

**CONTRIBUTION OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION TO
STAKEHOLDER VIEWS OF SUSTAINABILITY AT PHILLIP
ISLAND NATURE PARK**

Jean-Pierre Issaverdis, Betty Weiler & Sam Ham

*Working Paper 2/05
February 2005*

**DEPARTMENT OF MANAGEMENT
WORKING PAPER SERIES
ISSN 1327-5216**



Abstract

Phillip Island Nature Park's (PINP) Mission and operational objectives include the conservation and protection of the flora and fauna of Phillip Island. This can only be achieved through economic success and working in partnership with various stakeholders. While PINP recognises the importance of communication with stakeholders, to date it has not systematically examined the extent to which stakeholders are receiving messages about how PINP contributes to sustainability of the park and of the Island. Using a mixed methods approach, the final outcome will be an exploration of the relationships between audiences (membership in a stakeholder group), communication media and sustainability messages received. Implications of the research will focus on how PINP and similar organisations might more precisely target important stakeholder groups with messages about their sustainability philosophy and practices.

This paper is a work in progress. Material in the paper cannot be used without permission of the author.

CONTRIBUTION OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION TO STAKEHOLDER VIEWS OF SUSTAINABILITY AT PHILLIP ISLAND NATURE PARK

INTRODUCTION

As well as being one of Victoria's major tourism attractions with over 620,000 fee paying visitors per year and another 1.2 million non-fee paying visitors using park facilities, Phillip Island Nature Park's (PINP) Mission statement is

"To conserve and enhance the Park's environment for current and future generations while achieving a balanced environmental, economic and social outcome" (Phillip Island Nature Park, 2004, p3).

It thus has a mandate, and indeed an obligation, to play an important part in the environmental, social and economic sustainability and viability of Phillip Island. PINP needs to operate as a viable business operation as it receives no recurrent Government funding and depends on the revenue it generates as a tourism venture for its ongoing operation (Harris, 2002), but it also needs to continue to maintain good relations and a good image with the local and regional environmental, resident and business community.

There is evidence that PINP is indeed achieving its Mission. With respect to environmental conservation, PINP manages almost all of the native vegetation which remains on the island and which provides habitat for significant populations of birds and other wildlife (Dann, 2003). Moreover, wildlife and environmental research has long been a core part of PINP operations (Dann, 2000). The Park also plays an important role in the region as a major employer, and supports a number of community activities such as the delivery of science based school educational programs (Phillip Island Nature Park, 2004b).

An integral part of PINP's operation is communicating these sustainability "successes" to its stakeholders. While PINP recognises the importance of communication with stakeholders, to date it has not systematically examined the extent to which stakeholders are receiving messages about how PINP contributes to sustainability of the park and of the Island. A mixed methods study (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 1990) is currently underway to examine PINP's communication of sustainability messages to its stakeholders.

RESEARCH AIM

Using Phillip Island Nature Park (PINP) as a case study (Yin, 1998, 2003), the aim is to undertake research that seeks to better understand and evaluate a nature-based tourism operation's sustainability messages to its stakeholders.

There are two key outcomes, one theoretical and one practical. The theoretical outcome will be the development of a Communications Model/Communications Strategy that includes Stakeholders, Media and Sustainability Messages targeted at informing (influencing) stakeholder views of PINP sustainability. The model will indicate the pathways through which sustainability messages are, or can be, communicated and will analyse the media and contexts through which communication can occur between an organisation like PINP and its stakeholders.

The practical outcomes for PINP from this research will be that the results will assist PINP Management to enhance its strategic approach to communication and ensure key sustainability (and other) messages are being received by its stakeholders.

Research Objectives

- To identify and classify PINP stakeholder groups, both internal and external;
- To analyse the range of communication (marketing, interpretation and other) media used by PINP;
- To identify what sustainability messages are intended to be delivered by PINP;
- To establish what sustainability messages are actually being received by stakeholders, irrespective of whether they are intended or not;
- To explore the relationships between audiences (membership in a stakeholder group), communication media and messages received.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND DEFINITIONS

The concepts of sustainability and sustainable development are widely discussed in the literature. Sustainability first became a public issue after a report was published by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), also known as the Brundtland Commission Report in 1987 (Brundtland, 1987). Sustainable tourism has also been well documented and much debate has been entered into regarding definitions and key concepts of sustainable tourism, including the important aspect of operationalising sustainable principles (Buckley, 1996; De Lacy, 2003; Eagles, McCool, & Haynes, 2002; Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997; Hunter, 1997; Middleton & Hawkins, 1998; Mowforth & Munt, 1998; Swarbrooke, 1999; Weaver & Lawton, 1999; Wight, 1993).

