The Managing Local Tourism Master Class: Communicating and Building Sustainable Tourism Management Practices across Local Government Divides

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to describe an action-based research project entitled the *Management Local Tourism Master Class* (MLTMC) and to discuss the merits of this extension tool in building sustainable tourism management practices across local government divides. The MLTMC is specifically designed to explore and build awareness of local government's role in tourism management in the Australian context and to address a number of challenges being faced by Australian local governments including the need for a 'joined-up', networked model of management and service delivery for tourism. These challenges are not unique to Australia, and are common in many other parts of the world. The MLTMC demonstrates an innovative approach to information sharing and solution building in a complex organisational setting. The findings suggest there is potential to develop issue-based networks to address a range of sustainable tourism challenges faced by local government. However, collaboration is an essential forerunner to this issue-based network approach.

The MLTMC was designed as an information dissemination, extension and strategy building program to assist senior local government officers and elected representatives to better understand the role of local government in tourism management. To date, discussions of sustainable tourism education and training have tended to focus on higher education while the professional development of those working in, and more importantly around the outside of tourism in allied policy areas, has received only limited attention. The MLTMC addresses this gap. Participants of the MLTMC included general managers, councilors, strategic planners, transport engineers, parks and recreation planners, community and indigenous liaison officers. The tourism officers, who facilitated the development and implementation of the MLTMC, opted to be silent observers in the process. The significance of this paper then is to highlight the potential role of the MLTMC to address the challenges of developing a more comprehensive and collaborative response to local tourism management challenges. In doing so, the contribution of the paper is twofold: (1) the paper draws together disparate and fragmented information to identify the imperatives associated with local and regional tourism management and the need for a 'joined up'

approach, and (2) it outlines a potential solution to bridge internal 'silo-ification' of councils and fragmentation that characterizes the multi-sectoral tourism policy space of local government. Further, the paper provides an avenue for provocative debate about the future of Australia's local and regional approaches to tourism arguing for an alternative 'joined-up', issue-based network approach to local tourism planning and management.

Background Context: The challenges of local government tourism planning and policy

For Australian governments, a regional approach to tourism has been a key policy platform for over three decades. It is an approach adopted in many countries across the world as it offers what appears to be a cost-effective hierarchical solution to program delivery. (This approach is described elsewhere e.g. Carson & Macbeth 2005, Jenkins 2000). It is important to note however, that whilst regional approaches vary between the Australian states, the focus of Regional Tourism Organisations' (RTO) operational objectives and funding has generally been on growing market demand. Marketing and promotional activities receive significant injections of funds when compared to supply-side initiatives. Moreover, the operational objectives of RTOs, organisational skill sets and funding structures and processes have all been geared towards marketing. There has been little, and in some cases no attention to supply side issues such as tourism planning, visitor management, investment attraction and support for product innovation and packaging. Local governments have been critical of this regional approach and the lack of support for sustainable tourism planning and management activities (O'Neill 2008, Parliament of Victoria 2008, The Stafford Group 2008). This situation is exacerbated where RTO managers' salaries are supplemented by incentives such as how many marketing dollars they attract through co-operative marketing campaigns. Such a situation actively discourages sustainable planning and management by over-emphasising marketing activities.

This regional policy approach sits well with governments' continued support of neoliberal management practices. In these practices, market-based instruments are seen to be more desirable because they seek to grow markets and are thought to use limited resources more effectively (Pforr 2007). During the 1990s however, it became increasingly apparent that for many of the Australian States, even 10 or 12 tourism regions were too difficult to manage. According to an independent review undertaken in Queensland, and which tends to reflect mainstream thought: 'RTOs are mostly seen to be under resourced to perform the roles and tasks expected of them and are in the invidious position of having to try and satisfy member needs, State funders such as TQ and local funders such as local – regional councils' (The Stafford Group 2008: 7). Victoria was the

first to reform its regional structure by reducing its number of regions. In 2004 Western Australia followed, with a reduction from 11 regions to five zones. In September 2008, Tourism Queensland announced it would also restructure its 14 regions into seven zones (Tourism Queensland 2008).

Australian Local Government Reform

Despite these shifts at the regional level, local governments remain at the very centre of Australian tourism destination planning, policy-making, development and management as a result of responsibilities in managing and servicing local communities (Dredge 2007). That is, while Australian local government systems are still very much a product of their nineteenth century roots, and have been criticised because they are based on outdated social, economic and demographic systems, they nevertheless have a significant role in shaping local tourism development and resource use (Dollery & Crase 2004a, Dredge 2001). It is a situation that is unlikely to change in the short term despite significant reform.

