

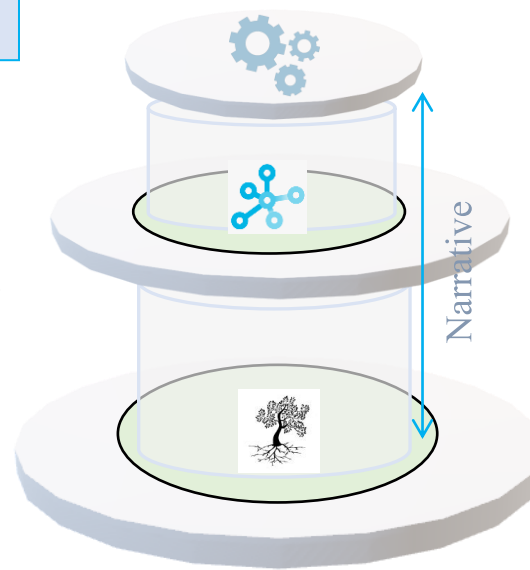
Thriving destinations – an ecosystem approach and the new role for the DMO

Abstract

Thriving destinations welcome visitors while ensuring a positive benefit for people and nature through constant renewal in a purpose driven local economy. Combining the thought of destinations as cohesive systems by utilising the intelligence of nature with the transformation of destinations functioning as ecosystems, a new and challenging role can be seen for the DMO in the future. The aim is to reshuffle and specify the five hexagons community, environment, economy, mindset and organisation. The paradigm will be embraced in the sustainability debate that damage limitation is deficient and that tourism is part of a harmonious interconnected social-ecological system. Through literature review and desk research a conceptual model will be created and will serve as input for further discussion. It will be also the departure point for explorative research in practice as well as curriculum innovation of hospitality management programmes.

Introduction

The role of a Destination Management Organisation (DMO) is long changing from a sheer marketing oriented one into a planning and management one. The DMO in this respect operates as a network organisation with many actors involved. One of the trends is that these actor networks are becoming productive coalitions when actors are working together in a strategic, organised and complementary manner based on a division of tasks, roles and responsibilities within the coalition (Hartman, Wielenga, Heslinga, 2019). However, also the tourism system needs to change since it has a potential to become a vital force for regeneration in communities enabling everyone to flourish and thrive only if there is an interaction, interconnection, interdependence, collaborative network, community engagement, purpose and commitment which can only be achieved when tourism is considered as a system rather than an industry (Joshua Ajoon, 2020).



Organisation

- Mutual purpose
- Collaborative advantage

Ecosystems

- Mutual interdependency
- Balance

Mindset – Nature's Intelligence

- Adaptation
- Symbioses
- Essence

Literature review and application

These system networks should evolve as biological ecosystems; a complex set of relationships among the living resources, habitats, and residents of an area, whose functional goal is to maintain an equilibrium state (Jackson, 2011). In order to face challenges in destinations, for which growth and economic gains are the leading and an aspiring factor in decision making processes, this new approach could lead to a dynamic and adaptive process of constantly seeking balance. In light of this, the concept of regeneration is at place. Regeneration indicates the process in which life in all its forms is placed in the middle of every action and decision. Regenerative tourism is based on a fresh understanding that the visitor economy in general and the destination, in particular, is not an industrial production line, but a living, networked system embedded in a natural system called nature and subject to nature's operating rules and principles (Pollock, 2019, p.7). Pollock (2019) uses the terms 'flourishing' and 'thriving' to describe the intention for tourism to promote healthy living systems. Regenerative tourism promotes tourism innovations by embedding tourism practices within local communities and ecological processes that elevate human and non-human wellbeing (Bellato and Cheer, 2021). The focus of regenerative tourism is mainly on communities and social well-being however an integrated role should be given to nature as well.

1. Mindset – The mindset is fundamental and inspired by nature's intelligence derived from longitudinally tested systems, an interdisciplinary way of thinking used by leaders to drive social newness (Akkaya, Yazici, 2020). Out of the six elements of destination ecosystem thinking (Santbulte, 2021), two have been allocated to the mindset; *adaption* and *symbioses* (Santbulte, 2021). Nature's systems are not necessarily innovative nor is growth a goal, they are agile with a constant search for the wellbeing of all, with the realistic acceptance of partial losses. The interaction within ecosystems is symbiotic and the focus will be on three of them to start with. Firstly, *parasitism* - a relationship in which one organism effectively benefits from another and the other one is harmed. Secondly, *mutualism*, a relationship with mutual benefit whereas, and thirdly, *commensalism*, a one-way win situation whereby nobody gets hurt. In all forms of symbiosis there is a limit to the extent of which it occurs, a so-called carrying capacity or an ecological ceiling (Raworth, 2017).
2. Ecosystem – the mindset is fundamental to the destination ecosystem, the hexagons defined by Dredge (2021) community, environment and economy are fused to one cohesive system of mutual interdependency in which diversity and composition are dynamically balanced. Inclusion is a precondition in an ecosystem since all elements matter and have a function.
3. Organisation – the DMO as a fosterer for thriving destinations, a new role for mutual purpose and creating new narratives in the ecosystem.

Research in practise and applied sciences education

In preparation for a system change, students are taught to change their mindset.

- ✓ Year 1: Multiple value creation - Natural Park the Weerribben-Wieden; mutualism, business model innovation – interaction between nature organisations, tourism businesses and agriculture
- ✓ Year 2: Smart tourism – Symbiotic relationships between actors – tourism contexts and inclusion
- ✓ Year 3: Flourishing Destinations – Case study – the new fostering role of the DMO in an ecosystem
- ✓ Year 3: Smart Solutions - Drinkable River IJssel – symbiotic relations between visitor and the river