

## **LOCAL ENVIRONMENTS AND IDENTITIES AS TOURISM PRODUCTS FROM A SUSTAINABILITY PERSPECTIVE**

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### **1. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE.**

Tourism is today one of the biggest industries in the world and there is nothing to suggest that the trend will be broken. Rather the industry will probably continue to expand both in already well-established tourist regions as well as in regions yet to be exploited. This is generally seen as something positive from the standpoint of regional development since development and success are increasingly measured in terms of the number of guest nights and turnover. In the struggle to attract tourists, new profile areas and increasingly sophisticated attractions are being produced, which we as tourism consumers are expected to find interesting.

Apart from the economic advantages (usually) generated by a resort, there are a number of environmental aspects to be taken into account. Continuing tourism development places increasing demands on the people who live in attractive and expansive tourism regions. Not infrequently intentions of a vertical nature may come into conflict here with intentions in the local territory, just as conflicts of a horizontal nature may arise between different groups of actors in the local territory.

The aim of the present paper is to focus on the unique place and its characteristic identity from a consumer and producer perspective. In this context, we discuss the growth of tourism from a development perspective, a process which is present in varying degrees in the local territory. The geographical territory as such is available to everybody but at the same time it is a unique meeting place and mental territory for the inhabitants in a specific place where the common denominator is the cultural, social and local identity. Thus a too one-sided and expansive exploitation of a specific place for tourism may threaten the uniqueness and significance of the arena for the local population, and this may lead to various kinds of conflict.

Initially, our discussion takes its point of departure in the individual's desire to travel and encounter new environments and places – the consumer perspective. Thereafter the focus shifts to the producer perspective, where we base our arguments on, among other things, Butler's life-cycle model of tourism development. Using these two perspectives, we examine the problems that may arise when investments in tourism are seen as the solution for regions with structural problems and when they entail an encroachment on the territory of the local population affecting both local identity and the process of local support.

The differing intentions of groups of actors in relation to the local environment and its significant identity are thus, in our view, an important research area. The point of departure in this paper is primarily a study of the literature but also the experiences gained in connection with our participation in an EU-funded international project

entitled Fondelf – cooperation for sustainable development (Recite II). The Hovfjäll region in northern Värmland together with Galicia and Extremadura in Spain, Jura in France and Kainuu in Finland have been included in the project, which has been in progress from 2000-2002 and whose objective has been to provide a platform for the exchange of knowledge between the regions and to create long-term conditions for local employment through sustainable development based on forests and tourism.

## **2. CHOICE OF RESORT – THE CONSUMER PERSPECTIVE.**

### **1. Our choice of consumption.**

We will first consider the ideas of the American professor of sociology John Crompton, who both alone and together with other authors,<sup>1</sup> has, in a number of articles, illustrated our consumer choice in the area of tourism. Crompton takes his theoretical point of departure in a process which eventually results in the tourist's choice of resort. According to Crompton, the presumptive tourist makes three choices during the process and this results in a final decision.

The first phase in the process implies that we are dealing with a presumptive tourist who is about to select a resort to visit. The resorts the presumptive tourist is most aware of during these initial phases have a greater chance of being the final choice. Geographical areas that have already been visited and short distances also increase the likelihood of the selection of a particular resort. The next phase entails discarding alternatives. These may be alternatives which the individual finds uninteresting, too expensive or too far away. According to studies by Crompton and Ankamah,<sup>2</sup> the remaining number of resorts after this phase is not more than four. However, they note that the number covaries positively with the presumptive tourist's level of education, i.e. the higher the level of education, the greater the number of alternatives. In the third and final phase, when the presumptive tourist takes the decision on which resort to visit, the choice is largely related to the extent to which the tourist has actively gathered information about the resorts. The greater the effort and resources they experience they have expended in contacting representatives of the resort to collect further information, the greater the likelihood that that resort will be the final choice.

