Conference papers

School of Hospitality Management and Tourism

2014

Using an Iconic Story to Bring Communities Together to Develop a Tourism Experience

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Recommended Citation

Using an iconic story to bring communities together to develop a tourism experience

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism destination governance is concerned with the development and management of a destination; who is involved and how they are involved. Although the term governance was traditionally associated with politics and government structures it has become more broadly applied in recent years to also describe more grassroots approaches involving various community stakeholders such as individual business owners in tourism product and service provision, business owners in other sectors, community leaders and community residents Morrison (2013).

Turbulence in the market has forced the tourism industry to move away from centralised, government-led, hierarchical type of governance towards more participatory approaches where stakeholders are included in decision-making. In Ireland, the importance of community engagement in tourism development, has been acknowledged by policy makers (Fáilte Ireland, 2010; The Tourism Recovery Taskforce, 2012). More than important however, it has been argued that for a destination development to be successful, community involvement is essential (Jamal & Watt, 2011). It has been shown that ensuring that stakeholders have active involvement in tourism development can enhance success by reducing conflicts, building trust, adding to the transparency of the process, improving policy co-ordination and creating an added-value to the enterprise through the utilisation of stakeholder knowledge (Ford, 2011; Schianetz et al., 2009).

Nevertheless, despite the rhetoric about the importance of including community stakeholders in destination development, in reality it does not happen often (Myers, Budruk, & Andereck, 2011; Schianetz et al., 2009). This paper describes an ongoing project where community members have been encouraged to become involved in destination development. The project is focused on examining how the iconic story of St Brendan the Navigator could be developed into a tourism experience along the Wild Atlantic Way in North and West Kerry. The challenges faced in attempting this type of tourism governance are described, as well as how they can be addressed.

BACKGROUND

The Wild Atlantic Way

The Wild Atlantic Way, one of Fáilte Ireland's signature projects, is currently under development and is a long distance driving route along Irelands Atlantic coast from Donegal to Cork. The brand

proposition of the Wild Atlantic Way is centred around its 'wildness' but the history, heritage, culture, people and food along the way are also emphasised as an important element of the brand. The aim of its development is to develop a touring route similar to global coastal touring routes such as the Great Ocean Road in Australia, The Garden route in South Africa and Route 66 in the USA and to provide experiences that will encourage visitors to come and also to stay longer on the West Coast of Ireland (Fáilte Ireland & The Paul Hogarth Company, 2013; The Tourism Recovery Taskforce, 2012).

There are 4 markets segments being targeted: Road Travel Experience Seekers - those tourists interested in wild/isolated drives; Landscape Experience Seekers - tourists interested in landscapes and seascapes; Culture and Arts seekers - tourists interested in culture and heritage such as castles, centres explaining history of local community, cultural events and programmes of activity; and Outdoor Activity Seekers - tourists interested in activities such as cycling, golf, angling and walking trails (Fáilte Ireland & The Paul Hogarth Company, 2013). However, the Wild Atlantic Way is in its early stages of development, and although there are tourism experiences already in existence along the route to appeal to each of these market segments, is it essential that more be developed (Fáilte Ireland, 2013) The research project described in this paper was conceived to investigate how this need could be addressed along one section of the Wild Atlantic Way with regard to the *Culture and Arts Seeker* market segment. The story of St Brendan the Navigator was chosen as a focus because his life and voyages are linked to numerous sites along the Wild Atlantic Way, in Kerry.

St Brendan's Story

St Brendan, often called St Brendan the Navigator, was an early Irish Saint who was born in 484 in County Kerry. His travels took him to Scotland, to the Faeroe Islands, to Wales and to Brittany, but he is best known for the legend of his travels recorded in the 9th Century *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* or as it is better known, *The Voyage of St Brendan the Navigator,* copies of which are stored in numerous libraries across Europe. This text describes travels to destinations reputed to include Iceland, Greenland and North America.

