

Challenges in managing and promoting Niche Tourism in the Irpinia region

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Introduction

Tourism and tourists have a long history of attempting to distinguish themselves from the 'other', most commonly to distinguish their activities from 'mass' tourism despite the fact that this is frequently, in economic terms at least, the most successful. At an individual level we may choose to describe ourselves as travelers rather than tourists or to emphasise that we select particular locations and activities which are 'different' the implication being that we are more knowledgeable / more discerning than others. Equally those who provide for this demand are equally anxious to define themselves and their products as being different. So if we accept a simple division between 'mass' tourism and 'other' tourism the list of 'other' products grows year on year. It is equally the case that some of these 'other' products can be and are accused of at best a very creative expansion of the meaning of the term being adopted, sustainable tourism possibly being the classic example.

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Niche Tourism-alternative approaches

If we apply this analysis to the term Niche Tourism and accepting that this involves individuals spending more than a day away from their home then to reflect briefly on the term niche may be helpful. It is claimed that the route of this term is the Latin of nest or to build a nest ie. a place to live and to produce offspring. Today we can argue that in English there are at least five different ways of defining / describing 'niche'. In business or commerce to describe a small specialized group or market, in ecology to describe the role of a plant or animal within its community and habitat which determines its activities, relationships with other organisms, etc. In fine arts and architecture to describe a recess in a wall, especially one that contains a statue. In mountaineering to describe a recess, such as one in a rock face and finally in general conversation to describe a position particularly suitable for the person occupying it. It is of course the first of these uses that we may automatically assume is being employed when we talk of niche tourism and Beech and Chadwick's definition proposed in 2005 would seem to support this.

'Small specialised sector of tourism which appeals to a correspondingly tightly-defined market segment'.

However, a review of the literature demonstrates that the 'ecological' understanding and use of the term appeals to other authors and organizations (UNWTO 2007). If we explore this ecological perspective in a little more detail we find that there are two approaches to the definition of 'niche' a habitat approach and an ecological one. A habitat niche is the physical space occupied by the organism in practice it is the smallest unit of a habitat that is occupied by an organism while an ecological niche is the role the organism plays in the community of organisms found in the habitat. It is the organisms "profession", biologically speaking. The activities of an organism and its relationships to other organisms are determined by its particular structure, physiology, and behaviour. It is not particularly challenging to replace the word organism with the word tourist / inhabitant or host / inhabitant in order to understand the potential attraction of this 'ecological' view of a niche.

An ecological TOURIST niche is the role the TOURIST plays in the community of organisms found in the habitat. The activities of a TOURIST and its relationships to other INHABITANTS are determined by its particular structure, physiology, and BEHAVIOUR.

An ecological HOST niche is the role the HOST plays in the community found in the habitat. The activities of a HOST and its relationships to other INHABITANTS are determined by its particular structure, physiology, and BEHAVIOUR.

Existing niches and Created niches

If we adopt this approach then we can argue that in essence we have two choices we can either invite tourists into an existing host's habitat / niche or we create a niche within the hosts habitat. Examples of 'invited' niches would include home stay accommodation, agri-tourism, wine tourism, gastronomic tourism and possibly medical tourism and music

tourism. ‘Created’ niches we might argue apply to adventure tourism, sport / golf tourism, wildlife watching along with the introduction of water parks and theme parks all of which set out to create a niche for the tourist to exercise his/her profession.

As indicated above the UNWTO have shown some sympathy for this approach in their 2007 publication concerning the development of tourism in Deserts. In brief this publication sets out to provide guidelines for developing tourism in deserts in which they emphasise the complexity of the desert environment with its multiple niches and the challenge of introducing the tourist niche(s). The ecological, cultural and social characteristics of deserts are reviewed the context for considering tourism development, the possible tourist products and the types of tourist. The guide concludes by considering the composition and role of the desert DMO. More recently He LingLi et al (2010) have applied a similar approach to reviewing the tourism potential of the rivers in Fuzhou province China.

A contrasting approach which develops the concept of exploring the host’s niche can be seen in Yankholmes et al’s 2010 paper concerning community attachment to and use of the transatlantic slave trade resources in Danish-Osu (adjacent to Accra), Ghana. The results of this investigation of the community’s attachment and knowledge demonstrated good levels of knowledge that the community were prepared to support the development of Ghana’s slave trade route project as a ‘niche’ tourism product.

