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Desirable tourism futures: stakeholders' participation in local strategic planning for sustainable tourism in Orkney Islands.

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Abstract: Comprehensive stakeholder engagement in tourism planning is vital for sustainable destination development, but many strategic plans fail to provide evidence of such engagement on a destination level. As a part of a wider doctoral research project, that aims to evaluate the sustainable tourism strategy in Orkney Islands, this paper aims to discuss a proposed process of developing the Strategy Evaluation Framework, which considers the high contextuality of sustainable tourism development, and the complex stakeholder structure in a specific rural island destination. It is argued that lessons learnt from this process, and the results of the wider Orkney case study, can aid in developing and implementing sustainable tourism strategies in other rural and island destinations, as well as provide a valuable contribution to future strategic planning for sustainable tourism development in Orkney. As a single case study, this research employs an in-depth analysis of sustainability needs in Orkney, as viewed by a variety of its stakeholders, and attempts to provide a pragmatic solution to a real-life sustainability challenge this remote island community is facing.

Keywords: strategy evaluation; stakeholders; Scotland; peripheral regions; rural tourism; island destinations; sustainable tourism; strategic planning

Desirable tourism futures: stakeholders' participation in local strategic planning for sustainable tourism in Orkney Islands

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Introduction

As a part of a wider doctoral research project, that aims to evaluate the sustainable tourism strategy in Orkney Islands, this paper aims to discuss a proposed process of developing a Strategy Evaluation Framework, which considers the high contextuality of sustainable tourism development, and the complex stakeholder structure in a specific rural island destination. It is argued that lessons learnt from this process, and the results of the wider Orkney case study, can aid in developing and implementing sustainable tourism strategies in other rural and island destinations, as well as provide a valuable contribution to future strategic planning for sustainable tourism development in Orkney. As a single case study, this research employs an in-depth analysis of sustainability needs in Orkney, as viewed by a variety of its stakeholders, and attempts to provide a pragmatic solution to a real-life sustainability challenge this remote island community is facing.

Literature review

Definition of sustainability emphasises its long-term focus, thus requires a strategic planning approach to its implementation (Simpson 2001; Hall 2000). Therefore, it is widely agreed that strategic planning is one of the most critical tools for sustainable tourism development, due to the complexity of the sector, multitude of stakeholders involved, and plethora of different views and opinions that must be considered for successful implementation (Simpson 2001; Lane 1994). To begin the journey towards sustainability, a shared understanding of what sustainability means for a destination and a variety of its stakeholders must be developed, and ways of how it can be implemented must be established (Albrecht et al. 2021). According to Simpson (2001), wide stakeholder participation in tourism planning, especially in peripheral regions, is seen as a significant contributor to sustainable development of a destination, determining collectively relevant strategic direction and maximising fair distribution of benefits.

To ensure the strategic plans are relevant to the needs of a destination, strategy evaluation is seen as an important process, allowing for efficient and effective implementation, and ensuring a long-term impact of the strategic actions (Malekovic et al. 2019). Evaluation of sustainable tourism strategies seeks to confirm the extent to which sustainable development principles are embedded into the strategic planning process, thus attempting to predict the success of sustainability implementation in the destination (Ruhanen 2004). However, strategic sustainable development planning for tourism is a highly contextual subject, since it must meet the sustainability needs of a particular destination (Maleković et al. 2019), taking into account opinions and values of local stakeholders (Simpson 2001) and the macro-environment of the destination (Haid, Albrecht and Finkler 2021). Therefore, meaningful evaluation of a sustainable tourism strategy requires a tool that can reflect these contextual features on a local level.

Methodology

Orkney Islands is an archipelago of 70 islands, approximately 20 of which are inhabited, and its tourism industry worth is estimated at £67M in 2019 (Fraser of Allander Institute 2020). Major pull factors include unique geographical and geological features, rich storytelling and cultural scene, abundance of wildlife, and heritage locations that include Heart of Neolithic Orkney - UNESCO World Heritage Site. However, the region is facing significant sustainability challenges, such as large-scale cruise tourism operations, environmental impact on vulnerable natural and historical sites, and external impacts of climate change and COVID-19 pandemic. Aiming to realise the benefits of tourism and minimise the negatives, Orkney Tourism Strategy 2025 was launched (Destination Orkney Partnership 2020), which is being evaluated in this study.

To evaluate this strategy, Strategy Evaluation Framework has been developed, as a tool to guide the researcher through the evaluation process. First, the conceptual framework was devised from applicable academic and professional literature (such as Simpson (2001) and GSTC (2019)), and input from the pilot study conducted in another rural destination in Scotland, coded into themes using NVivo. The resulting themes were grouped into three Stages, to guide the subsequent process. The schematic illustration of the conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1 below.

