

Tourism management and community participation in York

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Aim

To give students an understanding of how it is possible to develop community participation in a tourist historic city.

This case study aims to make the students aware of the following:

- the types of community participation that have been suggested in the tourism literature;
- the development of both community participation and stakeholder involvement in tourism management in York.

Keywords

community participation; public–private sector partnerships; stakeholders; tourist historic city.

Summary

This chapter examines the changing nature of tourism management within the tourist-historic city of York. The socio-economic and environmental impacts associated with tourism in such contexts is well reviewed in the literature together with the need for a more sustainable approach to visitor management. It is argued that community involvement is a key component in the sustainable management of urban tourism. Widening participation in tourism management and policy-making requires the development of appropriate techniques. In the case of York, a number of participation initiatives have been implemented. The tourism partnership in York is particularly active and can be regarded as a model worthy of further evaluation by tourism practitioners and students.

Learning outcomes

To make students

- understand the need for community involvement in tourism planning in urban areas;
- be aware of the need to involve all stakeholders in the tourism policy process in urban areas and in particular the tourist historic city;
- identify the limitations for community participation in tourism management.

Discussion topics

- Why is community participation regarded as being necessary to the success of tourism in urban areas?
- What are the main techniques being used in York to encourage community involvement?
- Who are the main stakeholders in tourism in the tourist historic city of York? Is the community truly represented?

Do all stakeholders share the same interests in tourism?
Which stakeholders have the power to get things done?

- Identify the benefits of public–private sector partnerships in the tourism management of the tourist historic city of York.
- Suggest the reasons why the full range of community participation techniques are not used in the tourist historic city of York.

Introduction

A great deal has been written in the tourism literature in recent years on involving the local community in the development and management of tourism destinations. Terms such as community tourism and community participation in tourism have been developed to describe these proposals. The rationale for these suggestions has been that they would make a positive contribution to what has been described in the literature as sustainable tourism.

However, as academics and tourism managers have tried to define what is meant by sustainable tourism, they have found that the concept is ambiguous and is thus capable of many different interpretations. For example, an economically sustainable tourism product may be environmentally unsustainable. To counter these difficulties new terms such as alternative tourism and more recently ‘soft’ tourism have been developed to describe forms of tourism which are often thought to be in balance with the natural and human environment.

With the exception of some recent work by Brent Ritchie (1993) on Calgary, most of the examples of community tourism and community participation have been in rural or peripheral regions. Other examples have been cited in the developing world where community tourism and community participation have been seen as ways of protecting vulnerable societies. If community tourism and community participation are to have a central position in tourism management and development, then the usefulness of these concepts has to be examined in an urban context in an advanced country.

York is an historic ‘gem’ city situated in the north of England. Founded in Roman times it has a rich assemblage of buildings, walls and Bars (gateways) representative of its long urban history. The main attractions in the city are the medieval walls and the Shambles, the Minster, the Jorvik Centre, the Castle Museum and the National Railway Museum. This urban fabric has proven attractive to visitors and York, a city with a population of around 100,000 now has around 4 million visitors a year. Tourist historic cities such as York exemplify many of the problems associated with tourism: increased congestion, parking problems, litter, crime, increased commercial rents, the erosion of the historic fabric and a deterioration in the

quality of life for residents. Consequently, managers and planners of urban tourism are increasingly turning to community tourism as a means of mitigating against such impacts and maintaining the integrity of the tourism products.

Suggested management techniques for the implementation of community tourism and community participation

Community participation seems to have its roots in early 1970s' rural America. Gunn advocated the use of forums to ensure public participation: 'By means of forums with community leaders and constituencies, designers can foster open discussion of the desired goals of tourism development' (Gunn, 1972: 66). Gunn considered that community approaches would contribute to increased quality of life for both residents and visitors. Murphy in a far-reaching work (1985) argued for community tourism. However, despite making the case for community tourism elegantly and designing a model, Murphy did not include a blueprint of how to achieve it in reality.

