Where’s the Strategy in Tourism Strategic Planning?  
Implications for Sustainable Tourism Destination Planning

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Abstract
Strategic planning is an acknowledged caveat of the sustainable tourism planning approach and is considered imperative in ensuring that a destination’s resources are managed and sustained for the future, while still responding to environmental, financial, community and tourist needs. Yet some authors have claimed that there have been no previous attempts to gauge the extent to which strategic planning actually underpins real world tourism planning processes. To address this gap, a study was undertaken to examine the extent to which strategic planning, as a contributor to sustainable development, is incorporated in the tourism planning and management initiatives of tourism destinations. The research utilised qualitative semi-structured interviews with 31 participants from five tourism destination planning processes in Queensland, Australia. The respondents identified many benefits of engaging in a specific tourism planning exercise yet noted numerous challenges that were inhibiting the process. Importantly, some respondents attributed the lack of strategy in strategic planning to the fact that the negative impacts of tourism have yet to be experienced in their respective destinations. This confirms assertions that where the tourism industry does plan, there is a tendency to revert to short-term perspectives focused on more immediate outcomes. These results support the notion that sustainable tourism policies may give the appearance of a paradigm shift but in reality are focused on the traditional concern of financial returns.

Keywords: Strategic planning, sustainable tourism.

Introduction
Sustainable tourism has come to represent and encompass a set of principles, policy prescriptions, and management methods, which chart a path for tourism development such that a destination’s environmental resource base (including natural, built, social and cultural features) is protected for future development (Welford & Ytterhus, 2004). Sustainability is often referred to in terms of the metaphorical ‘triple bottom line’, referring to the equal consideration of economic, social and environmental goals and outputs. In this respect the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) (1993, p.11) considers that tourism is sustainable when it “improves the quality of life of the host community; provides a high quality of experience for the visitor; and maintains the quality of the environment on which both the host community and the visitor depend”. Yet such things do not happen automatically and require a focused and deliberate process of decision-making and planning for development; both within broader regulatory frameworks generally and for tourism specifically. For instance, the United Nations’ (2003) 18 core principles for sustainability include a need for a long term
planning horizon, among others. In the context of sustainable tourism planning involves developing: a comprehensive and integrated plan of action for tourism at the destination; a clearly articulated set of goals and objectives which provide the focus for the plan of action; the establishment of systems for monitoring and evaluating progress towards goals and objectives; and, an approach to planning which assesses the existing and anticipated opportunities and threats within the environment (Faulkner, 1994).

The UNWTO have long claimed that “the absence of planning…has been responsible for most of the negative results of tourism development” (1983, p.10). Indeed it is now recognised that strategic planning for tourism destination’s is imperative to ensure that a destination’s resources are managed and sustained for the future and the different interests such as environmental, financial, community and tourist satisfaction are addressed (Hall 2000; Hardy & Beeton, 2001). In the post-Brundtland era the emphasis on the ‘strategic’ is important. Strategy in the case of sustainable tourism planning and development seeks to achieve three basic strategic objectives: conservation of tourism resource values; enhanced experiences of the visitors who interact with tourism resources; and the maximisation of the economic, social and environmental returns to stakeholders in the host community (Dutton & Hall, 1989; Hall, 2000). For instance, Wahab and Pigram (1997) claim that destination planning requires a broad vision, which encompasses a larger time and space frame than would be traditionally required in ‘traditional’ tourism destination planning and decision-making activities.

Additionally authors such as Bramwell and Lane (1993) have noted that there is a need for holistic planning and strategy formulation, preservation of ecological processes, protection of human heritage and biodiversity, and sustained productivity over the long term to benefit future generations. While Ritchie (1999) also identifies several planning related aspects necessary for sustainable tourism development including the need for a long-term planning horizon; an integrated and cumulative perspective of environmental, social and economic impacts, integrating tourism planning and development in the broader social, economic and environmental planning agenda of the destination and ensuring an approach to tourism planning and development that reflects the broader trends and expectations with regard to the level of community consultation involved. Such assertions reflect the importance of strategic planning in a tourism destination context and are considered fundamental in achieving or attempting to achieve sustainable tourism objectives.

