

Abstract submission for the BEST Education Network (BESTEN) Think Tank V, *Managing risk and crisis for sustainable tourism: Research and innovation*, 16 – 19 June 2005.

Author

E. Kate Armstrong
Lecturer
School of Information Management and Tourism
University of Canberra ACT 2601
AUSTRALIA

Ph: +61 (0)2 6201 5943
Fax: +61 (0)2 6201 2649
E-mail: Kate.Armstrong@canberra.edu.au

Title

Communicating with visitors during and after a natural disaster – Examples from the 2003 bushfires in the Australian Capital Territory

Keywords

Disaster, crisis, management, recovery, communication, bushfires.

Communicating with visitors during and after a natural disaster – Examples from the 2003 bushfires in the Australian Capital Territory

Tourism is often a significant component of a region or country's economic, social, cultural and environmental well-being and a natural disaster such as a hurricane, tsunami, landslide, flood or bushfire may cause a range of impacts on the destination. The recovery of the tourism industry after a disaster may be critical for overall community recovery. In January 2003 the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), home to the capital city Canberra, experienced a natural disaster. Lightning strikes on the western edge of the Territory started five bushfires that eventually spread to consume 157,000 hectares of natural, rural and residential land - almost 70 per cent of the Territory (McLeod, 2003). It also destroyed 488 urban and rural dwellings – a significant number for a city of 320,000 residents – and resulted in four fatalities (ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, 2003). The fires had serious repercussions for the ACT's natural and cultural attraction base as it damaged national parks, nature reserves, river corridors and cultural built heritage. The effect on the destination image was profound with images of the devastating fires being shown on regional, national and international media. Several tour operators and numerous other tourism businesses were directly impacted by the fires and the industry as a whole was affected by the downturn in visitor numbers.

LITERATURE

Despite high and increasing levels of activity in disaster management research, there is still relatively little published about disasters, crises and their implications for the tourism industry. Faulkner (2001, p. 136) argues that despite the tourism industry being prone to suffering as a result of disasters '...relatively little systematic research has been carried out on disaster phenomena in tourism, the impacts of such events on the tourism industry and the responses of industry and relevant government agencies to cope with these impacts'. However, the growing body of research and increasing interest in this area was demonstrated by an entire issue of the *Journal of Travel Research* in 1999 concentrating on crisis and recovery in relation to war and terrorism. With eerie foresight all of the papers focused on human-induced disasters and crises (eg, terrorism, crime, violence against tourists). More recent literature also demonstrates the increasing research activity prompted by high profile crises and disasters in the first years of this century (for example, 11 September 2001 terrorist bombings in the USA, Foot and Mouth Disease in the United Kingdom in 2001, Bali terrorist bombings in 2002, SARS in 2003). The literature will no doubt be supplemented with research emerging from the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami given its impact on high profile tourism destinations.

Despite this growing body of research on disasters and crises there is little published on destination recovery. Numerous disaster management frameworks and theories have been proposed (Faulkner, 2001; Faulkner & Vikulov, 2001; Murphy & Bayley, 1989; Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Ritchie, 2004; Santana, 1999) but the attention devoted to the recovery phase

is often limited. Most studies that have addressed recovery do so by considering short or medium term actions and no published research has been found that has considered the medium to long term aspects of destination recovery. Similarly there has been little research on building or testing destination recovery models although overall disaster management models and frameworks based on theory and/or real life have been developed.

Research on communication with visitors during and after disasters has received variable attention. The risk perceptions of managers and their disaster evacuation planning activities, which would by necessity involve communication with visitors, have been the subject of extensive research by Drabek (1994a; 1994b; 1995). Faulkner's (2001) tourism disaster management framework in both theoretical form and applied to the 1998 Australia Day Flood (Faulkner & Vikulov, 2001) refers to warning systems, communication during the emergency and later media communication strategies but provides little detail about the role of communications in recovery. The role of the media during and immediately after a disaster and the impacts the often inaccurate and sensational reporting may have on destination image is widely acknowledged (Cassedy, 1991; Murphy & Bayley, 1989) and the tendency for 'denial communication' (incomplete communication on the true state of affairs) has been reported by Cammisa (1993). Richardson and Fluker (2004), however, note the valuable role that the media can take in informing tourists during and after a disaster and for reporting recovery stages such as restoration of services and openings.

