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Audrey Gilmore ^a; David Carson ^b; Mário Ascensão ^c

^a Newtownabbey, University of Ulster, Jordanstown Campus, County Antrim BT37 0PE, N. Ireland

^b University of Ulster, N. Ireland

^c HAAGA-HELIA, University of Applied Sciences, Finland

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Sustainable tourism marketing at a World Heritage site

AUDREY GILMORE*

Newtownabbey, University of Ulster, Jordanstown Campus, County Antrim BT37 0PE, N. Ireland

DAVID CARSON

University of Ulster, N. Ireland

MÁRIO ASCENÇÃO

HAAGA-HELIA, University of Applied Sciences, Finland

This paper discusses sustainable tourism marketing in the context of a World Heritage Site and contends that a strategic marketing approach for the development of sustainable tourism is vital to the management of a WH site. A review of the literature on sustainable tourism, the WH site tourism ‘service- product’ and management of a tourist site is presented. In this study, sustainable tourism marketing is defined as marketing that incorporates social, economic and environmental perspectives in a given region. The paper then reports on the management perspectives and attempts to implement sustainable tourism marketing at a World Heritage site, the Giant’s Causeway. The study found that the Giant’s Causeway WH site suffers from an overall lack of integrated management and understanding of how to present and deliver sustainable tourism marketing.

KEYWORDS: Tourism marketing; tourism service-product; sustainable tourism marketing; marketing management; World Heritage sites

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry is a major contributor to the gross national product of many nations (Reige and Perry, 2000) and is one of the fastest growing industries in the world. Today the marketing of tourist destinations and tourism service products is a widely recognised phenomenon. However, the growth in tourism has created new challenges to tourism sites in terms of increased visitor

* Corresponding author: Tel: +(0)28 90 366397; Fax: + (0)28 90 368993; Email: aj.gilmore@ulster.ac.uk

numbers and their potential detrimental impact on the environment. This is becoming evident in popular tourist sites and often in unique and fragile environments such as World Heritage sites.

The focus of this study was on the Giant's Causeway WH site, the most iconic and most visited site in Northern Ireland representing almost a quarter of all trips to the region (Northern Ireland Tourist Board, 2004). The current growth in tourist numbers to the site has led to the recognition that consideration needs to be given to a sustainable tourism marketing strategy if the site is to be maintained for future generations. The objectives of the study were to gain an understanding of the nature of interactions between the organisations involved in managing the site, and to identify the dimensions of a sustainable tourism service-product offering in a WH site context.

SUSTAINABLE TOURISM MARKETING

Following the popularisation of the concept of sustainable development, sustainable tourism as a concept developed during the late 1980s and early 1990s (Bramwell and Lane, 1993; Hunter, 1995). This concept evolved in line with growing recognition of the potential for tourism to have a negative impact on the environment and social fabric of destinations. However, there is some concern that widely adopted interpretations of sustainable tourism are overly focused on a need to conserve the resources on which the tourism industry depends (Dewhurst and Thomas, 2003). For example, some view natural sites as conservationists and argue for de-marketing and 'stay away' messages to be given to tourists (Quan, 2000). The importance of trying to achieve a social, economic and environmentally balanced approach (according to the Brundtland (1987) principles, WCED) to managing and marketing tourist sites was the perspective taken in this study.

The core aim of the social and economic perspectives of tourism is to encourage more tourists to visit and to promote the growth of tourist value. The focus is on creating employment, achieving revenue return and developing some local engagement and interaction with tourists. The anticipated outcome is more tourist 'dollar' which contributes more GNP and eventually leads to large scale tourism.

The environmental focus of tourism is at a different end of the spectrum to the economic and social perspectives. The core aim is to protect and to conserve both the culture and the environment (as both are inextricably linked). There is often a dichotomy or conflict between the social and economic focus of tourism and the environmental perspective. For example, the environmental focus is on conservation and protection and is often about restricting the use of a particular site or keeping large numbers of visitors away.

If a natural tourist attraction is to exist and be economically viable, it must embrace economic and social objectives and also incorporate the environmental issues in the context of economic and social wellbeing. From a marketing management viewpoint, environmental objectives should not dictate the agenda for tourism attraction provision and perspectives. Delivering a sustainable tourism service product will depend upon interactive management, planning and decision-making and the implementation of a consistent service product to large groups of people in a well-managed way.