Although some of the descriptions in the Navigatio are quite fantastical and it may be difficult to separate fact from fiction in the tale, as Ó Donnchada (2004) highlights, it is clear that someone did experience and came back to describe ice floes in Northern Seas, Newfoundland fog and the exotic flowers of the Caribbean. Similarly, accounts in Icelandic sagas written in the 13th century talk of Irish priests who were in Iceland before it was populated by the Northmen (Foley, 2013). Whether this was St Brendan and his companions is impossible to prove, nonetheless, his name has come to be associated with a voyage to distant lands.

St Brendan grew up in County Kerry and as an adult spent time in the county between travels, although he eventually relocated to county Galway. There are many links in County Kerry to the story of his life. Additionally, as the tales of St Brendan's voyages were passed down through the centuries, pilgrims began to travel to the sites associated with his life and travels. Most notable among these pilgrimages is the journey to the peak of Mt Brandon. Currently there are a few sites that have been developed around his life and legend, but in the main, the story is underdeveloped. Thus there is potential to animate the story of his life and the legend of his voyages for visitors, providing them with information and experiences in the process.

Community Engagement

Although the destination in question in this project is a number of communities linked along a route rather than one region, the project is still an example of destination development, albeit an atypical one. There are several routes to destination development, where stakeholders from government, local agencies or local communities are involved to varying degrees (Hultman & Hall, 2012). This project aimed to establish a form of tourism destination governance based on community involvement following the recent trend in Ireland, where government agencies have begun to encourage much greater degrees of community engagement (Fáilte Ireland, 2010; The Tourism Recovery Taskforce, 2012). Since getting and keeping community stakeholders involved in tourism development can be a challenging process, studying a community-based approach is allowing us to examine the challenges involved in this type of destination governance. As the project involves several communities engaging in inter-community collaboration it is a different model of tourism development to one typically studied, which consists of the development of one bounded region. This project, in contrast, focuses on 4 different areas along an 85km route, bound together geographically by a road and thematically by the story of St Brendan. Accordingly, study results should give insights not only into community involvement in destination governance but also into inter-community collaboration.

 Social exchange theory suggests that individuals will become involved in destination development only if they value the perceived outcomes and if the perceived costs do not outweigh rewards (Yoon, 2002). Stories of success in other regions can provide examples for individuals of the potential tangible benefits to themselves to becoming involved in tourism development (Nel & Binns, 2002). For example, regions such as the West coast of Ireland, which were traditionally marginalised, have been able to utilise tourism as a path to greater economic prosperity for individuals. Similarly, developers of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, a walking route across France and Spain that has its origins in Medieval pilgrimage routes across Europe, have engaged in recent marketing and development efforts which have resulted in increased tourist numbers and economic benefits to individual businesses along the route in Spain (Leary, Sebenius, & Weiss, 2009).

Nevertheless, individuals do not always get involved in tourism development because of perceived tangible benefits to themselves. In a previous study, we found that stakeholders have different motivations for becoming involved including perceived benefits to the community as a whole (O'Leary & Stafford, 2013). Accordingly, to encourage community involvement, it is important to recognise that different stakeholders will have different set of concerns, such as whether they have been actively consulted, whether there are tangible benefits to the local area and whether the visitor attraction is an authentic reflection of local perspectives (Australian Heritage Commission, 2001). Within the current project, an added complication comes from the fact that four different communities are involved. Nevertheless, there are often common interests that provide a focus to encourage disparate groups to collaborate (Australian Heritage Commission, 2001).

Methodology

An action research approach was taken in this study. Action research emphasises reflective participation in an emergent process which can allow the space and conditions for collaboration to develop (Reason, 2006). It is focused on communications, reflection, participation and mutual respect

and essentially it involves engaging in action of some type, typically in collaboration with others, while studying the process at the same time.

