

Enhancing the Quality of Life through Cultural Events: The Case of the Danish Wadden Sea Festival

Janne J. Liburd and Anja Hergesell

Abstract

The Wadden Sea Festival in Denmark is based on the idea of integrating the coastal environment in the presentation of contemporary art. Specifically, unique tidal differences are utilized to stage a range of performances. The Wadden Sea Festival serves a dual purpose of enhancing local residents' sense of place and identity while also attracting visitors to the region. Furthermore, the festival is designed to create regional, national and international liaisons between artists and cultural institutions to improve the cultural attractiveness, hence fostering product and institutional innovations. The present research recognizes the articulated aims of the festival and investigates how a cultural event influences participants' quality of life (QOL). The study adopts a twofold approach to examine organizers' expectations as well as the impacts on participants' short-term subjective well being. The article sets out to probe how a cultural event may enhance QOL and identifies possible drivers in the process.

Introduction

Like many other peripheral areas of Europe, the economy in the Danish Wadden Sea Region has developed less favourably than the national average (Prognos 2004). The number of residents is expected to decrease in the near future, as many young people leave the region due to a perceived lack of educational and career opportunities (Cowi Consult 2003). Acknowledging the economic and demographic challenges, the three-year project entitled *Springflod* was initiated in August of 2004 to plan and implement a special event in the Wadden Sea area towards the development of a recurring cultural festival. Organized by volunteers and partners in art, education and nature, the festival was financed in part by the Ministry of Culture, the local municipality of Ribe and a marketing company, Marginal büro. The mandate of the Springflod project, which literally translates as *Spring Tide*, was "to strengthen, develop and call attention to the very special cultural heritage, nature and identity of the Wadden Sea" (<http://www.vadehavsfestival.dk>). Interpretations of the unique values in and of the area were expressed through innovative, contemporary art in interactions with nature and the cultural history. For centuries, the local population has lived with, and been affected by the pulse of the tide, storm surges and the rough

nature. The tide changes nature every single day – it gives and it takes - and can feasibly be seen as a metaphor of life and existentialist conditions for people living by the Wadden Sea. Illustrating these aspects in the special event, a manifest has been created to explicate the content of the Wadden Sea Festival (Box 1).

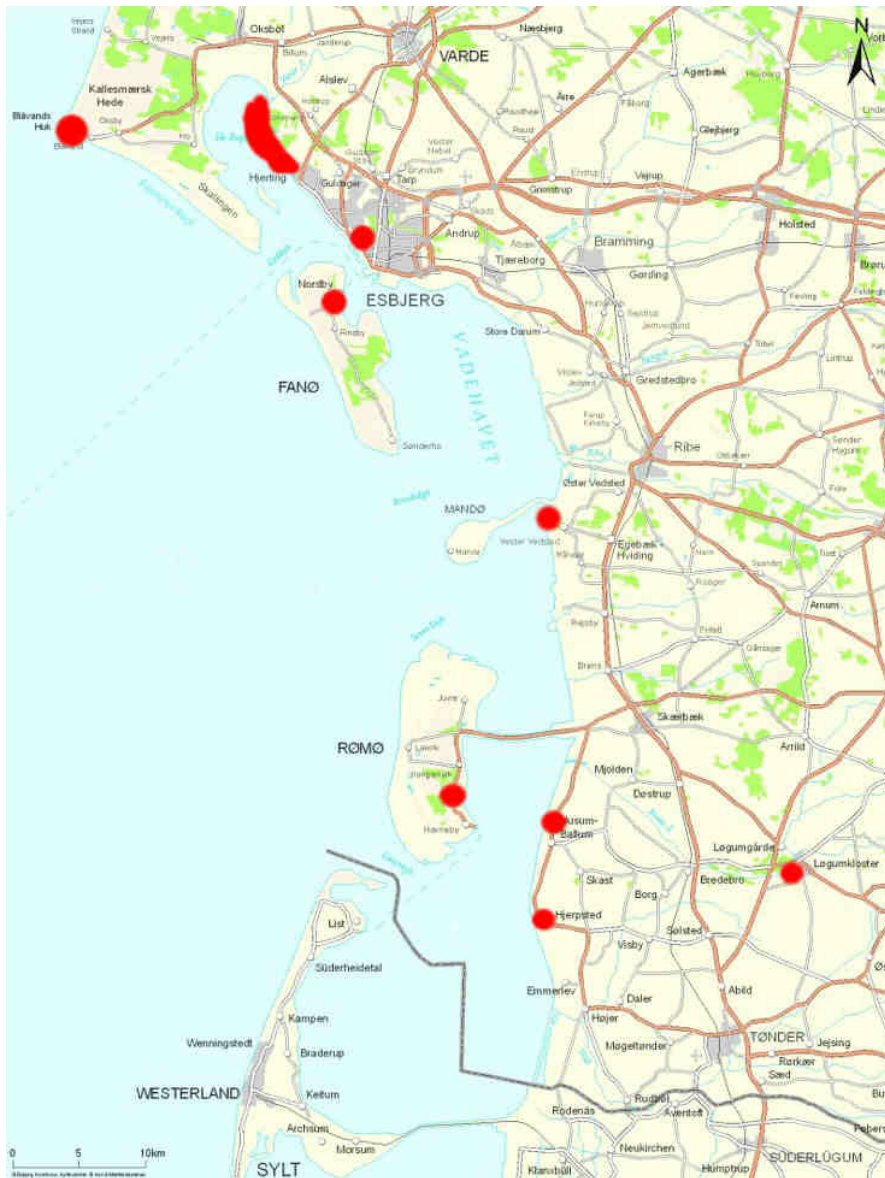
Box 1: Manifest of the Wadden Sea Festival (2008)

