DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Title of the dissertation

Green tourism planning: triple bottom line sustainability – rhetoric or reality. A case study of the Bluestone development.

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

Goal

The goal of this dissertation was to evaluate the achievability of triple bottom line sustainability (TBLs) and whether in this particular case study, i.e. the Bluestone development partly in the Pembrokeshire National Park in West Wales, it could be regarded as rhetoric, reality or a “guiding fiction”. This development is particularly interesting as it is half in a National Park where the environment, under National Park regulations, should have the first priority. The Bluestone development involved a number of public-sector stakeholders who prioritised different aspects of the triple

bottom line depending on their remit resulting in policy conflict. The case study investigated the motivations of key stakeholders in the process of approving the development in a National Park. The Bluestone case study emphasised the tensions between economic, social and environmental considerations.

Objectives

- ✓ Undertake a critical review of relevant literature on sustainable tourism development with a particular focus on TBLS and stakeholder theory.
- ✓ Identify issues relating to the operationalisation of sustainable tourism development and TBLS through a live case study of the Bluestone project in west Wales which resulted in a costly and time-consuming legal battle over planning permission.
- ✓ Explore the discourse underpinning the policies and perspectives of the different stakeholders involved in the Bluestone project.
- ✓ Make recommendations to enhance the potential for achieving TBLS.

Methodology

This research involved two main phases. Phase one was exploratory and involved the development of a case study of the Bluestone development in West Wales through the analysis of data collected through convergent interviews, document analysis, archival records and direct observation in two field visits to Pembrokeshire. Phase two was explanatory and involved discourse analysis through letters, e-mails, document analysis and nine in-depth semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved in the Bluestone development to better understand stakeholder interpretations of the concept of sustainable development. Stakeholder theory is used as a framework to explore the implications of alternative interpretations of the concept sustainability by the various stakeholders involved in the Bluestone development.

Results

Phase one of the research involved the exploration of the Bluestone development. The proposed site for the Bluestone development straddled the boundary of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park with half the development inside the National Park and half outside the National Park. This meant that the developers had to apply for planning permission from two different planning authorities – Pembrokeshire County Council and the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority. The interpretations of sustainability by these two authorities were very different. For Pembrokeshire County Council with high unemployment and few high-quality jobs higher priority was placed on economic development and employment opportunities than on the environmental agenda. In contrast, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority is mandated by law to make the environment the highest priority. The promise of a large number of jobs

put enormous pressure on the National Park Authority to grant planning permission to the development. This resulted in the Council for National Parks challenging the legality of this decision and taking the Authority to the High Court resulting in a long and costly legal battle.

Phase two used discourse analysis and stakeholder theory to explore a number of issues emerging from phase one of the research including: the implications of extensive cross-membership between Pembrokeshire County Council and the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority; the reality of the employment benefits promised by the development to the local community; the awareness of the government of the expected negative impacts of this major development on the National Park despite which it pressured for granting planning permission; the nature of the various relationships between the government and other organisations involved in the Bluestone development; the issue of precedence and the meaning of the term “exceptional circumstances” in relation to developments in National Parks.

Theoretical conclusions

The research develops an in-depth understanding of the issues emanating from alternative interpretations of the concept of sustainability. The dissertation adds to the growing academic literature on the different approaches to sustainable tourism development and looks in depth the relationship between the three aspects of TBLS and stakeholders’ power, legitimacy and urgency. Achieving sustainable development requires the adoption of a TBLS approach and powerful stakeholders that promote the environmental and social agendas, if you do not have such powerful stakeholder, TBLS will not be achieved.

Practical application of the dissertation

This dissertation contributes to the understanding of the various issues related to TBLS and stakeholder theory emphasising the importance of policy coherence in relation to cross-boundary planning decisions. Many of the difficulties emanating from the Bluestone saga are associated with the cross-membership of the development which totally undermines position of the National Park and its supporters. Certainly the results highlight that TBLS cannot be regarded as rhetoric, reality or a guiding fiction for the gatekeepers that safeguard our National Parks.

Despite the policy rhetoric that suggests that government at all levels will promote sustainability and assertions by different arms of the government that they are balancing the economic, social and environmental considerations and imagine their organisations in the heart of TBLS, in practice when it comes to economic benefits, the social and environmental agendas go out of the window. Therefore, awareness of the

practical ways of achieving the balance of TBLS must be raised in all governmental departments and sustainable tourism developments should be part of everyday decisions.

