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Tourism Research Turns for the Better

THE QUALITY of tourism research is taking a long overdue turn for the better. An analysis of papers presented at the 7th Conference of the Asia Pacific Tourism Association (APTA) held in Makati City, Philippines from July 4 to 7, 2001, showed a marked improvement in a number of problems that have long plagued the output of tourism researchers and academics. Among some of the immediately discernible trends were the following:

- The subject matter is no longer confined to pie-in-the-sky issues but much more meaningful approaches focussing on things that affect the way the travel and tourism industry does business.
- There is a good mix of short- and long-term issues.
- A good deal of questioning of conventional wisdom is taking hold, largely reflecting the cynicism, scepticism, idealism and/or pragmatism of academics.
- Quality of writing is improving considerably. Fading rapidly (and mercifully) are the days when academic papers could only be understood by academics. The new emerging crop of papers and studies are less jargon-strewn. This is especially important because research papers have good ideas, can provide structure, analysis and some historical perspective to an issue. In an era of short attention spans and presentations by bullet-points, material that goes unread is wasted.

The 7th APTA Conference was organised by a consortium of hospitality and tourism educators from the University of the Philippines in Diliman, the Lyceum of the Philippines and La Consolación College Manila. An annual gathering of educators, researchers, practitioners

and representatives of government and hospitality and tourism organisations, the conference is a forum for sharing of ideas, research and papers focusing on the Pacific Asia region. According to APTA President Corazon Gatchalian of the University of the Philippines, "Aligned with the mission of APTA, the conference forged closer ties among educators and practitioners to join hands and examine the wide mix of emerging issues on hospitality and tourism, with increasing responsibility towards shaping its future."

The volume contained 85 papers contributed by 150 authors from 52 academic institutions and seven organisations representing 16 countries in the Pacific Asia region, North America and Europe. Papers were classified into nine areas: tourism marketing (25 papers); tourism planning, development and management (15); tourism education and training (11); ecotourism and sustainable tourism development (10); tourism labour and employment (7); tourism impacts (6); tourism research tools (5); tourists' safety and security (3); and information technology (3).

Clearly, the number of papers presented in each reflected the changing levels of interest. While the traditional interest in marketing clearly dominates, the presence of only three papers on information technology shows that this once formidable issue has seen its heyday. Other topics like sustainable development and impact of tourism are also losing lustre because very little new is being added to past research. Safety and security is a growing problem, especially as the travel and tourism industry is increasingly susceptible to it.

The papers come amidst a changing background of the way tourism is taught. Much restructuring is underway in approach, content and teaching methods. For example:

- Intensive competition among the private sector is leading to increasing demands for universities to produce graduates who are more in touch with reality and require less investment in re-training and re-educating.
- This is leading to a wholesale revamp of hospitality management programmes to reflect the rapid and growing changes in the industry. Professors are beginning to get out from behind their desks and get more in touch with the market.
- Competition is rising among universities themselves to attract students, especially high-revenue foreign students. Budgetary cutbacks are leading universities to look for other sources of funding, which means having to take a more businesslike approach towards attracting students.
- Distance learning is coming into vogue, opening up more opportunities for students to get their degrees while working.
- The need to network is leading to groupings like the Asia Pacific Education and Training Institutes in Tourism (APETIT) as well as increasing bilateral arrangements between universities. The exchange of academics and students broadens the exposure to different disciplines.
- Academics are beginning to feel the need to start making a more positive contribution towards shaping policy by building upon the mass of data they compile. It also helps raise the profile of their institutions.

All this makes it necessary to produce research that is relevant, practical and readable. Indeed, the relative "newness" of travel and tourism as a subject in much of the Pacific Asia region also makes it an intensively exciting industry to research from several perspectives. It is both very high-tech and high-touch, and has extensive links with culture and nature. While it may be difficult to always draw definitive conclusions, quality research can provide very good guidelines on how to manage the complexity of intra- and inter-industry relationships.

Good research is also a tremendous resource for journalists, consultants and other data-miners looking for background info. It also becomes a very reliable historical track record of pros and cons related to industry developments, especially in a world with no

permanent solutions. Every "solution" has its weaknesses that have to be further addressed, opening up more opportunities for research.