Local governments have been subjected to complex, ongoing changes in their internal and external operating environments (e.g. Australian Local Government Association 2008, Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia 2003, Queensland Local Government Reform Commission 2007, Western Australian Local Government Association 2008). Costs shifting from upper (state) to lower (local) levels of government, and the expanding range of roles and responsibilities of local governments have severely challenged local government finances. As a result, local government amalgamation and reform processes are widely considered a response to a search for more economically viable local government (Dollery & Crase 2004b). Reform processes are usually triggered by inquiries into the financial sustainability of local government, an overwhelming view that 'bigger is better', and that significant economies of scales can be harnessed from amalgamation. Despite clear evidence to the contrary (i.e. the Tasmanian experience has shown that economies of scale do not emerge and there are significant, even overwhelming social and economic costs), extensive amalgamation and reforms are now a regular feature of Australia's local government landscape. These amalgamations usually involve significant changes both in the geographic, socioeconomic and political characteristics of Local Government Areas (LGAs), and the structures, functions and practices of local government (Techera 2007). They have also typically involved a range of human resource issues exacerbated by the reduction and rationalisation of staff, and movement of professional staff to other local government areas and away from the sector altogether. As a result there have been significant challenges in re-establishing team work, shared purpose and common understandings.

Tourism and Local Government

Given that local government reform processes are being driven largely by concerns about economic viability, it is worthwhile providing a background to local government financial arrangements, and how these affect the capacity of local government to undertake tourism related functions. Australian federalism is subject to an extreme fiscal imbalance. Commonwealth and state/territory governments raise 82 per cent and 14 per cent of taxation revenues respectively. Despite its expanding range of activities, local government is responsible for raising only 3 per cent of total taxation revenues (Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services 2007). Local governments also raise income from a variety of other sources including special levies and charges, but these sources vary significantly between local governments and are dependent upon state/territory legislation.

Given the huge diversity of local governments across Australia, ranging from Peppermint Grove (2 square kilometres) to east Pilbara (378,533 square kilometres) and from Murchison Shire (pop. 150) to Brisbane City (pop. 833,000), the resources available to local governments to manage tourism varies considerably. Moreover, despite expanding roles and responsibilities, local governments' capacity to increase its revenue is constrained. Several recent reports into the financial sustainability of local government have identified critical shortfalls in the funding of rural and regional local governments in particular. Special tourism and economic development levies have been implemented in some councils (e.g. Ballarat City and Alpine Shire, Victoria and the former Douglas and Noosa Shires, Queensland). But the implementation of this special rate is an exception rather than a norm. Indeed, approval to mount a special rate requires significant planning and a well-orchestrated community education and awareness campaign, skills that are not always present in local government.

Within this context, tourism is an emerging, non-mandatory area of local government activity, but existing data on local government tourism expenditure is difficult to compile. Local government expenditure data tends to be organised around the traditional roles and responsibilities of local government (e.g. roads, communication, community services, planning and environmental management). As tourism transcends a number of different sectors and council activities, and tourism can benefit directly or indirectly from expenditure in other areas, it is difficult to clarify local governments' financial investment in tourism. Estimating financial returns from local governments' support of tourism is even more difficult.

These issues demonstrate that local governments are inextricably involved, both directly and indirectly, in tourism. Moreover, local governments are not at liberty to decide whether they will be

involved in tourism or not. As leisure and recreation and travel continue to become part of the daily lives of people, tourism will become even more ubiquitous within the activities and functions of local councils. Questions therefore arise over the best way to deal with tourism management issues that balance fiscal responsibility, organizational capacity, democratic responsiveness and strategic vision. In this context, the opportunities and impediments for local government tourism collaboration were considered in the development of the MLTMC.

Drivers for Local Government Tourism Collaboration

In Australia, two important principles underpin considerations of the best way to organise and manage policy issues. Firstly, the *principle of federalism* suggests that functions of government should occur at that level which maximizes the benefits of the goods and services produced. For example, it has long been held that overseas tourism promotion is best carried out at the highest level of government to extract the best collective advantage for Australia. (Notwithstanding, various States/Territories have disagreed with this stance from time to time and have sought to supplement federal campaigns with more targeted state campaigns.) Second, the *principle of subsidiary* dictates that 'decisions should be taken as close as possible to the citizens by the lowest-level competent authority' (Head 2006: 160). According to Head (2006), together these principles require a strategic partnership approach whereby strategic objectives can be pursued within a framework that allows opportunities for innovation, diversity and competition at the local level and that reflect the different conditions and circumstances.

