

Rethinking destination success: An island perspective

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Abstract: The global tourism industry has shifted due to COVID-19, with tourism-dependent islands facing a dire need to realign and reconstruct their tourism offerings to remain competitive. The traditional mass tourism model that has dominated island development has to be re-examined in this new tourism environment with new mindsets regarding the current conditions for destination success. This paper aims to promote an understanding of destination success in an island context and to identify which determinants are critical during this period to achieve optimal destination success. The findings from this study suggest that island destinations are at a critical turning point, and key strategic shifts are necessary to enable future destination success as defined by the Destination Management Organisations. There is a need to shift from management to stewardship, from product to experience, from quantity to quality, and from stakeholder presence to engagement. Core to these strategic shifts is an incorporation of locals as central to the quality of the overall experience, with less reliance on the natural resources (sun, sea, and sand) to which these island destinations have been beholden to for decades.

Keywords: Caribbean, tourism, island tourism, destination management, destination success

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Introduction

The competitive landscape for tourism continues to evolve as destinations the world over now grapple with the fallout of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The last two years have been a period of unprecedented disruption and massive decline in global tourism arrivals, export earnings from tourism, and related employment. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) has designated 2020 the worst year in tourism history, citing a 74% decline in international arrivals and an estimated loss of USD 1.3 trillion in export revenues; a loss that is 11 times greater than the fallout of the 2008–2009 global economic crisis (UNWTO, 2021). A shock of this magnitude has redefined the operating environment for

global tourism and brings to the fore the issue of the capacity of tourism systems to deal with such stressors by maintaining the stability of tourism-related economies.

Tourism has been a panacea for economic growth and development among island destinations, with many of them solely dependent on the tourism sector for revenue generation, employment, and foreign exchange. While the positive economic growth impact of tourism has been identified (Cannonier & Burke, 2019), there is increasing evidence of negative impacts from tourism on island destinations (Chong, 2020). Yet still, some island destinations find it difficult to curb their sole dependence on tourism on account of their vulnerabilities. Moreover, many islands struggle to effectively exploit the developmental benefits of tourism and to be competitive in the global tourism market. For Caribbean islands in particular, tourism is deemed to be the “lifeblood of the Caribbean” (Jayawardena, 2002, p. 1; Twining-Ward et al., 2017), an industry connected to the survival, development, and growth of local communities.

The ability of island tourism planners to maximize the contribution of the tourism industry to the economy is severely constrained by several factors. Fluctuating visitor numbers because of global recessions or climatic variations, short lengths of stay, and changing holiday fashions are problems that restrict planners (Moore, 2010). Foreign ownership, leakage, and expatriate domination of management are at high levels (Sealy, 2018). Limited physical resources are overexploited and used unsustainably due to mass tourism, leading to a deterioration in the quality of the visitor experience (van der Veecken et al., 2016). Further, according to Spencer (2019), a delayed response to the integration of information and communication technology (ICT) into every aspect of the tourism sector has made the islands less competitive than developed tourist destinations.

For Caribbean islands, given the changing global tourism landscape, the islands’ vulnerabilities, and the perennial negative impacts of tourism, it is an opportune time to rethink what constitutes ‘destination success’ going forward. The traditional mass tourism model that has dominated island development has to be re-examined in this new tourism environment. With this in mind, the objectives of this paper are threefold. Firstly, this paper seeks to determine how destination success is defined in an island context. This is followed by an examination of the determinants of success for island destinations. The paper concludes with a discussion on the implications of the determinants of destination success for tourism practice. Consequently, this study provides a strategic focus on destination success from which island destination management organisations (DMOs) can learn from in the current COVID-19 context.

Understanding tourist destinations

From a geographical/spatial viewpoint, a tourism destination is a physically defined geographical space, which experiences tangible changes over time as visitors interact with various components inherent in the space (Koestantia et al., 2014). Viewed from the standpoint of those that ascribe to an economic geography-oriented approach, a tourism destination represents two spaces: one where visitors emerge (demand) and the other where planning, development, and management of tourism products and occur (supply) (Kogler, 2015). Źemła (2016, p. 5) captured this aptly by stating:

Perceiving a destination as a product i.e. an offer for tourists to spend their time, is much closer to the demand side approach as it returns to customers' perceptions and to competing for what they choose. On the contrary, considering a destination as a pack of products is close to the supply side approach. This reflects the fact that a destination's product might offer different ways of spending time in the same place. In that sense, local offers for active tourists, for culture lovers or spa and wellness lovers, might be perceived as different products of a destination and the task for destination managers is then managing the product portfolio.