In a posting to Trinet, Larry Dwyer (2005), in the interests of developing a research agenda, posed numerous research questions. At the disaster response stage he asks 'What types of warning systems are available?' and 'How are warnings communicated to tourists or potential tourists?' – very immediate concerns. In recovery the questions are 'What are the roles of the different tourism stakeholders?', 'What is the role in this [recovery] process of communications?' and the topics are 'media relations as an area critical to recovery and crisis management' and 'crisis and recovery communications as integral to confidence building'.

The bushfires in the ACT provided an opportunity to start to address the identified research gap and answer these questions posed by Dwyer (2005). The research will investigate longitudinally the short, medium and long term actions and strategies undertaken by tourism industry stakeholders to assist destination recovery. The larger research project will judge the usefulness of existing theory and build a specialized model for post-natural disaster recovery. This conference paper, however, will concentrate on those results relating to communication with visitors during and after the natural disaster.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a case study methodology, is informed by the holistic-inductive paradigm and has adopted the documentary method, participant observation and interviewing as the key methods (Jennings, 2001). The first round of in-depth interviews was conducted in January 2004 with industry stakeholders including the government tourism agency, industry associations, the chamber of commerce and industry, attraction managers, land management agencies and other government bodies. The short and medium term actions and strategies undertaken to assist the recovery of the industry (from day 1 to 12 months) were investigated.

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

Destination recovery comprises many facets but the way that the destination and the industry players communicate with local visitors or tourists has emerged as a significant theme. This paper examines the types of media used to communicate with visitors during and after the bushfire including visitor management (site closure, evacuations), electronic communication (websites, email), personal communication (Visitor Information Center, telephone), mainstream media (television, radio, newspaper), community newsletters, marketing communication and events. The communication strategies used in the response and recovery may serve as a useful guide for other destinations affected by natural disasters. As Faulkner (2001, p. 146) states 'By studying past events, the response of those affected and the recovery measures adopted, and retrospectively evaluating the effectiveness of these responses, we can develop strategies for coping with similar events in the future.'

REFERENCES

- ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce. (2003). *The report of the Bushfire Recovery Taskforce, Australian Capital Territory October 2003*. Canberra: ACT Government.
- Cammissa, J. V. (1993). *The Miami experience - natural and manmade disasters 1992 - 93*. Paper presented at the Expanding responsibilities: a blueprint for the travel industry, 24th Annual Conference Proceedings for the Travel and Tourism Research Association, Whistler, BC.
- Cassedy, K. (1991). *Crisis management planning in the travel and tourism industry: A study of three destination cases and a crisis management planning manual*. San Francisco: Pacific Asia Travel Association.
- Drabek, T. E. (1994a). *Disaster evacuation and the tourist industry (Program on Environment and Behavior, Monograph No. 57)*. Boulder, Colorado: University of Colorado.
- Drabek, T. E. (1994b). Risk perceptions of tourist business managers. *The Environmental Professional*, 16, 327-341.
- Drabek, T. E. (1995). Disaster responses within the tourist industry. *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, 13(1), 7-23.
- Dwyer, L. (2005). Destination Crisis Management: Developing a Research Agenda (email to TRINET bulletin board, 27 January 2005).
- Faulkner, B. (2001). Towards a framework for tourism disaster management. *Tourism Management*, 22(2), 135-147.
- Faulkner, B., & Vikulov, S. (2001). Katherine, washed out one day, back on track the next: A post-mortem of a tourism disaster. *Tourism Management*, 22(4), 331-344.
- Jennings, G. (2001). *Tourism research*. Queensland: John Wiley and Sons Australia Ltd.
- McLeod, R. (2003). *Inquiry into the operational response to the January 2003 bushfires in the ACT*. Canberra, ACT: ACT Legislative Assembly.
- Murphy, P. E., & Bayley, R. (1989). Tourism and disaster planning. *The Geographical Review*, 79(1), 36-46.
- Pearson, C. M., & Mitroff, I. I. (1993). From crisis prone to crisis prepared: A framework for crisis management. *Academy of Management Executive*, 7(1), 48-59.
- Richardson, J. I., & Fluker, M. (2004). *Understanding and managing tourism*. NSW: Pearson Education Australia.
- Ritchie, B. W. (2004). Chaos, crises and disasters: A strategic approach to crisis management in the tourism industry. *Tourism Management*, 25, 669 - 683.
- Santana, G. (1999). Tourism: Towards a model for crisis management. *Tourism*, 47(1), 4-12.