In this study, data is being collected through participant observation. Thus, throughout the action research process field notes are being maintained which consist of the following as advised by Silverman (2010):

- Short notes made at the time.
- Expanded notes made as soon as possible after each field session.
- A field work journal to record problems and ideas that arise during each stage of fieldwork.
- A provisional running record of analysis and interpretation.

These notes serve as a descriptive account of the action research. Description is not enough in action research, as an action researcher must make sense of the story (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). Consequently, as reflection is an integral part of action research, a section on reflection is an extra element that has been added to the field notes. The resultant data have been analysed consistent with the approach described by Miles and Huberman (1994).

The aim of the project is to gain intercommunity agreement on a plan of action to develop the St Brendan's Story into a tourism experience. A framework developed by Fáilte Ireland is being utilised within the project. This framework consists of the following steps:

Step 1: Establishing a destination development group (identifying key stakeholder and gaining agreement on their involvement)

Step 2: Understanding the destination and the visitors (defining what the destination has to offer and how it is performing and then examining what visitors want and how the destination proposition can be redefined to meet these needs)

Step 3: Developing the vision and strategy (Agreeing on a destination plan)

Step 4: Writing the destination plan

A further step, *Implementing the plan and monitoring success,* is outside the remit of the project.

The project is nearing completion as we are currently cycling between steps 3 and 4 of the destination development framework as outlined above.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Step 1: Establishing a Destination Development Group

Identification of all stakeholders that should be involved in destination development can be difficult as every destination has a unique set of stakeholders that should be involved (Pederson, 2002; Timur & Getz, 2008). In this project, members of community development groups in four communities were asked to be part of the project. This approach was taken as the members were seen to have an ongoing interest in development activities. Additionally, individuals who had previous links to the story of St

Brendan and an interest in tourism development were also asked to become involved. As the project has progressed, more individuals have been identified and contacted.

First steps involved speaking with a group from each community in order to discuss the project with them, followed by an inter-community meeting with representation from each of the four communities. This group, made up of twenty members, makes up the destination development committee and has met three times thus far with one more meeting planned. In between the inter-community committee meetings, the researchers have held meetings with individuals and groups from each of the communities to progress the project.

Inter-community meetings have proven challenging due to logistics. The communities at either end of the planned St Brendan's route along the Wild Atlantic Way lie 86 km apart, a journey that takes 90 minutes to complete. Additionally, committee members are all part of their local community development group, or other community groups, which, although it meant that they are ideal stakeholders to include in this project, also means that they have many other commitments. Although inter-community meetings have been held in a central location on days and at times that suited the majority of committee members, attendance has always been below 60% due to these logistical difficulties. Thus, although the project plan initially contained more inter-community meetings, communication within the project is relying as much on e-mail contact, conversations with individuals and meetings with groups from each community to progress it. Although this has the advantage of overcoming logistical difficulties, there are disadvantages also. Ensuring that stakeholders have active involvement in tourism development can enhance success by reducing conflicts, building trust, adding to the transparency of the process, improving policy co-ordination and creating an added-value to the enterprise through the utilisation of stakeholder knowledge (Ford, 2011; Schianetz et al., 2009). More face-to-face contact enhances this type of growth and development within a group (O'Leary, 2011) and it is becoming clear as the project progresses that relying on electronic communication or smaller meetings makes it more difficult to co-ordinate the development of effective inter-community co-ordination. This means that although we are months into the project, which is nearing completion, a high level of cohesion and co-ordination is still emerging.

Step 2: Understanding the destination and the visitors

This step in destination development involved:

1. Conducting an audit of St Brendan related products and experiences in and near each of the four areas.
2. Examining current tourism provision in the region
3. Examining similar product offerings elsewhere
4. Agreeing on target market segments after examining tourism data
5. Redefining the destination proposition by proposing possible brands, products and experiences

These steps have been conducted through inter-community meetings, meetings with groups from individual communities and e-mail contact. Within meetings, data on target market segments was introduced and discussed, a SWOT analysis was conducted and a branding exercise was carried out.