A marketing management-oriented outlook holds to the notion that a destination comprises products that are subject to marketing techniques and a combination of management processes which work together to create a strong brand and image in the minds of consumers (Żemła, 2016). From a customer-oriented perspective, the destination is seen as a service-oriented environment which provides an experience to the visitor (Saraniemi & Kylänen, 2011). A socio-cultural perspective views a destination to be derived from various interactions and relationships of actors, with the space being "constructed as a social and cultural landscape both historically and contemporaneously" (Pritchard & Morgan, 2001, p. 169), and Larsen et al. (2007, p. 258) indicate that it "is not merely an isolated 'exotic island' anymore but often also a significant set of social and material relations."

Destinations are both tangible and intangible, with the latter being conceived in the minds of both consumers and destination managers. Moreover, from a marketing management-oriented standpoint, the role of destination managers and other stakeholders at the destination is crucial in influencing what is conceived in the minds of the consumers. As a result, destinations are considered "complex co-producing networks" where "destination development needs to take into account the challenges of developing strategies involving a large number of firms and other actors such as, for example, local and regional authorities" (Haugland et al., 2011, p. 269). The complexity of destination development is further exacerbated by changes in the external environment such as globalization, advances in ICT, and global crises. However, Saraniemi and Kylänen (2011, p. 133) still assert that "it is important to define a tourism destination in its depth and breadth in order to build the right preconditions for successful destination-level marketing."

Destination success

The discourse on the concept of a tourism destination is expansive and rooted in various epistemological perspectives. Unlike other tourism concepts, there is not a definitional debate on the term 'destination success'. Instead, tourism researchers attempt to examine the phenomenon through the parameters, conditions, and actions that are required for a destination to achieve success. Traditionally, destination success is measured using metrics such as tourist arrivals and tourist expenditure. Bornhorst et al. (2010, p. 583) refer to this as "an output measurement of destination success." Conversely, Jessop (2017, para. 11) is adamant that the use of visitor arrivals provides a small snapshot of the whole story and encourages governments:

To broaden the base of national, and by extension, regional reporting and forecasting on tourism [...] include the amount retained by individual nations through taxes; the value and origin of the inputs and services the industry uses; reporting on average product pricing, and where not commercially sensitive, recognised metrics that indicate profitability.

Despite this position, global tourism bodies such as the UNWTO and the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) continue to use visitor arrivals as an indicator for top performing destinations. Concomitantly, the terms ‘destination success’ and ‘destination competitiveness’ are used synonymously in the literature, with Otto and Ritchie (1996) contending that success is a byproduct of competitiveness as determined by the visitor. Ritchie and Crouch (2000, 2003) indicate that destination success can be defined in terms of input and output variables, while Dwyer and colleagues (2014, p. 305) determine that destination success “is the ability to recognize and deal with change across a wide range of key trends and the way these trends interact.”

Indicators of destination success

Sustainable tourism

Over the last three decades, discussions have increased surrounding sustainability as a key indicator of destination success. Nadalipour and colleagues (2019, p. 329) advocate that a destination is truly competitive and can achieve success only when it establishes “a green and local based economy, to attract and satisfy responsible tourists, to create social welfare and to conserve natural capitals with social equity.” Booking.com’s *Sustainable Travel Report 2021* affirms a growing demand for sustainable travel and reveals that 61% of travelers want to travel more sustainably in the future due to the 2020 onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic (Booking.com, 2021). Notably, 72% thought that destinations should offer more sustainable choices, with 41% of travelers indicating that they didn’t know how to find sustainable travel options. Additionally, 76% expressed a desire to see all members of the society benefiting equally from tourism gains. This demonstrates that destinations striving for success in a post-COVID-19 context are required to focus on creating sustainable tourism products and services. This also mirrors the sentiments of those calling for a regenerative approach to tourism development since the occurrence of the pandemic (Cave & Dredge, 2020). Sheller (2021), writing on the reconstruction of Caribbean tourism considering the COVID-19 pandemic, advocates for mobility justice where there is a more formidable connection between tourism and other sectors resulting in more resilient social systems and structures. On the contrary, Gössling, Scott, and Hall (2020) contend that it is unrealistic to expect any transformative approach to be employed in tourism development and that tourism will continue with business as usual. They argue that institutional and governmental capacity have been overwhelmed with a focus on saving lives, employing a basic restart of economies and saving jobs and businesses (Gössling et al., 2020).

