A Conceptual Framework of Rural Tourism Policy
Employing Actor Network Theory

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Abstract

The ability to collaborate between actors has been an area of interest in tourism policies. The tourism industry evolves around a complex amalgam of human and non-human elements, therefore policy processes should evolve around theories that can support the complexity of it. The Actor Network Theory is a theory that encapsulates the elements of both human and non-human, allowing a dynamic and holistic approach in the policy framework process. The objective of this paper is to introduce the framework employing a series of human and non-human elements while integrating the components of economy, social and environmental implications. The novelty of this research aims to conceptualise the uniqueness of the industry towards an innovative framework.

Keywords: Actor Network Theory, tourism framework, human, non-human.
1. Introduction

The capability of coalition and collaboration between actors has been an area of interest in tourism policies (Baum & Szivas, 2008; Dredge, 2006; Paget, Dimanche, & Mounet, 2010). Researchers have indicated that the tourism industry is a complex environment as it involves multiple stakeholders (Byrd, Bosley, & Dronberger, 2009). This involves both humans; residents, entrepreneurs, government officials, tourist (Byrd et al., 2009), indigenous (Liu, 2006), and non-human elements such as infrastructure (Paget et al., 2010) and tourism products (Ren, Pritchard, & Morgan, 2010). The involvement of key stakeholders is crucial in tourism planning as it provides a platform for important communication of interest and strategies to take place (Dredge, 2006).

1.1 Actor Network Theory (ANT)

Actor network Theory or ANT was developed in the 80’s originating from the sociology of science and technology (Rodger, Moore, & Newsome, 2009). Considered as sociology of transition (Rodger et al., 2009), ANT is a patterned network of heterogeneous relations, or an effect produced by such a network. This relational and process-oriented sociology assumes agents, organizations and devices as ‘interactive effects’. ANT is therefore effect of interaction between materials and strategies of organisation (Law, 1992). The fundamental importance of ANT is that, it is not materialist oriented. Therefore, it does not intend to divide humans and non-humans but with the intention to understand that there is a simultaneous presence of different ‘agencies’. These agencies can be humans, machines or even symbols, whereby treated in heterogeneous actor network (Plesner, 2009).

ANT is worth considering as a framework for the study of tourism. In recent years, ANT has been recognised as an important analytical framework to study emerging tourism projects and policies (Rodger et al., 2009).

This theory will guide scholars in tourism on how and what to study in tourism (Vanderduim, 2007). This is because ANT establishes important insights for tourism research policies as it provides a possibility to bypass dualism and also to take into consideration the significance of materials in the concepts and practices of tourism. ANT, therefore provides the ability to deal with relational materiality of the social world where it provides an avenue for researches to identify how tourism happens through hybrid network practices of different actors while providing the opportunity to grasp multiple relational orderings (Jöhannesson, 2005). In short, tourism is held together by active sets of relations in which the human and the non-human continuously exchange properties, bringing some form of structural order to the whole picture at large (Vanderduim, 2007).

What actor-network theorists now seek to investigate are the means by which associations come into existence and how the roles and functions of subjects and objects, actors and intermediaries, humans and non-humans are attributed and stabilised (Murdoch, 1997).

In order to achieve this, the researcher would need to adapt an inductive, comprehensive approach, where the experiences of actors and the sense that they give to their actions and how they view the reality of the system they operate (Jolivet & Heiskanen, 2010). This procedure will be guided through the constructivist worldview. Therefore ANT serves as a notion of human and non-human agency and a radical ontology to the realm of tourism research (Ren et al., 2010).

Therefore it is important that policy framework should be formulated based on the ANT theory.
2 Policy Framework
Table 1 postulates a framework that incorporates ANT into the 3 major dimensions of tourism. The first column indicates the human and non-human continuum, followed with the important components of tourism policy planning that is, social, economic and environment (Blancas, Lozano-Oyola, González, Guerrero, & Caballero, 2011). The next column will indicate the breakdown of the social, economic and environment components, taking into consideration the extent of its relations towards the human and non-human spectrum.

