

Re-thinking Resort Growth and Governance: An Evolutionary Network Approach

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Abstract

Rapid growth in resort areas, combined with environmental and market stresses, has recently created concern amongst resort decision-makers about future paths of development. Growth models have operated effectively in maintaining resort competitiveness but there is evidence that this approach needs to be re-assessed (Beritelli et al., 2007). Globalization forces together with global environmental change are necessitating institutions to rethink how they 'do business'; who is involved and has power or influence in decision-making; within what spatial and temporal frames decisions need to be made; and to whom they are accountable. In this paper, we propose an evolutionary network approach that will guide empirical research on changing approaches to governance in mountain resort settings. The aim of the research project is to identify innovative strategies that will assist destinations in adopting appropriate governance responses to both endogenous and exogenous pressures. From a theoretical perspective, the application of an evolutionary network approach in the context of tourism destinations will introduce new theoretical interpretations.

Governance encompasses the values, rules, institutions, and processes through which public and private stakeholders seek to achieve common objectives and make decisions. In recent years, as a result of the downsizing of government and an offsetting of responsibilities, the shift from 'government' to 'governance' has blurred the roles of public and private sectors in policy-making. The degree to which local institutions and residents are engaged with or exercise any control over development will vary depending on the governance model of the resort. These models can be situated on a continuum ranging from community-focused to corporate-directed extremes (Flagestad and Hope, 2001).

Dwyer et al. (2009:63) observe that, "achieving competitive advantage in times of rapid change requires tourism stakeholders to have a clear understanding of the direction of change and its implications for ... destination management". Two major aspects of global change are already evident in many resort destinations. First, there is increasing concern about global environmental change. Environmental policy initiatives have been on-going in many resorts since the early 1990s and are now often embodied within broader sustainability objectives. The decision-making

processes associated with these changes also reflect evolving governance approaches that engage new stakeholders often associated with neoliberal agendas. The second major change has been an explosion of real estate development driven by the global stimulus of increased mobility of capital and people who are drawn to the amenities of resort destinations. Excessive residential growth may negatively affect the tourism function of the resort and the form of governance.

Network analysis is a common approach for examining how changes are taking place within institutions (Grabher, 2006). Network approaches are especially relevant in recognizing how, under different forms of governance, tourist destinations evolve in response to various factors including: differing community-corporate issues operating at different scales over time; blurred distinctions between private and public governance domains due to shared responsibilities for collective action; varying levels of political support for policies at different spatial levels; and, the varying roles, powers, support levels, and interactions of actors within existing governance systems (Dredge, 2006; Svensson, et al., 2006).

Our research project is broadly framed in a political economy approach that embraces both evolutionary and institutional concepts that help reveal the shaping of place in response to the pressures of global change. The focus is on governance and the capacity of traditional institutional frameworks and management processes to adapt to changing economic, environmental and political, social, demographic and political realities. This approach is fitting given the evolutionary approach to resort development posited in Butler's (1980) early resort life cycle model and the subsequent research that it has stimulated.

The renewed interest in evolutionary approaches in economics and subsequently in the social sciences has drawn attention to new ways of conceptualizing change. As Glückler (2007:619), states, "An evolutionary take on economic geography is committed to the integration of growth and innovation theories and to endogenous explanations of regional economic development". Glückler, (2007) proposes a conceptual framework of geographical network trajectories based on the evolutionary concepts of *selection, retention and variation*. Examining changing models of resort destination governance through such a lens focuses attention on how these variables influence aspects of path dependency and regional economic development.

We plan to conduct a comparative network analysis of four mountain resorts in British Columbia, Canada employing a multi-method field-based approach that includes, key informant interviews, GIS mapping of spatial data; document analysis and informal community engagement and observation. The initial study community will be Whistler, as it is widely recognized for its

innovations in resort planning and management. Previous research in the community also provides a good knowledge base for constructing past networks and understanding the role of path dependency and regional influence.

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