Destination marketing

Another key determinant for destination success highlighted by multiple researchers is that of effective marketing (Baker & Cameron, 2008). However, due to the complexity of the tourism product, it requires well thought-out strategies (Baker & Cameron, 2008). To this

end, Morgan (2012) advocates for more “mindful” destination marketing, emphasising the need for better inclusion of civil society, government, and business bolstered by research which addresses unethical destination marketing. On the more practical side, Kozak and Buhalis (2019, pp. 15–16) propose the use of cross-border tourism destination marketing and find that “selling cross-border destinations as a single package, mainly for long-distance travelers, can increase the variety of experiences created and strengthen the competitiveness of destinations.” In this regard, their review of Turkey and Greece also found that “in addition to attracting both international visitors and domestic visitors from one country to another, cross-border marketing practices can help to contribute to the local economies of both nations” (Kozak & Buhalis, 2019, p. 16).

Effective tourism product development

The proper development of tourism products and services is important for destination success, and is regarded by Bornhorst et al. (2010) as an input and advocate for creative and ingenious skill in the creation of experiences that can meet the demand of the new tourist who desire unique and authentic experiences. Marais and colleagues (2017) stress the importance of the tourism product as a critical success factor and contend that attention be given to ensure the availability, thoroughness, and efficiency of the tourism product to secure visitor satisfaction. For example, Ortigueira and Gómez-Selemeneva (2012) highlighted a strong link between the richness of Cuba’s culture as a tourism product and the motivations of tourists to travel to the location. However, Dwyer and Edwards (2009), in their study of tourism product and service innovation, caution against “strategic drift” which could occur if strategies adopted by a destination are not consistent with changes taking place in the external environment. They state, “staying abreast of research [...] can assist agencies and organisations to address the forces in the external environment; develop innovative strategies in their operations; undertake new product development, business management and marketing activities; and thereby avoid strategic drift” (Dwyer & Edwards, 2009, p. 333). These positions clearly indicate a need for destination planners to be flexible, creative, and adaptive in the face of change.

Quality product and service offerings

Destination success is also determined by the visitor’s feedback on the quality of experience directly had at the destination through interaction with various infrastructure and service offerings. Bornhorst et al. (2010, p. 584) write, “consumer experience is a ‘performance’ indicator of a destination’s tourism success as consumption of the product and service has already taken place.” Literature points to the development of positive or negative visitor perception and visitor satisfaction because of the quality of experiences at the destination (Gnanapala, 2015). Indeed, the visitor experience is influenced by multiple complex interactions, and it is essential to understand these components to achieve success (Huang & Hsu, 2009; Kim & Brown, 2012). Loi et al. (2017) found that tourist intention to revisit Macao was heavily influenced by the quality of experience with the tourist shuttle service, specifically relating to staff service, efficiency, punctuality, and safety. They concluded that “an unsatisfied tourist may not revisit a destination even though he or she perceived it as having a good image, especially when the functional factors are inferior to those elsewhere” (Loi et al., 2017, p. 120) and encourage emphasis be placed on effective training programmes which equip employees with the knowledge and understanding to deliver quality service.

Ortigueira and Gómez-Selemeneva (2012) discovered that though Cuba's cultural tourism offerings differentiated them from other Caribbean islands, poor management of recreational facilities negatively affected their overall success.

Effective stakeholder engagement

Support from destination stakeholders is another key determinant of destination success. Bornhorst et al. (2010, p. 584) contend that "even if the overall product and service mix is strong, tourism success could be negated [...] if the residents of the host population are unsupportive of the tourism initiative and treat visitors with disdain." Correspondingly, Freeman and Thomlinson (2014) identified the inclusion of community champions or stakeholders as a contingent factor to destination success. More recently, Roxas and colleagues (2020, p. 387) lobby for a shift in governance "from the destination to the value chain, wherein stakeholder cooperation and collaboration are keys to reboot the industry," given the impact of COVID-19. They noted the critical role that stakeholder engagement plays in redesigning tourism experiences in the 'new normal' and a post COVID-19 context. Islam, Ruhanen, and Ritchie (2018) view adaptive co-management as a way to engage more effectively with stakeholders where shared rights, interactive communication, and social learning ('we will learn and grow together') are core tenets. However, they caution against tokenistic engagement as destinations strive for harmonious and progressive relationships with stakeholders.