The practice of undertaking specific tourism related planning activities for geographical areas, or tourism destinations, is not new. Tourism developments, without the benefit of hindsight, grew rapidly following the Second World War and largely in the absence of development frameworks and strategies. However, by the 1960s and 1970s more cautionary and critical viewpoints about tourism were being aired (Jafari, 1990), and fortunately provided the impetus for tourism destination specific planning initiatives. In the years since a variety of processes and techniques for tourism destination planning have emerged, largely reflecting current political, social, cultural, economic and environmental paradigms (Table 1). The various tourism planning approaches have been described in terms of evolutions of government policy (Airey, 1983; Cooper, 1995; Din, 1992; Getz, 1986; Godfrey, 1996; Hall, 1998; Lundberg, 1972), platforms (Jafari, 1990), and as a series of methodologies developed in response to dissatisfaction with planning efforts (Jain, 2000; Tosun & Jenkins, 1998).
Table 1: The Evolution of Tourism Planning

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<td>1950-1960s</td>
<td>Unplanned development era</td>
<td>Streamlining of policies</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>Boosterism</td>
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<td>1960-1970s</td>
<td>Supply oriented</td>
<td>Marketing and supply</td>
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<td>Economic</td>
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<td>1970-1980s</td>
<td>Demand oriented</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Cautionary</td>
<td>Physical and spatial</td>
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<td>1980-1990s</td>
<td>Integrated</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Knowledge-based</td>
<td>Community</td>
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<td>1990-2000…</td>
<td>Collaborative</td>
<td>Public-private partnerships</td>
<td>Public platform</td>
<td>Sustainable</td>
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The experiences of some early tourism destinations highlight the fact that completely unregulated or unplanned tourism development will almost certainly lead to the degradation of the physical and social resource base upon which tourism and the destination community depends (Butler, 1980; Doxey, 1975; Formica & Uysal, 1996; Gunn, 1994; Hall, 2000; Inskeep, 1991; Lundberg, 1972; Manning & Dougherty, 2000; Smith, 1992; Veal, 1994). Therefore destinations with carefully planned development are likely to experience the most success in terms of high tourist satisfaction level, positive economic benefits, and minimal negative impacts on the local social, economic, and physical environments (Timothy, 1999). In the context of tourism, planning broadly refers to the anticipation and regulation of change to mitigate negative development issues through the promotion of orderly development and increasing the social, economic and environmental benefits of tourism to an area, while satisfying the needs of residents and guests (French, Craig-Smith & Collier, 1995; Inskeep, 1991, 1988; Jansen-Verbeke, 1992; Jenkins, 1991; Mathieson & Wall, 1982; Murphy, 1985; Timothy, 1999; van Harssel, 1994). It can also be viewed as a decision-making and organizational process for determining and designing preferred future tourism development (Chadwick, 1971; Fridgen, 1991; Haywood, 1988; Inskeep, 1991; Poon, 1993; Veal, 1994).

While various tourism planning approaches have evolved over the years the sustainable tourism planning approach has emerged as one of the most comprehensive and accepted approaches, and can generally be viewed as encompassing the key ideals of each of the previously mentioned planning methods (Table 1). The sustainable development concept arose in response to broader international concerns over ecological issues and has been advocated for the tourism sector as a possible solution to the environmental and social degradation of the industry’s resources and due to the fact that tourism is a resource dependent industry (Cooper, 1995; Murphy, 1998). It’s embodiment within tourism destination planning has been widespread (Augustyn, 1998; Berke, 2002; Bramwell & Lane, 1993; Cooper, 1997; Hardy & Beeton, 2001; Jayawardena, 2003; Jepson, 2004) with many destinations around the world purporting to develop tourism plans along the principles of sustainable development. However, the sustainable approach to tourism planning must incorporate a strategic and long-term orientation whereby strategic planning supersedes conventional planning approaches.
(Dutton & Hall, 1989; Hall, 2000; Simpson, 2001). Strategy as it applies to sustainable tourism planning and development seeks to achieve three basic strategic objectives: conservation of tourism resource values; enhanced experiences of the visitors who interact with tourism resources; and the maximization of the economic, social and environmental returns to stakeholders in the host community (Hall, 2000; Ritchie, 1999).

