An Evolutionary Model of Tourism Partnerships

by

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ABSTRACT: Partnerships have become a popular tourism management strategy for leveraging scarce resources in an era of fiscal constraint. Despite the popularity of partnerships, little empirical research has been done to explain the processes that occur when such interactions take place. An evolutionary model is presented in this paper based on an empirical study of three tourism partnerships, a review of existing tourism partnership case studies, and the integration of emerging theory from the organizational behavior field. Tourism partnerships begin in a context of environmental forces that cause a partnership to be initiated. Out of this environmental context, partnerships evolve sequentially through a problem-setting, direction-setting, and structuring phase. Partnership outcomes and feedback loops emphasize the dynamic and cyclical nature of partnership evolution. Special facilitative skills are needed to sustain and nurture tourism partnerships. Recommendations for future research are made.

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INTRODUCTION

It has become popular in tourism management circles to emphasize the importance of forging partnerships to accomplish collective and organizational goals (Gunn 1994). Tourism partnerships, as described in the literature, include cooperative marketing initiatives (Witt and Moutinho 1989), intergovernmental coalitions (Selin 1993), public-private partnerships (Murphy 1985), and intersector planning (Gunn 1994). This paper examines partnerships, both as a management strategy and as a theoretical construct. Partnerships, as a term popularly used in the tourism field, are arrangements working toward some common end among otherwise independent organizations. While tourism organizations have always been involved in partnerships to a certain degree, recent economic, political, and social forces have combined to make partnerships an explicit priority of these agencies. Indeed, presidential ideology, institutionalized in the reinventing government movement (Osborne and Gaebler 1993), has given rise to a number of partnership initiatives.

At the federal level, the USDA Forest Service have made partnerships the means to implement a number of agency initiatives that affect the supply of nature-oriented tourism opportunities. These include the National Recreation Strategy (Selin and Chavez 1993) and the Rural Assistance Program (McWilliams 1993). And the National Park Service, through the Vail Agenda, has made partnerships an explicit priority, particularly for its heritage tourism programs (Brown, 1993). Interest in partnerships, at all levels of government, has been chronicled in a number of descriptive case studies, where managers typically describe successful partnerships
and share keys to success and pitfalls to avoid (Crowley 1988).

Despite the popularity of partnerships, little empirical research has been done to explain the processes that occur when such interactions take place. This article will first provide a conceptual framework for understanding tourism partnerships. Next, a developmental model is elaborated. This model is based on an empirical study of three tourism partnerships, a review of existing tourism partnership case studies, and the integration of emerging theory from the organizational behavior field. The model will be illustrated with a partnership case history drawn from the empirical research.

PARTNERSHIP THEORY

Before developing an evolutionary model of partnerships, it is important to conceptually define the partnership construct and establish the theoretical assumptions upon which this study is based. Rising interest in partnerships across the political landscape has attracted the attention of pioneering scholars, notably from the organizational behavior field. The theoretical developments of Gray (1985), McCann (1983), and Waddock (1989) provide the conceptual underpinnings of this study.

Partnerships will be defined here as the voluntary pooling of resources (labor, money, information, etc.) between two or more parties to accomplish collaborative goals (Gray 1985). This emphasis in this study is upon organizational partners. Partnerships range from situations where two organizations interact briefly around a common problem to those where multiple organizations are represented in an ongoing venture. Partnerships may be highly structured, characterized by legally binding agreements, or may be quite unstructured verbal agreements between participating organizations. Examples from the tourism field include interactions between park
authorities and Friends groups that voluntarily provide support services for local tourist attractions like zoos and museums. Or, the collaboration between regional interests needed to create a state scenic byway system that receives funding through recent federal transportation legislation.

Several assumptions provide a conceptual framework for understanding the dynamic nature of tourism partnerships. First, it is assumed that tourism organizations operate in a turbulent environment (Trist 1977). That is, there are many economic, social, and political forces that influence policy and management direction. For example, the recent violence in Florida is having a profound impact on the delicate balance of tourism trade there. However, it is also assumed that tourism organizations have the ability to influence their environment through strategic planning.

