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Dr. Lisa Ruhanen
School of Tourism, The University of Queensland

Dr. Michelle Whitford
School of Tourism and Hospitality Management Southern Cross University

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Tourism as a Vehicle for Sustaining Indigenous Communities: The Australian Government Policy Response

Lisa Ruhanen, Ph.D.
School of Tourism
The University of Queensland
Brisbane, Australia

Michelle Whitford, PhD
School of Tourism and Hospitality Management
Southern Cross University
Tweed Heads, Australia

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which sustainable development principles underpin Australian State and Territory governments' indigenous tourism policy and planning documents. Although tourism is increasingly being used as an instrument to provide new economic opportunities for Indigenous communities, it is vital that Indigenous tourism development is underpinned by sustainable development principles to ensure that tourism progresses in an appropriate and responsible manner that facilitates sustainable development. The analysis found that the majority of tourism policy documents were not underpinned by broad sustainable development objectives, with limited visions of sustainability that do not address the full gamut of issues affecting Australian indigenous communities and individuals.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout Australia, indigenous communities are looking towards tourism as a means for achieving a better economic future. Growing demand from international visitors for Australian Indigenous culture and heritage has seen intervention from both Federal and State governments through the development of tourism policy and planning frameworks to facilitate market growth and product development. However, it is vital that any development of Indigenous peoples and culture is underpinned by sustainable development principles to ensure that tourism not only progresses in an appropriate and responsible manner but also facilitates sustainable development. Therefore, a study was undertaken to examine the extent to which sustainable development principles underpin State and Territory indigenous tourism policy and planning documents in Australia. This paper discusses the research results and reasons underpinning the narrow views of sustainability evident in the tourism planning documents.

RESEARCH METHODS

In order to examine the extent to which sustainable development objectives underpin indigenous tourism policy and planning in Australia, an interpretive design was employed utilizing content analysis. To assess the focus of the planning documents a matrix was developed which was applied in the analysis of each of the documents and included: the rationale or objectives for preparing the planning document; and the strategic directions and actions addressed in the planning document.

FINDINGS

The analysis of Australian State and Territory indigenous tourism policy and planning documents reveals that significant emphasis is given to a limited range of factors associated with indigenous tourism. In terms of the rationale/objectives of the plan, the strategic objectives and the sustainability citations, the analysis shows that considerable importance is given to the economic aspects of indigenous tourism including economic independence, employment, business practices and product development. For instance, The Northern Territory Indigenous Tourism Strategy (2004, p. 13) identified the need to ensure indigenous tourism businesses "... are both financially viable and provide significant community benefit (and) will involve sustained efforts in the areas of investment attraction, education, training and development support". However, the enhancement, preservation and presentation of culture were identified to a much lesser extent.

Such results concur with concerns raised in the sustainable tourism development literature that economic motivations are given priority over social and ecological issues and thus, are the dominant approach in tourism development planning (Getz, 1986; Hall, 2000; Ruhanen, 2004; Whitford, Bell & Watkins, 2001). The analysis of tourism planning documents showed that while goals and objectives are made regarding sustainability, these tend to be limited to very narrow views of sustainability, namely economic and to a lesser extent, socio-cultural development. However, even within the socio-cultural category, the emphasis is more on preservation, enhancement and promotion of Indigenous culture rather than considering broader issues normally associated with this sphere of sustainable tourism development including stakeholder and community engagement in the planning and decision-making process and local ownership and management of resources (Hall, 2000; Ritchie, 1999). Furthermore, only one reference was found within the five analyzed planning documents that had any bearing on the environmental aspect of sustainable development. Again, this was limited to the ability of Indigenous peoples to utilize traditional land for development despite the global increase in public awareness of environmental impacts and Indigenous peoples (Zeppel, 2006).

APPLICATION OF RESULTS

Ideally then, indigenous tourism planning documents should demonstrate a more balanced approach to tourism development to not only avoid accusations of rhetoric but importantly, to demonstrate a propensity for facilitating long term sustainable outcomes for indigenous tourism. Perhaps to counteract unbalanced and arguably limited views of sustainability, planning documents should, at the very least, adopt a more collaborative approach to the development of indigenous tourism policy and planning documents.

DISCUSSION

The focus on indigenous tourism in Australia is relatively recent and indeed, the very existence of Australian State/Territory Government indigenous tourism policy bodes well for the future of indigenous tourism. The simple presence of indigenous tourism policy however, does not necessarily translate into the effective and appropriate facilitation of sustainable indigenous tourism development. Arguably, it is the extent to which policy is underpinned by sustainable development principles which will significantly influence

future outcomes in indigenous tourism development. While the policies analyzed in this study articulated the need for sustainable outcomes, there was an obvious imbalance between the emphasis on economic, socio-cultural and ecological issues. Thus there is a need to place greater importance on achieving a balanced triple bottom line in policy advocating sustainable indigenous tourism development.

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Contact information:

Dr. Lisa Ruhanen
School of Tourism
The University of Queensland
Brisbane QLD 4072
Australia
+61 7 3381 1338 phone
+61 7 3381 1012 fax
l.ruhanen@uq.edu.au