

# Understanding Tourist Destination Growth Through a Systems Approach

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## Introduction

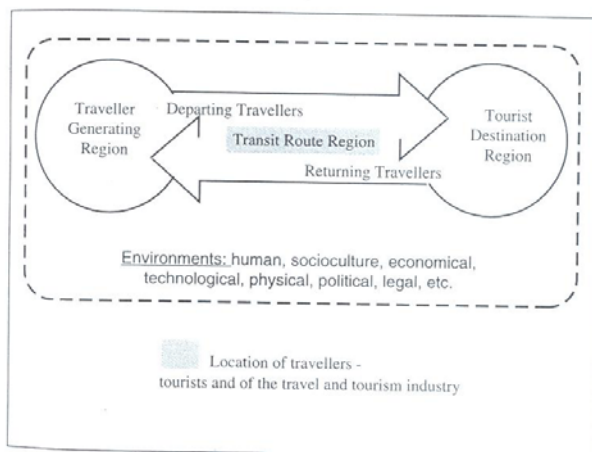
To understand the growth of a tourist destination it is necessary to comprehend the elements that relate and hence influence the increase of tourists to a place. To study a tourist destination it is important to view it as part of a tourism system as the one proposed by Leiper. While describing the components of the system such as the Traveller Generating Regions (TGR), the Transit Routes (TR) and the Tourist Destination Regions (TDR) one must analyze them under the influence of diverse environments. Tourism growth in a specific destination cannot be comprehensively understood unless the other regions, TGRs and TRs, as well as the environments influencing in each region are studied.

Human society as any other animal or plant species relates in complex ways among each other and with other species. To isolate a relationship, an environment or a component from another for further study obeys only to the need to simplify reality to understand it better and theorize. The study of tourism growth must view all possible environments at the same time to better describe the phenomena and predict future trends, it is not sensible to consider them in isolation. The following essay has the objective of proving this last statement.

The following argument evolves around the idea of understanding, in a very superficial manner, the tourism system of the Americas region as called by the World Tourism Organization. The Americas region covers North America, Central America, the Caribbean and South America. While the Americas'

tourism system is dissected into its three geographical components, the focus of the essay remains on the environments of the system and how these affect tourism and at the same time how tourism affects the environments at each geographical component. The same argument is evidence enough that not only the environments should never be considered in isolation to understand the growth of a destination, but also that the environments should be analyzed comprehensively for each of the regions to fully understand destination growth.

### The Americas Tourism System



Tourism System (Leiper, 1995).

Forecasts for international tourist arrivals in the Americas show that there will be 282.3 million in 2020. This represents an annual growth rate of 3.9 per cent over the period 1995 – 2000, a little below the world average of 4.1 per cent (Tourism 2020 Vision, WTO, 2000).

#### *Traveller Generating Regions*

"TGRs are the places where trips begin, where people who will later be described or counted as tourists start their journey" (Leiper, 1995, p. 72). The TGRs for the tourism system of the Americas are countries of the same Americas, mainly from

North America (United States, Canada and Mexico) and South America (WTO, 2000). This kind of travel is called intraregional by the World Tourism Organization. Intraregional tourism "refers to arrivals of residents of any country of a particular region to any other country of the same region" (WTO, 2000, p. 77). The WTO's statistics for 1995 for intraregional travel are of 78,867,000 (2000). International tourist arrivals to the Americas in 1995 from North America were of 63,949,000, from South America was of 10,892,000 (WTO, 2000).

The second biggest TGR to the Americas is Europe with 15,901,000 international tourist arrivals. The most significant subregions were Western, Northern and Southern Europe with 7,161,000, 5,064,000, 2,236,000 international tourist arrivals respectively (WTO, 2000). The WTO calls this kind of tourism long-haul travel. Long-haul travel "refers to arrivals of residents of countries of one particular region to any country of any other region than their own" (WTO, 2000, p.77).

It is important to analyze now the environments of the TGRs and how these determine the increase in the flow outbound tourist. Three main factors "time, affluence and freedom of movement - are necessary predisposing circumstances for tourism to take place" (Burton, 1991, p. 2). These three circumstances, without taking motivations to travel, are the same environments mentioned by Leiper if we translate free time as a the social environment regarding labour rights, money considered as the economic environment and freedom of movement as a political environment. These three environments, social, economical, and political relate to each other facilitating the flow of tourist to diverse destinations. The possibility of travel could not be understood by isolating one environment for example economics. For example, former Eastern Berliners would have traveled to West Germany to visit family, but the political situation did not permit this to occur before 1989.

Adding to these environments Burton concludes that one of the most important factors triggering international tourism is the climate (1991). "The main tourist flows in both Europe and North America are north-south to the warmer and more reliable climates" (Burton, 1991, p. 77). This can be the strongest environment regarding tourist arrivals to Mexico and the Caribbean. Other factors mentioned by Burton are: distance between countries, attractions, communications (transport infrastructure), relative costs (cost of living and exchange rates), cultural links, and political factors (1991).

Complementing the above mentioned factors Leiper presents the following factors that determine the size and characteristics of a traveller flow from a TGR: size population, gross economic prosperity, distribution of income and wealth, spare time, demographic characteristics, motivations as tastes and preferences, constraints on travel, transport facilities, fares and other prices, exchange rates, and promotion (1995).

