

**Tourism Public Policy in the Northern Territory of Australia – A
Process Facilitating Sustainability?
Dr. Christof Pforr (Curtin University of Technology)**

Introduction

The Northern Territory of Australia has become internationally renowned in the past two decades as an attractive tourist destination, home to famous Australian landmarks such as Ayers Rock in the Uluru Kata-Tjuta National Park and the Kakadu National Park, widely known through the legendary movie 'Crocodile Dundee'. Both parks are co-managed by their traditional owners and are included in the UNESCO World Heritage List as outstanding cultural sites and natural habitats. 'You'll never never know, if you never never go' has been the call of the tourism industry to capitalise on the Territory's natural and cultural assets (NTTC 1993). Remoteness, vast distances, spectacular scenery, distinct landscapes with rich and

diverse flora and fauna, wilderness experience, the sparsely populated outback as well as the unique Aboriginal culture are key aspects of the NT's appeal as a tourist destination.

Yet, these self-same characteristics are often seen and experienced by those who live there, 'Territorians' as they are wont to call themselves, in a quite different light. Many non-indigenous Territorians, like most Australians from other parts of the country, see the Territory in much the same way "as it has seemed throughout its recorded history, a vast, remote, harsh, and largely unknown part of the continent" (Heatley 1979: 1). Isolation, large distances and physical adversities still dominate perceptions of the NT, often reinforcing its image as a difficult and unattractive environment – just to mention its extremes of geography and climate. Within this challenging environment Europeans have put in place political and economic infrastructures, the operation of which is also shaped by the complex socio-cultural factors of a multi-racial and multi-ethnic society.

The Territory is therefore a unique region. It often stands, indeed represents itself, as both unique and different from the rest of Australia. This is a perception often shared by Territorians and non-Territorians alike, with the former, especially the local politicians, often playing to their self-defined sense of difference or 'otherness'. This is a key feature of Territory politics and an inherent constituent of the NT's culture and history.

Many of the factors mentioned, often in complex interrelationship, significantly impact on and influence the form and dynamics of tourism policy-making in the Northern Territory. This broader policy environment provides the background to understand the Territory's tourism system, which is inherently political in nature. Altman (1988: 71), for instance, points out that three interrelated constituents (historical, demographic and legislative factors) must be considered to understand the NT policy environment. He highlights that "the politics of tourism development is more complicated in the NT than anywhere else in Australia".

Since the 1980s the NT tourism sector has experienced strong growth and has developed from small scale to a mass phenomenon transforming tourism into one of the Territory's key industries. The potential economic benefits of tourism have always been the prime motivation of successive NT governments to become involved in developing the tourism industry.

The Focus on the Northern Territory of Australia

To ensure a viable tourism industry in the Territory which, is very strongly based on its natural and cultural resources, it is essential that the sustainability paradigm becomes a key theme of tourism public policy and decision making.

In the following some key aspects of the debates surrounding the rather vague notion of 'sustainable development' in the context of tourism will be outlined.

In particular the year 2002 represented a significant landmark for tourism worldwide.

A decade after the United Nations' Conference on the Environment and Development was held in Rio de Janeiro, the follow-up conference 'Rio + 10' (Johannesburg) as well as the United Nations nominated 'International Year of Ecotourism', provided an opportunity for a critical re-assessment of the current path of tourism development from the global to the local level. This renewed attention paid to the debate on sustainability as the shared goal of future development also offered scope for a re-adjustment to the chosen course in the various regional and local contexts. It has to be scrutinised if tourism developments in the real world fulfil the obligations entered into and follow the paradigm of sustainable development as the common framework for international and national action. The question has to be raised to what extent tourism development actually embraces the sustainability agenda and realises a balancing of economic, ecological and socio-cultural aspects. Despite being manifested on all political levels as a *leitmotiv* for future tourism development in many tourism policies, strategies and plans, and notwithstanding some success, more than ten years after the Rio Earth Summit, the implementation of the sustainability agenda remains rudimentary and slow-moving. The often disappointing outcomes in translating the vision of sustainability into a reality necessitate a debate about the role of government involvement in tourism, especially in terms of assisting and facilitating a shift towards a more sustainable future (Jenkins & Hall 1997). It appears that the traditional machinery of government has often not the capacity, nor the motivation to respond adequately to the challenges of the complex and dynamic sustainability agenda. To rephrase the governing capacity it has to be explored how policy processes and structures in place can be enhanced to better guide and support sustainable tourism development and if it is necessary to introduce new, complementary political mechanisms. A critical understanding of the current pattern of tourism policy-making is therefore fundamental to any analysis of what is a highly political process, the translation of the sustainability agenda into the tourism system.