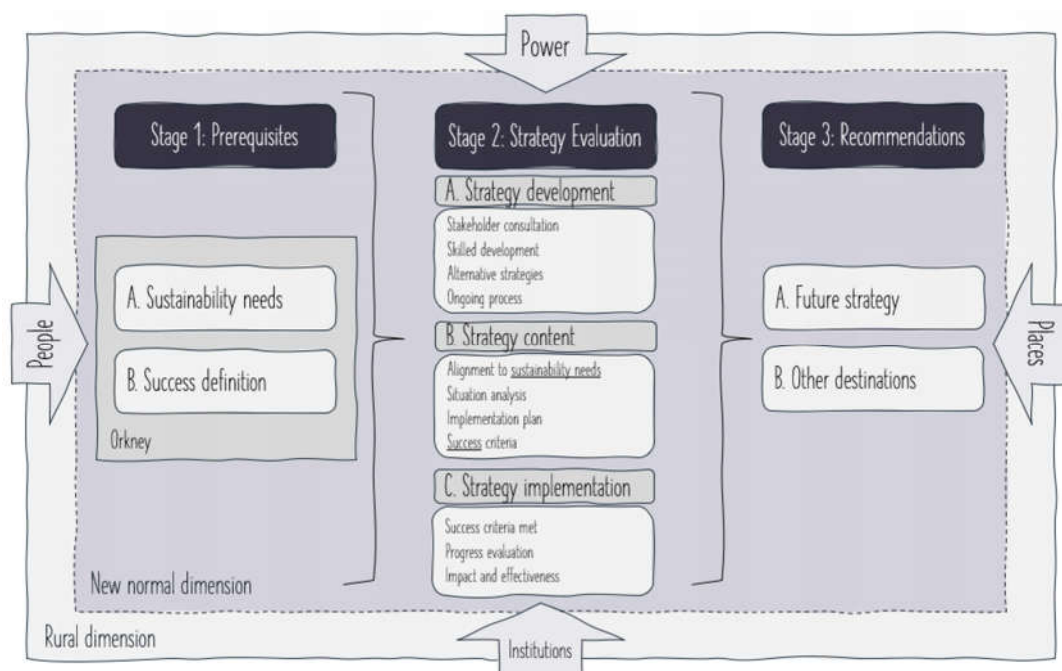


Figure 1: Conceptual framework (author)

These three Stages are framed into two dimensions, increasing the degree of contextuality of the subject: post-pandemic ‘new normal’ (Ateljevic 2020), with dashed line indicating its external and internal impacts; and ‘rural dimension’, where specifics of rural context, such as people, places, institutions and power (after Halfacree (2007) and Frisvoll (2012)), affect the needs, views and values that shape the development of a destination. This process of devising the conceptual framework aimed to consolidate the proposed generic evaluation criteria derived from academic and practical sources of information, as well as determine what data needs to be collected to allow the researcher to tailor the framework to Orkney context, and to perform the strategy evaluation.

As these initial evaluation criteria were not contextually confirmed, it was important to review them against the specific situation of the studied destination, by conducting Stage 1 of the study. In this stage, a variety of stakeholders have been asked about their views on Orkney sustainability needs and what success in Orkney Tourism Strategy implementation means for them, in a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews. Secondary data in form of applicable documentation and researcher's observations are also used to collect the required information. Results of the thematic analysis of the gathered data are used to establish context-specific Evaluation Criteria ahead of Stage 2.

In Stage 2, Orkney Tourism Strategy will be evaluated against the updated criteria, and a 3-point Likert scale will be applied to each criterion, after Ruhanen (2004). The result of the evaluation will determine to what extent (%) the strategy meets the principles of sustainable tourism destination development in Orkney. After completing the Strategy Evaluation stage of the project (Stage 2), the author will be able to provide Recommendations (Stage 3) to Orkney stakeholders for future strategic planning, as well as apply lessons learned from this process to other rural and island destinations.

Results

During the initial stages of selecting and reviewing existing strategy evaluation frameworks, several lessons were learnt, which were subsequently applied to the development of the Strategy Evaluation Framework in this study. It was learned that while some of the existing frameworks were looking for evidence of stakeholder participation in strategy development processes in the final strategy documents (Ruhanen 2004; Simpson 2001), the frameworks did not explicitly seek stakeholders' opinion on sustainability needs and success in strategy implementation before evaluating the strategy. Consequently, a difficulty to recognise stakeholders' contribution to the destination's strategic direction was noted by Ruhanen (2004), where none of the evaluated strategies was able to demonstrate evidence of such contribution. It is argued here that to recognise whether views of the stakeholders, especially local communities, are evident in the final strategy document, the evaluator must first learn and understand these views, which is being done in Stage 1 of this study, discussed here.

And indeed, as preliminary findings from Stage 1 of the research suggest, the views of the stakeholders on sustainability needs in Orkney Islands are varied, as well as perceptions of success in the strategy implementation. Moreover, the complex stakeholder structure of Orkney as a tourism destination and a remote rural community, in line with Halfacree (2007), creates a significant challenge in stakeholder engagement and in finding a just approach to addressing the variety of opinions on Orkney's strategic direction. The Strategy Evaluation Framework process, therefore, takes into account these challenges by mapping the views against the stakeholder structure, thus allowing users of the framework to recognise the influence of these views on the strategic direction of the destination. Such process can be replicated in another rural destination, tailoring the Framework to its specific context and stakeholder structure.

Conclusions

This paper aimed to introduce the process of developing a Strategy Evaluation Framework for local tourism strategies, and the benefits of applying the process to evaluate such strategies in rural and island destinations. The process takes into account stakeholders' views and opinions on the sustainability needs of their destination, as well as their perception of successful implementation of the chosen strategic direction. It is argued that such process can be applied

to developing evaluation frameworks for existing strategies, ensuring the evaluation considers stakeholders' input to the strategic planning in their destination.

Evaluating local tourism strategies to determine the degree of embedment of sustainability principles and local values can be used to inform future strategic planning, improving its inclusivity and relevance to the local context, therefore contributing to sustainable development. Locally, this research has the potential to provide a significant value and impact for Orkney community, which faces pressing sustainability challenges, and support their efforts in reaching sustainable tourism development of their destination.

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