DESTINATION ZONE FALLACIES AND HALF-TRUTHS

A Paper by

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As the topic of destination zone becomes more popular in tourism policies, writings and decision-making, it is also becoming more confusing. As tourism theory and technology begin to emerge, a scatter of meanings and applications is to be expected but it also hinders clear understanding. If a nation, such as Canada, wishes for greater social and economic rewards from tourism, greatest opportunities will lie in how it clarifies its destination zone approaches and policies.

The purpose of this paper is to bring to the surface for discussion some of the key issues surrounding the destination zone concept today. It is not intended to provide finite solutions but to identify some fallacies and half-truths that now clutter the field. Much of the material for this paper is drawn from recent destination zone analysis for the Canadian Government Office of Tourism.

The following discussion suggests that much work remains if provincial and federal policies are to be developed and especially if better tourism is to be available for visitors. In spite of the negative tone of the title, the paper concludes with some positive recommendations.

1. Destination zones are uniformly defined.

Uniform definitions are not merely an academic objective. Some agreement is needed on what is meant by a destination zone if confusion and
misunderstanding are to be avoided. Review of many Canadian and other documents on destinations revealed several and quite divergent interpretations of the concept of destination zone. All seem to have specific utility but are not uniformly applicable to nationwide development of new tourism product.

Some provinces have identified administrative zones for consideration of present and future destination areas. (Plan de development:n.d. and British Columbia Travel:1979). While suited to administration, the zones do not necessarily delineate differences of potential because the entire province must be represented equally. Such zones are suited to governance but require another analysis to determine areas of greatest potential within.

Often marketing zones are created. (Tourism Development and Marketing: 1980). These destination zones are based primarily upon attractions and services already developed. Such zones are suited to marketing strategies but do not necessarily include areas whose potential is yet to be developed.

Sometimes destination zones are based only on specific site development. (Market Feasibility Study:1981). They are of main concern to the individual project and its developer. As such, however, they do not report on the comparative potential of many zones throughout a region or a province.

Similar to a marketing zone is a destination zone based upon existing development. (A Saskatchewan Tourism Policy:1981). An area well established as the destination for tourists and already well supplied with physical plant and management is often referred to as a destination zone. Methods of analyzing such zones have been experimented with (Ferrario:1979, 18). Again these are applicable to existing situations but do not reveal potential elsewhere.

For some, the term destination zone has strong negative connotation. The reasoning is not clear but it may be due to resentment against a higher
level of government imposing its decision upon a lower level or upon the private entrepreneur if contrary to his wishes. Or, it may be believed to be competitive with existing development. No matter the reason, it presents a handicap to communication.

If one seeks future potential by identifying destination zones another definition is needed. Such a definition requires more than analysis of marketing, site, project or administration. It requires provincial and nationwide assessment of many factors that have proven to be supportive of tourism development and continued management. It is possible to study in broad terms a large region, even a nation, in search for those zones where the several factors converge with the greatest potential. (Ruest: 1979, Gunn:1972; 1979).

So, when one speaks of a tourism destination zone, it is necessary to offer some definitive explanation if good communication is to be achieved. Destination zones are not uniformly defined.

2. Destination zones have definite boundaries.

In order to describe the locations of destinations zones in reports, they are often shown graphically on maps as shaded or colored areas, or sometimes areas enclosed by a border line. These accepted cartographic techniques are difficult to improve upon (A Review:1977).

However, when translated into policymaking documents, they tend to imply rather rigid boundaries, contrary to the true composition of destination zones. The many factors that contribute to a zone vary greatly over time, requiring a rather diffuse rather than a hard edge.

Hard-edged zone delineation may contribute to local antagonisms. Local land owners are very watchful of how others, especially governments,
impose constraints on use of their own lands. If a boundary passes through their property, potential use, and even land value, may be adversely (or positively) affected.

Destination zones, in fact, should be interpreted according to their true qualities—not with definite boundaries but with wide belts and soft edges. Destination zones are merely generalized areas possessing some special tourism development qualities unlike other areas and for only one period of time.

3. Destination zones are forever.

When destination zones are placed on maps and published they tend to be frozen for all time. Readers are misled into believing the zones are forever. This is a half-truth because if all factors supporting the zone remain constant for many years, the zone does remain valid.

Predictably, many physical factors important to some destination zones will remain in place for many years. Mountains, glaciers, rivers, lakes, prairies, coasts and islands are likely to stay in place for generations to come. Even historic sites are anchored to specific places and will stay at their present locations for a long time.

However, not all these physical factors continue forever in importance for specific tourism developments and markets. Certain waters or mountains, for example, not now easily accessible and therefore not used by tourists, may become part of a destination zone with new and easy access.

Policy changes, market changes, shifts in international currency exchange, and new development of supply can alter the importance of local factors for tourism.