Content of the dissertation

Abstract of chapter one

Chapter one introduces the term TBLS and outlines the researcher's motivation to carry out this particular study and the significance of the research. It poses the question of whether TBLS is rhetoric, reality or a guiding fiction. It concludes by outlining the aims of the thesis and providing an overview of the organisation of the thesis.

Abstract of chapter two

Chapter two presents the epistemology and theoretical perspective adopted in this research. In order to achieve the aim of the research, constructionism was adopted as an epistemology with interpretivism as the theoretical perspective. A case study using a number of sources of evidence was identified as an appropriate methodology. This multi-method approach addressed issues of validity and reliability. In a second phase of the research, discourse analysis was used to gain a deep understanding of the different perspectives of the stakeholders involved in the case study. The chapter details the different methods and techniques utilised concluding with a discussion on the generalisability of qualitative research and a critique of qualitative research methods.

Abstract of chapter three

Chapter three critically analysed relevant literature to develop a theoretical understanding of the concepts underpinning sustainability tourism development and triple bottom line sustainability. The concept of sustainability is criticised as not being entirely clear and open to alternative interpretations according to the agendas of particular stakeholders - some stakeholders foreground the economic agenda, some the social agenda and others the environmental agenda. As a result in practice it is difficult to operationalise. TBLS, in contrast, implies a commitment to the balancing of environmental, economic and the social issues and potentially offers a way of operationalising sustainable tourism development. Adopting TBLS is considered a practical way to operationalise the sustainability concept.

Abstract of chapter four

Chapter four reviews the role of tourism in the economic development in Pembrokeshire and the vision of the local authority and Welsh Assembly Government in relation to economic development in the area. It evaluates the Bluestone case study in relation to its TBLS potential by highlighting the development's economic, social

and environmental agendas. The chapter identifies a range of private and public-sector stakeholders as well as non-governmental organisations involved in the Bluestone development and discusses the public consultation processes carried out by Pembrokeshire County Council and Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority. Although the development offered many economic benefits (particularly 600 jobs), potential social issues (including the need to import foreign workers due to local labour shortages) were highlighted. Despite the fact that there would potentially be significant negative impacts from the development on the natural resources in the National Park, the Welsh Assembly Government strongly supported the development and committed grant aid to the project subject to it gaining planning permission.

The chapter highlights the role of the non-governmental organisations - the Council for National Parks and Friends of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park - in attempting to prevent the development from going ahead in the National Park by taking Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority to the High Court over the legality of its decision to give Bluestone planning permission. A protracted and costly legal battle ensued. Many of the stakeholders supporting the project assumed that the main objective of the legal battle was to postpone the project and prevent any new development in National Park. Letters to the National Park Authority about the Bluestone development expressed strongly polarised views either for or against the development. The chapter concludes that TBLs is a guiding fiction not easily achieved on the ground as economic benefits have primacy over the environment even in National Parks which technically are protected by law from major developments, except in exceptional circumstances.

Abstract of chapter five

Chapter five concludes that there is a necessity for enhanced understanding of the tensions between the three objectives of TBLs. In the Bluestone story these led to an expensive and lengthy legal battle as a result of policy conflict between Welsh Assembly Government, the Welsh Development Agency, the Wales Tourist Board, Pembrokeshire County Council and the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority. The Bluestone development won the battle and gained planning permission to proceed with no further challenges allowed. The Council for National Parks asserts that this decision makes a mockery of National Park legislation, signals an end to any control of development in National Parks and threatening their very existence. Having offered financial support to the project the Welsh Assembly Government did not intervene in the planning controversy as might be expected in relation to such a cross-boundary dispute.

Abstract of chapter six

Chapter six presented the major findings of the thesis in relation to operationalising the sustainability concept via the adoption of TBLS approach. In this thesis, although stakeholders should balance the economic, social and the environmental aspects of TBLS in striving to achieve sustainable tourism development, they are often interested in the economic agenda and give it priority even in National Parks making TBLS unachievable. Additionally, the critical issues revealed in the Bluestone case study, such as, the cross-boundary nature of the development which resulted in conflict between the aims of PCC and PCNP; the devaluing of the National Parks; the lack of local community involvement; the lack of effective communication between the government at all levels and NGOs are considered obstacles in the way of achieving the balance between the three aspects of TBLS and hence achieve sustainable tourism development for the next generation.

Abstract of chapter seven

Chapter seven draws the thesis to a close. It reviews the objectives and reflects on the contribution of the thesis to tourism theory, practice and methodology. The chapter reflects on the limitations of the study and identifies opportunities for further research. It concludes on the researcher's overall reflections through the research journey.

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