A number of difficulties were highlighted during the process: Firstly, the difficulties inherent in creating tourism experience around legendary figures; secondly, the difficulty in developing tourism in areas in early stages of tourism evolution; and thirdly, establishing parity between communities in an inter-community project. Facilitators in the process of destination development included having access to data, for example data on how the stories of other legendary figures have been animated and data on market segments, having a neutral facilitator and committee members recognising the value of collaboration.

Creating tourism experiences around a legendary figure

It can be difficult to animate the story of 'legendary' figures such as St Brendan because of the length of time that has elapsed since they lived which can make it difficult to ascertain links to definitive archaeological evidence. Some committee members have struggled with how to capture authentically the story of St Brendan. To explore this issue the committee have discussed existing examples of how it can be done successfully. The Abraham Path, for example is a long-distance walking route which begins in Harran in Turkey and ends in the city of Hebron in Jordan. Currently only some sections of the route are walkable, making up a total of around 300km and there has been an initiative in place to continue development. The aim of the initiative is to revitalise a route that follows the path that Abraham, the patriarchal figure for Christianity, Islam and Judaism, took with his family 2000 years ago.

Although there is no definitive archaeological evidence that Abraham actually existed, his story appears in Muslim, Christian and Jewish religious texts as well as in numerous local folktales and mythologies across the Middle East (Leary et al., 2009). Accordingly, the development of the tourism route is based on the notion of cultural memory rather than on concrete archaeological or historical evidence. Thus, there are clear parallels to the St Brendan story.

Similarly, cultural tourism development in Iceland can be difficult as archaeological remains are rare and most of the heritage is present in ancient texts. Thus, the development of tourism in the country has to revolve around ways to animate the stories and link them to a sense of place. One example of this is the story of Egill Skallagrimsson, who was a son of one of the first Vikings to settle in Iceland and who became one of that country's most famous Viking and first poet. His story is recorded in Egills Saga, which was written in the early 12th Century and is the first book written in Icelandic. In the Settlement Centre in Borgarnes, two exhibits have been created around Egills Saga, one of which details the life history of Egill Skallagrimsson and the second which describes the lives of early settlers to Iceland in the ninth century. Visitors make their way around the exhibits using an audio guide. Visitors can also take part in guided tours to historical sites and the Settlement Centre also houses a theatre (Mossberg, Therkelsen, Huijbens, Björk, & Olsson, 2010).

Discussions of these and other examples allowed committee members to define three different elements of St Brendan's story namely, the *accounts* of St Brendan's life, the *legend* of his voyages and the *tradition* of the pilgrimages associated with this early saint. Categorising in this way allowed committee members to see how the different elements of the story could be developed differently. Firstly, the accounts of his life offer linkages with archaeological sites and these could be developed. Secondly, the legend of his voyages can be potentially linked with places through oral history, written accounts and traditions and these linkages could be developed whilst taking the lack of archaeological evidence into account. Thirdly, some pilgrimages associated with him, most notably the climb up Mt

Brandon, are still in existence and this link with tradition and oral history is the 'story' that could be told at these sites.

Developing tourism in regions in early stages of tourism evolution

Butler (1980) suggests that tourism development goes through six major stages of evolution: exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation and decline or rejuvenation. Although tourism is an important industry in county Kerry, the main tourist hubs are Killarney and Dingle. These hubs are mature tourism markets and thus have already gone through development and are in a consolidation stage of evolution where the economy of the towns is closely linked to tourism, large numbers of visitors continue to visit and tourism facilities are developed which means that there is capacity to deal with the large numbers of visitors. This project, however, involves examining the potential of developing tourism outside these hubs where the areas in question are in the early stages of evolution as described by Butler (1980). This means that in all four communities, there is poor tourism infrastructure with limited hospitality and accommodation choices.

