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Systems-based and internal factors enhancing resort community resilience

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Factors enhancing resilience in tourism resort destinations

Background to the study

Despite the research and efforts to implement more sustainable forms of development, implementation progress has been slow, piecemeal, and overall disappointing. From a tourism perspective, Bramwell (2011) contends that this is due to the complexity of the industry (i.e. a variety of public and private stakeholders, diverse policy and planning issues that include transportation, employment, and regional development). The industry is also complicated by the conflicting requirement to both consume and conserve natural resources, often simultaneously, in the delivery of the tourism experience (see Williams & Ponsford, 2009). Consequently, an increasing number of researchers suggest that a resilience approach to development, particularly at the community level, may be the key to more timely and substantive progress on sustainability (see Kemp, Parto & Gibson, 2005; Moberg & Simonsen, n.d.). Such an approach may also benefit tourism resort destinations.

The most common resilience definition arises from the socio-ecological systems (SES) field, where it is described as the “the ability to absorb disturbances, to be changed and then to re-organise and still have the same identity (i.e. retain the same basic structure and ways of functioning).” In this context, “A resilient system is forgiving of external shocks” (Resilience Alliance, 2012, n.p.). Relevant to the findings of this research, a second definition emerges from the developmental psychology field. In this context, resilience is described as a set of internally focused capacities, characteristics, or behaviours, as well as the structural conditions (social, cultural and political) that enable individuals to adapt in the face of adversity (Ungar, 2003). Most of this research has been undertaken with children and youth.

Statement of the problem & purpose of the research

While the concept of resilience has been a topic of focus in the management and conservation of parks and protected areas since approximately the mid 1970s (see Western & Henry, 1979), it is only recently that the concept has been extended to examine other aspects of the tourism industry, including environmental change and sustainability (see Klint et al., 2012) and disaster and risk management (see Biggs, Hall, & Stoeckl, 2012; Cochrane, 2010; Hall, 2011; Larsen, Calgaro & Thomalla, 2011). However, there is a lack of understanding of those factors that may enable and enhance tourism destination resilience, particularly at the governance level. In this context, governance refers to the values, rules, and laws, as well as the institutions and processes (i.e. policy-making, discursive debates, negotiations, mediation, elections, referendums, public consultations, protests, etc.) through which public and private stakeholders seek to achieve common objectives and make decisions (Lebel et al., 2006; Pierre, 1999; Rhodes, 1997). Further, there is a research void as it relates to understanding how shocks and stressors affect the resilience of tourism destination governance systems and the communities, generally. Indeed, tourism industry stakeholders are regularly confronted with a range of system shocks and stressors that require them to cope and adapt to evolving situations on a seemingly ongoing basis (Scott, Frietas, & Matzarakis, 2008). In this context a “stressor” refers to a slow moving event, and may include climate change, changing weather patterns, and demographics shifts. A

“shock” concerns more sudden events that typically precede crises, such SARS, terrorist attacks, and tsunamis (see Turner et al, 2003).

Consequently, this study sought to provide insights into those factors that may enhance the resilience of tourism destination governance systems, as well as insights into how shocks and stressors affect the resilience of such systems and the community at large. The research objectives and related research questions were explored in the context of the Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW), British Columbia, Canada. Whistler, one of Canada’s premier mountain resort destinations, was chosen for this study because of its unique, sustainability focused governance system. Of most relevance to this study, from approximately 2008 through to 2014, the community experienced a series of shocks and stressors that challenged the resilience of its sustainability-focus.

The case study

The RMOW is a purpose-built resort community, located approximately 120 kilometres north of Vancouver, British Columbia (BC). Over the last 15 years, Whistler has travelled a self-described *journey toward success and sustainability*. During this period, the Municipality pioneered the development and implementation of Whistler 2020, an innovative and comprehensive sustainability strategy and the community’s highest-ranking governance policy. For the most part, Whistler adhered to its sustainability strategy despite being subjected to a variety of governance system shocks (financial, economic, political) and stressors (e.g. climatic, demographic, travel market, 2010 Olympic Games). However, in 2011, in response to a perceived lack of political attention to the repercussions of the global recession, the local electorate replaced the incumbent ‘pro-sustainability’ municipal governance leadership with a more fiscally and economically oriented mayor and council. This shock to the governance system translated into a significant shift in focus and momentum away from many of the longer-term Whistler 2020 sustainability goals toward more immediate fiscal and economic concerns. This loss of Whistler’s broader sustainability focus and momentum is increasingly indicative of a global challenge in nurturing and maintaining sustainability momentum in times of shock and stress.

