INDUSTRY FRAGMENTATION VS. TOURISM PLANNING

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In this year of the nation’s bicentennial, it is well to reflect on the development of tourism — a phenomenon that wasn’t of much concern in either 1776 or even 1876. The purpose of this paper is to suggest that tourism can no longer follow its earlier growth and development pattern. The challenge is to overcome the ills of growing fragmentation and to redirect efforts toward a more harmoniously functioning tourism system.

The Way It Is

Actually, the present problems of fragmentation of tourism have grown out of its overwhelming success. By allowing the free enterprise system to function and flourish, the finest hotels, motels, resorts, restaurants and attractions of the world have been developed. Individual initiative spurred the entrepreneurs of the Holiday Inns, McDonalds and Disneyworlds as well as the hordes of small independent operators to develop new generations of tourist services and facilities. The normal competitive game continues to tap new markets and to weed out marginal services.

At the same time, a public awareness of social need has pushed governments to function as another type of tourism investor-manager. Increasingly, through legislative support, we have provided more and more natural and cultural resource areas for people to enjoy. Our many parks and reserves are the envy of even the most socialistic and communistic of nations. Custom and law now firmly support outdoor recreation functions as logical and appropriate for governments at all levels.

The development of the far-flung tourism network in this country generally has had grassroots beginnings. Local people, by and large, have taken the initiative and produced the commercial developments and even fostered the governmental involvement in what we now know as tourism in its broadest sense. Nor should we forget the very important role of the local non-profit organizations that have identified and developed most of our historic and cultural attractions.

Certainly, we could make a long list of the many positive accomplishments that have resulted from the laissez-faire approach to tourism development in this country. But, comforting as this might be, it would not address the issue of the future and whether the present trends should, or even could continue. Until we identify the problems to be overcome, there will be little progress made toward their elimination.

Therefore, I would like to suggest that several important problems of proliferation have crept into tourism in this country. While I see no pending tourism crisis, I am concerned that we seem to be unaware of issues that could develop into crises. Perhaps through some examples of events across the nation, the several problems of misallocation of resources, confused functions for visitors, opportunities foregone and resource erosion can be identified.

For example, the gasoline crisis squeezed out many small operators of tourist businesses, not because they were poor operators and not because they gave poor service but because they were improperly located in the first place. State highway departments, public park agencies and state planning departments generally are reluctant to give out planning information that would assist private enterprise in making sound decisions based upon full information. There is evidence that some governmental agencies would prefer that private enterprise would not succeed and make profits.

Many of us as travelers have experienced the clutter and congestion along the typical motel row as we approach our cities. Research now shows that the multiplicity of messages from signs and businesses is not even comprehended by the tourist. The “average observer cannot distinguish between more than seven different sights or sounds presented to him simultaneously.” (Ewald: 1971, 29) How many tourist businessmen are collaborating to reduce this confusion and congestion?

On a recent 6,000 mile tour throughout eastern United States, I visited many state tourist
information centers. In addition to being offered helpful literature, I was given verbal misinformation at every center. I was directed to highways that were not yet built; to interchanges that did not exist; to streets on the wrong side of the city and to other information offices only to discover that they were closed. I was routed 100 miles out of my way to avoid a highway bridge that was closed due to flooding. By checking my own maps and making a little local inquiry, I found a detour and bridge that took me only two miles out of my way.

For several years, I have been referring to the Mission Bay Park development in San Diego as an excellent example of public-private collaboration. This outstanding recreational complex of 4,600 acres of land and water has had millions of dollars worth of input on a collaborative basis from many levels of government and private enterprise. However, I was much disappointed to find on my visit there this fall that the information center had been completely taken over by the business interests. In spite of the fact that the entire area is owned and run by the city park department, with fine beaches and other public facilities, you can get literature and information only on the restaurants and commercial attractions — absolutely no information on the remaining 75 percent of the area in public parks.