The strategic planning concept reputedly evolved from studies of warfare in B.C. times (David, 1999; Eden & Ackerman, 1998; Joyce & Woods, 1996; Macmillan & Tampoe, 2000; Makridakis, 1990; Oliver, 2001; Quinn, Mintzberg & James, 1988) although modern applications of the concept are generally within the business management fields. One of the seminal authors in the field, Porter (1996, p.62) defines strategy as, “the creation of a unique and valuable position, involving a different set of activities...to choose activities that are different from rivals”. It is effectively a pattern of purposes, policies, programs, actions, decisions or resource allocations that define what an organisation is, what it does and why it does it (Ansoff, 1988; Bryson, 1995; Campbell, Stonehouse & Houston, 1999; Chandler, 1962; Hart, 1992). Strategic planning has been described as “a comprehensive plan of action that sets a critical direction, and guides the allocation of resources to achieve long term objectives” (Schmermerhorn, 1996, p.160).

A strategic plan will usually describe the present and planned directions and priorities, consider the scope or domain of action within which the organisation will try to achieve its objectives, while taking into account the skills, resources or distinctive competencies to be used to achieve its objectives. In addition it is considered necessary to address within the plan the advantages that the organisation expects to achieve vis-à-vis its competitors through its skills and resource deployments; and the synergies that will result from the ways the organisation deploys its skills and resources (Birla, 2000; Bryson, 1995; Schendel & Hofer, 1979). The concept of stakeholders is important in strategic planning (Eden & Ackerman, 1998), and as Simpson (2001) finds, a strategic planning approach should identify critical stakeholder values, use these values to articulate a broad vision for the future, establish generic goals which will contribute to a realization of vision, establish specific objectives to bridge the gap between current status and generic goals, and assign priorities, responsibility and control systems to monitor implementation effectiveness.

The scope of strategy and strategic planning can be extended to destinations, which are not organisations, but rather a complex mix of individuals, enterprises and natural and built environments (Haywood, 1990; Haywood & Walsh, 1996; Heath & Wall, 1992; Tribe, 2010, 1997). Despite the differences, strategic planning is not dissimilar to that of the private sector as it attempts to answer the questions of: Where are we now? Where do we want to get to? How do we get there? (Hall, 2000). Indeed, tourism destination strategic planning also involves making a sequence of choices and decisions about the deployment of resources committing a destination to a future course of action (Brownlie, 1994). It requires a deliberate, integrative and formalised plan which will permit the destination to adapt quickly to changing situations and develop information, planning and control systems to monitor and respond to this change (Chon & Olsen, 1990; Cooper, 1995). Strategic planning at a destination level also involves identifying participants in the planning process, establishing structures for undertaking the process, formulating a vision, mission statements and objectives, and agreeing on a
timeframe for the completion of the various planning stages (Haywood, 1990; Keane, Ó Cinnéide & Cunningham, 1996).

Hall (2000) notes that strategy in the case of sustainable tourism planning and development seeks to achieve conservation of tourism resource values, enhanced experiences of the visitors who interact with tourism resources; and the maximisation of the economic, social and environmental returns to stakeholders in the host community. The process will involve physically developing: a comprehensive and integrated plan of action for tourism at the destination; a clearly articulated set of goals and objectives which provide the focus for the plan of action; the establishment of systems for monitoring and evaluating progress towards goals and objectives; and, an approach to planning which assesses the existing and anticipated opportunities and threats within the environment (Faulkner, 1994).

