

# Tourism Research: A 20-20 Vision

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Edited by

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## Knowledge management in tourism: from databases to learning destinations

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# 17 Knowledge management in tourism: from databases to learning destinations

Chris Cooper and Pauline Sheldon

## Introduction

The tourism industry, a natural user and producer of information, has been a late and reluctant adopter of information technology (IT), and subsequently a limited user of knowledge management (KM). This chapter will identify the major developments and fields of research in tourism-related IT and KM with a focus on the latter. The historical development of IT in tourism is already well documented and need not be re-visited here. For example, Gretzel and Fesenmaier (2009) give a thorough history of tourism IT research over the decades. Their paper shows that most research has tended to focus on the private sector; airlines (Buhalis, 2004), accommodation (O'Connor and Murphy, 2004), the use of e-commerce (Werthner and Ricci, 2004), and management information systems (Buhalis and Laws, 2008), or alternatively on the consumer. Some researchers have examined KM at the destination level, such as the use of IT in visitors' bureaux (e.g. Zach *et al.*, 2008), however a common focus of that research is improving a destination's marketing and competitiveness. The volume of literature on public sector use of IT and particularly KM is more limited.

While KM is implicit in IT and vice versa, IT developments have not always delivered transformative knowledge solutions and some have kept firms and destinations locked in old patterns (Vendelo, 2005). Therefore we see KM rather than IT as the key area to develop competitiveness and sustainability in tourism; hence it is the focus of this chapter. The goal of the chapter is to track the development of knowledge management in tourism and to examine how future research can assist destinations in becoming more sustainable learning destinations integrating knowledge into responsible planning and policy.

## Knowledge in tourism

The generation and use of new tourism knowledge for innovation and product development is critical for the competitiveness of both the tourism sector and destinations. However, the tourism sector has been slow to adopt the principles of the knowledge economy and as a result, unlike many other economic sectors, tourism has not been subject to a knowledge management approach and the sector is less competitive as a result (Stamboulis and Skayannis, 2003; Cooper, 2006). Knowledge management is a relatively new approach that addresses the critical issue of organizational adaptation, survival, and competitiveness in the face of increasingly discontinuous environmental change. This pace of change underscores the fact that knowledge-based innovation is a core competency required by all tourism organizations if they are to be competitive in a changing world (Argote and Ingram, 2000). There are many definitions of knowledge management but this chapter takes the stance that it is about ‘applying the knowledge assets available to [a tourism] organization to create competitive advantage’ (Davidson and Voss, 2002: 32).

## Tourism and knowledge management research

For tourism, there are four significant issues for the development of a knowledge management research agenda. The first is related to types of knowledge. Knowledge can be thought of as the use of skills and experience to add intelligence to information in order to make decisions or provide reliable grounds for action. Knowledge management classifies knowledge according to its ability to be codified and therefore communicated (Polanyi, 1966). This distinction is fundamental and goes a long way to explaining the failure of the tourism sector to adequately capitalise upon and manage knowledge. Simply, the conversion of tacit to explicit knowledge is critical, as there is so much tacit knowledge in the tourism sector that could benefit other organizations, destinations and governments. It is here that a knowledge management approach provides significant benefits as it focuses upon the management of tacit and explicit knowledge to create organizational learning, innovation and sustainable competitive advantage.

The second is related to the issue of scale. If knowledge management is to be utilized by tourism at the destination level, then the micro-level focus on the organization, which dominates knowledge management thinking, needs to be expanded to embrace knowledge stocks and flows within networks of organizations at the destination. Here, Hislop *et al.* (1997) provide a solution by arguing that knowledge *articulation* occurs in networks of organizations attempting to innovate and build upon knowledge. They identify two types of network. First, micro-level networks within organizations where knowledge is created and is dominantly ‘tacit’ and ‘in-

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