Effective tourism education and training

The development of knowledge and skills among existing and potential labour force is key with Reisinger et al. (2019, p. 267) holding the view that "the availability of highly qualified and professionally trained human resources contributes to destination competitiveness." Wang and Li's (2008) study found that a lack of attention to educational matters in the tourism industry can potentially impede the industry's growth and development. Hall and colleagues (2002), in their study of the role of the regional university in Caribbean tourism development, found that during that period, the existing higher education curriculum at the University of the West Indies was inadequate and partially stymied the region's future tourism development. Reisinger et al. (2019), in their research, also discovered the need for the United Arab Emirates to provide increased attention to their labour force for tourism, particularly in the area of product knowledge and service skills for improved destination competitiveness. Research conducted by Seraphin and colleagues (2021) on tourism education in France found that the act of merging destination growth strategies with actions to build a strong supporting tourism labour force has led to their competitive advantage and formidable resilience as a tourism destination.

Other indicators of destination success

Other determinants, such as finance, are identified as a critical success factor for destinations. Finance is conceptualised in terms of cost control, adequate acquisition of funds for projects, competitive pricing, revenue and yield management, and financial planning (Marais et al., 2017). Freeman and Thomlinson (2014) also identify funding sources, be it public or private or in kind, as a contingent factor to destination success. In addition to stakeholder

management, other researchers point to the need for proper human resource development and management (Nieh & Pong, 2012).

Methodology

According to Neuman (2006, p. 379), “when the research question involves learning about, understanding, or describing phenomena” or the research entails “examining events as they occur in natural everyday ongoing social settings,” then qualitative research is most appropriate. Carson et al. (2001, p. 65) also suggest that the qualitative research methodology is most useful when seeking an in-depth understanding of a certain situation. This research was designed to capture how destination management organisations (DMOs) perceive tourism success for Caribbean destinations. This qualitative approach allowed the researcher to probe the topic of interest on an in-depth basis. The questions asked sought to elicit the respondents’ views on the definition of a successful destination, the factors that contribute to destination success, the barriers to achieving success, and the factors that would help the destination become more successful in its tourism pursuit. The data was collected through asynchronous email interviews over a two-month period in 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Amri et al., 2021).

Twenty-seven English and non-English speaking islands of the Caribbean were chosen for this study (out of a total of 30 Caribbean territories) to capture the views of the Caribbean region. The study focused on gathering responses from senior level officials in the DMOs. This decision was made because DMOs are responsible for coordinating and directing the efforts of the many parts of the diverse and complex tourism system. Given the qualitative approach adopted, the focus is on transferability rather than generalisation. According to qualitative researchers (Anney, 2014; Houghton et al., 2013; Slevin & Sines, 2000), truthfulness, consistency, and transferability of qualitative findings are achieved using expert involvement, thick descriptions of responses, and use of a constant comparative method, all of which were used in this study to ensure validity of research findings. Twenty-one senior officials from regional DMOs responded to the questions. Notably, no responses were received from the Dutch and French territories, so the views expressed are solely from the English- and Spanish-speaking Caribbean islands.

The collected data from 21 interviews was analysed using the Framework Method of analysis, as developed by Ritchie and Spencer (1995). This process involves the sifting, charting, and sorting of material according to key issues and themes, through a five-stage process of familiarisation with the data: identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting and mapping, and interpretation of the data. At the core of this method is the identification of a thematic framework within which the responses were categorised. The main themes identified were definitions of destination success, determinants of destination success, barriers to destination success, and improvements to destination success. These broad a priori themes were identified from the core objectives of the study, and were then further subdivided into a series of sub-themes generated by the officials’ responses. The sub-themes for two of the main themes are noted in Table 1.

