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Introduction to Visitor Management in Tourism Destinations

JULIA N. ALBRECHT*

Department of Tourism, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand

1.1 Conceptualizing and Explaining Visitor Management

Visitor management (VM) is practiced, explicitly and implicitly, within every destination, at every attraction, accommodation and tourism transport option. It considers such different issues as tourist facilities, gateways and orientation, transport routes and visitor flows, guiding and interpretation. Accordingly, a varied range of stakeholders at different levels in tourism management exercise interests in VM. These can include public sector organizations such as local government agencies or regional tourism organizations, (tourism) businesses or business advocacy groups devising VM strategies for the attractions and activities that they offer or manage, local resident groups, and non-governmental and third sector organizations, among others. VM can be subject to legal regulations or statutory frameworks, for example activities in protected areas, risk management in adventure tourism, or VM at UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Unregulated VM refers to VM interventions in museums or guided hikes on private lands.

Possible benefits of its implementation are to raise the profile and improve the quality of tourism products, to inform visitors of facilities, services and infrastructure, to aid in the dispersal of visitors, to manage and/or modify visitor behaviour, often in order to mitigate negative visitor impacts, and to positively impact visitor experiences through guiding and interpretation. Despite these potential benefits, VM receives relatively little attention in current research and even comprehensive practice guidelines for tourism destination management practitioners are scarce (with the notable exception of Spenceley *et al.* (2015) for the context of protected areas). Indeed, VM is under-theorized and lacks a widely accepted definition. To illustrate, (tourism) management tools related to pricing (e.g. differential pricing or revenue management), education and interpretation, and visitor flow and access

* E-mail: julia.albrecht@otago.ac.nz

management tend to be discussed in isolation but they are rarely identified as potential components of an overall strategic approach to managing visitors in a destination. VM is also not well contextualized. Its role in destination management and potentially overlapping responsibilities of the public and private sectors are seldom acknowledged and not understood. This book applies an inclusive description of VM, and all the above factors inform the following definition: visitor management refers to all management tools and interventions that regulate the movement and behaviour of visitors in a destination. Visitor experience and appreciation are shaped by these interventions.

Indeed, VM interventions profoundly shape visitor experiences, and they are at the core of tourism management. They encompass a wide range of activities on the part of the tourism manager, yet the attention that VM receives in tourism planning as well as tourism research does not reflect this significance. Such lack of attention or focus can be problematic where inappropriate VM decreases the perceived quality of otherwise high-end tourism products (Garrod *et al.*, 2006). It is also common for destinations and tourism attractions to develop and implement one VM strategy that covers different products as well as various visitor types (e.g. Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, 2007). Such comprehensive approaches have the advantage that they address a wide range of possible situations or events. They are desirable in circumstances where 'hard' VM approaches such as crowd control or risk management are necessary to prevent negative impacts on the resource or the visitors themselves (Mason, 2005). However, aspects of VM that are predominantly concerned with the management of the visitor experience or product, such as the provision of information or interpretation through signage, must be considered in a more differentiated way. Mehmetoglu (2007, p. 659) suggests that 'not everyone who visits a nature-based attraction is interested purely in nature-related activities'. Indeed, as visitor types differ in their expectations, they will differ in their management requirements and, ultimately, their response to, and appreciation of, VM interventions.

These issues receive sparse attention in the tourism management literature. Existing work on VM can be categorized into three main themes. Case studies in VM research typically focus on destinations or types of destinations (Shackley, 1998; Wachowiak, 2005), attractions (such as theme parks (Milman, 2001; Braun and Soskin, 2008), zoos (Ryan and Saward, 2004), or museums (Gilmore and Rentschler, 2002), or tasks closely associated with VM such as guiding and interpretation (Ap and Wong, 2001; Pastorelli, 2003; Hughes *et al.*, 2013), or risk management (Parkin and Morris, 2005). Case studies are useful in that they identify and discuss VM requirements in certain contexts. However, they tend to contribute little to an overall understanding or theorization of VM.

Another set of VM studies is concerned with visitor flows and simulations of visitor movement and behaviour. Technological advances in problem-solving and on-going management of visitors are relevant to a number of fields including tourism (Lawson, 2006), heritage management (Buhalis *et al.*, 2006), geography (Beeco and Brown, 2013), conservation (Cole and Daniel, 2003) and biology (Coppes and Braunisch, 2013).

The third theme, impact studies, is not necessarily perceived as a part of VM studies but is closely related in that it identifies and specifies areas or situations in

need of VM. The relevant literature (e.g. Mason, 2003; Ryan, 2003; Garrod *et al.*, 2006) assumes that adequate VM strategies can successfully mitigate negative impacts of visitation on a site. Further, impact studies supply information (such as visitor data) that can be critical in VM planning (e.g. Cole and Daniel, 2003; Coppes and Braunisch, 2013).

Effective management of a destination or visitor attraction is dependent on various supply-side factors (Garrod *et al.*, 2006) related to the attraction type and the nature of the resource (Benckendorff and Pearce, 2003). Wall (1997), for example, classifies tourism attractions according to 'points, lines and areas', thus emphasizing physical characteristics of the resource and their relevance for attraction planning and management. Kim and Weiler (2013) on the other hand highlight the significance of demand-side factors, environmental attitude in particular. The literature on guiding (Ap and Wong, 2001; Bowie and Chang, 2005) suggests additional demand-side factors related to visitor expectations with regard to service, service quality and product image that can be relevant in VM planning. Increasing visitor expectations of service, declining (public) funds, limited staff skills, challenges in balancing conservation values (Fennell and Weaver, 2005) and access are all identified as challenges in VM (Leask, 2010). Addressing management needs associated with the geography of a destination or attraction can be difficult, but the greater challenge lies in addressing management requirements resulting from demand-side factors. Different types of visitors behave differently and, consequently, necessitate a variety of potentially conflicting VM interventions.