Sustainable development is not a stable process but can take various pathways at different speeds. It is influenced not only by its specific regional and local context, but is also defined by its main stakeholders.

Core questions are:

- How is the global idea of sustainable development interpreted and implemented locally?
- What are the impediments – whether political, economic or social? and
- What, if any, complementary political mechanisms need to be developed in order to realise a sustainable tourism industry?

To address these questions, and in particular the question of if and how principles of sustainability are translated into tourism public policy, the thesis examined the

patterns of tourism policy-making in the Northern Territory. The aim was to determine whether the existing political framework facilitated or hindered a sustainable approach to tourism development.

In brief, the thesis provides an analysis based on empirical research that documents a particular government's approach to translating the ambitious vision of sustainable development into political action or non-action. This was achieved through a case study of the specific geographical and social formation of the Northern Territory of Australia. The focus was sectoral in that it concentrated on the tourism public policy domain, paying particular attention to a specific policy issue, the Northern Territory Tourism Development Masterplan as well as the debates and processes surrounding its genesis and implementation. Such a case study approach allowed for a detailed exploration of the highly complex and multi-dimensional political phenomenon, how to translate the sustainability agenda into the tourism system *via* public policy. The thesis had a number of aims that were part of the overall objective of providing a systematic account of a government's approach to the vision of sustainable development in the context of tourism.

These aims included

- exploring how tourism policy-making in the case study area was influenced by various local attributes and how they interacted with each other to create a distinctive policy environment,
- Another aim was to develop a detailed understanding of the debates and processes, which surrounded the formation and implementation of the Tourism Development Masterplan. This was done by segregating the underlying policy-process into different phases, and
- The thesis also aimed to establish the complex constellation of actors participating in the formulation process of this Masterplan as well as the nature of their interactions.

Thus, the purpose of the thesis was to demonstrate how the policy process was shaped by a number of inter-related factors such as

- the network of actors involved,
- the influence of the specific amalgamation of local issues and
- the dynamics of tourism policy-making.

The concepts of sustainable development and sustainable tourism as well as their public policy implications acted as important points of reference. Thus, the findings of the case study analysis were contrasted with this normative frame to assess if the existing political framework was sympathetic or antagonistic to the incorporation of the principles of sustainable development into the Territory's tourism system.

The Metodological Framework

The aims and objectives of the study, which I just mentioned, were addressed through the development of a descriptive and explanatory framework, which integrated three complementary conceptual perspectives,

- Easton's systems approach,
- the policy cycle model and
- the policy network approach.

To understand the tourism policy process in general, from demands *via* the policy-making system to outputs and feedback, Easton's model (1965) of the political system was employed as a basic conceptual framework. Public policy, understood as a highly complex process of problem solving, is influenced by an interplay of various economic, socio-cultural, political and physical factors. This policy environment determines the approach to political problems and shapes policy responses by governments. It is therefore imperative to discuss the policy process with reference to its environment.

Based on Easton's model, in my thesis it was argued that to understand the tourism system in the case study, and in particular its political dimensions, it is fundamental to develop an understanding of its policy environment. The complex interplay of

- the features of the political system,
- historical and constitutional developments,
- the economic structure,
- demographic and socio-cultural factors as well as
- the geographical setting are all seen as important determinants of the tourism policy process in the NT.

These characteristics, which influence and shape its policy processes in a distinct way, were considered with particular reference to the tourism system.

The core questions hereby were

- 'what are the significant dimensions of the policy environment?' and
- 'how do they shape tourism policy and decision-making processes and influence political programs?' (Dye 1987).

Based on the systems approach by Easton (1965), the policy cycle model was then used in the thesis to add an additional dimension by presenting the policy process in a particular sequence. The policy cycle model simplifies the understanding of the policy-making process by segregating it into different formal stages, since "it breaks the policy process into functionally and temporally distinct sub-processes" (Jenkins-Smith & Sabatier 1994: 176). Thus, it is suitable for a descriptive analysis highlighting the process character of policy and decision-making. "The policy cycle is therefore nothing more than a phase model in which policy is regarded as a dynamic process" (Schubert 1991: 33). Using the basic structure of the policy cycle model in my thesis, the NT Tourism Development Masterplan process was segregated into five different phases of

- agenda setting,
- policy formulation,
- decision-making,
- implementation and
- evaluation.

This approach made it possible for its dynamic dimensions to be better articulated.