Within this context, and countering arguments for amalgamation, there is a view that effective collaboration between local governments can provide a level of decision-making that can best reflect the interests of local people and can also strengthen local organisational capacity. In tourism management, the issue becomes one of balancing the economic costs associated with small and fragmented local government management of tourism with the best level to administer tourism functions and responsibilities. The continued restructuring of regional organisations as tools for the implementation of state programs (predominantly marketing initiatives) suggests that the States are responding to fiscal and administrative pressures by reducing the number of RTOs and reducing the number of stakeholders they deal with. Alternatively, the 'Joint Board model' proposed by the Shires Association of NSW (2004), and similarly, the proposal by the Local Government Association in Western Australia (2008), illustrate a solution that offers an administrative and operational alternative to amalgamation (Dollery & Johnson 2007). In this model, local governments retain their autonomy and spatial boundaries, but certain functions that

are appropriate to deliver at a higher level, such as tourism, and that would benefit from a more coherent management framework can be delivered jointly. Indeed a similar level of management exists in the West Australian local government whereby regional councils can be established to oversee particular activities (e.g. waste management).

The Managing Local Tourism Master Class

The MLTMC is a two and a half day program run at a regional or sub-regional level. Two pilot programs have been run: one in the Perth Eastern Metropolitan Region, Western Australia and one in the Northern Rivers Region, New South Wales. The former involved participation by senior council officers and elected representatives of six local governments (67 participants) and the latter involved five local governments (45 participants). The purpose of the MLTMC was to work with local elected representatives and council officers from across council divisions to develop tourism management capacities across internal boundaries and across local government administrative boundaries. Each council made a small contribution to the overall cost of the two pilot classes (thereby consolidating ownership of the initiative), with Southern Cross University providing significant in-kind support (e.g., IP development, administration assistance and facilitator time). Each participant received a workbook and follow up resources.

The objectives of the MLTMC were:

- To encourage participants to explore key issues and concepts in sustainable tourism and to develop an appreciation of the tasks involved;

- To develop a shared understanding of the issues involved and an appreciation for tourism management approaches appropriate to the council and the region;

- To identify possible strategies and actions that may be employed to improve local tourism management both within and across council boundaries.

Design and Delivery

The structure of the MLTMC is shown in Figure 1. Day one of the MLTMC involved a familiarization tour, which was designed to show participants key attractions but it also incorporated examples of poor signage, overflowing garbage bins, potholed roads, and lookouts and other infrastructure in need of repair. The day also incorporated a lunch stop and a talk by a local entrepreneur who had significant problems with a fragmented development approval process. Over the course of this day

participants reflected upon how their own jobs and responsibilities within their councils overlapped with tourism. The second day was a facilitated workshop (steps 1-4 in Figure 1), where participants worked through activities to give local meaning to the term 'sustainable tourism' and to consider how their usual work in council could also facilitate sustainable tourism. A follow up half-day workshop (steps 4/5 in Figure 1) was held 4 weeks later, so that participants could have time to reflect and identify appropriate actions.