The economic environment at the TGR's for intraregional tourism of the Americas, mainly coming from the United States with its recession following the Gulf War of 1991 explains why "the Americas underperformed the global average (growth in arrivals)" (WTO, 2000). The economic situation in the regional TGR's added up with the environments prevalent in the TDR's, as will be discussed further on, has been a reason why the World Tourism organization's forecasts for 1990 - 1998 international tourist arrivals were inaccurate "around 5 million higher in 1995" (WTO, 2000, p. 14) and 13 million higher in 1998 (WTO, 2000).

### *Transit Routes*

"This is an intermediate zone where the principal travel activity of tourism occurs, distinct from visit activity in destinations" (Leiper, 1995, p. 81). The factors that contribute to the growth of a TR must increase its efficiency (Leiper, 1995). "An efficient TR is a path where access is easy for large numbers of travellers"

(Leiper, 1995, p. 81). The factors mentioned by Leiper are: travel time, fares and other travel costs, availability of a carrier and other transport facilities, capacity, frequency of services on public carriers, changes in transit, discomfort, reliability, attractions around the way, and stopover points (Leiper, 1995). The mentioned factors by Leiper for the growth of tourism flows in TRs relate more to the infrastructure and technology environments at the region, rather than to the social and political to mention a couple. Though some other environment can be inferred such as geography, affecting the travel time. Nowadays another two environments are relevant to consider in TRs: security (terrorism threats) and health (SARS in Singapore). Further research is necessary to unravel the TRs of the Americas region and then analyze its environments.

### *Tourist Destination Regions*

TDRs according to Leiper are places where "a person chooses to stay a while in order to experience some feature or characteristic" (1995, p. 87), hence "become, temporarily, tourists" (1995, p.87) and as a consequence "counted in statistical surveys or estimates as tourists" (1995, p.87). According to the WTO the main TDRs for the Americas were North, Caribbean and South America with 73.9%, 12.9% and 10.8% respectively for 1995 international tourist arrivals (2000). As mentioned before the international tourist arrivals are through intraregional travel mainly, 76.9%, and only 23.1% from long-haul travel (WTO, 2000).

Some features and conditions are presented by Leiper on how TDRs become popular such as: attractions, accessibility, tolerance, security, life-support and comfort systems, cost and benefit advantage, and information diffusion (1995). As it can be observed some factors relate to the normal service and product offering of tourism enterprises or the infrastructure and uniqueness of the destination. On the other hand, it is observed that environments are mentioned such as security. Security can cover such issues like health, terrorism, crime and

political stability. "Competition and incidents that affect the safety of tourists (whether health scares, natural disasters, crime directed at tourists, terrorist attacks or socio-political disturbances) are the two greatest challenges for the America's tourism administrators to overcome" (World Tourism Organization, 2000, p. 10). Accessibility and cost can be two reasons why South America remains a third regional destination in the past. These two reasons relate to the geographical location and the economic-political environment (regarding the airlines) of the destination. Though the common assumption would be that South America's growth in the future, because of these two environments, would not be very strong other environments might be working, because according to the WTO South America will become the second biggest TDR of the Americas taking over the Caribbean for the year 2020 (2000).

The WTO in its Americas report pinpoints several "factors determining Americas prospects" (2000, p. 19) from which environments can be recognized such as technology, security and safety (crime, conflict and terrorism, natural threats), economic crisis, health and water (WTO, 2000). Some remarks by the WTO regarding how environments affect tourism and the prospects of growth in the Americas are very illustrative. "Outbreaks of disease, such as cholera, yellow fever and typhoid, which are particularly common in South America, have a temporary impact on tourists to worldwide destinations" (WTO, 2000, p. 22). "Natural disasters (such as Hurricane Mitch in October 1998) require substantial rebuilding before tourism can re-commence" (WTO, 2000, p. 21). "The end of several civil wars in Central America has produced a boom in tourism" (WTO, 2000, p. 20) a specific example of this was the signing of the peace treaty in 1996 in Guatemala. Not only are the effects of the environments on tourism mentioned, but also the impacts of tourism in the environments of the TDR's. "Tourism also puts great pressure on local water reserves" (WTO, 2000, p. 23).

## **Conclusion**

The Americas region is the second most important TDR in the world (WTO, 2000). Growth is estimated for the region to establish at around 3.9 percent according to the WTO (2000). Statistics and forecasts can draw a picture of what can happen concerning number of tourists, but other question stay unanswered, where do they come from and what causes this growth. For such a reason a tourism systems approach like the one proposed by Leiper was used. Through this approach a better insight was gained on the tourism dynamics of the Americas region and also addressing the question presented to us, should Leiper's environments be considered in isolation when trying to understand the growth of a destination?

Destination growth cannot be understood unless the generating and transit regions to that destination are included in the analysis. The instruments by which to analyze those regions TGRs, TRs and TDRs are the environments that affect each one of them and as a result the whole of the tourism system. Environments cannot be considered in isolation to understand destination growth. The simplest analysis in one environment will sooner or later relate to another environment.

Implications for researchers and also managers are important with relation to this tourism system approach. "Effective managers must not only have very good knowledge of the region where they are personally based, but they should also be outward looking and knowledgeable about places away from their own area which are linked to it in significant itineraries" (Leiper, 1995, p. 95). Managers become more competent, tourism boards more effective on their expenditure, marketers target and reach the proper markets and researchers deliver an insightful analysis. Further analysis is required to understand the tourism system of certain type of tourism, such as the so called alternative tourism. A detailed tourism system of alternative tourism for America would deliver significant information for marketers and managers of ecotours, for example.

## **References**

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