Sustainability for the tourism industry means maintaining the quality of the experience or product offered to visitors, conserving and protecting the environment that supports tourism and maintaining the quality of life for those who live in or near tourist destinations (Moscardo & Woods, 1998). The principle of sustainability includes finding a balance between the needs of the residents and visitors and between the costs and benefits of tourism for local (or host) communities. The principle also refers to ensuring the continuity of the resources required by tourism, the support of communities and the interests of tourists (Hardy, 2001, 2003; Moscardo & Woods, 1998; Weiler & Ham, 2002).

For the purpose of this study, PINP sustainability is defined as:

- the conservation and protection of the natural environment, which also supports the tourism experience at PINP;
- the meeting and exceeding of financial targets as a self-funding organisation;
- maintaining sustainable visitor numbers;
- the achievement of positive social and community outcomes for both the staff of PINP and the residents of Phillip Island.

Thus it embraces the three principles of economic, environmental and social sustainability and includes sustainability of both PINP and Phillip Island. In this study, a sustainability message is defined as a purposive statement aimed at achieving future outcomes for PINP.

Another key concept of this study is the relationship of stakeholders with PINP. First documented in the literature by Freeman (1984), stakeholders and stakeholder theory has been covered by numerous authors. Key concepts such as who constitutes a stakeholder, e.g. employees, government agencies, shareholders, customers and local communities, and the relationships between managers and stakeholders have generated substantial debate (Clarkson, 1994, 1995, 1998; Drago, 1999; Freeman, 1999; Medeiros de Araujo & Bramwell, 1999; Scott & Lane, 2000).

In the debate on sustainable tourism, a number of stakeholders have also been identified including government, industry, communities, tourists, tourism operators and environmental groups. All of these play a major part in promoting, planning and implementing sustainable tourism (Lindberg,

1998; Wearing & Neil, 1999) and must be considered when attempting to communicate sustainable outcomes to stakeholders.

METHODOLOGY

The underpinning research paradigm is constructivist/pragmatist (Creswell, 2003; Hardy, 2001; Patton, 1990) which suggests the use of a mixed methods approach to the research.

“For mixed methods researchers, pragmatism opens the door to multiple methods, different worldviews and different assumptions as well as different forms of data collection and analysis in the mixed methods study.” (Creswell, 2003, p12).

This approach has been selected based on the specific needs of PINP and is considered the best approach to achieving the research outcomes, given the need to ensure an outcome to PINP which will assist managers in making more strategic decisions and delivering outcomes that will improve the business performance of PINP.

Key elements of a pragmatic (Creswell, 2003; Patton, 1990) approach to research include:

- Recognising that researchers can use multiple approaches to understand the problem;
- That when engaging in the research, pragmatists are not committed to any one system of philosophy and reality, which allows the use of mixed methods (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, 2003) i.e. the use of both qualitative and quantitative assumptions and applications throughout the study;
- That researchers should choose methods, techniques and procedures of research that best meet their needs and outcomes (Creswell, 2003).

A Reference Group, made up of senior managers from PINP including the CEO, has been formed to provide input into the research project. A number of meetings have taken place with the Reference Group and some preliminary data have been gathered. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews with key managers from PINP will be used to identify key concepts such as key stakeholder audiences, the types of sustainability messages and the media used to deliver these messages. Using the results of these interviews, key themes will be identified and explored. The results are then expected to contribute to the second phase of the research, when a quantitative approach via a questionnaire will be used to gather data from the population of external stakeholders.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Preliminary findings to date include the identification of all of the PINP stakeholder groups, identifying stakeholder salience to key PINP managers using Power, Legitimacy and Urgency attributes identified by Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) and expanded upon by Agle, Mitchell and Sonnenfeld (1999), the identification of media used by PINP and the preliminary identification of sustainability messages being delivered by PINP in their corporate communications.

CONCLUSION

The final outcome will be an exploration of the relationships between audiences (membership in a stakeholder group), communication media and sustainability messages received. Implications of the research will focus on how PINP and similar organisations might more precisely target important stakeholder groups with messages about their sustainability philosophy and practices. In addition to communicating with strategic partners and gaining an understanding of how to better convey sustainability messages, this research will assist PINP as it continues to seek ways to ensure that visitors have a more enjoyable, yet sustainable, experience.