Defining island destination success

Respondents were asked the question, “How would you define a successful tourism destination?” The various responses were grouped into four distinct themes which were identified as, in order of most noted, sustainable tourism development, quality tourism experiences, sustained visitor flow, and an adaptive/flexible industry. For many officials interviewed, destination success is defined by the extent to which the lives of the locals have been positively impacted by tourism development. This sentiment is succinctly captured by one interviewee who stated, “a successful tourism industry is one in which the people are the main beneficiaries of the industry.” Another interviewee responded, “one that is capable of raising the standard of living of the people through tourism related jobs in a sustainable manner.” There is a clear understanding among the respondents that benefits can only be accrued when there is a sustainable approach to the development of tourism (Nadalipour et al., 2019; Sheller, 2021). As one respondent expressed:

Since tourism is about enriching the lives of the stakeholders it involves (3) aspects. One, providing a sustainable livelihood for the resident actors, the one providing the services. Two, transformation to those engaging in the experience, the visitors. Three, leaving the destination better off than when the tourism interaction occurred, meaning no degradation of natural resources.

Several respondents pinpointed that the quality aspect of the visitor experience is an integral component of destination success, noting, for example, that a successful destination is one that “delivers a high-quality tourism experience for visitors.” Another respondent explained that a quality experience is one that “keeps the visitors interested, obtains positive feedback and the destination seeks to continuously re-invent itself.” This supports the findings of Loi et al. (2017). Still pivoting on the locals as the core, a stakeholder highlighted a successful destination as “one which promotes inclusive growth for all, while exceeding the expectations of guests.” Unlike the findings from Bornhorst et al. (2009), where tourist arrivals were the primary definer of success, only three out of the 21 respondents in this study explicitly defined destination success in relation to tourist arrivals. Specifically, one official intimated that “successful destinations are those that have a sustained influx of foreign and domestic tourists. Success is also defined by the amount of revenue generated from the tourism.” Sharing this view, another respondent defined a successful destination as “one that is characterized by repeat visits from the diaspora and foreign visitors from existing source markets and new source markets.”

A surprising finding is the minimal attention given to safety and resilience in defining destination success, given the vulnerability of island destinations (van der Veecken et al., 2016) and the fact that the study was conducted during a pandemic. Only one respondent referred to the COVID-19 pandemic, noting that “given the pandemic challenges we are facing, a strategic balanced plan between safety and economical mobility is key to a successful tourism destination.” However, there was a recognition by two stakeholders that “a successful destination is one that is adaptive, innovative and responsive to the environmental conditions in which it operates.” This latter view is shared by Dwyer et al. (2014), where the emphasis is on flexibility and effective responses to a changing environment. The perspectives shared

on the definitions of destination success confirm that, for Caribbean islands, tourism is more than an industry to be exploited for economic gain; it is the lifeblood of the people (Jayawardena, 2002; Twining-Ward et al., 2017). Significantly, it is a socioeconomic phenomenon that, if managed effectively, can address some of the challenges facing the region articulated earlier.

Determinants of island destination success

As a follow-through from defining destination success, respondents were asked to identify those factors that contribute to and that are barriers to success. In delineating the determinants of success, the officials utilised a broad range of input, process, and performance variables that are closely aligned with research on destination success undertaken by Ritchie and Crouch (2003) and Bornhorst et al. (2010). A summary of the findings is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Destination success: Determinants and barriers.

Determinants of destination success	Barriers to destination success
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Effective marketing 2. Product development (<i>differentiated products; developed infrastructure; adequate airlift; naturally pleasing environment</i>) 3. Human capital development 4. Sustained tourist arrivals 5. Engaged stakeholders (<i>public/private sector collaboration</i>) 6. Effective policy development (<i>protection of the environment</i>) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Frequency of crises (<i>particular focus was placed on the pandemic but reference made to the environmental challenges</i>) 2. Inadequate funding (<i>particularly for marketing the destination</i>) 3. Disengaged stakeholders 4. Poor leadership (<i>lack of political will; inability of governments to respond quickly to change policy & legislation when needed</i>) 5. Overtourism (<i>overcrowding; over building; increased demand on infrastructure</i>)

The officials interviewed supported the view of Baker and Cameron (2008) that effective marketing is a key driver of success for destinations. In the words of one respondent, “our aggressive marketing and leveraged relationships with airlines and cruise lines are at the very premise of our destination success.” Another DMO official made the important link between marketing and the product when they stated that their “Ministry of Tourism engages a number of tourism and marketing expertise that helps to keep the product up to date, engaging leading edge strategies.” The need for destinations to engage in new product development and to maintain the product’s integrity to avoid strategic drift (Dwyer & Edwards, 2009) was a priority determinant for the DMOs interviewed. As one interviewee aptly noted, “the ability to sustain the existing cultural richness and infrastructure, conserve the natural resources and foster responsible tourism development” is key. It is that combination of effective marketing and a quality tourism product that leads to the most used destination success metric of tourist arrivals (Bornhorst et al., 2010). While not overtly stated by many interviewed, there is an underlying acknowledgement that tourist arrivals are a measure of success. To quote a senior official, “before COVID-19, this destination had years of record-breaking success in terms of the growth in visitor arrivals and the multiplier effect of visitor spend.”