STRATEGIC MARKETING MANAGEMENT: THE INTERACTIONS AND COLLABORATIONS BETWEEN ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

One of the two research issues of this study was to identify the nature of interactions between the organisations managing the site and with other organisations involved in delivering aspects of the

tourism service-product at the site. The tourism industry has some specific characteristics that impact upon any tourism marketing management activity. Both public and private sector companies are involved in the planning, management and delivery of tourism services (Font and Ahjem, 1999) and small companies often provide many fundamental services within tourism regions (Go, Milne and Whittles, 1992; Dewhurst and Thomas, 2003). So the industry is an amalgam of companies and organisations with different purposes and agendas and this has an influence on the overall tourism offering.

It is widely recognised that the tourism industry is fragmented and many authors have asserted the need for some form of co-operative arrangement between stakeholders (Butler, 1991; D'Amore, 1992; McKetcher, 1993; Bramwell and Lane, 1999; Boyd and Timothy, 2001). Integrated, co-ordinated tourism is seen to be desirable, if not essential, for the implementation of sustainable tourism (WTO, 1993). Therefore, an understanding of the ways in which WH sites operate and interact with tourism organisations within the wider geographical region is important. WH sites with their multiplicity of issues and broad interest group appeal, pose critical problems for stakeholder relations (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2001) and for the implementation of sustainable tourism. In the interests of sustainable tourism, people representing marketing and conservation need to build relationships that allow full collaboration of environmental and marketing matters in tourism development.

A review of the literature has highlighted the importance of including various organisations in the planning and management of tourism marketing sites (Witt and Moutinho, 1994; Font and Ahjem, 1999; Palmer, 2001; Dewhurst and Thomas, 2003). Increasingly, managers involved in tourism services recognise that potential tourism trade will come from people wanting to visit a region or national geographic area as well as experience-specific features or facilities, so that the destination needs to be promoted and sold as an integrated and complete offering. Therefore, tourism businesses need to view their businesses as part of a coherent regional offering (Roberts and Hall, 2003).

Traditionally, interaction and collaboration in tourism marketing occurs between organisations in the same industry and includes suppliers, distributors, intermediaries, competitors and trade associations and can be with cross-sector organisations, government and the voluntary sector. For example, at national, regional and local level, organisations often participate in joint advertising, print and public relations' initiatives. Because a WHS is an amalgam of service offerings supplied by a range of organisations such as operators of transportation, accommodation, attractions and other facilities, their interests are often best served by some form of collaboration, especially joint marketing activities. Although collaborations are often driven initially by motives of protecting or enhancing profitability, successful collaborations may lead to co-ordinating targets and marketing activities between tourism organisations that once established can be used for other purposes such as managing sustainability. Such participation is a useful foundation for developing and achieving sustainable goals where individual tourism organisations are too small to achieve any meaningful results.

In the context of planning and delivering the sustainable tourism service-product, managerial interaction and collaboration needs to include all organisations that contribute to the overall offering. This incorporates interactions and collaborations between organisations from the private sector, key organisations at the site and with tourism organisations from the public and quasi-public sector.

WORLD HERITAGE SITES: DELIVERING THE 'SERVICE-PRODUCT'

WH sites cannot be viewed as a product in the traditional sense as they represent the instantaneous production and consumption of intangible, social experiences and share a number

of characteristics with many service industry products (Buckley, 2004). WH sites are predominantly considered to be tourist 'service-products' and the characteristics of services influence the nature of tourism marketing employed (Palmer, 2001). However, there is no explicit definition of what a WH site service product actually entails from a tourism marketing perspective. Therefore the other research issue for this study was to identify the tourism marketing service-product dimensions of a WH site in the context of sustainable tourism and to evaluate the WH site service-product delivery.

The very nature of a WH site product is service driven (Teare and Calver, 1996), making the sustainability of the product intrinsically linked to the level of service provided. The WH site tourism service-product consists of the specific tangible and usually commercial components (Middleton, 1994), such as core site features, visitor centre and amenities. It also includes intangible elements such as the accessibility of services, interpretation and helpfulness of staff. The tourism service product is delivered in a physical environment or site encompassing land or building space, shape, lighting (Goulding, 2000) and means of directing and orientating the visitor, and methods of stimulating interest and engagement. Most writers in tourism marketing do not distinguish between product and service; they refer to the tourism product as products and services that are virtually synonymous (Lewis and Chamber, 1989; Middleton, 1994). Similarly Jefferson and Lickorish (1988, p. 59) describe the tourism product as a 'collection of physical and service features together with symbolic associations which are expected to fulfil the wants and needs to the buyer'. Bitner (1992) used the term 'servicescape' to encapsulate the tangible and intangible attributes and physical complexity of a service site that will impact upon consumers' perceptions and visitor-staff interactions.