REFERENCES

- Agle, B. R., Mitchell, R. K., & Sonnenfeld, J. A. (1999). Who matters to CEO's? An investigation of stakeholder attributes and salience, corporate performance, and CEO values. *Academy of Management Journal*, 42(5), 507-525.
- Brundtland, G. H. (1987). *Our common future - World Commission on Environment and Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Buckley, R. (1996). Sustainable Tourism: Technical Issues and Information Needs. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 23(4), 925-966.
- Clarkson, M. B. E. (1994). The Toronto Conference: Reflections on stakeholder theory. *Journal of the International Association for Business and Society*, 33(1), 82.
- Clarkson, M. B. E. (1995). A stakeholder framework for analyzing and evaluating corporate social performance. *The Academy of Management Review*, 20(1), 92-107.
- Clarkson, M. B. E. (Ed.). (1998). *The Corporation and Its Stakeholders: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research Design - Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (2 ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Dann, P. (2000). *Phillip Island Nature Park Research Strategy 2000 - 2005*. Phillip Island: Phillip Island Nature Park.
- Dann, P. (2003). *Research Annual Report 2002 - 03*. Phillip Island: Phillip Island Nature Park.
- De Lacy, T. (2003). *Public private partnerships for sustainable tourism destinations*. Paper presented at the Tourism Futures Conference: Sustainable growth, strategic alliances and positive futures in challenging times, Australia.
- Drago, W. A. (1999). Stakeholder influence and environmental sector volatility. *Management Research News*, 22(4), 1-9.
- Eagles, P. F. J., McCool, S. F., & Haynes, D. (2002). *Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas - Guidelines for Planning and Management*. Cambridge: IUCN Publication Service.
- Faulkner, B., & Tideswell, C. (1997). A Framework for Monitoring Community Impacts of Tourism. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 5(1).
- Freeman, R. E. (1984). *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach*. Boston: Pitman Publishing.
- Freeman, R. E. (1999). Divergent stakeholder theory. *The Academy of Management Review*, 24(2), 233-236.
- Hardy, A. L. (2001). *Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis - A Troubled Paradise: Stakeholder Perceptions of Tourism in the Daintree Region of Far North Queensland, Australia*. The University of Queensland, Brisbane.
- Hardy, A. L. (2003). Sustainable tourism and Stakeholder Management: A Symbiotic Relationship? In B. Goodall (Ed.), *Social inclusion in Tourism*. London: Routledge.
- Harris, R. (2002). The tale of the Little Penguins and the tourists - making tourism sustainable at Phillip Island Nature Park. In R. Harris, T. Griffin & P. Williams (Eds.), *Sustainable Tourism: A Global Perspective* (pp. 238 - 251). Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann.
- Hunter, C. (1997). Sustainable Tourism as an Adaptive Paradigm. *Annals of Tourism Research*, 24(4), 850-867.
- Lindberg, K. (1998). Economic Aspects of Ecotourism. In K. Lindberg, M. Epler Wood & D. Engeldrum (Eds.), *Ecotourism A Guide for Planners and Managers* (Vol. 2, pp. 87-117). North Bennington: The Ecotourism Society.

- Medeiros de Araujo, L., & Bramwell, B. (1999). Stakeholder Assessment and Collaborative Tourism Planning: The Case of Brazil's Costa Dourada Project. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 7(3&4), 356-377.
- Middleton, V. T. C., & Hawkins, V. (1998). *Sustainable Tourism: A Marketing Perspective*. Oxford: Butterworth - Heinemann.
- Mitchell, R. K., Agle, B. R., & Wood, D. J. (1997). Toward a theory of stakeholder identification and salience: Defining the principle of who and what really counts. *The Academy of Management Review*, 22(4), 853-886.
- Moscardo, G., & Woods, B. (1998). Managing Tourism in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. In E. Laws, B. Faulkner & G. Moscardo (Eds.), *Embracing and Managing Change in Tourism* (pp. 307-323). London: Routledge.
- Mowforth, M., & Munt, I. (1998). *Tourism and sustainability. New tourism in the Third World*. London: Routledge.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park: Sage Publications.
- Phillip Island Nature Park. (2004). *Phillip Island Nature Park Business Plan 2004/2005* (Annual Report). Phillip Island: Phillip Island Nature Park.
- Phillip Island Nature Park. (2004b). *Phillip Island Nature Park Website*. Retrieved 3/01/2004, 2004, from <http://www.penguins.org.au>
- Scott, S. G., & Lane, V. R. (2000). A stakeholder approach to organizational identity. *The Academy of Management Review*, 25(1), 43-62.
- Swarbrooke, J. (1999). *Sustainable Tourism Management*. Wallingford: CABI Publishing.
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (1998). *Mixed methodology: Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Tashakkori, A., & Teddlie, C. (Eds.). (2003). *Handbook of mixed methods in the social and behavioural sciences*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Wearing, S., & Neil, J. (1999). *Ecotourism: Impacts, Potentials and Possibilities*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Weaver, D., & Lawton, L. (1999). *Sustainable Tourism: A Critical Analysis*. Canberra: CRC.
- Weiler, B., & Ham, S. H. (2002). Tour Guide Training: A Model for Sustainable Capacity Building in Developing Countries. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 10(1), 52-69.
- Wight, P. A. (1993). Sustainable Ecotourism: Balancing economic, environmental and social goals within an ethical framework. *The Journal of Tourism Studies*, 4(2), 54-66.
- Yin, R. K. (1998). The abridged version of case study research: design and method. In L. Bickman & D. Rog (Eds.), *Handbook of applied social research methods* (pp. 229-259). Thousand Oaks: Sage publications.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case Study Research Design and Methods* (3 ed. Vol. 5). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.