- You will see nature, you did not know existed
- You will experience something unforgettable
- You will find simplicity in what you thought to be complicated
- You will perceive connections, you did not know existed
- You will feel compelled to discover your inner Spring Tide again

Source: www.vadehavsfestival.dk

Embracing a variety of aspects such as music, dance, visual arts, story telling, architecture and regional cuisine, most of the 2006 Springflod activities took place directly on the ocean floor at the tidal crossing point to the island of Mandoe (see Map 1). Motivated by the success of the 2006 event, which also attracted additional public funding from the Ministry of Culture and all four municipalities of the Wadden Sea Area, an expanded festival is scheduled for August 16-24, 2008.

Map 1: The Wadden Sea Festival sites



Source: adapted from <http://www.vadehavsfestival.dk>

Methodology

Drawing on the authors' scholarly backgrounds in anthropology and tourism management, the study adopts a twofold approach:

- examining expectations and perceptions of festival organizers in regards to the event effects on QOL, and

- exploring the events' short term impacts on affective and cognitive components of participants' QOL.

Recognizing QOL as a dynamic construct, which may be influenced by changes in the external environment and/or altering internal standards (Allison, Locker & Feine 1997), a pre/post study is planned for the August 2008 festival. In order to get a more holistic understanding of the anticipated and actual contribution of the festival to well being, a multidisciplinary research strategy is adopted. The study is informed by print and audio visual media coverage, participant observation as well as interviews with festival organizers and a survey among participants. Acknowledging the advantages and shortcomings of standardized and individualized questionnaires (Felce & Perry 1995), the questionnaire design is shaped by an extensive literature review and a study of the pilot event in 2006 based on written and audio-visual materials and interviews with informants. The study also adopts a holistic and integrated approach to culture. Culture exists in every group pattern as well as in behaviour, ideas and artefacts. These elements and practices form the very basis for understanding culture on its own terms, which implies taking a culturally relative stance as opposed to the management-centric approach common to tourism studies (Liburd & Ren 2009).

Preliminary Findings

Acknowledging the challenges associated with the economic and demographic development in the region and the potential of recreational amenities for economic growth and QOL (Deller *et al* 2001), the Wadden Sea Festival aims to contribute to a sustainable development by:

- supporting the collective identity formation of the residents in the region,
- attracting tourists and potential settlers to the region,
- creating and strengthening regional, national and international liaisons,
- branding the region.

The initiative applies the concept of the experience economy, a term coined by Pine and Gilmore (1999) and adopted by the Danish Government (2003) as part of the national growth strategy. Requiring little, if any, up-front investment the concept encourages the creative use of cultural assets to create added value for the individual and society at large. The importance of existential qualities deserves closer attention in order to understand the meanings associated with sustaining quality of life through tourism and/or special events. As argued by Andereck *et al* (2007: 484) quality of life refers to one's satisfaction with life, and feelings of contentment or fulfilment with one's experiences in the world. Commonly regarded as a "happy or good life", Vella-Brodrick (2007: 2) terms this subjective well-being, which is differentiated from psychological well-being

based on the actualization of one's self potential. Her findings support the growing body of evidence illustrating the positive relationship between existential factors such as life purpose/meaning, personal growth and well-being. Furthermore, spill over effects of satisfaction in major life domains such as leisure on overall life fulfilment are widely recognized in literature (Neal *et al* 1999). Acknowledging these interrelationships, the analysis will focus on how the event organizers' and participants well-being may be influenced by the cultural event Springflod. The study also recognizes the call for inclusion of both objective and subjective measurements (Australian Centre on Quality of Life 2008, Andereck & Jurowski 2006) as perceptions and aspirations as well as the values placed on certain components of a life domain differ among both individuals and situations (Felce & Perry 1995). A person "accidentally" joining one of the cultural performances may not perceive his QOL to be enhanced to the same degree as a "culture lover" from the area, as suggested by the television news coverage from Springflod 2006. Among some of the spectators were a group of male, Australian handball players who assessed the performance as "different" whereas local residents proclaimed their arousal caused by the amount of symbols. The study will hence include an examination of possible differences among the encountered participant segments and their drivers of QOL.

Conclusion

The Wadden Sea Festival aims to encourage regional identity formation and improve the quality of life in the region. Pursuing regional development goals, the event addresses economic and demographic challenges through product and institutional innovation and branding of the region towards tourists and potential residents alike. As a work in progress, this research sets out to investigate whether cultural events in the context of the 2008 Wadden Sea Festival can indeed help enhance the QOL of organizers and participating residents and tourists. Contributing to a better impact assessment and management of cultural events, differences and similarities among the various segments are examined and possible drivers are identified.

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