industries are characterised by a substantial lack of cohesion, understanding and integration. If the potential benefits of wine tourism are to be realised, it becomes critical to understand how the wine and tourism industries can be integrated. Studies examining wine tourism integration are disparate in approach and technique and the linkages between these two industries are not well understood. Wine tourism networks are therefore at the forefront of this study.

Network linkages can be understood in terms of both positions of the individual units in relation to one another and the shared interactions which they engage in. This study of the Wine Islands region (British Columbia) adopted a blended approach to network analysis that embeds network maps (illustrating structural characteristics) within a qualitative understanding of the interactional nature and transactional contents of emerging regional wine tourism networks. This approach allowed for analysis of multiple levels of winery and tourism relationships in an attempt to more fully understand the complexity of wine tourism networks within the case study region.

Many forms of networks were found to be present in the case study region, but no formal organisational networks were present. Rather, this study found predominantly informal dyadic relationships between wineries and between wineries and SMTEs, with few formal dyadic relationships, spanning communicative, exchange and social transactional contents. The region supports formalised vertical organisation sets, however, these tend to be tourism driven rather than winery driven. Regional level wine industry organisations constitute the region's horizontal action sets, with the regional wine industry marketing organisation having a central coordinating role in the network structure. However, it is not the mere presence of a formal organisational network structure that prompts vertical and diagonal linkages, but the social relationships embedded within these institutional arrangements and the development of more densely connected networks. Several impediments to inter- and intra-industry relationship development were also identified, including: proximity, both spatial and non spatial such as actor similarity; perceptions of asymmetric benefits between the industries; resource scarcity; product quantity and quality; lack of

infrastructure; relevancy of wine tourism to some businesses; business goal (in)congruency; the lack of a champion; lack of trust; and the stability of the region's actors.

As one of the first comprehensive studies of wine tourism networks and their characteristics, this study makes a significant methodological contribution to the tourism and wine tourism literature by applying a blended approach to network analysis to gain a holistic, in-depth understanding of the structure and qualitative nature of wine and tourism industry networks. An understanding of the structural weaknesses and centrality in the network, as well as those barriers to the development of networks allow for policy and management responses. Further, this study's findings allows for benchmarking and comparison across other wine tourism destination networks, and provides the basis for the development of best practice in wine region network development.