Figure 1 – Structure of the Managing Local Tourism Master Class
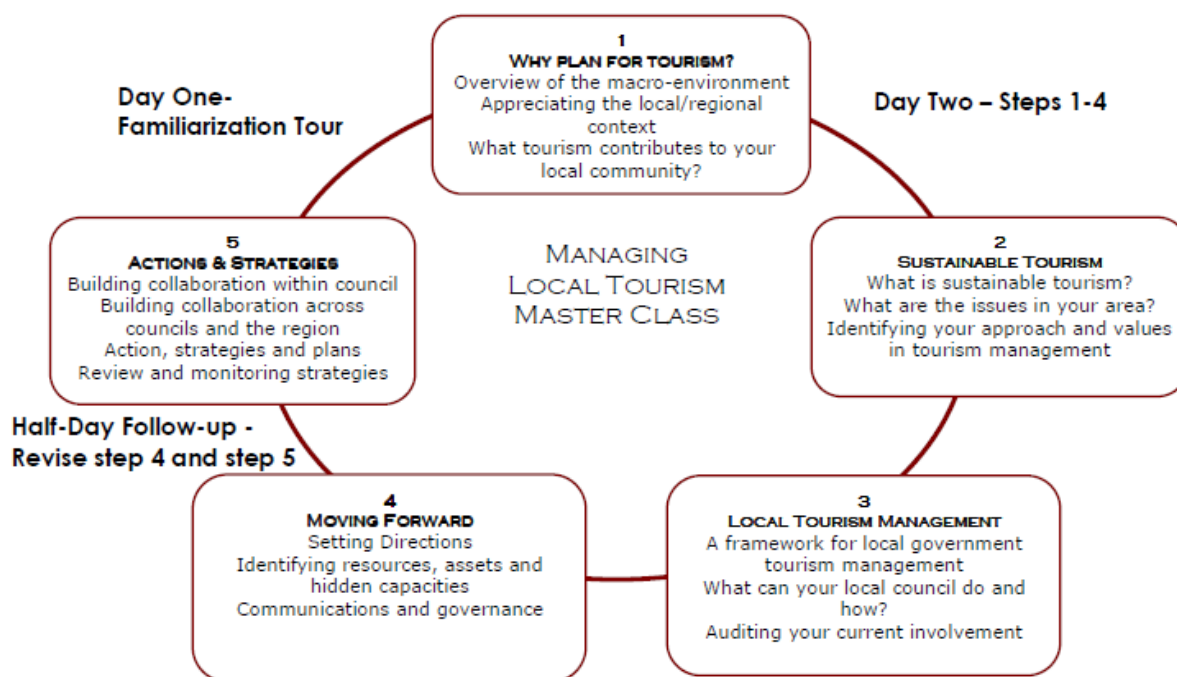
The MLTMC was designed to increase participants' appreciation of tourism and the different ways that individuals within their own divisions, and in communicating across different parts of council and between councils, can promote sustainable tourism destinations. The target audience included senior managers and elected representatives; the key policy makers and decision makers who generally have little time in the normal course of their duties to consider how tourism transcends the internal divisions of council or the potential advantages of working collaboratively across spatial boundaries.

The MLTMC workshop (day two) commenced with the presentation of an integrated framework for local tourism planning and management (see Figure 2) and a discussion of the principles of sustainable local tourism wherein participants were asked how they interpreted the following five principles in the context of their own work:

1. Sustainable Tourism: To manage tourism in a manner that is sensitive to the environmental, social, cultural and economic context in which it takes place now and in the future;

2. Good Tourism Governance: To build and resource collaborative structures and processes of governance that provide opportunities for constructive dialogue, information sharing, communication and shared decision-making about common issues and interests;

3. Inclusivity and Ownership: To develop and maintain positive and engaged cultures within the destination that promotes the development of shared solutions;

4. Rigorous Planning: To undertake informed and rigorous planning that embraces a creative and innovative approach to destination development, management and marketing. This planning process will ensure a match between supply and demand, ensure consistency with community aspirations and be underpinned by reliable research and data collection;

5. Effective Marketing and Promotion: To effectively and ethically market a type and style of tourism that is consistent with community aspirations, and to promote tourism to local communities.