Here is an analysis of some issues and trends identified in the APTA papers, many of which are critical to the way the Pacific Asia travel and tourism industry will pan out in future:

ETHICS: One of the most significant studies was entitled *Perception of Hospitality and Tourism Teachers Towards the Teaching of Ethics* by Sylvester Yiu-Cho Yeung of Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Forty hospitality and tourism teachers in Hong Kong SAR, were interviewed, yielding a unanimous consensus that ethics education is crucial. Despite that and the author's contention that having a strong ethical belief is important to work in hospitality and tourism, the study found that there is hardly any teaching of ethics in the programmes under scrutiny. Many teachers agreed with its importance, few actually took it through into their classrooms. The study identified several obstacles, including a lack of management support, teaching staff themselves having no formal ethics education and a heavy emphasis on "more practical subjects." Said the study, "The heavy emphasis of school management on teaching subjects of practical use and value is a projection of the mindset of society and reflection of the culture and value system of Hong Kong, as a whole. In society, people are looked at and judged by their career achievement and social status. Consequently, people of Hong Kong have become both aggressive and money-minded."

CREATIVITY: A study by Shirley Chappel and Lorraine Brown, University of South Australia, noted that creative thinking has been identified as one of the strategies for coping successfully with the challenges of the 21st century. Because the education process is seen as a major factor in delivering a creative society, people in education need to know more about the creative processes and how to develop commitment to creativity among students. "The time has come for democratisation of creativity," said the study. "It is no longer only the preserve of artists, poets, scientists and inventors. The challenge now is to distill the essence of creativity from the works of these creative people and to enable all to enjoy its benefits." It added, "Students

engage more easily in courses designed to develop their creative thinking capacity if they are the kinds of people who are willing to take risks, make mistakes and play with ideas. The methodology is a threat to students who are anxious to avoid uncertainty and to get the ‘right’ answer.”

A different approach was adopted by a paper, *Barriers to Creativity in the Hotel Industry*, by Simon Wong of Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Loretta Pang, Movieline (Hong Kong SAR). Extensive field-work and surveys were conducted among supervisors in Hong Kong hotels with 288 valid responses received. Four barriers were identified: 1) time and work pressure, 2) low commitment to organisation and system, 3) rigid rules and company style and 4) fear of change and criticism. To help overcome these barriers, the paper suggested that staff: 1) reduce work stress by flexible duties, 2) respect each other’s opinions, 3) change management style from conservative to be more open and 4) recognise the importance of creativity and support from top management.

The surveys yielded some interesting data, finding, for example, that employees who gave suggestions that proved unsuccessful did not receive good evaluations. Hence they stopped contributing any further ideas. Not surprisingly, the paper also concluded: “Hotel employees were facing excessive workload and pressure, no spare time was available for them to settle down and think of any creative ideas.”

FORECASTING: This is always an eye-opener, especially for long-term investments. But a forecast of Pacific Asia travel to Europe by Lindsay Turner, Victoria University, Australia and Stephen Witt, University of Surrey, UK, said, “Forecasts beyond 2005 done now become increasingly suspect, with potentially severe economic changes in the future.” Doubtless this statement would apply to the travel and tourism industry at large. Making rosy forecasts often a decade or two ahead has been one of the major reasons for many planning and investment mistakes and this study now strikes a long-overdue note of caution.

GLOBALISATION: A topical and controversial issue. Two studies focussed on the globalisation of air transport, (Hanna Fayed and John Westlake, Bournemouth University, UK) and strategic alliances