2.1 Cultural Resource
Culture and tourism has become an important component (Kastenholz, Carneiro, Peixeira Marques, & Lima, 2012; MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003) in socioeconomic development as the concepts of culture, rural and tourism are seen as multidimensional and interrelated. Tourist seeking cultural experience about a particular area would want to be informed about folklore, customs, natural landscapes and historical landmarks (MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003). It can be seen as an opportunity for specific skill development as the locals are then given the roles in the tourism experience (Kastenholz et al., 2012), enabling culture to be an attraction to tourist and create economic benefit (MacDonald & Jolliffe, 2003). However, in the case of Liu (2006) a study on the Orang Asli culture in Kedah, Malaysia found that while their folklore would enhance the rich assortment of cultural attributes, these individuals were unwilling to dance and perform as a ‘tourist attraction’.

Other issues relating to culture would also include the diverse impact on culture and the way of life and the sense of identity of ethnic groups. The fact that the rural communities become ‘living spectacle’ to be observed, photographed and interacted with will result in the ‘pollution’ of previously authentic cultures (Yang & Wall, 2009)

2.2 Risk
In tourism, the perception of safety and security of the tourist destination indicates the success of that destination (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998). From a sociological angle, social disruption theory postulates that communities experiencing an increase in growth especially while dealing with loss of traditional routines and attitudes can result in an array of social problems indicative to community disorganisation. Communities who receive tourist are exposed to rapid growth and hence affecting the community or individuals. The growth can be significantly related to adverse social impacts such as crime in tourism communities (Park & Stokowski, 2009).

On the other hand tourist and recreationist
themselves can impose ant-social and criminal behaviour at these tourist destinations. For example, soccer hooliganism, graffiti and theft (Mitchell, 2006), while gambling venues can induce organised and opportunistic crime (Mitchell, 2006; Park & Stokowski, 2010; Park & Stokowski, 2009). Therefore, a major consideration when there are large presences of visitors in rural locations is risk management (Mitchell, 2006). This is of major importance as the shift of touristic plans due to risk and security can seriously curtail the revenue of many destinations (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998).

2.3 Human Resource

Human resource is an integral part of tourism policy formulation (Baum, 1994a, 1994b, 2007; Baum & Szivas, 2008; A. Liu & Wall, 2006). The priorities of human resource include the concerns of the shortage of skilled personnel within the industry (Baum, 1994a; Siow et al., 2006). However, Liu & Wall (2006) mentions that tourism studies done to identify human resource is done quantitatively, for instance how many jobs will be generated. Other concerns would also include the effect of migration and tourism, whereby migrant workers would normally originate from less developed countries (Janta, Lugosi, Brown, & Ladkin, 2012). Tourism jobs as described by Nickson (2012) has high turnover rates, unsocial hours, lack of trade union presence, with poor management and career structures, and are poorly paid (Thrane, 2008). Baum (1994a) mentions that national tourism policies in developing countries must have formal articulation of policies and specialist ministry to guide the role of human resource management. Hence, government plays a pivotal role in the development, management and regulation of human resource policies in the tourism market (Baum, 1994b).

2.4 Socio Economic

Social equality advocates fairness and equal rights to resources by all actors, where it should reflect to a situation where all individuals have equal opportunity to participate, benefit, make decisions and manage resources for tourism development (Mbaiwa, 2005). Tourism can be a major influence in a nation’s economy or a particular region, thus bringing out strong linkages with the rest of the domestic economy (Mbaiwa, 2003) Through this understanding, tourism can be taken as a catalyst for national and regional development (Mbaiwa, 2003; Sharpley, 2002), bringing out employment (A. Liu, 2006), exchange earnings, balance of payment advantages (Mbaiwa, 2003) and important infrastructure developments (Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006; Mbaia, 2003). That is why sustainable development aim towards economic efficiency is important (Mbaiwa, 2003, 2005) for the future inheritance of generations to come. This is seen through producing the maximum output in order to achieve high standard of living within the constraints of existing capital (Mbaiwa, 2005). An important policy implication would be through decentralisation of natural management, redistributing power and transfer of responsibilities from central government to rural communities. Through asset decentralisation, communities will be able to have the power to promote conservation and rural development (Mbaiwa & Stronza, 2011).

