

Learning as Prerequisite for Innovations in Tourism – Sustainable Tourism Development in the North Sea Region

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Introduction

Located in Northern Europe, the North Sea Region (NSR, see Map 1) is regarded a unique natural landscape, a centre of oil, gas and wind energy production, a major transportation route, an important fishing and industrial area as well as a popular recreational destination (Burkhard & Diembeck 2006). The state of tourism, its characteristics and impacts vary greatly throughout the region. Remote areas such as Scotland and Norway are at an early stage of development whereas others like the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark are mature mass tourism destinations that are either consolidated or stagnated in the tourism cycle of evolution (Butler 1997; Staneva 2003). However, as coastal destinations they all rely on the North Sea as a common, transnational asset. Well-known environmental issues affect the coastal attractiveness whether caused by climate change with accompanied rise of sea level, increase in rainfall, storm surge and change in vegetation (Braun et al. 1999) or pollution through energy production and consumption, industrial activity, traffic and tourism (Burkhard & Diembeck 2006). At the same time, the NSR coastal destinations are presented with a number of socio-economic and administrative changes that in turn shape travel expectations, demand and behaviour. Two examples are the removal of frontier controls by the Schengen agreement and the introduction of the Euro as final stage of the Economic and Monetary Union (European Union 2007). Both affect tourists' destination concept and expectations which, in turn, do not necessarily correspond with administrative borders (Buhalis 2000). Despite ongoing efforts to create a single European market, transnational tourism is inhibited by local, regional and national legislation that may be further enhanced by differences in language and culture. Advancements in science and technology, and increasingly fierce global competition between destinations pose further threats but simultaneously, they also present opportunities for sustainable tourism development in the region (Dwyer 2005).

This article reports on an ongoing project that focuses on learning and innovation as prerequisites for sustainable tourism in a transnational environment defined by the European North Sea Region. According to Buhalis (2000: 113) providing innovative and well co-coordinated tourism products is exceedingly important for tourism regions. Similarly Hjalager (2002) agrees on the need for innovation in tourism, i.e. creating additional, commercially relevant value through the redesign of products, processes, management, logistics, and/or collaborative and regulatory structures.

Hjalager (ibid) further argues that there is a gap between existing literature emphasizing the importance of tourism innovation, which is currently not reflected in practice. A number of inhibitors can be identified, of which some relate to human resource practices and the sector's organizational structure. In particular, lack of retention, training and succession planning challenge the sustainability of the sector's many small and medium sized tourism enterprises (SMTEs) (Liburd 2007). Also lack of trust and fear of change constitute major barriers to the generation and use of knowledge to nourish innovation (Hjalager 2002; Cooper 2006; OECD 2006).

Map 1: The North Sea Region and the ToLearn Pilot Regions



Source: ToLearn (2007)

Developed on behalf of the European Commission in 2006 these impediments are addressed in the Tourism Learning Area (TLA) approach. The TLA objective is to improve human potentials in tourism at local and transnational levels by developing a suitable framework to improve learning opportunities and facilitate sustainable tourism development. The concept thereby recognises the importance and ephemerality of specified knowledge and the need for lifelong learning in a variety of formal and informal settings (European Commission 2006). Moreover, it underscores the need to enable training of human resources in co-operation between competing and complementary destinations (Buhalis 2000: 114). In accordance, a key component of the TLA approach is to establish information and cooperation networks between stakeholders from relevant sectors with

either a thematic or spatial focus. Also proposed as a problem-solving methodology the approach implies a mutual understanding of issues and goals (European Commission 2006). Moreover, partnerships among research and educational institutions for the identification and analysis of problems as well as dissemination of findings are strongly encouraged.

In due course a two-year project entitled “Developing Sustainable Tourism in the North Sea Region – Applying the Tourism Learning Area Concept” is currently underway. Led by Christian-Albrechts-Universität Kiel, Germany, the consortium consists of the following universities: Stavanger University, Norway, CHN University, the Netherlands, University of Gent, Belgium and the University of Southern Denmark, Denmark which are partly funded by the European Regional Development Fund. The project is part of the Interreg North Sea Programme set to support the European Union’s efforts “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion” by 2010 (European Parliament 2000).

Incorporating the basic principles of the Interreg programme, namely spatial development, cross-sectorality, transnationality and sustainability, the present project aims at stimulating cooperation and mutual learning among coastal destinations in the NSR (Staneva 2003). Within this scope,

- destinations facing comparable conditions and development challenges are identified and matched;
- “best practice” examples and their success factors are identified and highlighted;
- information and communication structures are set up;
- recommendations for the further implementation of the TLA concept are developed;
- five projects incorporating the recommendations are implemented under the guidance of the partner institutions.

Method

In order to provide for meaningful comparisons in the North Sea context a shared, multi-disciplinary methodology and timeframe for completion guide all research efforts. First, regional tourism profiles covering all coastal areas are created by use of statistical information from EUROSTAT, the statistical office of the European Communities producing comparable and harmonised data on various regional levels of the EU (NUTS), and national statistics. These are supplemented by semi-structured interviews with five tourism experts per region using a common checklist of questions. Ongoing literature reviews inform the research process and proved particularly useful for

formulating the framework and issues to guide the expert interviews. The criteria for selecting expert interviewees are based on expertise in tourism, nature and landscape protection, communal/municipal development or destination management. Experts are questioned on the current state of coastal tourism, its demand and supply characteristics, collaborative and regulatory structures as well as development strategies. Opportunities and threats to sustainable development are highlighted and successful strategies in dealing with development challenges are identified.

Through selected pilot regions in the five participating countries (see Map 1) the analysis is taken one step further. By means of in-depth expert interviews the aspects addressed in the regional tourism profiles are examined in detail. Addressing the regional tourism development strategies, focus is on the significance of sustainability issues, the key actors and their communication networks, the structure and dynamics of regional learning processes in order to understand the multi-sited conditions for innovation. Project progress reports and findings are accessible on an ad hoc basis through an online platform (<http://www.tolearn.info>) and regular electronic newsletters. Interregional communication and learning among project partners and relevant stakeholders are also facilitated through local workshops, joint conferences and study visits. Further learning opportunities are provided through partnerships with kindred initiatives in the NSR, such as “Creating Sustainable Tourism Destinations” (CREST).

Expected Outcome

The project is considered the start up for the development and implementation of a tourism learning area in the NSR context. Reports and networking activities are expected to broaden the understanding of the current situation and future needs of tourism destinations and industry by enhancing communication among coastal areas and initiating regional learning structures.

However, whereas knowledge and learning may be necessary for economic success they are by no means sufficient to ensure it; nor, even more so, are they sufficient to ensure equality, cohesion and social justice (Hudson 1999: 69). Therefore, the principles of sustainability and equity must be considered in all actions which, among others, are visible in the stakeholder approach towards equitable partnerships while acknowledging that they are competitors. The identification of innovative strategies and how to manage threats and embrace opportunities are expected to provide tangible evidence of the benefits from collaboration and interregional learning.

While these expected outcomes do not automatically result in competitive advantages for destinations and individual tourism firms in the NSR, they are envisaged as having an effect on the

design of regional development strategies for sustainable tourism and innovative practices. SMTEs may profit indirectly through the improvement of the learning framework and initiatives targeting competence development and innovation in the private sector. The successful implementation of the tourism learning area approach will to a certain degree depend on post-project funding, the learning ability and willingness among individual stakeholders, and notably that research efforts are sensitive to the practical issues facing tourism businesses.

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