The criticism that may be levelled at this type of relatively stereotypical classification is that only to a very small extent does it capture the complexity of real life. No account is taken of the degree to which the individual's feelings have influenced the choice of resort and factors such as little involvement, the passive search for information, nostalgia and day-dreaming are also ignored.<sup>3</sup>

Despite this criticism, we would nevertheless emphasise the importance of the degree to which we as consumers learn about and associate with certain specific places (these arguments relate primarily to the first phase). Our own grounds for association can be seen from two perspectives:

How we form our image of and identity with the individual place on the basis of our own experiences.

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1 Crompton 1992 and Crompton & Ankamah 1993.

2 Crompton & Ankamah 1993.

3 Decrop 2000.

How, through active marketing, the media and rumour, we allow ourselves to be confronted with places with which we have had no previous relation and which by these means create an image and identity for us whose objectives we are not always aware of or take note of.

### **3. PLACE AS EXPERIENTIAL SPACE.**

Let us initially focus on the importance of a place for our identity, as place has been for a long time a central point of departure in research in human geography. As human geographers, we find it natural, in our discussion of tourism-related activity, to start with place and its various meanings. Irrespective of which inhabited place on earth we focus on, there are, usually, different categories of actors with different intentions as to how the place should be developed on the basis of the activities that are currently in progress there.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore there is social interaction and culture in the place. If we consider the people living there, we find there are both similarities and differences as regards class, life modes, lifestyles and ethnicity. People possess different kinds of resources (human capital) and have different positions of power, which, for instance, implies different conditions for entrepreneurship.<sup>5</sup> The various actors in the place are linked together and are, to varying degrees, interdependent through complex social and economic relations, both in the place and in global space. Each actor also has an activity space with a specific range, which in its turn encroaches on and overlaps the activity space of other actors in a complex manner. The activity space of the different actors contributes to the creation of the unique culture of the place.<sup>6</sup>

Let us for a moment return to our previous discussion of consumer choice with regard to tourism. According to Crompton, before phase one occurs there must initially be a need to travel somewhere. This need is based on the fact that there is something which attracts us and which thereby entices us to travel to a specific place. However, we do not always seek attractions as such but also the feeling and the identity the place creates for us<sup>7</sup>. We often seek a total experience.

In order for us to travel and become tourists, we must also have resources in the form of both time and money.<sup>8</sup> Further it is essential that there are no other restrictions which limit our decisions to travel, such as disability, age or politically related restrictions on domestic and international travel.

How the need to travel and the feeling we wish to experience arise varies over time and from individual to individual. It might be a matter of friends influencing our choice of destination, or of places which we have become interested in and attracted by through television, films, postcards, literature or which we have read about in travel brochures.<sup>9</sup>

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4 Blom 1996.

5 Karlsson & Lönnbring 1999.

6 Aronsson 2001.

7 Rose 1995.

8 Jakle 1985.

9 Karlsson 1994

Selänniemi<sup>10</sup> points out that most theories on the behaviour of tourists are based on the fact that tourists travel because they are interested in the destination and because they seek variation in their lives through visiting environments outside their ordinary living space. Given this reasoning, we can divide the driving forces behind travel into two main types, push or pull effects, terms which were originally used migration theory. Push effects refer to the need of the individual to flee from everyday life and experience something different, whilst pull effects relate to the attraction exerted by various destinations and activities.

Thus we often seek places which are able to provide us with satisfaction and which are individual in nature and reflect our life mode, previous experience and knowledge. Is it possible to simplify this by saying that our need to travel is a function of the fact that we are interested in something which is not accessible to us here and now? The American sociologist Neil J. Smelser<sup>11</sup> goes further, saying that consumption is basically only a matter of satisfying a fundamental human need.