2.5 Economic Impact

Tourism is recognised to have a positive impact on long-term economic growth through various channels. Schubert, Brida & Risso (2011) have indicated six positive economical impacts created by tourism namely (1) tourism being a significant foreign exchange earner (2) tourism as an important activity to increase investments of new infrastructure and competition between local businesses and businesses in other countries, (3) as a stimulation towards other economic industries through direct, indirect or induced effects, (4) as a contribution towards employment and increase of income, (5) as a means to exploit the economies of scale of a nation and finally, (6) as a factor of diffusion of technical
knowhow, inspiring the need for research and development and accumulation of human capital.

A study on the economical impact as a result of park conservation for the purpose of ecological protection and ecosystem opportunities for recreation and touristic activities. The study indicated that economic benefit resulting from the park conservation acts as means of compensation to the local population. This is seen as a method to compensate those who initially used the resources of the park as a means of life and had to bear with the restrictions associated with the protection status of the park (Mayer, Müller, Woltering, Arnegger, & Job, 2010). However, it is important to highlight that the tourism industry is an amalgam of different industries. It evolves around accommodation, catering services, retail trade, etc. that causes an income and employment effects extending far into the lives of other regions and communities (Kauppila & Karjalainen, 2012). As a result, when tourism changes or policy shifts occur, determining the impact on the economy and what it can bring to the community should be thoroughly evaluated (Dwyer, Forsyth, & Spurr, 2004).

2.6 Environmental Evaluation

It is important to maintain or enhance the quality of tourism environment of a particular destination as tourism development largely depends on it (Zhong, Deng, Song, & Ding, 2011). Having said, many developing countries and emerging economies are encouraging tourism for development along with other economic activities often cause considerable environmental degradation (Lemos, Fischer, & Souza, 2012). Therefore, tourism is often considered a double-edged sword where it creates positive impacts such as creation of jobs and negative impacts such as impacts on the biophysical environment, for example water and air pollution and ecosystem degradation (Zhong et al., 2011).

To date, there are various ways to assess environmental impacts contributed by tourism activities. The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) has been the applied assessment in tourism planning in Europe since the early 90’s (Lemos et al., 2012). The SEA is said to have the capacity to influence strategic decisions on the environment and sustainability to provide sound, integrated and sustainable policy and planning frameworks (Kuo, Hsiao, & Yu, 2005; Lemos et al., 2012). However, SEA practice can be seen challenging as it deals with different planning and institutional context (Lemos et al., 2012) such as public participation during decision making process and communication breakdown involving governmental agencies (Kuo et al., 2005).

The Tourism Environment Carrying Capacity (TECC) is a framework developed to find the appropriate number of visitors that a tourism destination can accommodate (Zhong et al., 2011). It is seen as the physical impact of tourism on a destination, looking from both the environmental and experiential points of view (O'Reilly, 1986). Carrying capacity can be both bio-physical – relating to the integrity of the resource base that may impose strains on the natural ecosystem and behavioural component – reflecting the quality of recreational experience (Saveriades, 2000). Sustainable planning is important (Lobo et al.), because knowing the carrying capacity of a particular area gives researchers the ability to express in terms of an unambiguous standard measure that is essential to facilitate tourism planning (Simón, Narangajavana, & Marqués, 2004).

2.7 Natural Resources

Areas endowed with natural and built amenities such as beauty, recreational sites and tourism attributes experience significant economic growth due to tourism activities (Marcouiller, Kim, & Deller, 2004). Examples of natural resources that would encourage tourism activities would include geothermal waters, the
mountains, mountain pastures, islands, lakes, waterfalls, caves, forests, monumental trees, natural medicinal plants, wild animals and scenic beauties (Ataberk & Baykal, 2011). In fact, nature-based tourism is a significant part of the world tourism economy where it attracts both inbound and outbound tourist and generates employment opportunities for the local community (Priskin, 2001). Sustainability hence becomes the main strategy for areas rich in natural resources. Therefore, the management and development to facilitate tourism activities must ensure that sustainable practices are in place (Alaeddinoglu & Can, 2011).