The process has both benefits and challenges. For instance, it has been said that a strategic plan provides a sense of purpose, ownership and support for both the industry and the public sector, which can lead to a framework for cooperative action and policies (Hall, 2000; Hall & McArthur, 1998). Importantly it also emphasizes the need for both short and long term objectives which can accommodate changing circumstances, and which the sector can be judged against in the future (Cooper, 1995; Faulkner, 1994; Hall, 2000; Hall & McArthur, 1998). However, the complex nature of tourism destinations offers a number of strategic planning challenges and as a result Cooper (1995) claims that strategic tourism destination planning is still the exception rather than the rule. One inherent challenge is the composition of tourism destinations, with a range of public and competing small to medium sized private sector organizations (Cooper, 1995; Hall, 2000; Mason & Leberman, 2000). This contributes to the challenge of identifying the vast number of stakeholders that must be considered in a strategic planning exercise (Farrell, 1999). The diverse nature of destinations has resulted in strategic planning often being put into the ‘too-hard basket’ (Hall, Jenkins & Kearsely, 1997). As Cooper (1995, p.192) notes, “[destinations] do not function in the same way as companies and therefore other considerations have to be built into the process”.

A further challenge is the tendency towards ad hoc, short-term and tactical tourism planning, particularly by the private sector where success is judged by short-term profitability and volume growth (Athiyaman, 1995; Bozeman & Straussman, 1990; Cooper, 1995; Haywood, 1990; Ring & Perry, 1985). The public sector has traditionally been viewed as responsible for higher-order planning, but they too have been found guilty of lacking a strategic view (Cooper, 1995; Dredge & Moore, 1992; Page & Thorn, 1997). As Jenkins (1991, p.62) notes, “ad hoc responses to tourism opportunities and problems do not constitute a policy for tourism, they merely provide short-term solutions to essentially long-term problems”. Faulkner (1994) reports that in the Australian tourism public sector there has been a fixation with advertising at the expense of a more balanced strategic approach for the destination. Similarly a UNWTO study of over 1600 tourism related plans found that in the majority of plans, profit was given priority over social aspects and little provision was made for environmental protection (Wilkinson, 1997). A further challenge is that when destinations have been in the growth stages of the destination life cycle, success has obscured the longer-term view, while a declining destination may have difficulty in justifying the overhead costs of an expensive planning exercise (Hall, 2000).
While strategic planning is an acknowledged caveat of the sustainable tourism planning approach it has been noted that “…there have been no previous attempts to gauge the extent to which such considerations play their part in real world tourism planning processes” (Simpson 2001, p.4). This paper reports on one aspect of a larger study of local tourism destination planning in Queensland, Australia and examines the extent to which strategic planning, as a contributor to sustainable development, is incorporated in the tourism planning and management initiatives of Queensland tourism destinations. This paper explores these findings and considers the importance of strategy in sustainable tourism destination planning.

Methodology

To determine the extent to which strategic planning is incorporated into the tourism planning practices of tourism destinations, a two-phase qualitative research process was instigated. As part of a broader study the first stage involved a qualitative content analysis of the tourism specific planning documents of the 125 Queensland local tourism destinations. Of the 125 destinations it was found that only 30 had a tourism plan and each of the identified documents was assessed against a tourism planning process evaluation instrument developed by Simpson (2001) (Table 2). Full results of this stage of analysis can be seen in Ruhanen (2004).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Tourism Planning Process Evaluation Instrument</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Physical, Environmental and Economic Situation Analysis</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>• The planning document describes the area’s principal geographic features</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The planning document describes the main characteristics of the local climate</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The planning document identifies flora and fauna which are unique to the area</td>
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<td>• The planning document assesses the resilience and/or fragility of the physical environment</td>
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<td>• The planning document identifies current population levels and demographics</td>
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<td>• The planning document identifies current land use and ownership patterns in the area</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The planning document identifies the major economic activities in the local area</td>
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<td>• The planning document establishes the relative importance of tourism, compared with other industries, to the economic development of the local area</td>
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<td>• The planning document quantifies the economic benefit of tourism to the area</td>
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<td>• The planning document quantifies the employment creation ability of local tourism activity</td>
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<td>• The planning document describes the principal tourism sites in the area</td>
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<td>• The planning document evaluates the current capacity of tourism plant and infrastructure</td>
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<td>• The planning document evaluates the adequacy of business skills possessed by local tourism industry operators</td>
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<td>• The planning document includes quantitative analysis of current visitor numbers, length of stay and spending</td>
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<td>• The planning document acknowledges the need to integrate local tourism strategies with other local, regional, state and national plans for tourism development</td>
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Strategic Indicators of Destination Planning