#### **4. THE FOCUS ON THE DESTINATION.**

##### **1. Symbols as marketing instruments and tools of association.**

For places to be interesting and appeal to tourists it is thus necessary for there to be some form of attraction. Gunn<sup>12</sup> and Lew<sup>13</sup> both stress the fact that the attraction is the fundamental structure in all tourism; in other words, if there is no attraction, there is no tourism. Here we may refer to Leiper's use of a so-called system of attractions,<sup>14</sup> consisting of primary, secondary and tertiary attractions, to illustrate the importance of what a certain place or region has to offer the presumptive tourist.

The primary attraction is of such importance that the tourist selects the destination purely on that basis. The secondary attraction may contribute to the selection of the destination but is not of such interest that it alone can attract tourists. The tertiary attraction, on the other hand, is often not known beforehand but is discovered by the tourist during the course of the journey or at the destination. The latter form of attraction exerts no influence on the choice of destination, says Leiper. Leiper's system of attractions is closely linked with the classification Guide Rouge<sup>15</sup> uses when grading restaurants around the world. Here the categories "worth a journey", "worth a diversion" and "worth a visit" are used. In both cases the importance of the attraction is assessed on a scale of values.

Thus it is difficult to give a general definition of the concept of attraction and to define what constitutes an attraction, and in general terms explain the importance of an attraction from the standpoint of the individual. MacCannell<sup>16</sup> defines an attraction as a relation between a marker (travel brochures, adverts, signs etc.), a sight and a tourist, where the markers form the bridge between the tourist (consumer) and the sight, as well

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10 Selänniemi 1999.

11 Smelser 1966.

12 Gunn 1972.

13 Lew 1987.

14 Leiper 1990.

15 Earlier Guide Michelin.

16 MacCannell 1989.

as the place with its various actors (producers). According to Gunn,<sup>17</sup> the sight forms the nucleus in what the tourist is seeking and this, in its turn, may be part of the attraction or the attraction as a whole. In contrast to MacCannell and Gunn, we do not intend to make a distinction between marker and sight but will unite these two concepts in what we term symbol. A symbol is place-bound and we relate our associations to it and thus it creates the attraction for us. The term symbol stands for an attribute of some kind which provides the receiver of the image with associations to something specific. Symbols may

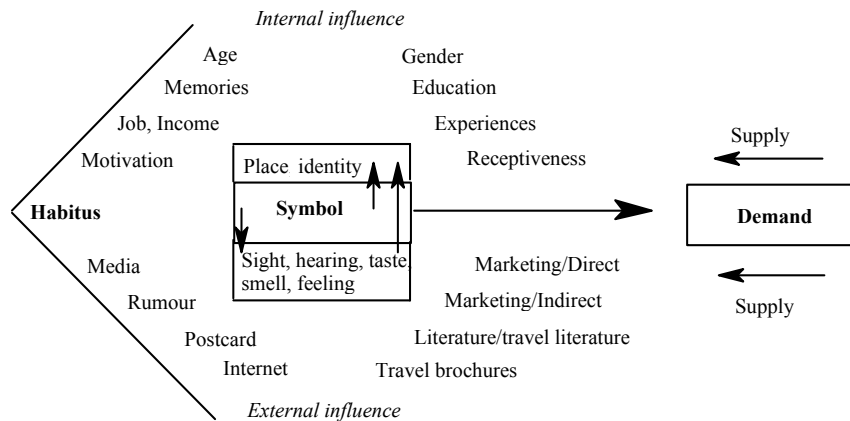


Figure 1. The importance of the symbol as an associational attribute<sup>1</sup>.

thus be buildings, statues, works of art, natural phenomena or something else that is linked to a particular place.<sup>18</sup> The Empire State Building, the Sydney Opera House and La Sagrada Familia are examples of well-known physical symbols which have considerable place-related value. It is also possible to speak of personified immaterial symbols in that they describe a lifestyle, an ideology and a mode of thinking that is accepted by many people.<sup>19</sup>

Symbols with which we come into contact by various means are thus mental labels for our experiences and the expectations we have of a place and an attraction. If we have not been there before, we have certain preconceived notions of what the journey and the destination will mean. These are based on what we know from what others have told us, on what we have read in brochures and the literature and on what we have learned via the media. Typical of this material is that it is a matter of secondary sources to which basically we choose to expose ourselves.<sup>20</sup> In this context, the symbols play a significant role as they often relate geographically to a particular place, and, at the same time, this creates identification in us. The symbol with which we are confronted gives rise to a form of total experience where all our senses are involved and where place and identity are central concepts. The symbol as such need not, however, always be visual in nature, it can arise as a result of the stimulation of other senses. However, the stimulation

<sup>17</sup> Gunn 1972.

