

The Tyrolian Way: Developing a Sustainable Tourism Policy

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The Tyrolian Way:

Developing a Sustainable Tourism Policy

Introduction

The aim of a tourism policy is to provide a strategic framework for governing the sustainable development of destinations (Beritelli, Bieger, & Laesser, 2007). A tourism policy is usually the result of a government-led strategic planning process that involves a multitude of actors and stakeholders (Carlisle, Kunc, Jones, & Tiffin, 2013), and follows the steps of idea generation, policy development, implementation and evaluation (Dredge & Jamal, 2015). As a result, a destination policy typically articulates a tourism vision for the destination, development objectives, fields of actions and a framework for evaluation.

Despite the complexity of tourism policy development processes, tourism researchers tend to play a marginal role in this process. Thus, leading scholars have underlined the need for linking policy research with policy practice and called to “bridge the theory-practice dichotomy” through active engagement of academia in tourism policy and planning processes (Dredge & Jamal, 2015, p. 295). This research paper takes up this call for a more active role of tourism researchers in tourism policy and planning processes by presenting the tourism policy process of the region Tyrol, Austria in which researchers played an active role as facilitators and moderators.

This paper presents the results of an action research account (Argyris & Schön, 1989) of the tourism planning and policy process of the region Tyrol, Austria. The outcome of this study is “The Tyrolian Way”, a tourism policy-process model that is characterized by the inclusion of multiple stakeholders in the policy process, data-driven decision-making processes, and equal appreciation of economic, social, and ecological goals. Key interventions and data gathering approaches are discussed in the methods section. The findings are structured around the three layers of the policy process and present corresponding key measures. The contribution of this research outlines how researchers can engage and contribute to tourism policy and planning processes, and how a tourism policy can incorporate economic, social and environmental goals.

Literature Review

Tourism policy making and planning are key strategic tasks of destination management practitioners and an important analytical domain in tourism research (Dredge & Jamal, 2015). Dredge and Jamal (2015) note that tourism policy and planning research is a heterogeneous field and the terms ‘policy’ and ‘planning’ are used to refer to the implications or an outcome of research findings, rather than being the central focus of research. Tourism policy frameworks typically focus on the strategic level (Dredge & Jamal, 2015; Laing & Lewis, 2017), and economic prosperity, and are less concerned with a holistic governance perspective that incorporates sustainability and environmental goals (Mach & Ponting, 2018; Saarinen, Rogerson, & Hall, 2017). Within the diverse research accounts on tourism planning and policy there is a trend towards developing generic frameworks and models that can serve as a blue print for the ideal planning process. Generic models tend to focus on particular policy questions, and the superficial integration of stakeholders in the planning process.

This research project contributes to two contemporary trends in tourism policy research. First, there is a current research interest in community engagement and participation. The research focus lies on enhancing the inclusiveness of planning processes and the management of collaborative relationships. Key questions are concerned with the management of complex relationships and how to sustain efficient collaboration (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010). This stream of research is based upon the argument that government authorities favored the interests of business on the expense of the interests of marginalized groups such as local communities (Nomm, Albrecht, & Lovelock, 2020; Tosun, 2000). Second, there is a trend of widening the focus from understanding tourism in economic terms as a means to great value towards an understanding of tourism as an “environmental and socio-political phenomenon” (Dredge & Jamal, 2015). The following research project presents a tourism planning process that is based on a high level of community engagement and participation and a tourism policy that incorporates economic, social and environmental goals and measures.

Methodology

This research project is grounded in the basic premise of action research. The purpose of action research is to develop theories about the organization and about the change process that produced it. The researchers intervene into the problem situation in order to improve the self-help competencies of participants (Argyris & Schön, 1989; Susman & Evered, 1978), as well as to facilitate a learning process at the organizational level. The action research approach follows two aims of providing practical insights to managers and providing scientific insights to researchers.