Second, we adopt a domain level focus in examining tourism partnerships. Most tourism managers still embrace an organization set perspective (Evans 1966), where their organization is thought to be the focal agency and other organizations and interests are considered to be external "publics." Though appropriate for a more predictable environment, successfully navigating a turbulent environment requires that managers adopt a domain level focus defined as, "the set of actors (individuals, groups, and/or organizations that become joined by a common problem or interest" (Gray 1985, p. 912). One example of a domain might be the set of actors interested in establishing a multi-county area as a heritage region to position itself for federal funding through the National Park Services' heritage partnership initiatives. Or, another might be the actors interested in protecting old growth forests in the Pacific Northwest for their aesthetic and tourism value. Each of these problems involves
many organizational and individual interests that transcend traditional organizational boundaries. We argue that a domain level focus is needed to understand and solve these complex issues.

Finally, we adopt a process-oriented, rather than a cross-sectional approach to the study of tourism partnerships. Past research on partnerships in the organizational behavior field has been criticized for focusing primarily on formal transactions, is insensitive to multiple outcomes, and is oriented towards individual actors at the expense of the larger system dynamics (Rogers and Whetten 1982; Selin and Beason 1991). In this paper, we attempt to overcome these criticisms by developing an evolutionary model of tourism partnerships that emphasizes partnership dynamics at the domain level and views tourism partnerships as a dynamic system of interactions, constantly changing in response to internal and external forces.

THE STUDY

The evolutionary model developed in this article is in part based on an empirical study of three tourism partnerships. Case study research has been used extensively in the management sciences field to study the internal structure and processes of partnerships (Waddock 1989). To construct a population of partnerships, a questionnaire was mailed to Recreation Staff Officers on all national forests requesting cost-share agreements and supporting documents describing two of their most successful partnerships. In addition, a copy of all USDA Forest Service regional reports on partnerships during the 1990-91 fiscal year was obtained. The final population included descriptions and supporting documentation for 280 partnerships representing 78 national forests.
A criteria-based procedure was used to select three partnerships for the case study phase of the project. The criteria included attributes such as degree of success in accomplishing ambitious goals, maturity, number of partners, voluntary association, and regional proximity. The three partnerships chosen included a community project in Eagle, Colorado to construct a regional visitor information center. Key partners in the effort included the Eagle District of the White River National Forest, the Colorado Division of Wildlife, Eagle County, the town of Eagle, the Bureau of Land Management, the Eagle Valley Chamber of Commerce, and the Eagle County Historical Society. The second partnership was a statewide effort in Utah to develop an integrated scenic byway system. Key partners included the USDA Forest Service, the Utah Travel Council, the Bureau of Land Management, the Utah Department of Transportation, the Federal Highway Administration, the National Park Service, and the Utah Travel Regions. The third partnership was another community effort in St. Maries, Idaho to interpret the logging history of the region. Project outcomes have included the construction of an interpretive center and several recreational trails. Key partners were the St. Maries District of the Idaho Panhandle National Forests, the St. Joe Valley Association, and the Marble Creek Historical Society. All three selected partnerships have received national exposure and awards for their significant accomplishments.

During the summer of 1992, the author visited each partnership site. A triangulation method (Miles & Huberman 1984) was employed to collect multiple sources of data to control for possible biases caused by the researcher being the sole observer of the partnership. Data sources included semi-structured interviews with all
key partners, letters, agendas and minutes, administrative documents (reports, proposals, brochures), and newspaper clippings. A total of 23 interviews were conducted, each lasting an average of 45 minutes. In all cases, the most directly involved and knowledgeable individual within each agency was interviewed. All interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed word for word for subsequent analysis. In each of the three partnerships, key participants were interviewed about the development of their partnership, the opportunities they envisioned, problems encountered, and the developmental stages of their partnership. Developmental histories were then constructed for each partnership. Key individuals from each partnership were consulted to validate the accuracy of the case histories. These case histories then became the basis of analysis of the developmental process.

AN EVOLUTIONARY MODEL

A major goal of this research study was to develop an evolutionary model of tourism partnerships. This evolutionary model is illustrated in Figure 1. The evolution of tourism partnerships begins in a context of environmental forces that cause a partnership to be initiated. Out of this environmental context, partnerships evolve sequentially through a problem-setting, direction-setting, and structuring phase. Partnership outcomes and feedback arrows emphasize the dynamic and cyclical nature of partnership evolution.