- The time dimension of the planning process reflects a long term orientation
- The planning document includes broadly based goals related to the nature and scale of future tourism development
- The planning document identifies broadly based goals related to the economic benefits of future tourism development
- The planning document includes broadly based goals related to environmental protection
- The planning document includes broadly based goals related to community values and lifestyle protection
- The planning document includes broadly based goals which emphasize the local benefits of tourism development
- The planning document identifies a range of alternative strategies by which broadly based goals may be achieved
- The planning document evaluates each strategy option prior to determining a range of specific objectives
- Specific objectives support previously established broad goals
- Specific objectives selected are based on supply capability as opposed to market demand
- Specific objectives target the equitable distribution of tourism’s economic benefits throughout the local area
- Specific objectives for future tourism activity are quantified and readily measurable

Stakeholder Participation and Influence in the Planning Process

- The planning document addresses the relationships between destination stakeholders
- Relevant state/federal government agencies took part in the planning process
- Relevant local agencies took part in the planning process
- Governmental opinions (federal, state, or local) influenced the final strategic direction selected
- The relevant regional tourism organization took part in the planning process
- The relevant local tourism authority took part in the planning process
- Regional tourism organization or local tourism authority opinion influenced the final strategic direction selected
- The local tourism industry took part in the planning process
- Local tourism industry opinion influenced the final strategic direction selected
- Other local non-tourism organizations took part in the planning process
- Other local non-tourism organization opinion influenced the final strategic direction selected
- Ordinary local residents took part in the planning process
- Ordinary local resident opinion influenced the final strategic direction selected

Destination Community Vision and Values

- The planning document identifies locally important community values
- The planning document identifies locally important lifestyle features
- The planning document identifies current issues which are critical to residents
- The planning document assesses community attitudes to tourism
• The planning document assesses the overall quality of life in the area
• The planning document includes a vision for the future which aligns with local community values, attitudes and lifestyles

**Tourism Planning Approach**
• The planning document addresses economic development and growth
• The planning document addresses the physical resources of the destination
• The planning document addresses the impacts of tourism on the natural environment
• The planning document addresses how tourism can benefit the local community
• The planning document addresses tourism in the context of sustainable development

Source: Adapted from Simpson, 2001

Building on the secondary data analysed in stage one, the subsequent phase of the qualitative research process entailed in-depth interviews with a sample of participants in five case study destinations in Queensland. All participants had participated in the tourism destination planning process for their respective destination area. The objective of the interviews was to gain participant’s perceptions of the tourism planning process undertaken within their destination. From the case study destinations 31 stakeholder participants were interviewed based on a purposive snowball sampling strategy (Jennings, 2001) and this approach generated a cumulative response rate of 76%. Participants in the study included stakeholders from the local government authority of the destination (councillors and council officers), consultants and members of the tourism industry (private sector operators, members or staff of tourism associations and similar authorities) (Table 3). Semi-structured interviews were held and each participant was posed broad questions regarding:

- The perceived motivation for their respective destination to undertake a tourism destination strategic planning process;
- The outcomes of the tourism destination strategic planning process;
- The benefits derived for the destination in undertaking a tourism destination strategic planning process; and,
- The challenges associated with undertaking a tourism destination strategic planning process.

**Table 3:** Interviewee Affiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee Affiliation</th>
<th>Case Study 1</th>
<th>Case Study 2</th>
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<th>Case Study 5</th>
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<tr>
<td>Council</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Association</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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The content analysis thematic framework approach was used to analyse interview transcripts with data coded utilising manifest and latent methods (Baker, 1999; Neuman, 1997). This involved organising the data into categories on the basis of themes, concepts or similar features, from which new concepts are developed, conceptual definitions are formulated, and relationships among concepts are examined (Berg, 2001; Jennings, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1984; Neuman, 1997; Sapsford & Jupp, 1996). Identified themes, concepts and patterns are then considered in light of previous research and theories, so that generalisations can be established (Berg, 2001).