Figure 2 – Framework for Sustainable Local Tourism Management
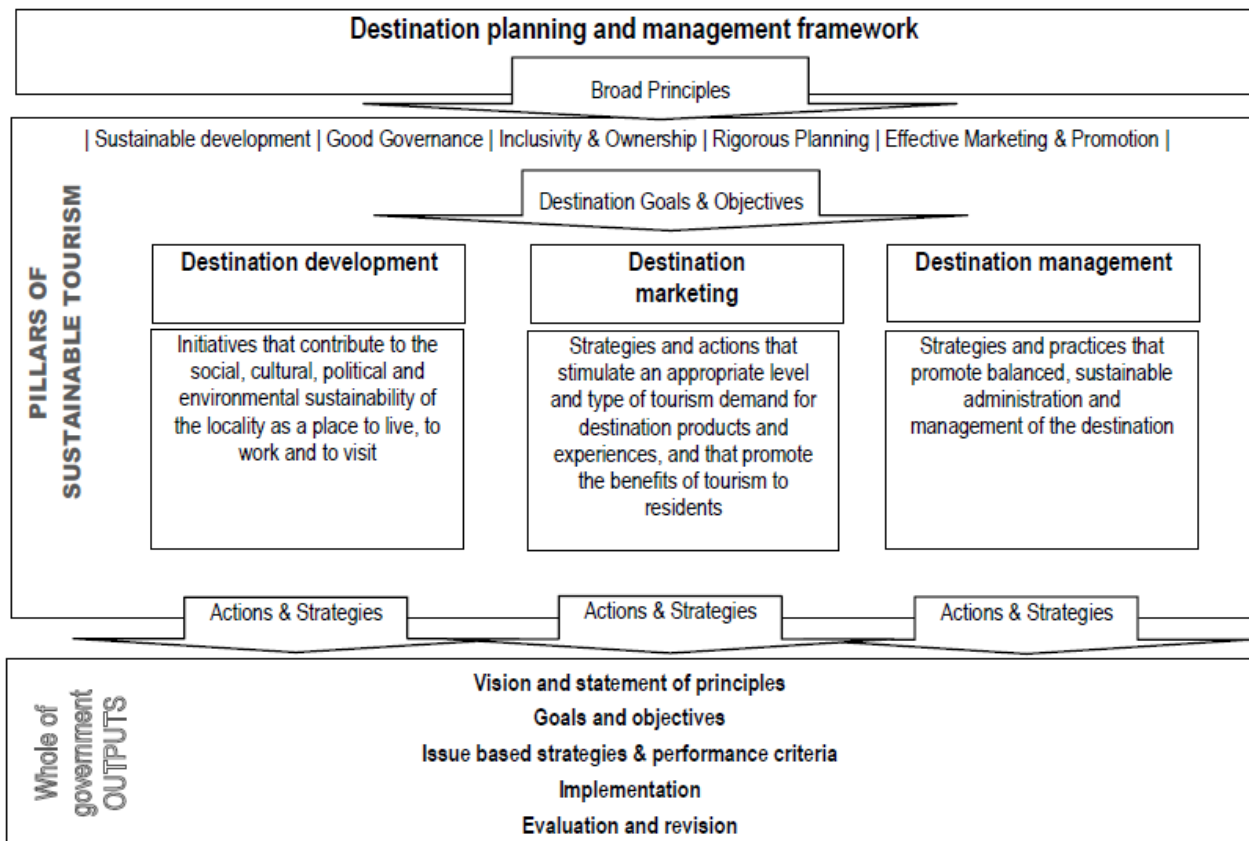
Data was collected before, during and after the MLTMC using a range of qualitative and quantitative methods, which in turn was fed back to the participants at various stages during the process. These data collection phases included the following:

- A web-based industry survey of attitudes, values and priorities for local government involvement in tourism;

- Collection of secondary data such as visitation data, market characteristics, local and regional business profiles;

- Semi-structured interviews with tourism managers and other key stakeholders;

- A pre-participation web-based survey for MLTMC participants;

- Activities and tasks presented during the MLTMC;

- A post-evaluation of the MLTMC participants; and

- A post-evaluation interview with tourism managers.

The challenge for local governments that are experiencing increasingly limited resources, is to address tourism in the most resource efficient and collaborative way possible, pooling resources and expertise where needed rather than adopting 'go-it-alone' policies. Indeed, creating additional resource demands such as the preparation and funding of a new tourism strategy, often represents an additional layer of responsibility that places pressure on resources. It may be more efficient to promote an integrated and coordinated approach to sustainable tourism by 'joining up' the activities and initiatives already being undertaken by developing issue based networks. In this way, internal competition between directorates for limited resources is not further exacerbated.

Clearly, there is no 'one size fits all' model for local government collaboration nor is there a prescribed solution for the development of issue networks. There will be different models of collaboration that reflect the particular issues, opportunities, resources, and objectives that councils bring to the process. In preparation for the MLTMC, interview data with tourism managers identified a range of issues for inter- and intra-council collaboration (see Table 1). The design of the MLTMC and the facilitation tried to address these issues by openly raising and discussing them in an effort to develop shared understandings of tourism.

Table 1 – Issues for inter and intra-local government collaboration

INTER-COUNCIL COLLABORATION	INTRA-COUNCIL COLLABORATION
• Parochialism and perceived competition between local government elected representatives is impeding collaboration between local governments in the region	• Professional boundaries and physically separate locations of tourism officers (in Visitor Information Centres) impedes flow of information
• Uneven expertise and resources within different councils is influencing the style of collaboration that is possible	• Tourism officers can lack credibility (despite significant experience) and are traditionally not senior enough to be invited to strategic meetings and are excluded from important meetings and decisions
• Knowledge base of local government decision-makers can vary considerably making political collaboration challenging	• Tourism officers generally lack the policy opportunities to take control (e.g. to develop a 'bottom-up' regional approach or framework for managing tourism activity)
• Perceived need to protect 'ownership' of initiatives can stymie collaboration	• Professional boundaries and internal competition for funds reduces propensity to share information and develop joint solutions
• Different political contexts and budget cycles in each local council can make direction setting and collective agreement difficult to reach	• Misunderstanding that tourism is 'just marketing' is prevalent amongst senior officers in other divisions
• Lack of resources to devote to collaboration; it's seen as 'yet another task for local government'	• Organization of local government reflects Local Government Act; tourism not mentioned so it's perceived as not important
• Many destinations have presentation issues, e.g. presentation of parks, maintenance of signs, surface condition of touring routes need to be resolved at a regional level, yet the current marketing-focused regional approach gives no weight to destination presentation issues	• Overarching belief amongst most council staff that tourism has nothing to do with them and therefore it is not a priority
• Opportunities to share costs of certain tourism related activities and create economies of scale (e.g. visitor information centres and marketing) but there is no historical precedent or experience to draw from.	