The methodology

From a theoretical perspective, the study employed a socio-ecological systems (SES) lens within a social constructivist approach to explore the diversity of factors and ways in which resilience is nurtured, maintained, and challenged. An SES lens helped the researchers more fully understand the effects of shocks and stressors on the governance system and the community. It was also a valuable lens for understanding community resilience, particularly in communities that are closely interacting with their environment (see Berkes & Ross, 2013), including those in tourism settings (see Farrell & Twinning-Ward, 2005; Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011). As such, the approach utilized in this investigation complements several other past investigations on governance and resilience, particularly within the tourism literature.

From a more applied perspective, the research employed qualitative methods to examine the case of Whistler. Relevant data were drawn from interviews, participant observation and the analysis of a variety of written sources, including community governance documents, government communiqués, newspaper articles, and websites, et cetera. Based upon initial pilot survey testing and feedback a broadly framed and user-

friendly personal interview guide was developed to gather key informant perspectives on the research topic. It focussed on five thematic areas: 1) previous engagement in Whistler's governance evolution; 2) perceived critical events affecting Whistler (1990- 2014); 3) perceptions of critical event affects on Whistler's governance system, 4), factors strengthening and weakening the community's ability to proactively respond to critical events (shocks and stressors), and 5) the role of key people and organizations in influencing community resilience.

The informants were drawn from a cross-section of Whistler governance actors related to one or more of the following sectors: elected and appointed government institutions (provincial, municipal, First Nations), business, media, and non-profit organizations. Some informants were current employees, while others had moved on in their careers and relationships with Whistler. All but two informants were current or past residents of Whistler. As such the vast majority of informants were familiar with the evolution of Whistler's development, and also part of its civil society. Overall, 45 in-depth personal interviews were conducted with key informants during a period extending from November 2013 to November 2014. Depending on the informant, these lasted from 30-180 minutes each. Most occurred on a face to face basis, but a few were conducted via phone or Skype.

All interviews were personally transcribed by the lead researcher, which resulted in approximately 660 pages of transcribed data. The interviews were transcribed directly into NVivo software for Mac users. Each transcribed interview was also copied and pasted into individual Word documents as a back-up measure. This resulted in two copies of each interview: one housed in NVivo and the other housed in a Word folder. During the transcription process, the lead researcher also created a key themes document in Word, for the first 34 interviews. After this, saturation of themes was attained and key themes documents were not created for the remaining 11 transcripts. Creating separate key themes documents in Word for the first 34 interviews was a valuable process as it enabled the lead researcher to begin seeing and documenting the patterns at an early stage (during transcribing).

The next step in the data coding and analysis process involved the creation of a series of codes, in NVivo, to match the interview guide's six areas of questions. These six major code categories were as follows: 1) critical events; 2) factors strengthening proactive responses; 3) factors weakening proactive responses; 4) resilience strategies; 5) roles of key individuals; organizations; and, 6) sustainability-related topics. A seventh major code was created for miscellaneous data that did not fit within the six question areas. After creating these seven major nodes, the researcher went through each interview to code the data. During this process, relevant sub-nodes and sub-sub nodes were created in NVivo, under the seven major nodes, to capture the themes. At the end of this process hundreds of nodes, sub nodes and sub-sub nodes had been created. NVivo has a valuable function that permitted the lead researcher to create memos during the analysis process. She utilized this tool to capture her thoughts during the coding and analysis process and for documenting ideas for future analysis. The lead researchers drew from these nodes to write up her findings based upon the research and interview questions.

Key findings

The factors enhancing the resilience of Whistler's governance system were compared against the findings of Ruiz-Ballesteros (2011). Ruiz-Ballesteros developed and tested a socio-ecological resilience (SER) framework in the small rural tourism community of Agua Blanca, Ecuador. The SER framework identifies four overriding community-based resilience-enhancing factors. These include: 1) learning to live with change and uncertainty; 2) nurturing diversity for reorganization and renewal; 3) combining different kinds of knowledge; and, 4) creating opportunity for self-organization. The general notion is that the more prevalent these factors are within in a community, the greater the place's overall resilience. While this research demonstrated that all four SER factors were present in Whistler, to varying degrees, a key finding was the existence of a set of internal or personal resilience factors. Informants perceived that both community and individually based factors contributed to the overall resilience of Whistler.