The physical aspect of the tourism service product is the site itself, a natural feature or land area. The layout of a tourism site is important as it creates the space for visitors to sightsee and explore. Facilities such as retail and catering outlets provide additional aspects of service and have an impact upon the overall comfort and reason for visitors to stay longer at a tourism site. Visitors have different interests and requirements and so to satisfy the mass market, different variations of service products should be available. Accessibility in terms of the availability of the key attractions of a site, its buildings and visitor facilities need to be considered in the context of visitors' convenience and visiting times.

Regarding the more intangible aspects, tourism sites need to facilitate visitors in their discovery of the natural, cultural or historical context of the site. To this end, promotional material specifically designed to attract and inform visitors about a site along with guidance signs and directional information are important in aiding visitors' overall perspectives and to prioritise their time on site (Gilmore, 2005).

Visitor experiences occur throughout the site and so require interpretative material as well as being managed at points of staff-visitor interaction. Interpretation adds value and meaning and helps visitors appreciate the unique features and context of a site. Different methods of communication can be used to provide interpretation to a diversity of visitor types and so contribute to a memorable experience.

The prime objective of WH sites is the preservation of natural, built and socio-economic resources. Often, because of the inward, product-centred focus of WH sites, attention is drawn away from tourism, and there is little recognition of the global phenomenon that it is today (Gilmore, 2005). Although a WH designation is not intended as a tourism marketing device, it does represent an international top brand and often tour operators use WH sites to advertise an area (Buckley, 2004). Against this background, trying to achieve social, economic and environmental objectives poses different challenges for site managers. Careful management and delivery of the tourism product is needed.

The key issues discussed above and those impacting upon sustainable tourism marketing are illustrated in Figure 1.

METHODOLOGY

The Giant’s Causeway WH site was chosen as a case study to examine the complex and interrelated issues involved in the strategic marketing of sustainable tourism incorporating social, economic and environmental perspectives as it is typical of many WH sites. The numbers of national and international visitors increase every year but there has been little development in terms of facilities and consideration of how to manage large numbers of people on-site. The research objectives were to identify the nature of interactions between the organisations managing the site and with other organisations involved in delivering aspects of the tourism service-product at the site and to evaluate the WH site service-product delivery on-site. The study aimed to provide some insight of how the growing visitor numbers were managed (socio-economic perspective) while maintaining the authenticity and attractive qualities of the site (environmental perspective).

A qualitative case study methodology was used for this study. As the research focussed on a relatively understudied area of academic enquiry where phenomena were not easily isolated and the interrelationships between phenomena was not well known, a qualitative research approach was chosen (Eisenhardt, 1989, 1991; Parkhe, 1993; Perry and Coote, 1994; Riege and Perry, 2000). A qualitative case study methodology is particularly useful when ‘how’ and ‘why’