The Context of Tourism Partnerships

Organizations that are potential partners operate in a dynamic societal environment that exerts many forces on them. Some of these forces are competitive or technological, others are political, social, or economic. Many of these forces work
against cooperative relations among independent organizations. Other forces tend to draw organizations together to address some common concern or problem. A number of these latter forces have been identified in the partnership literature or were observed in this empirical study. They are illustrated in Figure 1 as the context of tourism partnerships.

- Crisis is often the catalyst for collective action through partnerships. For example, the recent Los Angeles earthquake prompted an aggressive inter-agency campaign to repair structural damage and allay prospective tourists' fears regarding future catastrophe. Partnerships can also be initiated through the intervention of a broker or convener. In the Eagle River partnership, the district ranger had a vision for a regional visitor information center and shared this vision at a Chamber of Commerce meeting attended by many of the future partners in the cooperative project. In some cases, partnerships can be legally mandated. For example, in the Utah case, funding for scenic byways through the federal transportation bill (ISTEA) was contingent upon formation of a local or state-level interagency planning commission. A common vision is also important for partnership formation. All three partnerships in the study grew out of a mutual recognition that tourism will play an important role in revitalizing rural economies historically dependent on natural resource-based commodities. This was generally recognized by participants whether they represented federal resource management agencies, state or city government, or the private sector. All three partnership projects, the Eagle Visitor Information, the Utah Scenic Byway program, and the St. Maries Historical Project included tourism development as a central goal.

Existing networks played an important role in all three partnerships in the study.
In some cases, the agencies involved had worked together on other projects so it was quite natural for their relations to expand into this partnership. In other cases, the individuals might not have worked together professionally but knew each other socially through church or other community organizations. Leadership also played a critical role in the development of the three partnerships. A strong leader acted as a catalyst to bring the various interests together in each case. This individual was, in each case, a strong-willed, enthusiastic person who in the words of one subject, "would not take no for an answer." Incentives were another force that led to partnership formation in the study. The National Recreation Strategy, with its emphasis on partnerships and availability of cost-share grants motivated certain individuals to get involved. In the Utah case, federal monies available through the federal highway bill (ISTEA) stimulated interest in collaborative planning. Likewise, the Scenic Byway programs initiated by the USDA Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management provided powerful incentives to resource managers to engage in partnership activities. Finally, vested interest emerged as another important factor leading to partnership formation. A strong sense of community and personal attachment to the natural resource motivated a number of individual to become involved in partnership efforts. This was particularly true for private sector involvement. Comments like, "I railroaded in the St. Joe Valley for ten years" were often offered as reasons for becoming an active partner.

**Problem-setting**

In the problem-setting stage, the various interests start to appreciate the interdependencies that exist between them and begin to realize that problem
resolution will require collective action. Consensus is reached on who has a legitimate stake in the issue. Stakeholders begin to mutually acknowledge the issue which brings them together (Gray 1985). But, recognizing interdependence may not be enough to initiate a partnership. The perception that there are benefits to be derived by each partner is also important. These benefits must be perceived to outweigh the costs of participating in the partnership. In the Colorado case, one participant noted that early in the project there were several months of, "testing peoples' commitment" to the project. Other comments described the process where interests started to come forward and "embrace" the idea. The common problem definition that occurs during this stage was described by several subjects as a time when, "the idea started to germinate." One participant described this phase as a time when, "a lot of developmental thinking was going on." It is highly unlikely that a partnership will be successful unless there is a perception that partnership outcomes will result in benefits to each partner. Predictably, subjects were self-effacing on this issue. Many talked of the potential benefit to the state or to the community. But, most did acknowledge that their organization would benefit from the partnership.

**Direction-setting**

In the direction-setting phase, partners begin to identify and appreciate a sense of common purpose (McCann 1983). Stakeholders typically engage in joint information search where they explore the desired future of the partnership. Goals are established, ground rules set, and sub-groups organized to examine specific issues. Several participants discussed the process where, "everyone gave up turf to try and get a broader ownership." Common goals addressed often focused on operational
considerations such as what should be built or accomplished. Ground rules are also elaborated at this stage. For example, the Utah scenic byway planning group adopted an internal decision rule that if two people on the committee disagreed with a proposed byway nomination then it would be discarded.