Based upon this finding, a recommendation is made to amend and extend the Ruiz-Ballesteros SER assessment framework to include a set of internal or personal resilience factors. Appendix A demonstrates how the framework was amended and extended during the data analysis and interpretation process to include a set of internal/personal resilience enhancing factors (physical, emotional, & spiritual well-being, as well as behaviour & cognitive competencies). Appendix A draws from a documentary analysis, as well as informants' perspectives to illustrate how both personal/internal factors, as well as community-based factors were present in the community. The presumption is that both sets of factors were influential in shaping the resilience of the governance system and its ability to proactively respond to a series of shocks and stressors as they emerged.

Most interestingly, despite the apparent presence of both sets of resilience enhancing factors, Whistler's sustainability focus and momentum appeared to falter following the hosting of the 2010 Olympic Games. This situation existed through to the conclusion of the research (late 2014). On the one hand, this finding suggests the challenge sustainability-focused governance systems may experience in maintaining momentum in the face of shocks and stressors. On the other hand, it demonstrates the responsiveness and adaptability of such a governance system to shocks and stressors. Future research is required to determine whether or not the loss of sustainability focus and momentum in Whistler was a temporary situation. Such research will add more comprehensive understanding to not only the ability of sustainability-focused governance systems to proactively respond to shocks and stressors, but also their overall ability to maintain sustainability momentum in such times.

Theoretical and applied contribution

This research focused on understanding the factors that enhance destination governance resilience, particularly in times of shock and stress. While past SES research points to the importance of systems' based (community) factors, this research evidenced the importance of both community and individual factors in enhancing overall resort destination resilience, particularly in response to shocks and stressors. Based upon this finding, it appears that together, both sets of factors offer a more robust basis with which to explore resilience-building factors in resort destination communities. Until this investigation, individual/personal factors were neither included (nor identified) in past SES investigations. Perhaps, most importantly, this study contributes valuable understanding

concerning the functioning of the cross-scale dynamics between individuals and the community and how these, in turn, enable proactive and resilient responses to shocks and stressors. It also suggests how individual and community resilience factors support (or do not support) sustainability initiatives during economically challenging times. This begins to lay a foundation for understanding how, if at all, a resilience approach may support sustainability initiatives at the community level.

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Appendix A

Factors nurturing SER at local level	Defining characteristics	Evidence: Whistler informant perceptions + document analysis
Learning to live with change and uncertainty	Learning from crisis;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although Whistler has not experienced a crisis, per se, it has experienced & learned from significant critical events (i.e. Olympics); • Informants spoke about Whistler’s enhanced ability to host festivals and events.
	Building rapid feedback capacity to respond to environmental change;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WB built Peak2Peak Gondola in response to climate change; Snowmaking equipment installed; • More weather independent activities (i.e. museum, cultural centre)
	Managing disturbance;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good response to economic disturbances (i.e. EPI); • New ecosystem monitoring program may help Whistler better monitor environmental disturbances;
	Building a portfolio of livelihood activities;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current focus on diversifying economy; • Whistler is still “sticking to its knitting.” Governance system needs to enable diversification into non-tourism related areas (i.e. education, small manufacturing, cottage industry) for a broader set of livelihood activities.
	Developing coping strategies;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • EPI document is a coping strategy; • Whistler Blackcomb has a climate change initiative: Climate Change and Resource Efficiency Strategy • Lack of strategy to deal with future potential threats (i.e. peak oil, loss of international market); • Emergency Management program, but lack of a risk management plan;
Nurturing diversity for reorganization and renewal	Maintenance of memory as it relates to coping with change;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Life Survey is a valuable instrument for maintaining community memory; • Ecosystem Monitoring Program will help to create a memory as it relates to natural environment;
	Catalyzing resolution of conflicts, channels of negotiation, participation, & mechanisms of collaboration;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This aspect could be in decline, as some informants perceived it was harder to get information from RMOW; • Communication has become centralized and delivered from the mayor’s office only; • Loss of Whistler2020 task forces means less citizen participation in governance; • On the other hand, committees of council, do allow for input of residents, but only chosen residents; • Open houses, and open council meetings allow for participation, but not necessarily citizen collaboration;
	Contributing innovative ways of tackling functioning of the system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many informants perceived that governance system is now more vertical system; more traditional approaches; • RMOW is developing a customer service strategy to improve ways for public to get information;
	Nurturing ecological memory;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whistler published a 2013 State of Environment Report; this report will help to nurture ecological memory • Whistler Biodiversity project is supported by RMOW; annual BioBlitz and Fungus Among Us events