Destination zones must be considered of only one time—the time when they were identified. Tourism destination zones are not forever; they are constantly subject to revision, new creation, and even elimination.
4. A destination zone is whatever a developer or local community wants it to be.

This statement is only half-right. There is much to be said for strong motivation on the part of a developer or a community. Such local stimulation and support are essential to tourism destination success. Unless people take on responsibility, gather the resources, and provide the tourism product, there is no tourism.

However, enthusiasm and optimism that are not coupled with feasible accomplishment can leave long-time scars and even can be devastating to small communities if major investments fail. A reputation of failure, no matter the cause, can chase away other potential opportunities for many years to come.

It is popularly believed, especially among tourism promoters, that success depends solely upon building a new hotel and blanketing the world with heavy promotion. This naive approach happens to succeed enough to lend it rule-of-thumb validity. But, there are more instances where such development and promotion were lavished on infertile ground resulting in poor success or even failure. Good management, including superior promotion, must be coupled with a wide array of positive tourism factors surrounding the enterprise itself—within a destination zone.

Understanding the many factors and their distribution on a broad, even nationwide, scale is important to destination zones for tourism. This begs for national and provincial policy and for research that can offer developers the many clues needed for selecting locations with greatest chances of success.

5. Destination zones are the prerogative of the private enterprise sector.

Certainly, no one in the private enterprise sector would refute this statement. One of the cherished traditional rights of private enterprise
is that of entrepreneurship—the freedom to create a business whenever and wherever markets exist. By definition, this principle must be a part of tourism destination zone development.

But, especially throughout North America, it is only half the story. As the hotels, marinas, restaurants, car rentals, and shops derive the major economic impact from travel, they are not the complete suppliers within destination zones. Two other sectors, non-profit organizations and governments, also have vital development roles. Destination zones are not the sole prerogative of the private enterprise sector.

In addition to governance and regulation in both Canada and the United States, governments at all levels are huge tourism attraction providers. While their enabling acts and mandates may not have so specified, functionally they have become extensive owners, developers, and managers of the most spectacular and most widely distributed tourism destination assets. One of the major issues yet to be resolved is the extent to which these governmental agents are willing to overtly manage these properties for tourism.

Increasingly, the non-profit sector, which depends upon volunteerism for its support, is providing impetus for many tourism developments, such as festivals, events, and historic restorations. These are equally important to the success of many destination zones.

So, destination zones are the result of inputs from all three sectors. Rather than the popularly conceived conflicting relationship, a symbiosis exists between all in the creation and sustenance of destination zones.

6. Destination zones are intrinsic physical entities.

A popular stance for tourism is that all destination zones were foreordained because of native physical factors. The long list of major attractions in Canada—Niagara Falls, Banff glaciers, the Gatineau, the
Laurentians, Vancouver Island, to name only a few—gives such an argument considerable support. Certainly, physical resource assets are much of the stuff from which destination zones are formed.

And yet, what of government policy, of variations among markets, and of the creation of new supply, such as Kananaskis Country? Factors, other than those indigenous to the land are also important to destination zones. The extensive research carried out by the many marketers in Canada reveal significant differences in preferences as well as some similarities among markets. As Canada seeks to stimulate greater inter-regional Canadian travel and understanding (Intercan:1977), certain destinations will take on much greater significance.

Therefore, assessment of destination zones cannot rely only on the intrinsic qualities of place, important as they are. Zones are subject also to the many changing political, market, economic, and supply influences.

7. Destination zones include only tourist activity areas.

As was described at the outset, definitions vary and some include only the activity areas where tourists enjoy their fun. Attractions that can supply the many values of tourists—excitement, novelty, serenity, beauty, challenge, nostalgia, patriotism—are critical to destination zones. But, even tourists cannot play all the time.

Often excluded from destination zone definitions are the very important service centers, the cities, that provide essential services to tourists. Cities offer transportation termini. They provide important infrastructure—water, waste disposal, power, fire control, communications, hospitals. Cities offer travel services: travel agents, car rentals, hotels, restaurants, shops.
The successful isolated resort is more of an anomaly than the rule. Travelers of today resist long delays and difficult access, comparing time, cost and effort with other opportunities more readily accessible. Management cannot benefit from area or regional promotion if located too far from its coverage.

A basic principle of destination zones is that of clustering. Clustering offers advantages for development success, for greater economic potential, for greater social interaction, for greater environmental protection and for promotion. (A Review:1977,3)

Destination zones cannot fulfill their functions completely unless they include service centers, access, transportation as well as the many activities desired by the several travel markets.

3. **Inventory is the main step in determining destination zones.**

   This is a half-truth because, on the one hand, it is worthwhile to obtain many facts about areas if they are to serve as destinations. The error, on the other hand, is the word, "inventory," and its narrow meaning.