Results

From the stage one analysis of tourism planning documents it was found that of the 125 local tourism destinations in Queensland only 30 had a tourism plan and of these 56% claimed to be ‘strategic’ plans. Each of the identified documents was assessed against a tourism planning process evaluation instrument developed by Simpson (2001) (Table 2). The ‘strategic indicators of destination planning’ section of Simpson’s instrument included a range of evaluation items designed to establish whether the destination has clear goals and objectives to allow for future planned development (Simpson, 2001). Of the 12 assessment items in this category, the majority of the evaluation items (nine) were not evident in over half of the analysed documents. Indicators such as ‘broadly based goals related to the nature and scale of future tourism development’ were not even considered in 22 of the 30 plans.

The first phase of the research highlighted that a number of the tourism planning processes did not address key aspects associated with strategic planning (see Ruhanen, 2004), the second phase of the study was designed to elicit further information from those who had participated in the tourism planning processes and multiple responses were coded from the interviews. A number of issues associated with strategic planning arose during the stakeholder interviews and were coded as: perceived motivations, benefits, challenges and outcomes of the strategic planning process.

Respondents had various perceptions as to the reasons why their destination undertook a specific strategic planning process for tourism. A number of respondents identified the need to be proactive (n=9) and set a direction (n=7) for tourism in the destination - “there was a need to plan out a strategy because you need to have a vision of how much development is wanted, what type of tourism they wanted” (Industry). Other respondents considered the motivating factor for undertaking a strategic planning process was to educate the stakeholder groups within the destination (n=4) about tourism and to instigate action regarding development (n=3), “they wanted to get some actions happening, some runs on the board...” (Consultant). Managing tourism’s impacts on the destination (n=3) was also identified with one respondent noting,

“We bought the strategy forward by about two years because of some of the sort of more urgent issues around tourism issues, tourism development of the shire and our concerns over where tourism was going...so we brought it forward for that reason for more of a strategic platform” (Council).

The second factor arising from the strategic planning theme related to the outcomes of the strategic planning process. The majority of stakeholder respondents
(n=18) considered that as a result of the strategic planning process their destination had a specific document outlining a directional framework for tourism, “they’ve got that document, of where they’re going. It’s got to be a positive so they will never go backwards from that step” (Consultant) and “there was a lot of stuff in it that set out a framework; you know the vision for tourism in the Shire, setting out a broad direction” (Council). Stakeholder respondents also identified that an outcome of the strategic planning process was that the destination now has an agenda for action (n=2). On the contrary, other respondents (n=10) discussed the fact that in their view the process had not lead to any strategic outcomes for the destination,

“I think the intent was always to set up a framework and a more strategic way of thinking about their issues, you know maturing markets and that sort of thing but I haven’t seen any evidence of that, that there’s been a major shift” (Association).

The third factor arising in the strategic theme related to the perceived benefits derived from the destination undertaking a strategic planning process. Stakeholder respondents identified a range of benefits including stakeholder buy-in to the process (n=8), “the vision and direction for the future set out in the strategy was useful in pulling people together, with some sort of direction for the future” (Council). Also identified as a benefit of undertaking a strategic planning process was the improved destination management capabilities (n=4), “I think probably the best use of the tourism plan is that it has actually informed our planning schemes, it’s been very useful for land use planning” (Council) and providing direction for tourism development within the destination (n=9), “Council at least has a strategy and people have the opportunity to fit into that strategy, they can have some sort of direction for the town” (Association). The strategic planning process was also considered beneficial because of the resulting decision-making capacity for tourism in the destination (n=4) and the ability of the process to lead to the creation of a framework for the future of the destination (n=2) and raising awareness of the tourism sector in the destination community (n=2).