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Factors nurturing SER at local level	Defining characteristics	Evidence: Whistler informant perceptions + document analysis
		collect information about local species;
	Nurturing diversity of institutions to respond to change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempting to find the right educational institution as a means to diversify. This is a step in the right direction; • Consideration should be given to providing incentives to other institutions/industries to locate in Whistler (i.e. small manufacturing, cottage industries, media, elective health care facility);
	Creating political space for experimentation;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The loss of the Whistler2020 task forces means that there is possibly less political space for experimentation; • There does not appear to be much experimentation at the governance level;
	Building trust among users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many informants stated there was a greater level of transparency in the governance system related to reporting; however, other informants perceived a higher level of barriers in trying to seek information; • Whistler awarded 2013 Canadian Association of Journalists' Code of Silence Award in (Barnett, 2013);
	Using social memory as a source for innovation & novelty;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was no indication from informants that this was or is occurring; • Document analysis did not find evidence of this;
Combining different kinds of knowledge	Incorporating systems of local knowledge into management & external decision-making;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Nations knowledge is not currently incorporated into management & external decision-making; • At one time a video that documented the history of Whistler was shown to all new RMOW employees.
	Building capacity to monitor environment;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2013 Ecosystem Monitoring Program implemented; • Cheakamus Community Forest, Ecosystem-based management;
	Building capacity for participatory management;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cheakamus Community Forest; community managed (Lil'Wat, Squamish First Nations, RMOW, Province) • Committees of Council may help build capacity for participatory management; • Lack of opportunities for capacity building for participatory management amongst citizenry;
	Building institutions that frame learning, memory and creativity;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RMOW is attempting to build learning, memory, & creativity at institutional level (Audain Museum, Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, etc); while citizens are no longer guiding conversations through task forces, committees of council are used to provide direction to RMOW; opportunity for citizens to comment at open houses, etc;
	Building institutions to create cross-scale mechanisms to share knowledge;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many informants spoke about the cross-scale sharing of knowledge amongst Whistler's partners; • Many informants felt knowledge sharing in the SLRD was improving;

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Creating opportunity for self-organization	Promoting participatory strategies that permit self-organization of groups & communities;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 62% of permanent residents & 51% of second homeowners are very or somewhat satisfied with opportunities to provide input into community decision-making; Informants spoke about open houses, Committees of Council; • Participatory opportunities for citizenry have declined since the Olympics; greater use of consultants; • Apparent lack of a strategy to prepare individuals to deal with a significant crisis (i.e. earthquakes, flood)
	Promoting participatory strategies that consider the diversity and alteration inherent in resilience;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committee of council struck to examine educational opportunities as a means to diversify economy; • Lack of participatory strategies that consider diversity and change within the community; current efforts appear to focus on undertaking studies, developing plan which lays course of action. This approach is less flexible, and does not provide opportunities for citizen input.
	Building capacity for user self-organization;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No indication of capacity building for individual self-organization; Previously there was a program called iShift Business run by WCS and iShift Citizen, run by RMOW. Neither programs currently running. • However, there are three local funding agencies that could support self-organization projects (Community Foundation of Whistler, RMOW Community Enrichment Program, WB Foundation)
	Building capacity for self-determined, self-organized fairness in resource access & allocation;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local First Nations have gone to court to win the right to resource access & allocation;
	Building conflict management mechanisms;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conflict management mechanism does not appear to exist, particularly as it relates to local First Nations;
	Matching scales of ecosystem governance;	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ecosystem Monitoring Program; Biogeoclimate Ecosystem Monitoring/Terrestrial Ecosystem Mapping increases understanding of ecosystems; Cheakamus Community Forest provides opportunities for multi-scaled governance with First Nations
	Creating multi-level governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some indication of multi-level governance, particularly as it relates to non-profits (e.g. Whistler Foundation, Whistler Weasel Workers; Whistler/Blackcomb Habitat Improvement Team, etc.) • Some informants indicated that governance has become more hierarchical in recent years;