**Structuring**

The structuring phase involves institutionalizing the shared meanings of the group and devising a regulatory framework to guide future collective action (Gray 1985). In any partnership there is a need to manage stakeholder interactions in an increasingly systematic manner. Legal forms of organizing are instituted, roles assigned, and formal agreements reached to monitor and assure collective compliance to the goals of the group. The degree of formalization varied significantly across the three study partnerships. In the Colorado and Idaho cases, formal memorandums of understanding (MOU) were drawn up where goals and individual agency responsibilities were spelled out. However, the Utah scenic byway committee never formalized under an MOU. In each case, committees were assigned during this stage. Typical committees included signing, interpretation, and steering committees. In addition, systems were established for inventorying the amount of private resources contributed to the project. Operational plans were also developed during this phase. One subject described this stage of the project as, "proceeding from the conceptual to the operational stage."

**Outcomes**

Implementation inevitably leads to partnership outcomes. The most obvious of these are the programmatic outcomes, the visible, tangible products of the partnership.
In this study, this would include visitor centers, brochures, a dedicated scenic byway system, campgrounds, and interpretive trails. Many comments addressed these tangible accomplishments of the partnership. Other, less tangible, benefits also were derived from each partnership. Improved relations among community groups was frequently mentioned. One participant in the Colorado project described how the partnership, "brought the entire town together." In several cases, there was an elevated respect for the role of USDA Forest Service personnel in the community. Comments such as, "everyone knows the ranger now" or "the Forest Service became a community leader" were stated frequently. Another obvious benefit resulting from all three cases was the recognition received for a job well done. In each case, rewards and grants were received over the course of the partnership.

Finally, as the feedback arrows in Figure 1 illustrate, partnerships undergo a cyclical reevaluation of purpose. This reevaluation often leads to a broadening of focus if the partnership is to flourish. This was the case in each of the three study partnerships. For example, the Eagle Visitor Center concept grew from a community focus into a regional attraction. The Utah scenic byway project added a backway (dirt roads) component. And, the St. Maries historical project added several other dispersed recreational facilities. However, this reevaluation of purpose may also lead to partnership "death" if partners lose interest in the issue or a split coalition develops. This "death" may be appropriate if the purpose of the partnership has been fulfilled or unfortunate if the problem remains unresolved.

AN EMPIRICAL EXAMPLE

The stages of partnership development described illustrate the complexity
involved in initiating and sustaining the energy of tourism partnerships. They also suggest the fragile areas of partnership development including maintenance of the coalition and the need to continually broaden the partnership agenda or risk partnership collapse. In this section, the Eagle Valley partnership will be used to illustrate the stages of partnership development presented above.

**Context of Eagle Valley Partnership**

The idea for a visitor information center (VIC) in Eagle, Colorado emerged from several contextual factors. Eagle, like many rural American communities, is making a transition from an agriculturally-based economy to a service-based economy. Because of the varied outdoor recreation opportunities available on surrounding public lands administered by the USDA Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management, as well as in nearby Vail, tourism has emerged as an economic development stimulus. In addition, Eagle’s location, adjacent to the Interstate 70 corridor between Glenwood Springs and Vail, created a significant opportunity to entice through-travelers off the interstate.

Prior to this VIC project, tourist information regarding services and recreation opportunities in the Eagle area were fragmented and incomplete. The Eagle Chamber of Commerce had been operating a small information center, but limited resources constrained the operation of this center. The Eagle District office of the White Mountain National Forest, located in downtown Eagle did distribute information on recreation opportunities in the National Forest. However, the downtown location made it difficult for casual visitors to find the office and the office was often closed on weekends and holidays. The closest Bureau of Land Management office was located
30 miles west in Glenwood Springs. And the district wildlife manager for the Colorado Division of Wildlife worked out of his home. All of these agencies were beginning to see a need to provide better information to the traveling public.

Typical of a small town, several of the key individuals who would emerge as catalysts in the VIC project knew each other personally and, in several cases, had professional relations prior to this project. Overall, though, most of these agencies had worked independently in the past. For example, even though the Eagle district office for the White Mountain National Forest was located in downtown Eagle, the actual Forest boundary was 17 miles to the south. As a result, district personnel rarely were involved in community projects.