Collaboration in the MLTMC and the Emergence of Issue-based Networks

From the above discussion, the drivers for developing a more collaborative approach to local government tourism management are diverse and are heavily influenced by fiscal constraints and the pressures of an expanding repertoire of council functions. Tourism is a complex policy domain, where there are multiple stakeholders, shared roles and responsibilities and where it is often difficult to implement change. Collaboration has been mooted as an important tourism management approach. According to Bramwell & Sharman (1999), collaboration can improve co-ordination of policies, promote consideration of diverse tourism impacts beyond those of the decision-making agency, and help to avoid adversarial conflicts. Furthermore, they argue, collaboration can enrich stakeholder understandings of complex problems and can promote

innovation and channel energy towards positive outcomes. The following section identifies the motivations for, and perceived benefits of, collaborative tourism and also a networked approach to addressing multi-sectoral tourism related issues within the local government environment.

Collaborative advantage*:* Collaboration provides important opportunities to maximize the strength and synergy of existing tourism planning, marketing and management activities whereby the strength of the whole is much greater than individual efforts. Drawing from network theory, the strength of collaborative relationships is derived from the capacity of individuals and agencies to work individually and collaboratively towards a number of shared goals whist still maintaining their individual goals and autonomy (Dredge 2006). The strength of this collaborative advantage is derived from the efforts of multiple individuals in many agencies, which is much stronger than individual competitive advantage that depends on a singular player and their capacity to maintain this edge over their competitors (Bramwell & Lane 2000).

In the MLTMC, opportunities for shared information and understanding of tourism and the opportunity to elaborate upon important issues and priorities stimulated the emergence of a issue based networked approach to tourism management that extended in three directions: (1) vertically upwards to the RTO level and beyond; (2) horizontally across different councils in the region; and (3) vertically down through the divisions in each council. In the Perth Eastern Metropolitan Region's MLTMC, inter-council issue networks were convened to address marketing issues and to revise the regional tourism plan. In the Northern Rivers Region, whilst the tourism managers network was in existence prior to the MLTMC, the Class was used to consolidate and prioritise the agenda of this group. Other positive outcomes included the establishment of internal intra-council issue based networks for local signage and tourism development. Another positive development reported by participants was improved internal dialogue across council directorates in relation to tourism issues. The development of a three-pronged collaborative approach maximized collaborative advantage by extending network reach. While each MLTMC case study drew these networks differently depending upon the issues they were experiencing, in both instances the value of developing collaborative structures in three directions was demonstrated.

Knowledge and information sharing*:* The sharing of knowledge and information is an important benefit that is aligned with the exchange perspective previously discussed. Local governments can collaborate by sharing information and knowledge so that more robust understandings of complex issues can be developed. The advantage of knowledge and information sharing is that local governments and other stakeholders can learn from others in the collaborative networks, and potential solutions can be discussed and refined. According to Bramwell & Sharman (1999), collaboration can also improve trust, confidence and mutual understanding and can have a

transformative effect on the way that stakeholders communicate, conceptualise their problems and build solutions. Furthermore, drawing from the perspectives and understandings of others can lead to innovative product development and problem solving (Dredge 2006).

In terms of knowledge and information sharing, the MLTMC was designed to collect information from industry (via an industry survey) and council participants (via survey and MLTMC activities). Whilst evidence from Northern Rivers tourism managers gathered in the pre-MLTMC interviews suggested industry was at loggerheads with councils over perceived priorities, industry survey results revealed similar priorities between MLTMC participants and industry. In particular, the first four priorities were the same, but in a different order, a finding which gave Councillors much needed confidence that they could indeed address tourism issues within their traditional roles and responsibilities and that there would be community support for tackling these priorities:

Table 2 - Comparison on Industry and Master Class priorities in Northern Rivers Region