Turning now to Iripinia, existing and created Niches

What existing host niches are there into which tourists may be invited? Homes (accommodation), farms, vineyards (attractions, products and activities), Concert venues, Theatres, Hospitals?

What niches might be created within the existing habitat? Niches for adventure, sport, watching wildlife, hunting?

What habitats might be created? Theme Parks?

Promoting Iripinia’s Tourist Niches

How might these products be promoted? Attempting to answer this question takes us back to the idea that niche’s are small both in terms of the niche tourism product and its market. It also asks a series of supplementary questions including:

1. How well do you know the market?
2. How do you reach a market that is ‘small’ and widely scattered?
3. Which ‘profession’ should undertake this?

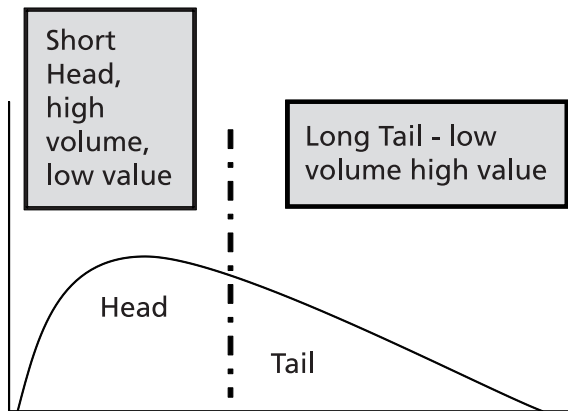
At Bournemouth we have recently completed a study of wildlife tourism in Scotland. The key question that Visit Scotland wanted answered was: For how many is watching wildlife

the main reason for visiting Scotland? The answer: Relatively few and they are relatively demanding, for example they want a very early breakfast. Considerable challenges in defining wildlife tourism and in distinguishing between actual and potential visitors.

Wine tourism is another example, a good number of books and papers have been published demonstrating the nature of the demand which indicate that only a relatively small % of wine tourists are ‘dedicated’ ie only interested in wine and that visiting a winery is just one dimension of touring / visiting an area where vines are grown and wine is produced and that landscape aesthetics and cultural factors are as if not more important. Interestingly a recent paper by Romano and Natilli (2009) argues that in Tuscany Wine Tourism is not a Niche product but is simply part of a broader ‘rural’ product.

The customer or niche tourists may be a tightly defined market segment but they are almost certainly very widely scattered, however, there is some reason to believe they will pay to access a specialist product encouraging providers to try to contact them. The Internet has for some years been seen as the ‘answer’ because it allows not only the ‘big’ players to have a presence it also allows small specialist products to be offered very widely and very cheaply. The internet has of course been widely adopted by many vendors to promote their products. Based upon the graphical representation of a population that is not normally distributed ie where there is a substantial head reducing to an elongated drawn out tail has given rise to the term long tail tourism.

The ‘Head’ represents the high volume low value mass market whilst the ‘tail’ comprises a large number of specialist niche tourism products.



Lew 2008 based on Anderson 2004

Whilst the internet provides a very low cost promotional channel it has its own limitations, the very number of competing offers populating the web pages being one of them. In regards to niche tourism products there it may well be that internet based messages will reach and appeal to the independent traveller but will have limited appeal to those who want others to make their travel and accommodation arrangements.

Those who want their travel organised for them may well turn to: Specialist Publications, Sections of General Publications, Specialist Tour Companies and / or Specialist Tour Operators consequently promotional material in these more traditional channels may well be as significant as web based materials.

Collaboration

In marketing and promotional terms a major driver over the last thirty or forty years for small specialist companies to collaborate either unofficially or officially by creating an association have been the costs of this activity. What is clear is that the advent of the internet has not necessarily reduced the importance of this driver. It would seem prudent if not essential to employ a range of promotional techniques linking the internet based 'long tail' approach to the specialist company or tour operator.

The question was posed earlier as to who does this promotional work which requires the ability to encourage collaboration in order to offer a diversity of specialist products based on either existing or created niches. Is it a lead organisation within a sector, a particular winery, a particular accommodation provider or association, is the tourist board is it a public / private sector agency established for this express purpose?

In this brief review an attempt has been made not to provide answers but to stimulate discussion amongst those who know the Irpinia region and its diversity of existing and potential niches.

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