During the 1980s and 1990s increasing attention was paid to the need to establish techniques for the achievement of community tourism, community participation in tourism planning and development and management decision-making. A number of problems have been highlighted in the literature such as the difficulty of defining community and the unequal power relationships between government and officials, on the one hand, and the community, on the other. The relationship between key stakeholders in the tourism industry and the community is also biased in favour of the industry.

Despite these difficulties a variety of techniques have been mentioned in the tourism literature, which are thought to contribute to the achievement of community tourism and community participation. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine the techniques and their application in detail, however, there seems to be a degree of consensus over the techniques which are listed below:

- establish a permanent tourism committee or forum, with the widest possible community (stakeholders) representation which acts in an advisory and consultative capacity to management;
- local, regional or national government to give consultative advice and continuous financial support on community issues/initiatives;
- the community to be balloted on key issues in tourism strategy with opportunities to vote for alternatives;
- use of small group processes and/or focus groups to facilitate democratic process;
- the use of regular attitudinal surveys of the community to identify issues and solutions;
- the use of outside speakers and experts to impartially inform the community of the implications of proposals of tourism development and management;
- the provision of educational materials and documentaries, design workshops and visual presentations to inform and educate;
- hold public meetings on key planning issues, introduce measures to improve the quality of work in the tourism industry – training initiatives to raise the career profile of tourism employment;
- organize events, residents weekends, festivals to ensure the widest possible local community participation.

Methodologies such as these vary in their appropriateness according to destination type. The case study of York is indicative of the opportunities and constraints on such initiatives in tourist historic cities.

Background to tourism management in York

In the 1960s The UK government placed increasing emphasis on the conservation of historic townscapes such as that in York. Conservation policies in York became a model for the conservation of other English historic towns, but did not once mention the words tourist or tourism! York at that time had a diverse manufacturing industrial base consisting of engineering, the manufacture of railway rolling stock, and chocolates. The municipal government at this time was not concerned with tourism, but it saw as peripheral to its main preoccupations with modernization and attracting the inward investment of new manufacturing industry.

In the early 1970s the largely Georgian character of the central business district of York only just avoided the sort of redevelopment that was to transform (not always for the better) so many other UK cities. The hands-off nature of York city management towards tourism continued for most of the 1970s. Tourism was seen as contributing to low pay in York and tourists were perceived as a nuisance. During this period it was not unusual in the tourist season, to see York citizens wearing T shirts with the logo 'I'm not a tourist'. For these citizens, in other words, and for many others in the York community, tourism and tourists were seen as making negative contributions to city life.

Conditions leading to change in tourism management in York

In the late 1970s and through the 1980s York, as in so many UK cities, saw an acceleration in the loss of jobs in manufacturing employment which accumulatively resulted in fundamental changes in the city's economic base. It began to dawn on city management that the city was becoming largely dependent on the service sector for its income and employment. A new university founded in the 1960s developed a thriving conference trade which helped the economic life of the city. The university's academic community contributed greatly to the initiation and maintenance of the cultural life of the city.

The late 1970s and 1980s also saw the growth of tourism in the world generally for reasons which do not have to be recited here. In particular during this period there was an upsurge of interest in cultural and heritage tourism. In the 1990s as the interest in cultural and heritage tourism has perhaps passed its peak York has benefited from the growth of interest in urban tourism. The result of the changes in the economic life of York has led to a reappraisal of the municipal council's role in tourism management.

