TRENDS IN TOURISM RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the present status of tourism research and identifies the kinds of research effort in greatest need today. Because tourism appears to be a field built on practical experience, research is neither abundant nor strongly supported. There is great need for more factual and documented information on many aspects if tourism is to meet its stated goals. Greater use of the scientific method rather than less exacting ways of learning is needed for tourism planning and development.

The complexity of tourism requires a multidisciplinary research approach. Many specialties, such as geography, anthropology, forest and wildlife science, behavioral science and recreation have relevance to tourism. Although some research reporting is now available in a few tourism research journals, much greater research effort from many disciplines is needed. There is insufficient research to establish basic principles and theory. At the national level, many topics remain untouched, especially well-designed studies of markets and supply side development. Even proprietary research needs more exacting methods and standards if it is to be most meaningful to enterprises and organizations.

KEY WORDS:
Tourism, research, markets, supply
Tourism research today is in its infancy. It is just beginning to produce information of value to public and private decision makers. Even so, there is much misunderstanding and scepticism over the value of research and what it can do for tourism. This paper focuses on just three aspects of tourism research: the meaning of research, the need for multidisciplinary approaches, and today’s tourism research needs.

THE MEANING OF RESEARCH

For most tourism developers and promoters, the image of research is a function performed by laboratories for scientific and technical study. Generally, research is not a high priority, as evidenced by the low budget allocation to research by most tourism organizations.

Unfortunately, tourism leaders and practitioners today obtain their information by means other than rigorous research methods. Usually, they base their decisions on what Kerlinger (1973) calls tenacity, authority, and intuition.

Many travel enterprises depend on tenacity or "rules of thumb." For example, the belief persists that the only factor for hotel success is 100 percent occupancy. Research, however, has proven that the most successful hotels have a much lower percent of occupancy—that many other factors, such as the cost of finance, quality of service, and extent of promotion, are equally influential to success.

Another popular form of learning in the tourism field is from authority. Information from agencies and individuals is relied upon because it comes from an authoritative source.
And, much of tourism information is believed because of
intuition—it just seems to be right. For example, it is
popularly believed that tourism is always an economic boon. It
stands to reason that it must be true.

The major problem with all three methods is their lack of
rigor and proof. It is for this reason that increasingly the
scientific method is being used for tourism studies. Basically,
this method includes the steps of setting precise objectives and
hypotheses, using exacting methods of study and analysis,
reporting findings, and drawing conclusions. This form of
deriving information is systematic, logical, and can be
replicated. The scientific method, originally used only in
medicine and physical science, is now being applied in many other
disciplines important to tourism.

The most popular form of tourism research today is
proprietary—exclusively within the firm or agency. While some
is well done, much tends to lack objectivity, is not rigorous in
method, is not subject to review by other specialists, and cannot
be generalized for other firms or agencies.

MULTIDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH NEEDED

Because of the complexity of the field of tourism, many
disciplines should be involved (Gunn:1987,5-12, Ritchie:1987,13-21).

Because tourism includes land resources and the movement of
people, the field of geography has application. The relative
locations of populations, the transportation system, and the
location of destinations are topics appropriate for research by
geographers.

The field of anthropology is of increasing value to tourism research. The identification of sites and artifacts of archeological significance is important to the study of destinations. Host-guest relationships and particularly the impact of tourism on local cultures requires the training and experience of anthropologists.

The disciplines of forest, fisheries and wildlife science have important contributions to make to tourism. These resources are valuable to tourism destinations because of the many outdoor recreation activities sought by visitors.

Certainly, the behavioral scientist has much to offer the field of tourism. Research studies of both hosts and guests can reveal information needed for establishing and promoting destinations.

Business research has several applications to tourism. Management practices, investment and finance, personnel, and business ethics are important topics of business research.

Many other disciplines have important roles to play in providing information of value to tourism development. Park and recreation research, involving land use as well as behavior, has direct bearing on tourism. Engineering research is a vital component of many businesses directly related to tourism products and equipment. The field of communications is frequently identified as a distinct discipline and is having great impact on tourism. Marine engineering and oceanography, with their many concerns over coastal development are disciplines important to
coastal tourism. Political science, law, health and sanitation are disciplines of world wide significance to tourism. And, of course, the disciplines of economics, planning and design have strong relevance to tourism.

Rare, indeed, are the instances in which these and other disciplines are brought to bear upon study of tourism issues. Again, this is due largely to the lack of understanding of the comprehensive nature of tourism and the lack of financial support to these disciplines for tourism research.

