The Role of Events in Creating Sustainable Tourism Destinations

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Sustainability is one of the key dimensions of development for tourist destinations. One commonly accepted definition of sustainable development is that used in the Brundtland Report – development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). For tourism destinations, maintaining visitor numbers at an economically acceptable level, yet one which neither exceeds the capacity of the local environment, nor the tolerance levels of the local community, can be a difficult task. Events, whether large or small, can play a role in finding the sustainable balance that destinations seek. Events can bring visitors outside the traditional peak seasons and can contribute substantially to local economies. Events can create awareness of a destination and also be the catalyst for repeat visitation by attendees. Finally, events can draw attention to the social and environmental impacts of tourism, contributing to the education of visitors.

There are two main aspects to considering sustainable events. Initially, there is the sustainability of the event itself – financial and economic sustainability and longevity, social sustainability in terms of acceptance and ownership by the local community, and the environmental sustainability measures undertaken by the event organisers. This is often referred to as the triple (or even quadruple) bottom line (Hede, 2007). However, despite the obvious importance of these issues, there have been few studies that have examined the role of environmental sustainability at events (exceptions include Hede, 2007; Laing & Frost, 2010; Mair & Jago, 2010; Park & Boo, 2010; Sherwood, 2007). Therefore, this represents a fruitful area for further research.

There is also the question of how an event or series of events may contribute to the sustainability of a tourist destination in the long term. As an area of study, this has received even less attention. Taking a case study approach, three event destinations will be discussed, and the implications of the event for the sustainability of the destination will be identified. These three destinations are Parkes, New South Wales; Steamboat Springs, USA; and Byron Bay.

Case Study 1 – Economic Sustainability: The Parkes Elvis Festival

The Parkes Elvis Festival is held every January in Parkes, Central New South Wales. The event is held on the second weekend in January, coinciding with Elvis Presley's birthday. There is no known link between Parkes, New South Wales and Elvis - the Parkes Elvis Festival represents a community-led approach to event development where a group of passionate Elvis fans living in the town decided in 1993 to create a festival to celebrate the legacy of Elvis Presley, and the event has been running each year since then. In the words of the organisers: "The Parkes Elvis Festival has sparked a boom in awareness of Parkes as a tourist destination and the town has become widely recognised as the 'Elvis Capital of Australia'" (Parkes Elvis Festival website). In the first 10 years of the festival there were only limited visitors attending. However, the latest figures are testament to its popularity. In January 2012 a whopping 18,000 visitors attended the festival, doubling Parkes' resident population (Parkes Elvis Festival website). While there remains a certain level of contestation around the event and the way it portrays local culture and the local community (Brennan-Horley, Connell & Gibson 2007), nonetheless, the injection of such a large number of visitors into the town during the festival coupled with raised awareness of Parkes as a visitor destination has undoubtedly contributed to the survival and prospering of a remote rural town with few other economic prospects. This certainly appears to represent a contribution to economic sustainability.

Case Study 2 – Social Sustainability: Triple Crown, Steamboat Springs

Steamboat Springs is a small town in Colorado, USA, best known for its ski slopes. As part of a strategy to diversify the tourism product, a number of events were introduced into the town. The Triple Crown baseball tournaments are a central fixture of the summer tourism calendar in Steamboat and bring thousands of amateur athletes into the community (Triple Crown website). However, the event was introduced during a period of steady economic growth in the town, and for some community members, negative social impacts arising from
the event (mainly overcrowding and noise) made the event seem an unnecessary burden on the town, and over time, resentment towards these particular event tourists became obvious. It took the economic recession of 2007 to remind the community members of the importance of Triple Crown tourism to the town. Negotiations with the event organisers to minimise any negative social impacts have resulted in a more amicable atmosphere for both residents and event attendees. This case represents an interesting glimpse into the social sustainability of both the event and the tourist destination that hosts it.1

**Case Study 3 – Environmental Sustainability: Byron Bay Bluesfest**

Bluesfest is a Blues and Roots Festival that takes place just outside Byron Bay in New South Wales over the Easter Weekend each year. It regularly attracts crowds of 87,500 (over five days) and with such large numbers attending in a relatively small destination, it is easy to see how environmental issues might come to the forefront (Bluesfest website). However, Bluesfest does not simply conform to the minimum requirements for such a large event. For them, the environment is front and centre of all that the festival represents. Bluesfest organisers are committed to the principles of environmental sustainability and they actively pursue opportunities to implement these principles in the management of the festival. Bluesfest has a Waste Wise message - Refuse, Reuse, Reduce, and Recycle – and has been the winner of a number of environmental awards including A Greener Festival. In addition, Bluesfest also understands the importance of sustainable transport to and from the festival, which helps to highlight the importance (for locals and visitors alike) of protecting the local environment in what is a very beautiful location. On their website, they promote car-pooling schemes and public transport to attendees. Interestingly, they go even further in their desire to advocate for environmentalism and educate attendees – in the words of Festival Director Peter Noble: “I see the importance of increasing public awareness of all the environmental issues and to lead by demonstration” (Bluesfest website).

These case studies have illustrated how events can contribute to the various dimensions of sustainability required in a tourist destination, and how events more generally can contribute to boosting visitor numbers. Despite presenting the case studies in this way, it is important to recognise, that the fundamental pillars of sustainability (economic, social and environmental) are intertwined, and overlap considerably, such that an economic boost to a tourist destination can also have positive social impacts, whilst drawing attention to issues of environmental sustainability can have a positive economic impact on an event location (in terms of revenue that accrues to public transport and taxi operators). Further, while the links between events and tourism are clear, the links between events and sustainable tourism development require considerable further study.

**References:**


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Triple Crown website (2013) “Steamboat Mountain Magic” url: 