Perhaps I am biased by the waterfront amenities of the areas in which I have lived such as Michigan, Massachusetts, Hawaii and Texas, but I am disturbed by the tourism development I see along waterfronts. Certainly, visitors need and are anxious to pay for lodging, food service, products and other services when they visit the water’s edge. But, it seems that businesses serving this need completely ignore protection of the scenery and access to the very waterfront that puts them in business. Waterfronts are special places and deserve landscape protection and development that keeps them clean and beautiful. Furthermore, they demand planning concepts that provide for a balance of open space and concentrated use.

(Gunn: 1972b, 133)

Another example of tourism’s lack of coordination was the Mississippi coastal pollution problem of 1973-74. Bickering over jurisdiction of the beaches and over how to define pollution overshadowed the issue of cleaning up the beaches. The main spark for concern did not come from tourism interests but from the state health and pollution agencies. The only voice of tourism came from the hotel and motel interests who objected to posting beach pollution signs in their lobbies as their business dropped about 10 percent. (Cartee: 1975)

Zehnder, in his book, Florida’s Disney World, raises the question about the possibility that some areas in the future may not want tourists. This is based upon some of the social and environmental implications and complications that come when a major attraction is established. The tourism assumption that more and more is better and better may be up for test. (Zehnder: 1976)

Nearly all surveys of tourists show “driving for pleasure” as the most popular activity and yet the parkways of the country are now in great financial difficulty. There is no mechanism whereby the National Park Service, developer of scenic parkways, can obtain any of the tax revenues that go directly to the highway departments. Furthermore, they are being threatened by unesthetic and poorly planned commercial developments nearby. Mr. Raymond L. Freeman of the National Park Service recently made a plea for regional land use planning that would guide such growth in a way compatible with scenic parkways. (Freeman: 1975)

A similar interface problem exists between major parks and the nearby service businesses. Planning Director Gerald Christenson of Minnesota recently said, “The national government designates a park and makes it clear that it will accept responsibility for only the area inside the boundaries. State governments generally have said the area around the park is not our responsibility — that is a local matter. Most often the local units of government have not been equipped to meet the inordinate pressure put upon them by these developments.” (Christenson: 1974)

Millions of tourists are attracted to our inland and sea waters because of the sport of fishing. After abusing our waters for many years we are now showing improvement, especially with the introduction of salmon in the Great Lakes. These fish are worth about $350 million annually to Great Lakes states and the province of Ontario. Yet they may not be harvested in the next few years because of the increasing threat of contamination due to PCB’s — polychlorinated biphenyls — as effluents from plastic
manufacturers. I wonder how many tourist business people are pressuring the industries and Washington to demand the enforcement of toxicity standards — standards that must be kept if the waterfront tourist businesses are to survive and develop. (PCB’s: 1976, 2)

I need remind no one of the drop in 1974 of Disney World stock from $123.87 to $37.62 a share. (Zehnder: 1975, 327) The action of the tourism leaders in Florida to persuade Congress not to ration gasoline was commendable. But, what have the many segments of tourism across the nation done since to consider the outcome of future threats no matter the source? I see no private or government organization taking any leadership in identifying and interrelating the many parts of tourism and seeing to it that the total system of tourism continues to function.

From these and other observations in this country today, I come to three conclusions about the fragmentation of tourism:

First, from a marketing point of view, the public is looking for security and certainty that they are not getting. When package tours are aborted midstream; when advertising promises tropical temperatures and bikini-clad maidens on the beach and the tourist finds near-freezing temperatures and no other wildlife than a dead crab; when a park is closed after driving 2,000 miles to get there — that “set of human activities directed at facilitating and consuming exchanges,” Kotler’s definition of marketing, completely breaks down. (Kotler: 1972, 12)

Second, proponents would say that the problems of interrelating the parts is eliminated by the government controlling all segments of tourism: transportation, attractions, promotion, services and facilities. Gaps in linking these together would be eliminated.

Aside from the fact that this whole thought is repugnant to Americans, especially in the year that we are commemorating the founding of a nation based upon other principles, we could probably identify some very good reasons for not electing this option.