The three authors of this paper had the following roles: The third author held the role of the project leader. He was responsible to design and manage the research and consulting process. The second author was part of the expert team and contributed with expert knowledge in the fields of alpine tourism, agriculture as well as with providing data. The first author was not actively engaged in the policy development process. He cooperated with the other authors in evaluating the project and had a leading role in writing the research report.

The core team consisted of three researchers, a policy consultant, the head of the Tyrolean Tourism Board and the managing director and deputy managing director of the regional destination management organization. The latter, a governmental tourism organization, commissioned the project. External researchers and experts were consulted where appropriate in terms of content, such as for sustainability, tourism policy, digitalization and regional planning.

The researchers used a variety of methods in order to develop an understanding of the problem situation among researchers and the participating executives. Means of data collection included desktop research, a tourism survey of the local population, a qualitative study on tourism and agriculture and special surveys with experts and key decision makers (DMO directors and CEO's, representatives of the Chamber of Commerce, tourism consultants, hoteliers, cable car company managers, campground managers, mountain guides, local museum managers, leisure facility managers and travel agencies).

An important resource were qualitative expert interviews with so-called *critical friends*, i.e. stakeholders who are closely connected to the industry, but potentially hold a critical stands towards local tourism development: the Chamber of Architecture, the Disabled Persons Association, the Environmental Advocacy (Landesumweltanwaltschaft), Alpine Clubs, the

Chamber of Agriculture, the Local Design Council (Gestaltungsbeirat), District Governors (Bezirkshauptmannschaft), and Bloggers.

The tourism policy planning process represented an iterative process consisting recurring loops of desktop research, surveys, discussions and refinements in the core team, and presentations and discussions with industry representatives and experts. In total, the project comprised three loops over the course of one and a half year. The first loop started with an evaluation of the previous tourism policy and the identification of key elements of the new tourism policy. In this stage, the wish emerged that the new tourism policy should include a holistic vision statement, guiding principles and concrete measures. Within the second loop, the first draft of the Tyrolian Way was reviewed, discussed and refined with the industry representatives and experts. The final loop was characterized by an extensive exchange with the local government and organizations who were potentially responsible for the implementation of measures. The following section provides a brief overview of the key measures that were developed as a result of this collaborative process.

Results

The Tyrolian Way (Siller et al., 2021) is a tourism policy that consists of the three layers vision statement, guiding principles, measures as well as a performance measurement framework. What makes the Tyrolian Way distinct from other tourism policies is the collaborative development process, the inclusion of sustainability and the multidimensional performance measurements. Furthermore, emphasis was put on implementing the Tyrolian Way as an ongoing process with the intention to constantly add new measures. This section provides a brief overview of selected key results and measures of the Tyrolian Way (Siller et al., 2021). A full version of the Tyrolian Way can be accessed online via www.tirolwerbung.at/tiroler-tourismus/tourismusstrategie.

Layer 1: Imaging a tourism vision for Tyrol

The first step of the policy process was the development of a vision statement for Tyrolian tourism. From the results of the intensive exchange with the numerous stakeholders and the resulting objectives, "the self-image" of Tyrolean tourism consists of the elements of *sustainability, connection and lifestyle*.

First, Tyrol stands for "a balance of economic, social and ecological sustainability" (p.17). Second, the Tyrolian Way acknowledges that Tyrol is an alpine region with one of the best combinations of nature, movement and mountain experience worldwide. Nature and landscape experiences, activity and sport, but also enjoyment, and a certain degree of alpine idyll are the central motives of guests for a vacation in this alpine region. Third, Tyrol is seen as "the epitome of alpine lifestyle" (Siller et al., 2021). This alpine lifestyle is associated with both appreciating and protecting "an alpine mountain world", and a certain "steadiness, openness, straightforwardness and joie de vivre" of its inhabitants (Siller et al., 2021, p. 17).

Layer 2: Developing four guiding principles and key measures

The second layer comprises four guiding principles that represent the base for the development of tourism in Tyrol. Each principle is accompanied by a detailed description and concrete measures. The four principles are (1) "Living Space and Recreational Space", (2) "Sustainability and

Regionality”, (3) “Family Businesses and Hosting Quality”, and, (4) “Competence and Innovation Leadership” (Siller et al., 2021, p. 19).