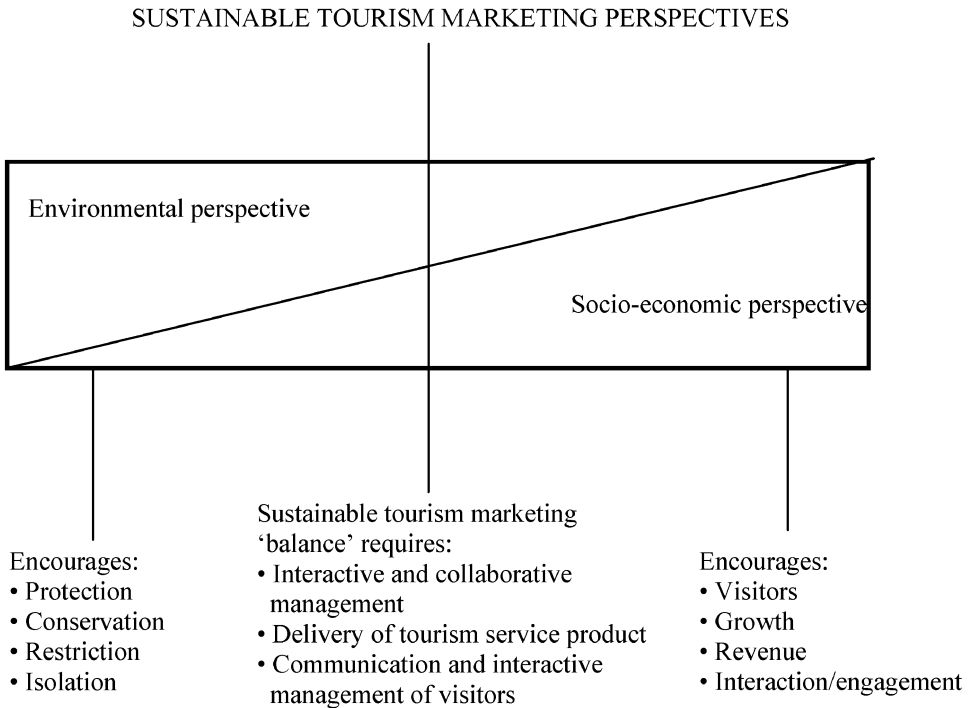


Figure 1. Sustainable tourism marketing perspectives.

questions are being posed, when the researcher has little control over events, and when the focus is on contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin, 1994). Also, the aim of the study was to obtain in-depth understanding, explanation and interpretation of particular situations and meaning of practitioners' experiences and perspectives (Gilmore and Carson, 1996).

The study included observation studies of the Giant's Causeway site over a period of one year and in-depth interviews with key experts involved in tourism marketing and management for the Giant's Causeway and the surrounding region. All informants were highly knowledgeable of current sustainable tourism initiatives regarding the Giant's Causeway region. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured and allowed the informants to provide a rich stream of information on the issues central to the research problem.

The observation studies were carried out according to a research protocol developed to record the range of tourism service-product offerings and how visitors used the site in terms of the physical features and accessibility and the communication and interactive management on site. Printed materials were also used to provide background information and current brochures were used to gather information on how the site was promoted.

FINDINGS

The findings from the case study were analysed according to the themes highlighted in the literature and outlined in the research objectives above. The key insights are described in terms of the extent of management interaction and collaboration regarding the WH site and the implementation of the tourism service-product offerings.

Management interaction and collaboration between organisations at the site

At the Giant's Causeway there were three main landowner organisations with responsibility for the overall management of the site. One landowner (a registered charity) currently owns and manages the actual Causeway stones, a retail outlet and tea-room. A second landowner (public sector) owns the land immediately adjacent, the car-park and the temporary Visitor Centre facilities. The third landowner (private business) owns the surrounding land, a restaurant and a Heritage Railway near the site.

The findings from this study indicated that the organisations owning the site and adjacent land have very different perspectives on how the site should be managed and developed. It was evident that they did not share their knowledge and collective experience in contributing to the management of the Giant's Causeway WH site. There was also a low level of co-operation between the organisation (private) involved in providing facilities surrounding the site and the two main organisations that own the land (public sector) and the stones (charity).

The following comments highlight the view of the owners of the Causeway stones (charity). These views are different to the other organisations providing facilities at the site (public sector and private company), those trying to promote tourism and encourage the social and economic development of the local region. The public sector organisation (owner of the car-park, surrounding area and a temporary Visitor Centre) wanted to attract visitors to the area to help improve the local economy. However the owners of the stones were strongly focused on site conservation and opposed to any economic development and would like to have complete control over the site and adjacent area, for example:

I'm directed by people whose only job is to conserve—and that is my priority. (Site supervisor)

...there is a proposal for a public restaurant...doubling the size of that thing [existing building], making 25 car parking spaces, right at the gateway to the World Heritage site.... One councillor said—this restaurant will create jobs for people so it should be allowed...that is a very good example of short-thinking in my mind. (Site manager)

...we're taking on a commitment to manage that site forever but it would certainly work a lot better if we were also controlling the interpretation and the income. (Site manager)

In addition, two of these organisations (the registered charity and public sector organisation) do not consider it important to engage with visitors on the site. Currently there is very limited interaction with visitors. One of the organisations (the charity) was constantly looking for new membership and they employed a member of staff to solicit potential members. The second organisation indicated that visitors can contact them by telephone if necessary. In practice, the organisations' staff only interacted with visitors at the retail outlets' cash desks.

Management interactions and collaborations with private sector organisations

There was evidence of very limited and informal co-operation with intermediaries, such as coach tour operators. For example one site manager commented:

...we have some co-operation with one or two coach operators who book in advance, but many do not bother.