Industry Survey Regional Priorities for Industry	Master Class Discussions Regional Priorities for Local Government
1. Traditional infrastructure, e.g. parks, roads and lookouts 2. Planning practices and policies to encourage sustainable tourism 3. Traditional services, e.g. parking control and litter removal 4. Visitor information services	1. Planning practices and policies to encourage sustainable tourism 2. Traditional infrastructure, e.g. parks, roads and lookouts 3. Traditional services, e.g. parking control and litter removal 4. Visitor information services
5. Supporting tourism business development 6. Growing employment by exploiting tourism opportunities 7. Facilitating development of tourism supply 8. Destination promotion and marketing 9. Organising vents and festivals 10. Managing tourism attractions	5. **Education for decision-makers and the community about tourism** 6. **Developing a clear strategic vision for tourism in the region** 7. Organising events and festivals 8. Tourism industry development friendly information 9. Facilitating development of tourism supply 10. **Educating operators about local government services**

Note: Bold points were those that did not emerge from the industry but emerged in Master Class discussions.

This data provided the MLTMC participants with a much needed perspective on what was important in managing tourism, it also helped to dispel feelings that industry was generally ungrateful and unable to understand their particular roles and responsibilities. Typical feedback from participants about information sharing and knowledge included:

> With little knowledge on the subject I had hoped to learn enough to discuss issues in Council intelligently. Your presentations and class far surpassed my expectations (MLTMC participant, Perth's EMRC).
>
> What I got out of today was improved personal & corporate understanding – it reinforced the need for coordination & integration of services (MLTMC participant, Northern Rivers, NSW).

Reduce inefficiencies: Another important motivation for working together is to reduce the inefficiencies that are derived from duplication of effort. The desire to improve the management of scarce resources (i.e. resource dependency approach) provides the core motivation for local government collaboration in this instance. Paralleling developments in economic development theory that promote clustering and networking, tourism literature has increasingly acknowledged the importance of streamlining the use of scarce resources. In tourism for example, the duplication of activities such as marketing and promotion within adjacent local governments can lead to overlapping efforts and ineffective resource use. In the worst-case scenario, this is not only wasteful of time and financial resources, but can also lead to conflicting or contradictory outcomes. As a result, Gunn (in Jamal & Getz 1995: 187) note that 'the 'go-it-alone' policies of many tourism sectors of the past are giving way to stronger cooperation and collaboration. In local governments, such an approach can lead to reduced duplication of service provision and increase the value gained from particular initiatives.

The Perth Eastern Metropolitan Region MLTMC highlighted the disparate energies that various (and often adjacent) local governments were investing in tourism and that greater synergies could be attained if:

- Communication occurred around the timing of festivals and events and 'smarter' collaborative approaches to marketing for such events were undertaken.

- All councils could effectively and collaboratively communicate with development assessment issues and streamline their dealings with a particular state agency which, as they found out in the MLTMC, was problematic for almost all councils. It was decided to make a joint submission relating to these difficulties and that the state tourism agency (having equivalent power in the state policy arena) would act as a facilitator in getting this matter brought to the attention of key public managers.

- That each local government was attempting to deal with land use planning and transport issues separately (e.g. the best location for tourism accommodation, services and touring routes). It was decided that the regional tourism plan be revised to include a structure plan

to guide tourism land use development to ensure overall consistency in what was happening in each local government area.

Likewise, in the Northern Rivers Mater Class, participants identified that greater efficiencies could be gained from a collaborative, strategic approach to Visitor Information Centre (VIC) services, instead of the existing 'go-it-alone' approaches that had seen councils develop their own approaches and double-up on efforts to provide services and train personnel.

Resource pooling: Closely related to the above, collaboration increases the pool of resources available (Wood & Gray 1991). Resources may come in a variety of forms including financial resources, in-kind resources and human resources and expertise. Whilst the collective power of those resources can be far greater than the contributions of individual stakeholders, not all stakeholders receive equal and unfettered access to the resource pool. Indeed, collaboration may require that stakeholders relinquish control over individual resources in order to maximise competitive advantage. In tourism, this is illustrated in the notion of collaborative advertising, where individual agencies make financial contributions to a marketing fund, which is then managed by a controlling agency, such as the Local Tourism Organisation (LTO). Wood & Gray (1991) note that resource pooling can have the effect of improving the legitimacy of certain agencies, in this case the LTO, because it enjoys control over an enhanced resource pool. Not surprisingly, resource pooling usually requires a set of collective rules governing how to access and use pooled resources. Whilst these rules are usually negotiated amongst collaborating agencies, the general thrust is to ensure wise use of resources to maximize the collective power of those resources. In some situations, these rules may also seek to deny or control access of non-collaborators (Wood & Gray 1991).