Conversely the challenges of undertaking a tourism destination strategic planning process were discussed with stakeholder respondents. Approximately half of the respondents (n=13) considered the implementation phase of strategic planning as the greatest challenge of the process. The scope of tourism planning activities was seen as a challenge,

“It has really just been put on the shelf actually. It’s just that there are a long list of actions at the back, and we haven’t gone through them and said you do that, you do that, or rearrange them or resource them” (Council).

Other respondents viewed the ability to generate the resources required for implementation as the greatest challenge,

“We’ve found that unless there are some dollars forthcoming or some funds identified for roll out of some immediate priority actions so you get some immediate wins on the board in the first 12 to 18 months for a strategy of that scale it can almost be seen as a waste of time. If you don’t have a strategy in place about how you’re going to resource some of the
key priorities people are going to look at it and say well that wasn’t worth the effort” (Consultant).

The second challenge of the strategic planning process discussed by a number of respondents was obtaining stakeholder buy-in to the process (n=9), “Unfortunately at the time there was a lot of politics involved and it didn’t get the majority support on the table for a number of the concepts” (Council) and “the things they really grappled with all the way through this was getting industry buy in and ownership of it” (Consultant). Several respondents perceived the main challenge associated with strategic planning is getting agreement on focus and scope for the process (n=3), “The Council had some really fixed views about development and how to try and get it funded and we were trying to broaden that picture” (Consultant).

Discussion and Conclusion

Strategic planning is recognised as a key contributor in meeting sustainable development principles and a means of alleviating some of the negative impacts of tourism activity (Dutton & Hall, 1989; Harrison & Husbands, 1996; Page & Thorn, 2002; Simpson, 2001; Wall, 1997). Yet it became quite evident in the first stage of the research that key aspects of the traditional strategic planning approach recognized in both the general and strategic tourism planning literature are not incorporated into the tourism planning processes conducted for local destinations in Queensland (Cooper, 1995; Faulkner, 1994; Hall, 2000; Hall & McArthur, 1998; Schendel & Hofer, 1979). By not engaging in a strategic planning approach the majority of destinations in the study would not have given consideration to what their destination will be like in the future, and therefore would have no point of reference to measure, even anecdotally, when the destination has reached a critical stage of development. Further, as a result of failing to address economic, environmental and social goals related to tourism, there is no means to monitor the attainment of goals and more importantly that such goals are not unknowingly exceeded or diverted from.

The failure to engage in strategic, long-term thinking regarding the destination is quite concerning but not necessarily unexpected. The Australian public sector has a reputation for being overtly preoccupied with marketing at the expense of strategic planning (Faulkner, 2003). This marketing versus management mentality has been to the detriment of a more balanced and rational approach to the development of the tourism industry. Indeed, Page and Thorn’s (1997) study of tourism planning in New Zealand also confirmed the use of ad hoc approaches at the expense of an integrated planning framework for tourism leading them to conclude that planning is destined to remain a reactive response to problems and pressures generated by tourism.

This study has confirmed that local level planning in Queensland is conducted without a long-term strategic view. This is despite the fact that a wealth of literature and case evidence exists which explicitly warns of the dangers of failing to engage in strategic planning (Coccossis, 1996; Gunn, 1994; Hall, 1998; Inskeep, 1991; Murphy, 1985). Why tourism destination planners in the 21st century would choose to ignore the lessons of the past is quite intriguing. However for the destinations examined in this study this certainly appears to be the case. One possible reason that long-term, strategic thinking is not featuring in the planning process of many local tourism destinations in Queensland is that the negative impacts of tourism have yet to be experienced,
“You have to create momentum with planning and being involved in long planning style processes where you spend a lot of time thinking strategically and collecting information to get a strategic view can only be done when there’s a really serious problem. In a place like [destination], tourism isn’t a problem it’s an opportunity” (Consultant).