<sup>18</sup> Blom 1994.

<sup>19</sup> Blom 2000 and Blom & Nilsson 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Aronsson & Wahlström 2000.

of one or more senses starts a reaction in us which simultaneously affects our other senses and as a result appears to us as a total experience.

The postcard is a concrete example of a visual symbol-creating place-related associative attribute where the motive, depending on the receiver's previous experience, activates all the senses and thereby creates a total experience and an identity. Through the stimulation of sight we also experience that we perceive both smells and even sounds which are characteristic of the place of which we see a picture. See figure 1. In this way local environments and identities can to some degree be packaged as tourism products.

### **5. LOCALLY, REGIONALLY, NATIONALLY OR GLOBALLY RECOGNISED SYMBOLS?**

The geographical range of the symbols is of great importance from a marketing viewpoint and thus indirectly also from an economic producer angle. Symbols of a global significance such as Sydney Opera House, the Statue of Liberty and the pyramids outside Cairo are, it may be assumed, well known by large numbers of people and thus also attract many visitors, both domestic and foreign. A symbol which is known to many people has a significant value in several respects since the importance of recognising a place and, at the same time, experiencing a pleasing sensation can produce a positive attitude in us towards a certain product.

This reasoning is related in some degree to Crompton and Ankomah's discussion of phase three, where the final choice of destination is largely a result of the tourist's being confronted with information about a particular place. However, we would emphasise that the information related to the choice of destination is not merely dependent on quantity.

In many regions around the world there is today an intensive discussion about how best to attract tourists and thereby draw advantage from the global expansion of the tourism industry. Many people turn to tourism when other industries in the region fail. A crucial factor in this discussion is to be able to develop tourism, which, in many cases, is based on a local and regional resource with a unique character, and at the same time take into account the intentions of the various actors at the local level.

### **6. THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN A REGIONAL AND LOCAL PERSPECTIVE.**

After the Second World War the tourism industry began to develop in a more distinct and purposeful manner. The mid fifties, for instance, saw the start of package holidays by air from Northern Europe to places on the Mediterranean and with it the birth of mass tourism. Mallorca and southern Spain quickly became a significant destination, not least for Swedes and Danes.

Over the years the battle for tourists thus became increasingly intense. What had previously been small fishing villages have in some cases today become hypermodern resorts, where hotels crowd together along the seafront. Spain, with its amenable summer climate, plethora of sandy beaches and the encouragement of its national government, came to host a succession of mass tourist resorts, which subsequently attracted a degree of notoriety.<sup>21</sup> Benidorm and Torremolinos, for example, were both

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21 Thea Sinclair and Bote Gómez 1996.

transformed from fishing villages into high-rise urban resorts in 15 years of intense development between 1960 and 1975. These coastal resorts were characterised by the speed of their development, uncontrolled land speculation, reliance on access by air by northern European tour operators, such that their character was largely homogeneous – based on the massification of imported, rather than indigenous, values.<sup>22</sup>

All the same, some places still market themselves as picturesque fishing villages deeply rooted in the genuine tradition that has marked the village for hundreds of years and where the local identity is still the focal point. An example of this is the following text taken from a Swedish travel brochure marketing Morocco: “*In the Berber villages life goes on in the age-old manner. Here you can still see women clad in brightly coloured clothes and with beautiful henna tattoos on their hands and faces*” (our translation).<sup>23</sup>

The mass tourism which placed its mark on Spain in the 1960s has since spread, with varying regional and local effects, to Greece, Cyprus, Tunisia, Morocco, the Dominican Republic and Thailand.