In the MLTMC case studies, one difficulty for local governments in pooling resources was highlighted: that elected representatives have a duty to ensure funds are appropriately spent on initiatives that contribute to local community sustainability and wellbeing. Collaboration that requires relinquishing control of even a small pool of funds was problematic for elected representatives' who saw it as their responsibility to make sure funds are used wisely. Despite this issue, in both MLTMC cases, participants saw collaborative development of regional development funding applications as an opportunity to pool human resources and expertise.

Increased resilience: According to Gray (1989: 1), many organisations 'are hard pressed to make effective or timely responses' to the many problems that confront them, reflecting the 'turbulence' of our contemporary environment. It has become increasingly difficult for organisations to act unilaterally to address many problems because multi-party solutions are required. Wood & Gray

(1991) observe that the desire to reduce and control uncertainty and turbulence is increasingly evident in decisions to collaborate. In tourism for example, collaboration across local government boundaries in the form of collective purchasing of advertising services creates an economy of scale for destination marketing and promotion efforts. It also strengthens the product base and promotes a more diverse array of product packaging opportunities.

In both cases, the MLTMC offered opportunities to develop shared understandings and priorities on a range of issues affecting local government tourism, and evaluations were positive at the time. Increased resilience to shifts in tourism demand and to combat industry demands and pressures on local council were some of the longer-term objectives that were sought but cannot as yet be measured.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper was to present some preliminary findings from an action-based professional development program, the *Managing Local Tourism Master Class* that sought to combine research, dissemination and solution building in the management of sustainable local tourism. The paper described a range of background influences and shifts taking place in Australian local government and identified the risks to and implications for sustainable regional tourism management. In particular, the increased range of roles and responsibilities that local governments have, and the tightening of fiscal conditions has meant that local governments need to become more strategic and efficient in the way that they address tourism planning and management pressures.

The MLTMC responded to two main messages voiced by local government elected representatives, managers and council officers: (1) that the existing market-led regional frameworks for supporting tourism have failed to provide any support for the local governments to address the range of tourism issues that councils regularly have to address and that cross-border collaboration not driven by a marketing-led RTO would be useful; and (2) that councillors and non-tourism related council staff are often unconvinced about the value or importance of tourism and therefore see it as a low priority when compared with overflowing garbage cans and poor road surface conditions. Therefore, there is a need to improve intra and inter-governmental collaboration and management of tourism issues.

The MLTMC program encouraged local government tourism management 'bubble up' from the initiatives and interests of the participants. It balanced the current top-down regional marketing approach with a subregional, collaborative approach to sustainable tourism issue management.

Participants identified areas where they felt they could undertake particular tasks that might help to achieve sustainable tourism. For example, issues such as collaborating and sharing expertise in visitor information centre management; developing a region-wide planning framework that can be integrated into local and strategic land use planning; taking an integrated regional approach to visitor signage; and investigating the possibility of collaborating to develop regional funding applications were all areas where participants had both personal interest and an opportunity to do something within current Council work schedules.

Future Implications

Whilst the contributions of the MLTMC need to be studied over the longer term, some advantages and weaknesses of the program can be identified. The participants identified and organized themselves into a number of issue-based networks identified as a result of discussions about sustainable tourism. This represents a very important and positive outcome. However, in retrospect one year on, different budget cycles and varying political power of tourism officers within their councils to consolidate and move forward the resolutions developed within the MLTMC meant that some councils lagged behind in facilitating these issue based networks and implementing various initiatives. Moreover, the collaborative capacity of neighboring councils to work together was weakened because not all councils could make a financial commitment to initiatives at one time. Notwithstanding, from the impetus provided by both pilot programs some councils have forged ahead. In one of the Northern Rivers Councils, the program contributed to a reconceptualisation of tourism within the organizational structure. The tourism officer was moved from the visitor information centre and into the Corporate Communications division. With this elevation, this officer now has the opportunity to contribute to a wider range of dialogues including, for example, planning and development applications. Clearly, further work is to be done. It would be useful to offer a follow up half day master class to monitor what has been achieved and to offer further opportunities to build and consolidate the embryonic issue-based networks already developed.

In sum, this paper does not advocate a withdrawal of the current 'top down' regional frameworks, which may be an efficient mechanism for distributing marketing funds and undertaking promotional activities (although this continues to be of much debate). Instead it argues for the existing top-down (predominantly marketing–led) approach to be balanced with a bottom-up issue-based, networked approach to manage local tourism. The findings suggest that an action-based collaborative forum such as the MLTMC opens up potential to develop issue-based networks across council

boundaries and within council structures to address local governments' tourism management challenges.

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