

Reflections from the first day of the 8th International Conference on Responsible Tourism in Destinations (RTD8)

At the end of the second full day of RTD8 I was asked to join Martin Brackenbury to reflect on the first day's presentations and speeches. A tall ask given both days had been packed with thought provoking content. It was particularly challenging from my perspective having co-chaired the first day with Harold Goodwin I didn't have the luxury of absorbing the content in the same way as a delegate.

I am also, of course, biased but it was an impressive day filled with interesting views from destinations around England, the UK and the rest of the world (although we perhaps could have been stronger in this regard). If engagement was a success measure then it was without doubt a resounding success - the energy through the day did not wain and the level of engagement both in the room but also online was impressive.

In my opening remarks I commented that it was a shame that not more destinations didn't stay for day two. A key observation from day one is that we need to be having new and different conversations locally (and not just in England). To do this destination managers need to have the skills, knowledge and confidence to engage. It is perhaps unrealistic expecting two days out of the office at this time of year but it is often the case that the focus has to be on the day job; time is precious and as we heard resources short. As a result many [destination managers] don't do enough horizon scanning and long term thinking as they should or indeed in many cases really want to. The short term is more critical for some - chasing money and support from local stakeholders.

Rather than picking out favourite sessions I have identified a number of common themes, these are noted and then expanded on below.

Common themes that emerged

- Importance of the private sector and communities
- Partnership and collaboration
- Management not marketing
- Focus on Growth
- Sharing lessons (and not just success)
- The purpose and changing nature of Destination Management

Importance of the private sector and communities

In the "what does success look like?" session we heard from a number of examples across Britain where the private sector really are leading and where the interest of the communities are at the heart of destination management. I was asked why there were not more speakers from the private sector if they were so important and this is an important consideration for any future events. The private sector should be involved and active at these sessions; apart from the OTA session we had 2 private sector speakers.

We heard from a number of people that private sector needs to step up to the plate for funding and get involved in the process of destination management. There was a common belief, however, that they are only interested in the marketing of destinations. Whilst I agree I do wonder how they are being engaged in wider conversations about more than just promotion. Private sector businesses are in the main interested in the quality of product and in the place in which they live (it's in their best interest) but if destinations only ask them about marketing they will only get a marketing response. I gave an example during my slot of Durham (there are others) where businesses are asked to vote on the actions in the destination plan - these are actions about much more than promotion.

Partnership and collaboration

The message here is not new but what came through very strongly is that partnership and collaboration is critical but it needs working at constantly. From my own perspective, in destination management it is key, particularly around the development of destination management plans. It wasn't said at the event but in my opinion it's more the process of plan development that is valuable than the document itself

"Management not marketing"

This came up from the very outset during James Berresford's keynote; it is a personal frustration that people do not understand the difference and I was delighted that it remained a theme throughout a number of presentations.

It is an interesting thought for many in local areas and a point of confusion about what destination management is all about. My favourite mantra, which I think is true, is "management of a place often includes marketing it but rarely does marketing of a place include the management of it."

There was a comment during the OTA session about the confusion of the ubiquitous acronym DMO, with lots of confusion to what the M means. A proposal was put forward to just call them all "DOs" (destination organisations) but I'm not keen on that as some have already pointed out that if there are DOs there must also be DONTs. Interestingly from my role at VisitEngland, we are trying to change this confusion with acronyms and not use them. The common name is destination organisations (for those who might just do promotion or for those we don't understand what their function is fully) or destination management organisations, who genuinely do the management function.

What wasn't said is that Destination Organisations generally don't do marketing they focus on PROMOTION elements in the 4 "Ps" of marketing.

I also reflected during my presentation that this misconception of marketing vs. management starts (or is reinforced) in universities. There are lots of "destination marketing" courses, which may well cover marketing in its fullest sense but for institutions that pride themselves on accuracy of reporting I feel it misrepresents the role that future destination managers will have. If this is just an attempt to make the undergrad course more appealing (I appreciate how competitive it is for Unis too) then add the management into the mix - "destination management and marketing". Not all universities are created equal and I know there are some (MMU and Leeds Met with their Responsible Tourism courses) ensure their students know the difference. Where are the others??

Focus on Growth

Growth was mentioned by a number of speakers (domestic and international) but there was no attempt to define it. Everywhere is different and some places need more visitors to help support their local communities or indeed their environments but others clearly don't and perhaps should be focusing on growth in value terms. There are of course other places that might need fewer people or else the damage done by tourism outweighs the benefit.

The session with Manda and Jane at the end of the day one left us all with some interesting things to think about. The question here that I was left with will be a difficult one for any of us to answer quickly, although clearly it needs our joint consideration. Do we need to redefine what we mean by growth- should it just be an economic measure and if not can we consider more circular economic models?

Sharing lessons (and not just success)

It is great to hear the success but we also need to learn what went wrong and why. It was raised as a comment by Peter Hampson from British Destinations but many people acknowledged this point publicly and privately after that. John Swarbrooke's reflection at the end day two also hit home for me. Many people talked about the outputs, in

some cases the outcomes but very few talked about the process and what are the lessons to be shared from during that journey?

The purpose and changing nature of Destination Management

Tony Gates, CEO at Northumberland National Park articulated it most clearly for me - Destination Management is about the place not the organisation. It was interesting to note that during some of the sessions where sustainability was mentioned the reference was about the organisation and not the sustainability of the place. Language is important and it is clear that some organisations need to start having a different type of conversation about their places. It's back to the theme of the final session - does tourism use the destination or can the destination use tourism?

The role of planners in the destination management was highlighted as critical, perhaps through conversations facilitated by the development of a destination management plan. Having a closer relationship with planners was suggested to ensure that activities focused on improving the place benefited local people primarily but not at the detriment of visitors. It was also noted that the length of service of most planners outlived the tenure of many politicians – so if tourism features in the local development plans it is more likely to survive long term.

The pace of change was noted and destination management is clearly not immune. Justin Francis raised the increasing role of technology in visitor information provision and holiday booking. He suggested that destination management organisations needed to reflect on their role and move more towards curating experiences and the provision of inspiration rather than the detailed promotional role they currently have. I would go further and suggest that there needs to be a more radical reflection of destination management - can those responsible locally embrace the other "Ps" in marketing more robustly? Is it possible to build relationships with OTAs and other tech providers to address market failures? Can a genuinely holistic approach demonstrate the value of destination management more clearly?

It was also clear that working across sectors will be important. Tourism is special to those of us who work in it but in reality we are no different to retail, professional services or manufacturing - they all think they are special too. All the sectors in a destination have a common interest - the place and its people (who can be visitors too), that can't be denied and this is the starting point to enable some of these silos to be broken. If organisations want to be sustainable, I think having some of these conversations is a must. Some examples we heard already taking this approach include Jane from Visit York and Emma from the Visit Lincoln Partnership.

What remains constant in destination management is need for passion about the place. Without this you really have to question why we are doing it at all. It was evident in all of our speakers and it clearly makes a difference. It is also evident in my fellow chair, Harold Goodwin, and the team led by John Swarbrooke at MMU whose passion was clearly was evident in helping to put on such a successful event.

In my opening remarks as RTD8 officially started, I reflected on the previous RTD events I had had the privilege of speaking at and the comments I had received from the many people I have met over the years, who have spoken or attended the series of conferences. The common theme for all was the degree of inspiration that people took away from the events. RTD8 has been no different, although for me it has been closer to home and much more poignant in many respects. I am not sure what the legacy of RTD8 will be yet but without question it has got a lot of people thinking.

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