Underlying the marketing and product development efforts are several less overt determinants that contribute in no small measure to the destination's success. One such determinant is the development of human capital (Reisinger et al., 2019; Seraphin et al., 2021). In the words of one interviewee:

Investment in human resources is critical for retaining visitors. Our beaches will not be enough. A visitor's overall satisfaction can convert to more potential visitors and our very own people are at the forefront of making a vacation or a business trip pleasant.

Chief among these determinants is the support and collaboration among stakeholders (Bornhorst et al., 2010; Islam et al., 2018; Roxas et al., 2020). According to another interviewee, "lack of meaningful and sustained stakeholder engagement and a lack of shared vision for what the destination wants to be and a lack of a clear vision" can stymie the destination's efforts at attaining success. Ortigueira and Gómez-Selemeneva (2012) confirm that the inclusion and receptivity of Cuban nationals featured as a main critical success factor for Cuba as a tourist destination.

Coupled with the importance of stakeholder engagement is the need for political will and visionary leadership. Interestingly, while these two variables were not featured in Bornhorst et al.'s (2010) study, they were prominent in this study. A deeper probe into this finding revealed that in some destinations, the DMOs shared the view that there was insufficient support and commitment from the government to develop the industry, which was evidenced by the inadequate funding commitments. This is corroborated by Pillar #6 of the *Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019*, 'Prioritization of Travel and Tourism' by governments (inclusive of spending), on which the small island nations of Trinidad and Tobago and Haiti received scores of 4.0 and 3.6, respectively, compared to Jamaica, who received 6.2 (on a scale of 1–7 where 7 is best; Uppink Calderwood & Soshkin, 2019, p. 75).

Earlier in the discussion, it was noted that while island destinations continue to focus on mass tourism as the main form of economic development, there is evidence of increasing strain on the natural and built resources on the islands (van der Veeken et al., 2016). The respondents highlighted several stressors including the frequency of environmental hazards, overcrowding (particularly from cruise tourism), and overbuilding in environmentally sensitive areas. As the interviewees reflected on the determinants of success, there was an underlying questioning of the value that mass tourism brings to island destinations and its place in the success of the island destination of tomorrow. This enquiry is succinctly captured by one official in the following statement:

During this pandemic, the shutting of our borders has led us to realize the importance of quality versus quantity as a new success metric. The tourism strategy has shifted to focusing on providing higher quality and memorable experiences at premium prices. There was a lot of debate amongst the residents about the value of tourism, its impact on quality of life and whether or not people were really benefitting from tourism and to what extent. Tourism sustainability discourse generated many ideas and thought provoking discussions as a conduit to taking the opportunity provided by the pandemic slowdown to rethink the country's future in sustainability terms.

This open dialogue will be a key success factor in reshaping the economy and the tourism sector.

The issue of the value of tourism and its impact on the quality of life of the residents lies at the core of island destination success (Sheller, 2021). As DMOs navigate the redefined tourism space post COVID-19 and move towards attaining success in their respective destinations based on the above definers, a shift in focus is required in tourism practice. There is a need to move from management to stewardship, from product to experience, from quantity to quality, and from stakeholder presence to engagement.