As an additional, third level of analysis the policy network concept was then discussed. This approach identifies the various and multiple ways in which the actors participate in tourism policy-making as well as the complexity of their interactions. The concept was adopted in the case study as an explanatory tool to describe the complex nature of the interaction between private, non-profit and political-administrative actors in the NT tourism policy domain.

The aim of employing such an approach was not only

- to identify the key policy actors,

but the establishment of

- their influence reputation and
- their decision-making relevance as well as
- the mapping out of the intensity and density of their relational constellations.

On the basis of three different network analyses, namely

- influence reputation,
- co-operation activity and
- participation in information exchange,

it was possible to establish mutual relevance, the way these actors took each other into account in their actions.

The combination of these three conceptual perspectives allowed for a particular process-oriented analytical focus of the thesis. It enabled the articulation of a detailed and comprehensive systematic account on tourism public policy in the Northern Territory. In analytical terms, this framework also facilitated an essential cross-check of findings, the data presented and their interpretation.

On the Road to Sustainability?

As I highlighted, the understanding of the pattern of tourism policy-making in the NT was seen as the crucial means to address the question of whether the existing political framework facilitated or hindered the incorporation of principles of sustainable development into the Territory's tourism system.

The thesis demonstrated that the specific economic and political climate in the Territory was not sympathetic to the idea of sustainable tourism. The analysis was developed along a set of complementary policy imperatives for sustainable tourism, namely

- improved mechanisms of collaboration and co-ordination,
- greater democratisation and decentralisation of policy and planning processes,
- the establishment of a better information and knowledge base, as well as
- strategic planning

The findings of the thesis showed that the sustainability agenda was not of prime concern throughout the policy process of the NT Tourism Development Masterplan.

The principles of sustainable development were at best a footnote, since the ecological and socio-cultural effects of tourism development were neglected, overshadowed by the NT government's economic motivations in dealing with tourism. The machinery of government also made certain that the debates and processes surrounding the Masterplan remained within this parochial economic scope. Although tourism strategies developed at all levels of government in Australia are supposed to be based on Ecologically Sustainable Development principles following the objectives for tourism outlined in the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development, the Masterplan was not a key vehicle to conceptualise and implement the sustainability agenda into the Territory's tourism system.

Given the findings of the thesis, it is unlikely that a more sustainable approach to tourism development in the NT will emerge in the short and medium-term future. In my thesis I pursued a positive argument to the effect that in order to move on from this policy *status quo*, a fundamental change in the NT's current tourism policy processes, priorities and directions will be needed if tourism in the Northern Territory is to be brought more in line with the principles and values of sustainable development. The challenge faced by the NT government is to find a new approach to development to integrate environmental, economic and social goals. Instead of considering sustainability primarily as a serious threat to the Territory's economic development, the opportunities that it can offer for future tourism development must be embraced more actively. In the thesis the argument was put forward that in the process of re-thinking society and its future development, the NT government must be more proactive in facilitating the transition to a more sustainable approach to tourism. This can be achieved through developing a strategic plan for sustainable tourism as a socio-political construct. Unlike the Northern Territory's Tourism Masterplan, such a plan should be the outcome of broad consultation and participation of all interested parties and individuals in an open and democratic manner. This would ensure an ongoing commitment to tourism's sustainability by government, industry as well as the wider community. The analysis of the Masterplan, in contrast, highlighted the problematic nature of the much promoted public-private partnerships as an exclusive network structure between government and industry. But it is not only a matter of opening policy networks to a wider range of stakeholders. To ensure more sustainable outcomes will also require the

willingness to share decision-making powers with the local political tier to enable community needs and visions for sustainable tourism to be taken into account.

Furthermore, it is also essential that the NT government in the future co-operates more strongly with the Commonwealth and other state and territory governments to better co-ordinate policy instruments to achieve sustainable tourism. This commitment to sustainability must also be pursued from within an international perspective to be able to attend to global issues while at the same time addressing a more sustainable future for the Territory.

Conclusion

To conclude, sustainable tourism development is a controversial socio-political process, purposive and at the same time erratic, successful and futile, a challenge but also an opportunity.

Nonetheless, despite the great diversity and even contradictory nature of the various approaches to realise a sustainability paradigm, the notion of sustainability itself remains a positive, even common-sensical perspective, with which to frame the different attempts to deliver a better future.

In pursuit of this goal, politics has a crucial role to play. Indeed, though it may be that the political process is, as Max Weber (1973: 185) once commented, "a strong and slow boring of hard boards", it is the only means by which sustainable development can be made actual.

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