TODAY’S TOURISM RESEARCH NEEDS

One could honestly say that almost everything concerning tourism deserves research study today because of the low level of accomplishment to date. But, this would be an injustice to the research accomplishments of the last two decades.

Current and back issues of several journals contain research results on a variety of tourism topics. The Annals of Tourism Research deals with the social and anthropological side of tourism. The Journal of Travel Research is published by the Travel and Tourism Research Association and reports studies on marketing, management, and economics. Tourism Management contains a variety of research and professional articles of tourism interest. Occasional research papers and extensive bibliographies are published by the Centre des Hautes Etudes Touristiques in Aix-en-Provence, France. Increasingly, scholarly journals in economics, geography, anthropology, and recreation are including reports of tourism research.
Types of Research Needed

The characteristics of tourism suggest three types of research needed today: fundamental, geographical, proprietary.

Needed is research that leads toward fundamentals, principles, and perhaps eventually, theory. This type of research cuts across all geographical and political boundaries and speaks directly to topics that are universal. All countries need better information from research on research methodologies—how to study markets, how to research development potential, how to determine tourism’s impact on regions. In other words, the basic scientific method needs elaboration and adaptation to specific tourism needs. How one researches spatial distribution of physical plant would differ from techniques used to determine changes in social values due to tourism.

All countries could benefit from studies on tourist flows and how these are influenced by price, regulations, and personal preference for the several modes. All nations need research information on the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism. All nations, even though they are structured differently need better information on the politics and governmental roles in tourism.

A second type, geographical, is research of tourism related to a specific nation or group of nations. This type of research would not be generalizable to other nations but would be directed toward issues specific to the nation or group being studied. For example market studies of travelers to Turkey might have little direct application to Japan except for the methodological approach. Topics needing research within countries include:
* discovery of market segments
* identification of characteristics of market segments
* gap analysis--degree of market-product match
* attraction-market match
* analysis of destination potential
* changes needed in transportation, access
* service business-market match
* effectiveness of traveler information systems
* effectiveness of promotional programs
* public-private sector role definition
* environmental impacts
* social impacts
* economic impacts

A third type of tourism research, proprietary, is still in need but should be strengthened greatly in quality. When the public and private sector managers improve the rigor, objectivity, and research methodology, proprietary research can be useful. This type of research, because it is not published and is narrowed in scope to the individual enterprise, is not generalizable elsewhere. It will continue to be used to determine information on location, feasibility, and interior management.

Management Research Needed

Ritchie (1987,13-21) has identified five major performance roles needed for tourism management.

Policy research: Research on management policy is needed to provide broad guidelines and priorities. This research is needed
in order to determine action needed along each guideline dimension and priority. Alternative action should be identified.

Evaluation research: Measures should be made of the success or failure of existing policies and programs. Weaknesses in application to different user groups would be identified. By focusing on success factors, management decisions can be given direction.

Management tactical research: Decision-making will be assisted greatly by study of factors related to specific problems. Technical and factual data would be collected for specific issues. Survey research, observation and modeling may be useful methods.

Action research: Research is needed to identify specific actions needed to solve problems. There may need to be changes in the work environment, modification of rewards, and changes in organizational structure.

Operational research: This kind of research discovers flaws in specific managerial tasks and guides decisions. This would include personnel administration routines, purchasing practice, and delivery of services and products. The output would provide explicit decision rules on what to do, when to do it, and how to do it.

CONCLUSIONS

There is little question about the need for more and better research of nearly every facet of tourism. Today's tourism is more complicated and more competitive, requiring much greater sophistication than earlier muddling through. Although
experience is a great teacher, it is insufficient as a method of information-gathering for tourism. More precise, objective, and published (public) research must be added to proprietary (private) research by businesses, organizations and governments.

Information from more exacting research methods is needed for two major aspects of tourism—(1) about tourism and how it functions and (2) planning, development and management of tourism. Because the phenomenon of tourism is relatively new, all actors need better information on its many ramifications and functions. Although individual parts of tourism, such as hotels and airlines, may have usable basic data on their internal operation little research shows how they interrelate to all the other parts of tourism.

Who should do research? Probably all sectors and all levels from federal to local should be engaged in the search for greater truths. It is difficult for individual segments to justify the broad-scale research efforts that are longer term and more costly to perform. These latter studies, particularly on the national scale, may fall best within the jurisdiction of national organizations and governmental agencies.

Finally, research does not produce knowledge and action, only facts about the past. Research information is absolutely essential for more enlightened decision making by all sectors. Even so, research must be considered a valuable tool but not the action agent for better tourism. Unless there is creativity and innovation coupled with competence and commitment, it will not, of and by itself, produce a better tourism world.
REFERENCES