First, it would eliminate all private enterprise and its initiative. Reacting to new markets and developing innovations would undoubtedly be slowed. The freedom of an individual to try out a new approach such as happened in the development of the recreation vehicle or the fiberglass boat would no longer be possible.

Second, time after time in the last two hundred years we have demonstrated that efficiencies are not necessarily obtained by centralizing control. Considering the hundreds of thousands of individual parts of the total tourism system across this nation, the complications of red tape to develop and manage them all from Washington present a formidable specter.
Third, all the risk of making decisions on planning and management is placed in one spot. The greater the magnitude of responsibility, the greater is the risk of making bad judgment.

Fourth, the farther removed from the land we take our decision-making, the greater is the chance of having incomplete land use data upon which to make decisions.

I mention this alternative only to suggest that it could be argued as one alternative. As the policies for a national tourism office are being structured and deliberated, it would be my hope that this alternative would have no proponents.

**Alternative Solution: Collaborative Planning**

Personally, I would like to see another alternative. Today, I see the opportunity for a new partnership between government and private enterprise. Furthermore, I see many advantages to closer cooperation between the many segments of the private enterprise of tourism, itself. Instead of squaring off against each other, I see much to be gained by collaboration — yes, even for the selfish protection of the success of every element of tourism. Let us imagine for a moment the possible outcome of concentration on making the tourism system function in total rather than directing our attention merely to promoting conflicting ideologies and policies. (Gunn, 1972)

Suppose that the governmental agencies, such as the National Park Service, Army Corps of Engineers and the USFS, recognized the role of private enterprise and assisted in the planning of commercial services and facilities near their major land holdings. It isn't new research or new technology that is needed to interlace commercial services and parks, for example; it is merely a new partnership. When all investor-managers direct their attention more to the service of visitors and less to obsolete ideologies, better planning and development will take place.

Suppose that private enterprise, when it develops rare resource assets, such as waterfronts, realizes the importance of these resources and their protection by governmental control. Instead of using every inch of the waterfront, wedges of development are left open for vistas and access, so important to all waterfront tourism.

Imagine that we have researched markets more extensively and more deeply to identify not merely lists of activities, but perhaps clusters of interest groups. It is possible that the people who like superlative scenery, such as that in our national parks, also like symphonies and gourmet foods. Therefore, it may be important to cluster development to serve special interest groups.

Suppose that our transportation modes are interconnected. No matter how we travel, we are able to shift easily into a link that takes us to the final destination. At each node we can get complete information on means of access no matter where we are going.

When major public parks are established, imagine the satisfaction that visitors would obtain if they knew that their total interests were considered. They would be allowed to concentrate wherever they preferred gregarious activity. At such points service can be offered more efficiently. At the same time, rare ecological areas would then be zoned off and visited by means that not only protect but also interpret the environment.

Suppose the businessman who intends to invest in some tourist business had maps and information available to him that would help guide his investment. Maps would show him the distribution of the natural resources of his state and area, such as the best water resources, forests, scenic areas, and wildlife areas. Graphic and descriptive information on cultural resource distribution, such as historic trails, sites and locations of important historic events would also be available. Furthermore, he could obtain facts on the influence of major transportation routes and the distribution of major service centers. His selection of a location, even though carried out on his own business terms, would be expedited greatly.

Suppose that the environmentalists and protectionists identified those locations where special natural resource characteristics are very important and need to be protected. But, at the same time, suppose that they engaged in the design and management of programs and services that would provide interpretation of resources to the greatest number of people. This allows the populace to gain greater insight into the workings of natural forces and the value of respecting natural functions when land development takes place.
Suppose that an individual or family could go directly to a travel counselor for advice on planning a vacation. From this source, maps, guidebooks and tape narrations could be obtained. Furthermore, the counselor could provide computer printout and video information on all necessary travel information on the destination desired.

Suppose that the entire array of private enterprise in tourism had regular input to state, regional and local planning departments, the state highway department and the state parks department. Then, when decisions are made on changes or additions, they can reflect the needs of tourists and tourist businessmen.