Lee (1997) postulates that tourism policy makers and planners are continuously concerned that sustainable strategies are engaged to ensure the existence of economic benefit. This is because poorly-planned policies can deter future generations from benefiting from resources (Alaeddinoglu & Can, 2011). This will affect the economy as an income generator as well as a resource for their daily sustenance such as food and water. Therefore a method or framework is required to systematically assess the natural resources and can be incorporated into the planning process of tourism development (Priskin, 2001).

2.8 Infrastructure

Some scholars have argued that infrastructure is the country’s determinant of attractiveness for a tourism destination (Khadaroo & Seetanah, 2007, 2008; Lamb, 1988; Xiao, 2006). The rapid provisions to enhance tourism related infrastructure has been an area of highlight in policies (Lamb, 1988), this is because infrastructure such as airport, streets and hotels (Al Haija, 2011; Alaeddinoglu & Can, 2011) has been recognised as a direct contributing factor to the tourism industry (Xiao, 2006). One of the most important component of tourism related infrastructure in a country would be transportation, viewed broadly as the sum of roads, seaport, and airport facilitation (Khadaroo & Seetanah, 2007, 2008). The benefits of this form of development is seen as a form of modernisation, transferring capital, technologies and expertise (Xiao, 2006).

However, other scholars have highlighted the concerns over the negative impacts of tourism related infrastructure where the risk would involve issues like shoreline erosion (Phillips & Jones, 2006) impact on wildlife (Lindberg & Veisten, 2012) and cultural drawbacks (Ramsey & Everitt, 2008). The issues that would often arise from tourism development are the receptiveness of the local communities. While proposed developments might be embraced by non-local residence, the local residence might not welcome this form of development, as they prefer to safeguard the natural setting of their environment (Lindberg & Veisten, 2012). Therefore, holistic tourism planning must be incorporated (Al Haija, 2011) in tourism policies in order to safeguard the interest of the environment and people, and at the same time, generate economical benefit for the country.

2.9 Natural Environment

Tourism and the natural environment are seen as an area of concern (Farr & Rogers, 1994; Yürüşdür & Dicle, 2011). In fact, a study by Liu, Sheldon & Var (1987) indicated that environment was ranked higher than cultural benefits, social costs and economic benefits, where further emphasized that placing environment as an essential area of study for the continued succession of that particular destination. Environmental problems related to tourism can include global warming, ozone depletion, bio-diversity loss, species extinction and ecosystem degradation (Holden, 2009). Liu, Sheldon & Var (1987) found that this is a major key concern as research indicates that landscape is the major key contributor of attractiveness, where according to a tourist
satisfaction survey conducted in Hawaii found
that the natural environment captivates visitors
more than anything else. The relationship
between tourism activities and the environment
is complex as it involves a variety of
stakeholders, the variance of multiple
dimensions of its activities and unclear
definitions of key conceptual themes. This
creates cumbersome development planning for
policy development (Holden, 2009).

Tourists’ interest including environmental
interest, knowledge conservation behaviour
and motivation for visiting is an important
attribute to comprehend as this orientation will
determine the visitor’s interest, knowledge
about conservation and their engagement
towards environmentally responsible behaviour
(Ballantyne, Packer, & Falk, 2011). Therefore
understanding people’s environmental values
has been seen as an increasingly area of
concern for policy makers (Kim, Borges, &
Chon, 2006).

3. Conclusion
It is evident at this juncture that ANT should be
taken into consideration while analysing
policies that would effect tourism. The holistic
approach, looking at through the elements of
human and non-human will assist policy
makers integrate the importance of economy,
social and environmental implications towards
tourism ecosystem. It is also important to
understand that these elements cannot exist in
isolation, otherwise affecting the other
components of the framework.

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