The lack of communication and interaction with other organisations such as accommodation providers and restaurants was acknowledged, and some managers' of tourist related services and facilities in the area surrounding the Giant's Causeway site (particularly small business owners) did not see themselves as part of the wider tourist service-product. They did not collaborate or interact with managers of the WH site or any other site in the region. For example:

...it would be good to develop relations with other organisations, but our goals are very different. (Private coach manager)

...there are obvious integration possibilities with other attractions but we never get around to discussing it. (Tourism organiser)

Although the WH site managers could obtain valuable information about other local tourism related organisations and engage in business collaborations, the evidence indicated that they did not. There was no evidence of any interaction or collaboration with other tourism businesses. Comments included:

...we don't cross-promote other sites other than our own National Trust sites, to be honest, we don't. (Site manager)

...we don't have any formal interaction with other attractions, because they are very different. (Site supervisor)

Interactions and collaborations with public and quasi-public sector tourism organisations

On-site operators had implicit connections with several quasi-government public bodies such as the NITB (Northern Ireland Tourism Board), CC&G RTO (Causeway Coasts and Glens

Regional Tourism Organisation) and DoE (Department of Environment) regarding advisory and promotional support. There was a commitment to the provision of support, both advisory and financially through grant aid from the Environment Service. However the interactions and collaborations with these bodies were not specific or explicit and did not have any impact on the current management of the site.

In summary, the three organisations that own the land and the stones at the Giant's Causeway have different perspectives. One has a single focus on conservation, restriction and perhaps closure to visitors. The second organisations' objectives are to bring more visitors to the area, encourage them to stay longer in order to contribute to the economy of the whole region. The third organisation wants to develop a wider range of visitor facilities and services within the immediate area, to make profit and provide jobs for local people. These different perspectives result in little interaction and collaboration between the organisations, in fact they see each other as competitors for the same business. In addition, the interactions between the on-site landowner organisations and the wider range of public and private sector tourism related businesses were very limited. Such lack of communication led to conflicting decisions being made by each organisation resulting in confusing communication messages for visitors. To summarise, there was little evidence of sustainable tourism management, there was no unified sense of direction and the implementation of the tourism service product was limited and the site was poorly managed as described below.

Delivery of the WHS service product

The physical features and core product of the WH site, the Giant's Causeway stones (a natural feature) was poorly presented and maintained. At the most famous part of the site, the 'honeycomb' area where the majority of visitors go, there was evidence of neglect (mud and litter) and vandalism (graffiti and chipping) on the stones. With regard to visitor facilities on site there was little evidence of recent capital expenditure, the buildings were old, and small. The size of the buildings (shop and visitor centre) were inadequate and often became congested due to the limited space available and queues for toilets and cash desks.

In terms of accessibility of the core product, new transport services to bring visitors to the site were introduced in the areas adjacent to the Giant's Causeway and Causeway Coast during the time of study. These included a heritage railway service and a 'rambler' bus service. However these services were introduced incrementally without any overall plan on vision. One on-site manager commented: 'these facilities are planned on an ad-hoc basis'.

The majority of visitors to the site arrived by car. If they arrived between the hours of 9.30am and 5.00pm, a car-park attendant was positioned at the entrance of the park to request payment. Often there was confusion regarding what the payment was for as there were car parking ticket machines clearly evident within the car park. Because of the payment required within the car park areas or at busy times when the car park was full, cars parked along the roadside causing congestion, disruption, tailbacks and contributing to erosion at the side of the main road.

Communication and interactive management of visitors

There was little communication of any kind to stimulate visitor interest in the site, for example, promotional signs or pictures to illustrate the features of the site or service areas such as the cafeteria or souvenir shop. One on-site manager commented:

...we don't market the Giant's Causeway, there is a policy of not really marketing it because it receives so many visitors already...

There was an overall lack of clear directional signs for visitor information. The site had poor visual communication in terms of guidance, information or advice on-site. Signs on the site and on the way to the stones were too small to be read from the path, making it necessary to step off the path (onto grass or heathland) to read signs. Within the site, the only staff available were those employed within the retail outlet and café facilities (open between 9.30am and 5.00pm only), otherwise there were no staff available for guidance, direction or supervision of visitors.