Nevertheless, the fact that each community is in the early stages of tourism development is not being seen as hugely problematic by committee members as there are sufficient accommodation choices along the Wild Atlantic Way in the County for example, in Tralee. Tralee could also act as a hub for information about St Brendan and thus provide a means for tourists to be directed to the four smaller communities.

Establishing parity between communities in an inter-community project

The initial decisions on whether a destination should be developed can elicit a wide range of opinions from stakeholders. Similarly, attitudes on how this should occur can vary. As Morgan et al (2004 ,p.14) highlight: "place branding is an extremely complex and highly political activity….many organizations and groups have vested interests in the promotion of particular identities (many of which may be in direct conflict with the interests of others)". Additionally, it has been shown previously that collaboration can be difficult if there are competitors involved (Grängsjö & Gummesson, 2006; Plummer, Telfer, Hashimoto, & Summers, 2005). In the case of this project, even though four different communities are working together to investigate the potential of the St Brendan Story as a tourism experience, they are essentially in competition for any resources that may be injected into the development of products and experiences.

This is apparent in meetings but has not thus far created major difficulties. This appears to be because committee members recognise that a funding application from a collaborative inter-community group is stronger than an application from each community working alone. Thus, working together provides an opportunity for *collaborative advantage*, the benefits that can result from co-operating with others that cannot be gained by acting alone (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). In this case, the collaborative advantage is not only the potential to be better placed to access funding for the development of the tourism products and experiences but also to create a better tourism experience which would allow communities to gain from longer tourist stays in the region. Additionally, the fact that the researcher facilitating the committee meetings is not associated with any of the four communities means that

there is a neural mediator for any discussions that could potentially advance the case of one community over another.

Another facilitator in developing inter-community collaboration has been the brand development exercise. Destination branding, which involves developing a brand for a region as a whole, has received attention in recent years and has become a rapidly expanding field of study and practice (Morgan et al., 2004). Many destinations are distinguishing themselves from other destinations and actively marketing themselves using a brand, which can be a symbol, name, term or design that combines the attributes of a destination under a single concept (Hankinson, 2007; Tasci, 2011).

We are currently carrying out a destination branding exercise and this has provided a means for individual community members to identify with members of other the communities in the project rather than identifying solely with their own communities. Destination development is what Haughland et al (2010) refer to as a multilevel phenomenon. In other words, it must take account not only of the destination itself and the interactions between individual stakeholders within it but also the larger geographic area within which it sits. In the case of this project, the geographic region in question lies along the Wild Atlantic Way and developing the St Brendan story must link to the 'Ireland' brand which is centred around the idea of the island as a place of beautiful scenery, engaging people and a living and historic culture (Tourism Ireland, 2013), and the Wild Atlantic Way brand which is centred on 'wildness'. By focusing on the notion of linking the communities geographically, using the Wild Atlantic Way, and thematically, using the Story of St Brendan, committee members have been able to focus on the bigger picture rather than solely on their own community.

Step 3: Developing a vision and strategy & Step 4 Writing the Destination Plan
The vision and strategy development is currently ongoing. An action plan is being written and will form the basis for more feedback and for the communities to progress the project further.

CONCLUSION

Using the iconic story of St Brendan and linking it to the Wild Atlantic Way has so far facilitated a process of inter-community tourism destination governance where individuals from several communities have come together to collaborate in the first steps of a tourism development process. The potential for a legendary journey to facilitate such inter-community collaboration has previously been highlighted by the development of the Abraham Path, an ongoing project in the Middle East. This long distance walking route passes through a number of cultural, religious and historical sites associated with Abraham and it has received attention because of the *'potential unifying power'* of using the development of the walk as a non-political tool to bring together those from different religious and cultural backgrounds in order to work on achieving a common goal (Leary et al., 2009,

p.1). The current project, centred on the story and legend of St Brendan also has the potential to tie together members of different communities to work together in order to achieve benefits for all the communities. A number of challenges will arise in progressing this project, including continued facilitation, coordination of activities and funding and will need to be addressed to see the project through to completion.

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