   Inventory without purpose is meaningless for destination development. This is merely non-directed cataloging that, through serendipity, just might turn up something useful. Frequently, consultant reports contain masses of data without explanation of why they were collected and their meaning for tourism. Such efforts are appropriate for statistical reference centers that are designed to serve a great many needs. For tourism destination zones, much more than bare inventory is needed.

   Instead of inventory, a research effort should be directed toward an understanding of the several factors known to be important to future tourism development. Over the years and throughout the world, certain factors consistently foster tourism. If an area or portion of a region contains these factors in high quality and in great numbers, the potential
for tourism is greater than elsewhere.

One way of grouping these important factors is to divide them into those relating to physical characteristics as compared to those that relate to policy, promotion and other program factors. (Gunn:1979,247). Rather than a non-directed inventory, it is far more productive to direct analysis efforts toward those factors that can assist in identifying areas with greatest tourism development potential.

9. Destination zones can be scientifically determined.

This is a leading statement. It implies that through scientific methods destination zones can be located just as we might test the strength of steel. Unfortunately, tourism varies from steel in several important ways. We do not yet have the same precise measurements for tourism. So many factors are yet to be researched. For example, we do not yet know the necessary relationships between resources and tourism enterprise success. We do not have formulas that can measure market reactions to planned tourism innovations. There are many psychological and sociological aspects of tourism that are not yet developed into theory. And, many unpredictables of tourism surround the creativity and innovations of the entrepreneur.

Increasingly, we are applying new techniques and we are experimenting with new approaches. A few organizations, such as The Travel and Tourism Research Association, in which Canada and Alberta are very active, are regularly reporting on new findings about tourism. We are now gaining some insight into destination zone theory. But, we must beware of some exaggerated promises of complicated models and "black box" formulas that tend to oversimplify tourism and promise more than they deliver.

As an aside, the issue of scientifically determining destination zones begs the question of education in tourism development. The number of
hotel schools, recreation departments, and park management departments in colleges and universities is increasing but seldom are curricula directed toward the topic of destination zone assessment on a national and provincial scale. It deserves far greater study and teaching so that the graduates entering the field of tourism have some understanding of the inputs of science, technology and art in the planning and developing of destination zones.

10. **Destination zone identification assures feasibility of projects.**

   This statement is so nearly true that it can be misleading. One of the major purposes of destination zone study and policy is to foster better feasibility of business. The catchword in the above statement is "assures." No one can assure anyone's success in any enterprise.

   When an analytical approach is taken to identify destination zones with tourism potential, all factors that contribute to feasibility must be included and at least most of them must be present in great strength. The physical assets of natural and cultural resources should be known—their quantity, quality and distribution. Likewise, information on governmental policy, promotion, local attitudes, market potential, and competitive status should be obtained. These investigations can identify zones with potential on a pre-feasibility basis. But, each entrepreneur must make his own special input to determine project feasibility.

   Each individual entrepreneur and each governmental agency that plans, develops, and manages property for tourism has its own project objectives. Individual business objectives are not the same even though all may seek a profit-making goal. Each firm has different expectations. Some prefer to sacrifice some profits for other objectives, such as family inheritance, conservation of the land resources, or even tax write-off. Some government agencies have strong resource protection policies while others are more
user-oriented. These differences can greatly influence individual project feasibility.

Destination zone delineation and policy can foster business success but there is no substitute for each developer to create his own feasibility and to do so within the context of broad-scale destination assessment.

Conclusions

Destination zones, in spite of misunderstandings and imperfect knowledge about them, are still the lifeblood of tourism. Just because there are some fallacies and half-truths about destinations, the concept remains valid. The future of tourism—its social and economic impact—depends upon how well existing and future destinations fulfill their important functions. The following conclusions may be drawn from this examination of the destination concept.

1. Local projects, area development, and even provincial development can be more successful when placed in the broadest possible context. Large-scale perspectives are even more important to tourism than they are to agriculture and forestry because markets come to the resource rather than the other way round. Only by moving from the large-scale to the small-scale perspective can the individual site owner know how his potential relates to the whole.

2. As we continue to improve our application of the destination zone concept, all effort should be made to keep the boundaries soft, not hard; flexible, not fixed; and fluid enough to adapt to changing political, economic, social and market conditions. Instead of fixed plans, support should be given destination processes that require periodic updating.

3. Narrow agency and personal objectives are worthy but can be most productive when placed in as large a knowledge base as possible. Political expediency and flighty approaches to tourism development should
be replaced by more studied and analytical approaches because of the increased complexity and uncertainties of tourism.

4. While destination zones have very important qualities of place, they are also creatures of markets. When markets and places are studied in concert, true evaluation of potential can be made. A building-then-marketing process must be supplanted by a marketing-building mix.

5. Until destination zone analysis, as a continuing process, is raised in provincial and federal priority, tourism will fall short of its potential. Policy priorities on destinations must be raised to the position held for years by promotion and advertising. Unless the supply side is continually kept up to date, we may discover someday that the demand side has left us.
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