Such a response suggests that long-term strategic planning is seen as an activity that is employed only when a destination is in crisis mode. Indeed, Butler (1991) claims that tourism planning is too often reactive rather than proactive as the prospect of large returns overturns a cautious approach. If this is the case it is not surprising that the planning practices of destinations analysed in this study performed so poorly on the strategic planning criteria of the evaluation instrument. If strategic planning is seen as a reactive measure only to be employed when tourism activity becomes a problem in the destination then destinations that are looking to diversify into tourism would not be thinking towards the future, but looking at achieving short-term gains to get tourism established in the destination. Here tourism appears to be the attractive ‘soft’ option to revitalise and improve local economies (Wahab & Pigram, 1997). However, the need for tourism planning is even more important in such destinations where an inexperienced public and private sector may have little or no experience in how to properly develop such a sector, how to integrate it with other sectors of the economy or how to realise the benefits and negate the negative impacts (Inskeep, 1991; Poon, 1993).

While such destinations may achieve short-term gains the long-term impacts of such short-sighted actions has proven to be dangerous. It is unlikely that Queensland local tourism destinations are the first to believe that it is acceptable to kick-start tourism activity without firstly giving due consideration to what such actions will have on the destination in the future. Many of the world’s most developed destinations can probably trace back to a time when tourism was experimented with as an alternative economic and employment generator, and the need for long-term strategic thinking was seen as unnecessary. Murphy and Murphy’s (2004, p.3) warning that “those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it” may well be the case. Small, local destinations in Queensland may not be Majorca or the Mediterranean, but tourism, even on a small scale and especially when not managed properly, has still been found to create considerable detrimental effects on the destination. It is likely that in time these destinations will experience the repercussions for such oversight, and as Martin and Uysal (1990) noted, while the initial stages of tourism are usually met with a great deal of enthusiasm because of the perceived economic benefits, it is only natural that, as unpleasant changes take place in the physical environment and in the type of tourist being attracted, this feeling gradually becomes more and more negative. By engaging in a sustainable approach in the early stages of destination growth tourism planning can be used as a means of alleviating the economic deterioration arising from poorly planned and managed tourism development in an attempt to maintain, in perpetuity, the characteristics that make it a desirable place to live and visit (De Lacy, Battig, Moore & Noakes, 2002; Manning & Dougherty, 2000).

It has been said that the sustainable approach to tourism planning is particularly useful at the local level due to the fact that this is where tourism’s negative influences are felt most acutely (Aronsson, 2000; Ashworth, 1995; Nijkamp & Verdonkshot, 1995). However, strategic planning, a recognised contributor to sustainable development, is not evident within many of the analysed planning processes in this
study. Indeed, long-term, strategic thinking about the future of the destination was not
evident and confirms assertions that where the tourism industry does plan, there is a
tendency to revert to short-term perspectives focused on more immediate outcomes
(Cooper 2002; Jepson, 2004; Lew & Hall, 1998; Swarbrooke, 1998; von Friedrichs
Grangsjo, 2003). This result supports the notion that sustainable tourism policies may
give the appearance of a paradigm shift but in reality are focused on the traditional
concern of economic returns (Butler, 1991; Dovers & Handmer, 1993; Getz, 1986; Hall,

Although the results of this study are particular to local tourism destinations in
Queensland, and cannot be generalised, this research has supported the notion that there
has not been a significant evolution in tourism planning paradigms from narrow
concerns with promotion to a more balanced form of planning recognising the need for
strategic planning. As such the criticisms levelled at the public sector in Australia for
their adoption of sustainability principles, in this case, seems to be justified (Faulkner,
2003; Hall, 2003, 1994; McKercher, 1993) and as such this study concurs with the view
that government policies and plans for sustainable tourism development are little more
than statements of platitudes and rhetoric, backed by glossy images (Berke & Manta
Conroy, 2000; Pfarr, 2001; Pigram, 1990; Slee, Farr & Snowdon, 1997). While the
industry may in principle support the concept, this has been without a full understanding
of its meaning or its implications for planning and development activity. As such there
was some consensus by respondents that there is a need for tools and processes, which
could be utilised for tourism planning, an issue also highlighted in the literature.

References


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