The development of tourism management in York

In recent years York city council has worked with predominantly local organizations which seek to enhance the urban environment in the city, for the benefit of residents and visitors. For example, the city council issued a small grant to the association of Voluntary Guides and is supportive of street entertainers and buskers. The city council worked with English Heritage and North Yorkshire County Council to refurbish historic buildings through the York Town Scheme. The majority of the city centre is covered by Conservation Area designation. The focus of the city council on visitor management and conservation of the urban environment and a focus on resident and community needs as defined by the council themselves brought them into conflict with the commercial interests of the tourism sector. The private sector established the York Visitor and Conference Bureau (YCVB) now the York Tourism Bureau (YTB) in 1987 to promote the city as a tourist attraction. This consultative body now has a membership of some 200, representative of a broad range of tourist interests in the city. The YTB is somewhat unique for the UK because it was initiated and funded by the private sector.

In the early 1990s the city council commissioned a study by Touche Ross (1994), which, while it identified the strength of York's position in the market, identified a number of weaknesses (lack of reinvestment, poor market intelligence, and failure to exploit synergy between attractions) and threats (absence of monitoring methods, environmental damage/capacity restraints, shopping tourism and the fading appeal of the Jorvik). The Touche Ross study (1994) reinforced the approach the city council had been taking (visitor management) but advocated a stronger liaison with the private sector. Following the Touche Ross report the council, the private sector and key players in the industry established the York Tourism Forum in early 1995. Both the council and the private sector indicated an interest in the community of York. However, while the city council wished to see the views of local residents built into the process, the private sector were keen to emphasize the contribution tourism made to the lives of the local community, as a source of income, in particular. Moreover, the private sector wishes to redress what they saw as negative attitudes of residents towards tourism.

The Tourism Forum can be defined as a partnership of the city council, the regional tourist board, York Tourism Bureau, the Chamber of Commerce, the local Training and Enterprise Council, the tourism industry, trade unions and the York Archaeological Trust. Community groups and residents are represented through the council rather than through direct participation.

The Forum have identified a tourism strategy for York (1995) (*First Stop York: Strategy and Action Plan*) with six key goals:

- economic and employment benefits to be maximized;
- the city to be recognized as a high quality tourist destination that is continually being enhanced, both in terms of product and customer service;

- a wide range of quality jobs to be available – with training and career opportunities;
- the potentially negative environmental and social impacts of the tourism industry to be managed so that both the quality of life for residents and the enjoyment of York by visitors will be enhanced;
- local citizens to appreciate the benefits of tourism in York and therefore give it their support;
- those engaged in the industry in York to possess the means to understand and respond to national and international trends in their business.

The elements of the strategy inevitably reflect the interests of different partners but the local community figures quite prominently. However, the input of the local community into the implementation of the strategy is indirect; residents are represented by the city council. The views of local residents on issues in their neighbourhoods are facilitated by neighbourhood forums which are meetings of local residents together with representatives of the city council. Conservationists are represented by the York Archaeological Trust. Employees are represented by the trade unions and non-tourism businesses by the Chamber of Commerce.

Power within the partnership remains unequal: the tourism industry and the local authority remain the main players, though this is hardly surprising as YTB and the city council are the main sources of finance. The city council remains the dominant player within the Forum, though the chair does rotate. The dominance of the council is probably inevitable, owning as it does the City Walls and Bars and a significant proportion of the heritage attractions. The Forum meets once a year and is underpinned by sub-committees/ project groups representing the key objectives, including visitor management, market intelligence, product development, bookability, training, events, retailing and residents' support.

Undoubtedly as regards the public in York, the Forum sees itself as largely conducting a public relations exercise on behalf of the tourism industry. However, its attitude is not just a cynical response to perceived negative attitudes to tourism in York. From the semi-structured interviews with members of the Forum it seems that its members are anxious to respond positively to public concerns and not just placate them. One interesting initiative has been the Residents' Weekends where residents receive free admission to a range of York's attractions; Stratford upon Avon runs a similar scheme. This was designed as a 'thank-you' from the industry and a means of informing residents on the doorstep. As part of this development the Yorkshire Tourist Board conducted attitudinal surveys of York residents at each of the attractions. The results seemed to indicate a softening of some of the negative perceptions of tourism held by the citizens of York. So the public relations aspects of the Tourism Forum seems to be working.

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