(Fisher Chia-Yu Chen, Shin-Hsin University, Chinese Taipei). The former was an excellent compilation of the historical driving forces behind globalisation, including open skies agreements, privatisation and the issues likely to face developing countries as a result of the General Agreement on Trade in Services. The latter discussed public policies toward airline alliances in the US, Europe and some Asian countries. Both led up to the final conclusion: In spite of “broad and flexible” policies being followed by countries toward alliances, consumer benefits should not be sacrificed. “How to regulate the airline industry so as to balance the cost and benefit of international strategic alliances is one of the biggest challenges for airline policy makers in the new century.” Together, the two papers provided an excellent overview of issues and background for those seeking to better understand the changes taking place in aviation.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT: An industry with such a large female workforce is bound to have its share of sexual harassment incidents, involving both staff and guests. This study by Jerome Agrusa and John Tanner, (University of Louisiana at Lafayette), Wendy Coats (A.C. and Associates), and Jennifer Sio Leng Leong (Hong Kong Polytechnic University), compared the perceptions of sexual harassment by hospitality employees in China (PRC) and the United States. The study was driven by fact that sexual harassment lawsuits are on the rise, costing the industry big time both in litigation costs and settlements. The results were based on 674 questionnaires distributed to restaurant employees (330 in the US, 344 in Hong Kong SAR). One of the main conclusions was a wide gap in perceptions about what actually constitutes harassment. Asked if it occurs more in their environment than other industries, 63.8 percent of American respondents said yes, but only 36.2 percent of Hong Kong SAR respondents concurred. But when asked “If a customer flirts with you, is it sexual harassment?”, only 24.2 percent of US respondents said yes, compared with 78.8 percent of Hong Kong SAR respondents. The study noted that many companies don’t have policies about sexual harassment, while in other companies, employees are unaware that their companies have such policies.

RELIGIOUS TOURISM: Stops at churches, mosques and temples are important parts of any tour programme.

But in this study entitled *Religious Tourism and Heritage Management: Allies or Opponents*, Maureen Griffiths of Monash University, Australia, looked at a number of issues, such as the interaction of the congregation with visitors, heritage management of the properties and entrance fees. The example of Sacred Heart Church in Melbourne, listed on the National Trust Register, was cited in looking at these issues. The parish priest was emphatic that he must balance the needs of the congregation with the wants of visitors. However, funding that has come from visitors has been put to the congregation's use, and not into site interpretation. The study notes nevertheless that as congregations in older, inner city parishes decline, it may be the heritage value of the churches that helps provide the funding for their preservation and conservation.

TOURISM AND PEACE: A fascinating study by Reil G. Cruz, University of the Philippines, and Romeo B. Alinea, Columban College, Philippines questioned claims by "several international organisations, world leaders, great men and academics" about the role of tourism as a "vehicle for international understanding and peace." The cross-national study of college students in six countries on the impact of tourism concluded that the researchers "were not convinced that tourism does indeed lead to world peace." Instead, researchers found that there was a more positive contribution to economics and national integration and pride, but less so to "world peace." There were interesting differences in the perceptions of students in the cities and provinces, and between those who had some overseas travel experience and those who hadn't. However, the study indicated that further research that broadens the definition of "peace" may be necessary.

REUNITING COUNTRIES: Immediately following the tourism and peace study was one that explored the role of tourism in helping improve relations between DPR Korea and Korea (ROK), now one of the last two remaining pairs of politically divided countries in the world. The study by Larry Yu (George Washington University) and Moo Hyun Chung (Hallym University) began by referring to other academic papers' assertion of the role of tourism in building world peace. It analysed the role of the Mount Kumgang project, agreed upon by the two governments with funding from the Hyundai

corporation, in developing tourism. However, the study noted that while Hyundai initiated the project for patriotic reasons, its fears about the project's commercial risks were proving true. The group is losing money badly due to a variety of problems and restrictions that still plague travel between the two countries. Nevertheless, the project has become a barometer of the current status of relations between the two countries, and keeps going because it is still a source of income for DPR Korea. It is only a "first step" and may eventually help bring the two countries together, the study concludes.

HOLIDAY DECISION-MAKING: Do parents or their children decide where and how to holiday? Always an important consideration for advertising and marketing, this subject is explored in a study by Kuo-Ching Wang, Yi-Chun Yeh and Wen-Yu Chen, of Chinese Culture University, Chinese Taipei. A total of 240 responses from various kinds of families were analysed to see how decisions were influenced. Heavy influence of children was felt on decisions related to kind of activities, destination, departure day and restaurants, while wives had greater say on factors like choice of accommodation, shopping and travel agency. However, the influence of husbands increased substantially in the final decision-making stage.

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