“Tyrol as a living space” acknowledges that Tyrol is “a living space, a recreational space and an economic region at the same time” and that “tourism takes place in the real life of the population and not in a delimited, artificial vacation setting. The special features of this living space and the details of its identity shall be recognized, appreciated, promoted, and linked with the tourist offer and made accessible in an authentic way.” (p. 20). Guiding measures include dialog forums with the local population and stakeholders, a quantitative growth limit for the accommodation industry, high standards of spatial design and architecture and “ a respectful use of space” (Siller et al., 2021, p. 20).

The guideline “Sustainability and Regionality” contains measures for the implementation of a “multidimensional sustainability strategy” (Siller et al., 2021, p. 23) for all Tyrolian destinations, the aim to achieve climate-neutral ski resorts and on-site mobility by 2035, and to strengthen the cooperation between agriculture and tourism in terms of regional economic cycles.

The guideline “Family Businesses and Hosting Quality” acknowledges that family firms are a central success factor of Tyrolian tourism and contribute to the distinct Tyrolian experience. The concrete measures focus on current management issues in family businesses such as succession, digitalization, the implementation of sustainability measures, tourism education and employee shortage.

The last principle “Competence and Innovation Leadership” concerns the overall quality of the tourism offer, and how innovation can be sustained. This includes the identification of key markets, and current social trends, as well as the strengthening of local DMO’s and their CEO’s.

Layer 3: Defining multidimensional performance measurement

The last layer develops a multidimensional key performance indicator dashboard. The new Tyrolian Tourism Dashboard combines traditional key performance indicators such as overnight stays, arrivals and length of stay with criteria of the Global Sustainable Tourism Council (GSTC-DC). The overall aim is to track the tourism process in its economic, social, and ecological dimensions (Siller et al., 2021, p. 27). This monitoring of Tyrolean tourism shall contribute to a better understanding of the tourism industry and a transparent, data- and evidence-based control of fundamental tourism processes.

Conclusion and Discussion

It has been remarked that tourism researchers tend to play a marginal role in tourism policy processes. This research project takes up the call for more active engagement of tourism research in tourism policy and planning processes (Dredge and Jamal, 2015) by presenting the Tyrolian Way – a tourism policy process where a regional tourism research institution played a leading role, and a team of senior researchers were responsible for structuring, guiding and executing the project.

A critical reflection on this research-lead tourism policy process reveals a number of benefits and challenges. On the one hand, the researchers were perceived as neutral, trustworthy actors, without a political agenda. This allowed attracting a number of critical and non-tourism stakeholders for participation (e.g. chamber of architecture, environmental organizations and agricultural

associations), and designing a data-driven discussion and decision process that was guided through current research findings. The researchers could include a number of socially and environmentally important landmark decisions and measures, some of which are unpopular for the local tourism and leisure industry.

On the other hand, this one and a half-year process revealed a number of challenges for research-driven tourism policymaking processes. It turned out that it was challenging for the researcher team to maintain their independence and their perceived objectivity throughout the process. As project leaders, the researcher team had to make decisions. This included decisions regarding whom to incorporate in the process, and whom to exclude, what topics to address, and which to drop, and finally, which measures to adopt. This novel role of researchers led some participants to raise resentments regarding the role of tourism research in general, some stakeholders felt left out, and others expected a tourism policy that is more oriented on short-term economic interests of the local tourism industry.

A central challenge for the research team was to remain steadfast in the face of political pressure and the industry's interests. Being in a project leadership role means to step out of the comfortable position of a neutral researcher, but provides the opportunity to demonstrate the value of research to tackle current issues in sustainable tourism policy development. For tourism policy and planning research, this action research project can serve as an example of how to overcome the tourism research and praxis gap. This concerns the role and perception of tourism research within the local tourism industry and the establishment of a more objective and multidimensional performance measurement. Especially the latter provides a promising field for applied tourism research.

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