Leask (2010, p. 168) suggests that visitor attraction research should 'develop tools to establish and evaluate how individual [visitor attractions] can adopt appropriate management practices for their resource, visitors, individual property and stakeholders'. This may be challenging for tourism managers, but it is one instance where closer exchange between academics and practitioners promises to be productive. In the words of Brown *et al.* (2010, p. 880): 'A substantial challenge commonly faced by managers is that they have not been given theoretical frameworks for analysing visitor behaviour [...]'.

1.2 Book Aim and Content

This book considers VM as a component of destination management at all levels of a destination and involving a wide range of stakeholders. It aims to demonstrate current knowledge on VM and to provide insights into conceptual issues rather than providing merely descriptive case studies. This book is primarily aimed at post-graduate students and researchers as it seeks to provide specialist perspectives on the state of the art of important aspects of and issues within VM.

The introduction and foundation chapters in Part I provide the context for the book as well as the broader topic of VM. Part II considers critical concepts and influential factors in VM while Part III illustrates current issues. Where case studies are included these are research-based and they contribute to our overall understanding of core issues in VM. Part IV of the book covers the state of the art in guiding and interpretation, followed by concluding thoughts and an overview of current issues and future research directions.

1.3 Content and Overview

The fact that VM is seen as part of overall destination management rather than a management task in its own right may arguably account for the relative lack of VM-specific research. Chapter 2 systematically explores this relationship by investigating and comparing the goals, policies and implementation activities associated with destination and visitor management. By bridging the two streams of literature, this chapter thus lays an important foundation for the appreciation of VM research at the different levels of a destination in this book. In providing the foundation for the consideration of visitor experiences, Chapter 3 has a similar role in this book. Arguing that visitor attractions comprise objects, people and places that are perceived differently by the various target markets, the authors emphasize the challenging nature of visitor attraction management. Several conceptual frameworks relating to visitor experience management are examined with a view to identifying beneficial factors. Chapter 4 is the final chapter in the foundation section. It examines factors that are simultaneously part of the external and internal business environments, namely social and political aspects of the host culture, destination and community. Demonstrating how social and political conditions influence the selection of VM interventions, it addresses factors that, to date, have been largely neglected in VM research. Furthermore, Chapter 4 is one of the relatively few studies of tourism management in the Middle East – Iran specifically – published in the English language.

Part II comprises three chapters exploring critical concepts in VM. Chapter 5 examines possible applications of indicators and standards-based VM frameworks at cultural heritage sites. It is argued that if implemented successfully VM can help to achieve sustainability in heritage tourism. Indicators and standards are suggested as means to identify and negotiate the fine line between the visitor experience and resource protection. Chapter 6 links VM to the concept of service quality. It argues that in nature-based tourism there is a direct relationship between VM, service quality, visitor satisfaction and repeat visitation. Chapter 7 introduces the concept of visitor affinity to the VM literature. In line with Mehmetoglu's (2007) statement quoted above, the authors state that protected areas attract visitors for different reasons. Visitor surveys and monitoring can help identify visitors' affinity-relations, thereby providing opportunity for differentiated and effective VM. The chapter then illustrates possibilities and limits of segmentation according to visitors' affinity.

Current issues and challenges in VM are the theme of Part III. Chapters 8 and 9 are the only chapters in this book that also touch on the topic of visitor impact management. Chapter 8 traces the implementation of a systematic 'best practice' approach that applies and tailors a United States Forest Service methodology for visitor monitoring to a region in the Brazilian rainforest. As such, the chapter shows how well established management methods can be transferred and adapted to a different context in order to improve visitor (impact) management. Chapter 9 is also concerned with visitor impacts, though it draws heavily from an urban (mass) tourism context. Exploring tourist behaviours, vandalism and related stakeholder responses, the chapter considers tourist value systems insofar as they influence tourist behaviour as well as unintentional behaviour that results in site damage. Chapter 10 draws attention to the use of innovative technologies in visitor management, visitor experiences specifically. Considering existing uses of augmented reality applications

in mostly Western contexts, challenges for its implementation in emerging tourism destinations are identified.

The four chapters in Part IV address guiding and interpretation, and their roles and relevance in VM. Chapter 11 on the operationalization of guided tours reports on empirical research conducted in 31 museums covering more than 70 types of guided tours therein. Chapter 12 focuses on heritage interpretation in the context of film tourism. The preparation and design of information and interpretation material are identified as crucial issues in VM, among other things. The chapter argues that heritage interpretation can be a valuable VM tool as well as an essential part of the overall quality of visitors' experiences. Arguing that learning is by no means confined to a classroom, Chapter 13 provides an original account of theories of learning and their possible applications in interpretation. Chapter 14 critically reflects on possible roles of interpretation in VM. Considering relationships between interpretation and other forms of communication, as well as the changing management functions of interpretation over time, it is posited that some aspects of interpretation in particular are related to positive outcomes for the visitor experience as well as the destination. Finally, Chapter 15 provides a summary and conclusion as well as identifying further research needs.

1.4 Conclusion

This book aspires to address the significant gap in VM research. The combination of theory and case studies is intended to demonstrate our current knowledge as well as identifying the research gaps still in existence. As such, this book goes beyond destination-specific content and delivers analytical insights, theoretical advances and concluding thoughts on further related research needs and areas.

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