I am describing a scenario — a very possible one in my opinion — in which overall planning of the tourism system is taking place. This is not done by some super power that imposes its singular will upon all. It is done by collaboration and cooperation between the many existing elements of tourism, just as we find them today.

For example, if the many decision-makers within a radius of a major destination community got together and planned for their future of tourism, I can see many advantages to be gained by all. The commercial interests could know about plans for transportation changes, major public service changes and locations for pending development of major public parks or open spaces. The public agencies could know the potential ability of private enterprise to develop and offer services that the government would not have to provide.

I see several advantages to this kind of ongoing collaborative planning. If done properly and sincerely, the people who come to visit an area will receive better treatment, will find it easier to get around and will return with richer memories of highly satisfying experiences. If done in a studied and businesslike manner, commercial interests will be able to be more successful because they are better located with reference to all external factors, both public and private. If carried out with full recognition of the natural and cultural resource characteristics of the area, there will be less damage to the environment, both socially and physically.

Obstacles to Collaborative Planning

As I study tourism development, I keep asking why this is not already being accomplished. It seems so obvious that the advantages outweigh the difficulties. But, apparently this is a naive attitude. And, as I have probed this more deeply, I see several obstacles to the implementation of this alternative solution to our tourism fragmentation problems today.

First, it seems that there is a major semantic obstacle. Park planners and administrators do not see their visitors as tourists. Therefore, they do not relate to programs that support tourism. Conversely, tourism interests generally do not include anyone that is not private enterprise. Their definition of tourism excludes the many government parks, reserves and reservoirs as well as the non-profit historic sites. Both sides fail to see the functional overlapping. People who travel for pleasure could care less about how they are defined — they are interested only in their ability to travel and to obtain satisfaction therefrom.

Second, there seems to be a philosophical and ideological obstacle. Those who support government parks are often conservation-preservation oriented. Therefore, they must be against commercialization. In spite of the fact that when they travel — when they seek enrichment — they prefer to align themselves philosophically with the ideology of conservatism. We seem to treat these ideologies as religions and become bigoted and fanatical about the issues of development and resource protection.

Third, there seem to be real institutional obstacles. Governmental agencies are sensitive to their political support and have found it desirable to adhere closely to legal mandates and court-supported functions. It takes a brave agency leader to strike out on his own to collaborate with others — often to his demise. Private enterprise tends to be very secretive about everything regardless if it is important to business success. Therefore, it is not easy for the many parts of tourism to initiate collaboration — even communication.

Fourth, the issue of private rights is a major obstacle to collaboration. Whenever government acts as land owner and manager, even if the cause is accepted, the manner in which acquisition and management takes place can be a contentious issue. Because governments can sometimes skip the very critical item of capital investment in their accounting procedures, their fees and charges can undercut private enterprise.
Conclusions

In spite of these obstacles, I am seeing more and more cases where they are being ignored and planning progress is being made. Here and there across the country, we are beginning to see cases, even though small in scale, where collaboration is taking the place of antagonism.

The greatest obstacle, in my opinion, is the lack of commitment to two of the three objectives I stated earlier: better visitor satisfaction and better utilization of the environment. When our attention is directed toward these two, I believe we will see greater economic returns — the traditional objective of tourism development.

It is possible that the kind of collaboration needed cannot be expected to generate itself. Perhaps this should be the major role of the new office of tourism at the national level. Certainly, I see greater economic and social rewards if this agency acted as a catalyst for collaboration rather than competing with others who now advertise and promote. Personally, with the excellent and well-supported state agencies, private advertising by the many businesses and the excellent work being done by Discover America Travel Organizations and the United States Travel Service, I do not see advertising and promotion as a legitimate role for a new national tourism agency. But, by means of supporting education, by providing incentives, by fostering changes in legal mandates, by offering professional guidance on planning and by establishing a national focal point for tourism, such an agency could be just the catalyst needed. With such a catalyst, perhaps we can retain the integrity of all the many parts of tourism but demonstrate the value of collaborative planning in order to reach the goals that all seek.
References

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