For the rest of our discussion on regional and local tourism development, we will make use of Butler’s model of resort development. The model defines each stage in terms of visitor numbers and changes in the tourist industry and its relationship with the local community. See figure 2.

#### **6.1. Characteristics of a resort at each stage of the model:**

*Exploration:* difficult access, no facilities, destination unchanged

*Involvement:* facilities provided by local people. Visitor numbers increasing.

*Development:* rapid expansion of facilities. Increasing investment by non-local companies to develop accommodation, natural, cultural and manmade attractions.

*Consolidation:* growth of visitor number slows down.

*Stagnation:* destination no longer fashionable, needs sustained marketing, problems emerge.

*Decline:* local involvement increases, tourists switch to competing newer resorts, tourist accommodation etc. changes to non-tourist uses.

*Rejuvenation:* attractions change to appeal to new markets.

On the basis of Butler’s model, we deem it of the utmost importance to focus on the development phases which Butler terms Involvement and Development. The issue on which we have primarily chosen to concentrate is the process which may arise when a relatively limited tourism-related activity expands relatively rapidly, at the same time as the local support for and participation in the development process is in danger of becoming less significant.

On occasion, different intentions may lead to confrontation and conflict. From a national and even regional top-down perspective there is often a desire to develop regions which, as a result of structural problems, have lost their primary source of income, and also to find new and so far unexploited regions where new tourism-related activities may be started. Sometimes these intentions may come into conflict with the

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<sup>22</sup> Knowles and Curtis 1999.

<sup>23</sup> I en svensk researrangörs katalog (Apollo 2001-2002) i beskrivningen av en by i Marocko.

groups of actors working at the local level. The desire to, for instance, develop ski resorts, or hunting and fishing environments and establish trails is perhaps a national and regional intention which is not always compatible with development ideas at the local level. Similarly a local conflict situation may arise if a planning idea has emerged from below at the same time as the conditions for its implementation are restricted from above, for instance through financial control<sup>24</sup>. A further and often more complicated issue in this context is the situation that may arise when different groups of actors, each with their own interests come into conflict with each other at the local level in the local territory.

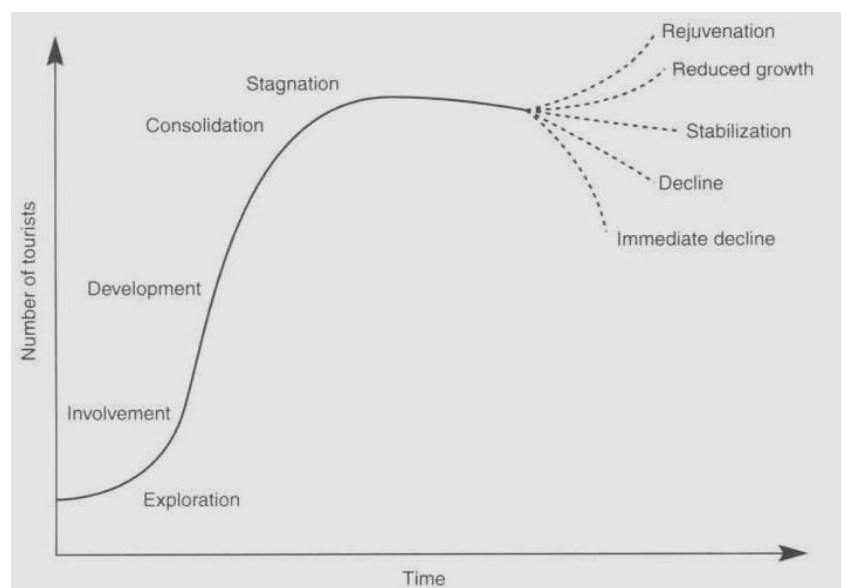


Figure 2. Butler's model of resort development<sup>25</sup>.