Strategic shifts for island destination success

From management to stewardship

The success of the region's tourism industry requires a shift from a focus on management to a focus on stewardship to address the aforementioned challenges and to remain competitive. This shift is premised on the stance that Caribbean tourism is more than an industry; it is a way of life for the people of the region. As a definer of life in the region, tourism cannot be seen only as an industry to be managed but as a tool to transform Caribbean societies. Stewardship versus management views tourism through three lenses:

As an industry, a revitalization tool and a social force. As an industry, there must be a shift from an almost total dependence on high-density/high-impact styles of mass tourism to a greater embracing of more low-density/low impact alternatives. As a revitalization tool, tourism must be viewed as an opportunity by Caribbean nationals to construct a more satisfying culture through deliberate, organized, conscious effort. As a social force, tourism should emphasize benefits to society and the environment and is expected to be used for a multitude of benefits. (Lewis-Cameron, 2015, p. 87)

From product to experience

The mass tourism model of high-rise hotels and air-conditioned tour buses has dominated the Caribbean tourism product, where the focus has been on the exploitation of the standardised 3S (sun, sea, and sand) product. While this model of development has brought some gains to island destinations, the findings from this study show that the DMOs recognise the important role that “authentic, high quality and distinctive visitor experiences” play in the future success of island destinations. Island destinations must shift from a production-oriented approach to tourism to tourist engagement. In the words of one interviewee:

Promote experiential tourism. Mature destinations will need to find and design unique and memorable tourism initiatives. The great challenge will be to satisfy the growing number of tourists eager for experiences of relaxation, adventure and cultural exchange that connect with emotions and sensations.

From quantity to quality

At the core of the mass tourism model is visitor numbers, where tourist headcount is the primary measure of success. The respondents consistently indicated that success must be

determined by a mix of variables that measure not only visitor numbers but, more importantly, the two related aspects of quality: quality of the visitor experience and quality of life for the residents. It is the quality of the visitor experience that contributes to the emotional connection with the destination. As one respondent accurately intimated, “the ultimate goal should be to create ambassadors of destiny.” Further, it is the improved quality of life for the residents that results in buy-in and support for tourism development. According to another respondent, “the sector involves everyone so everyone should be acquainted with tourism strategies and plans and the roles that members of the general public can and must play in its success.”

From stakeholder presence to engagement

This notion of the sector involving everyone is echoed throughout the responses from the DMOs. There is a recognition among the DMOs that they are responsible for coordinating the efforts of many stakeholders to achieve the destination’s vision and goals for tourism. The challenge for the DMOs, as articulated by some respondents, is “sustained stakeholder engagement; collaborative approach amongst stakeholders; seriousness of intent by all stakeholders; stakeholders are selfish in their orientation.” There is a need to shift from the individualistic approach to shared ownership of issues and solutions to island tourism development. Sustained engagement by multiple stakeholders with differing interests and perspectives will encourage more consideration of the varied socio-cultural, environmental, economic, and political issues affecting sustainable tourism development. Further, sustained stakeholder engagement has the potential to increase the self-reliance of the stakeholders, facilitate more suitable trade-offs among stakeholders with competing interests, and promote decisions that enjoy a greater degree of ‘consensus’ and shared ownership.

Conclusion

Caribbean island destinations have a longstanding relationship with tourism from as far back as the 1950s. This relationship has earned these islands the title of the ‘most tourism-dependent region in the world’. The heavy reliance on mass tourism, in particular, has brought with it some benefits, as evidenced by the varying infrastructural development, employment opportunities, and foreign exchange generation. However, many islands struggle to effectively exploit the developmental benefits of tourism and also to be competitive in the global tourism market. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this struggle, as island destinations now have to re-examine the traditional mass tourism model and consider how to manage this tourism relationship in such a way that the quality of life of the locals remains at the core. The findings from this study suggest that island destinations are at a critical turning point, and key strategic shifts are necessary to enable future destination success as defined by the DMOs. These insights are not new, having been expressed in past research and discussed by policy makers, tourism planners, and stakeholders alike. However, the findings signal the urgency of implementing the strategic shifts at this time where the COVID-19 pandemic has levelled the ‘playing field’ for Caribbean destinations.

This calls for pivoting on the people as the core and requires a stewarding of the destinations’ resources to transform the societies through a change of the approach to tourism development as opposed to a myopic focus on managing the balance of payments. A focus on the people requires a shift from the total reliance on the natural resources (sun, sea, and

sand) as the main product to incorporating the locals as central to the quality of the overall experience. Finally, stakeholders must be supported and empowered to manage their affairs in such a way that accrues benefits both for them and for the destination as a whole. At the time of writing, island destinations are still grappling with the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic and are implementing various measures to steer their economies on a sustainable path to recovery. There is scope for future research on the perspectives of key stakeholder groups on island destination success to determine the degree of alignment between the destination managers and the destination 'practitioners'.

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