Overall interpretation of the site and attempts to engage or 'educate' the visitor was very poor. Some of the on-site managers did not want any interpretative material or activities provided at the site unless it was about conservation. They also thought that the companies bringing people to the site (such as bus and tour operators) should provide interpretative information about the site. More fundamentally the opinion of the site-owners was that the site could be managed by restricting the number of visitors instead of addressing the issues of interpretation, education and visitor guidance as illustrated in the following statement:

I guess we would prefer to ask people to voluntarily stay out of areas, we may have to consider more severe fencing and things to keep people out... (Site manager)

To summarise, there was a limited choice and range of visitor facilities in terms of catering, entertainment and shopping opportunities on-site. The more intangible dimensions such as providing guidance, communication and interpretation facilities for visitors were very ad-hoc and informal. Overall the site itself was poorly maintained and there was little evidence of interactive management of visitors.

DISCUSSION

The current activities at this WS site would appear to be failing social, economic and environmental objectives. Currently the site maintenance including the care of features/exhibits, physical site and paths at the site is poor. There is evidence of erosion, neglect, litter and graffiti throughout the site. Although local managers (especially the registered charity and the public sector) do consider that it is important to preserve and protect for sustainability, they have the potential to make detrimental decisions that may threaten any economic and social well-being. Many of these managers tend to focus on environmental perspectives and allow this to influence decision-making on-site without full consideration of the social and economic repercussions. For example, planning to close off areas or erect fences to keep visitors away rather than planning how to manage visitors more proactively throughout the site. As a result, they do not have the resources to manage the site in terms of preventing natural and man-made damage to the vulnerable parts of the site. Because mass tourism is a fast-growing industry, economic and social perspectives also need to prevail and this leads to tension and sometimes conflict between managers and organizations with different perspectives in the same region.

In many tourism sites, especially WH sites, the local managers are not business specialists and are unlikely to be marketing professionals. They are more often specialists with specific scientific interests pertaining to the site (such as geologists, archaeologists, environmentalists). They may not have a marketing mindset or expertise that would allow them to use marketing techniques to achieve environmental objectives in balance with economic and social ones. Currently, little or no on-site marketing techniques are being employed to achieve a balance of economic, social and

environmental factors. Marketing could be used much more strategically and effectively to help encourage sustainability and preservation along with maximizing tourist revenues and catering for the mass market and future growth of this market.

On-site marketing management at this WH site is deficient in two broad aspects, offering a complete tourism service-product and the interactive management of visitors. Marketing techniques have not been employed in creating a range of products and services offering choice and variety for visitors. Tourism sites need revenue generation in order to 'stay in business', to fund the running of the site, pay for maintenance and upgrading. The simplest and most direct means of doing this is using revenue gained from the provision of tourist services at the site or very close to the site. Alongside this, marketing can be positively used to inform, educate and communicate with tourists about the importance of recognizing the needs of social and environmental well being for the benefits of current and future generations.

Marketing for sustainable tourism requires information and education both on-site and off-site, and interactive management of visitors on-site. Clear and proactive communications ensuring customers understand what the service product entails and how to use it is a prerequisite. For example, communicating with the customer at all stages of their experience with the tourist site, from arrival at the site.

CONCLUSION

Strategic integration and co-ordination of all tourism related planning and activity is vital to the creation of sustainable tourism marketing management that delivers social, economic and environmental well-being. Marketing techniques can be utilised to educate and raise awareness of the unique benefits of a WH site and careful management both on and off site can educate and guide potential visitors of the sustainable environmental issues.

Overall, the management and tourism delivery regarding the Giant's Causeway was ad-hoc and fragmented. There was a lack of co-ordination and co-operation in delivering all dimensions that make up the various parts of the overall tourism 'service product'. The lack of integration and collaboration between the public and private companies involved and the diverse nature of the private companies, many of which are SMEs, add to the overall fragmentation of the tourism service-product in the region.

This study demonstrates that currently there is an unsustainable approach to managing and marketing tourism at the Giant's Causeway WH site. Interactions and collaborations between the key organisations at the site, with private sector organisations and between public and quasi-public sector organisations lack integrative and collaborative management planning. This results in a poorly managed, uncoordinated, fragmented tourism service product and a limited tourist experience for visitors. There is little evidence of interactive management of visitors and all marketing communication is poor. Currently, there is little understanding of how marketing management may be used more holistically to help develop a sustainable tourism marketing ethos and the future of the Giant's Causeway WH site may be severely jeopardised.

There is a need for on-going, collaborative, interactive and hands-on management with relevant expertise to ensure the unique environment is respected while making the sites' offerings attractive to the diversity of tourists who visit. In this way the WH site can bring some (much-needed) economic benefit to the local economy and contribute to the long term development of sustainable marketing offerings and a more holistic approach to tourism can be achieved.

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