Returning to the example of the development of Benidorm and Torremolinos, we find a double problem. On the one hand, again referring to Butler's model, there is the crucial issue from the local angle of the transition from Involvement to Development with respect to the local base for the industry and, on the other, there is the change of identity which may occur locally when the place and region are transformed from one type of living environment to another. This problem may find expression in the fact that the tourism-related activities which the local population have developed and from which they have perhaps gained a living alongside their main livelihood, not infrequently some form of farming, are professionalised and "taken over" by new actors without a local base. These actors from the outside, with their often well-developed businesses, can thus indirectly drive both local initiative and locally-based businesses out of the market. From

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24 Blom 1996.

25 Burton 1995.



a national perspective, however, this type of development is perceived as positive as it may result in an increase in both economic turnover and employment, leading to greater revenue from taxation. In this case, the problem lies more at the local level as the original local and regional base is diluted and the “genuine” identity, which was perhaps part of the business concept, becomes less important when external entrepreneurs take over the arena. This local identity can probably be maintained by artificial means for a time but will most probably mean that the group of tourists one originally wanted to attract will eventually choose other destinations. However, there are instances where the use of artificial attributes alluding to a local identity that has long since disappeared can continue to attract tourists for a considerable time even though they are aware that authenticity is lacking. This modified Disney-like post-modern environment is also successful in attracting “new” visitors. Seen from the visitors’ viewpoint, this may be perceived as positive but from the local individual perspective this kind of development may well be devastating. See also the Rejuvenation phase in Butler’s model, figure 2.

Another issue which has sometimes arisen in Sweden and which is directly related to successful regional and local tourism development but which has also caused problems for the local residents is the significant increase in the rateable value of properties in attractive tourist regions (primarily coastal areas) in recent years. A conflict has arisen here between national and local interests. With this issue as the point of departure, the shift from the Involvement phase to the Development phase in tourism development in a region may be perceived as a problem from the local standpoint.

## **7. SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS.**

It is important to emphasise that our discussion should not be seen as a warning against developing tourism in small local environments where the local identity is a major part of the tourism product. What we wish to highlight and discuss is the way tourism is developed and on whose terms this occurs. Thus we consider it of the greatest importance that there is a real and continuous dialogue during the process of developing tourism products, with the emphasis on support from the local population and local actors, in particular when the initiative concerning what is to be developed comes from the national or regional level (vertical level). It is just as important to create the conditions for a dialogue between the actors at the local level.

A concrete example of how local support for tourism development can be ensured is provided by the recently completed Fondelf-project concerning, among other things, the development of tourism in the Hovfjäll region in northern Värmland, Sweden. This project facilitated both a horizontal and a vertical dialogue in the discussion of measures to develop local tourism. This process clearly demonstrates the importance of the criteria highlighted by “The Ecotourism Society”. Ecotourism is concerned with providing the visitor with the opportunity to gain insight into and knowledge of issues related to nature, culture, the environment and development. Customers should always have the chance of a personal meeting with the organisers or their representative in order to maintain a high level of quality in their experiences. Ecotourism places great demands on both organiser and participant and must be marketed in a responsible manner in order

to generate realistic expectations in the customer. Economic profitability for the local population is also of importance.<sup>26</sup>

It is fairly obvious that in the coming years we shall probably be faced with a growing level of tourist activity where the demands on both producers and consumers will also increase. The continual search for new attractions and experiences creates both in us and in our tourism producers new niches which arouse our interest and curiosity. As the experiences we often seek as tourists are consumed as they are produced, place plays a central role, where local identity is a major resource and thus local support is primary. What we can see at the same time is that mass tourism will not disappear, rather it will be replaced by a more responsible, and more realistic, variety of mass tourism, where price is no longer the critical factor in consumer choice.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Mångbruksplanen för Hovfjällsområdet 2002.

<sup>27</sup> Knowles and Curtis 1999.

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