However, the organizational climate within each of the state and federal resource management agencies was beginning to change. In response to public pressure, these agencies were beginning to adjust their traditional emphasis on commodity production to non-commodities such as recreation and tourism use of public lands. Indicative of these changes was the National Recreation Strategy (NRS) implemented by the USDA Forest Service in the spring of 1988. This system-wide strategy was designed to re-emphasize recreation in the agency's multiple-use mission. The agency hoped to implement this strategy through partnerships as a way to stretch federal dollars. A challenge-cost share fund was established as an incentive to field managers. At about the same time, the USDA Forest Service also implemented a rural development initiative designed to encourage staff involvement in rural development projects. So, it is not surprising that when the District Ranger took office, the Forest Supervisor gave him implicit instructions to get involved with the
community of Eagle.

One other contextual factor was that the town of Eagle owned Chambers Park, an undeveloped piece of property bordering the Eagle River and a stones throw from Interstate 70. In 1984, the city had allowed the Eagle County Historical Society to move a donated barn to the site. The Historical Society entered into a lease with the city and proceeded to raise private funds to restore the barn, someday hoping to house a museum there.

Problem-setting

The actual idea for a Visitor Information Center was the brainstorm of the Eagle District Ranger. In 1987, at a Chamber of Commerce meeting, he presented the idea for a "first-class" information center for the city of Eagle. The idea was warmly received by the business leaders and city of Eagle staff present that evening. The group became aware that they all shared a common interest in the proposed project and that tackling the project would require collective action. The city and Chamber of Commerce were excited about the economic development potential of the project while the USDA Forest Service was primarily interested in providing better interpretive services to the traveling public.

For a few months the idea incubated among representatives of the USDA Forest Service, city of Eagle, and Eagle Valley Chamber of Commerce. In the words of the district ranger,"we went through a few months of testing peoples' commitment to the idea." Concurrently, other partners were sought or came forward to participate in the project. This would include the county, the Colorado Division of Wildlife, and the Bureau of Land Management.
Direction-setting

These early discussions evolved into a weekly meeting over lunch. At this stage, discussions were informal and focused on reaching consensus on the concept of a visitor center. As one participant put it, "we addressed the question, what do we want to build and accomplish."

The obvious advantages of locating this visitor information center at Chambers Park soon became apparent to the working group. The Eagle Valley Historical Society were enthusiastic about joining efforts with the information center as long as they could proceed with their plans to operate a museum there also. These early discussions culminated in a May 1988 interagency meeting held at the proposed Chambers Park site. Representatives of each agency unanimously supported the project. An action committee composed of one representative from each agency was formed and charged with developing an operational plan for the proposed facility and then proceeding with fundraising and implementation.

Structuring

Discussions also centered at these early stages on who the lead agency should be. Because the proposed site was on city property and the Historical Society already had a lease with the city, the Eagle Board of Trustees agreed to coordinate efforts to plan, construct, and operate the tourist information center. At a June 1988 board meeting, an advisory committee was established consisting of members from the original working group and action committee. An information center account was set up to collect and disburse funds for the project.

To formalize the responsibilities and role of each agency, a memorandum of
understanding was drafted and signed by agency directors. The agreement designated the town of Eagle as the lead agency with final authority over administration of the information center. The advisory committee was formally established to make recommendations to the city on matters related to the information center. Each signatory agency was given one vote on the advisory committee.

With this interorganizational structure in place, the city of Eagle and advisory board proceeded with the planning, fundraising, and construction of the tourist information center. A preliminary master plan was developed for the facility with the volunteer assistance of a local architect. And, fundraising efforts began in earnest. Each advisory committee member went back to their respective agencies and solicited internal sources of funds for the project. In some cases, the entire committee made joint presentations to potential funding agencies. And, until the facility was dedicated in the summer of 1991, the committee continued to meet weekly over lunch.

All of the signatory agencies contributed to the project, some in cash and others through inkind contributions. The county contributed heavy equipment and skilled labor throughout the construction phase of the project. A Challenge cost-share grant was obtained from the USDA Forest Service. A major grant was given to the project from the Colorado Department of Local Affairs to stimulate innovate rural development projects. And, community involvement and contributions were solicited. A major step forward occurred when a farmhouse was donated to the project to house the information center.

Outcomes

Finally, after three years of hard work, the information center was opened to the
general public during the summer of 1991. The information center-museum complex, in its final form, also included restrooms, a picnic area, a boating access ramp, and a Caboose donated to the effort. The tourist information center is now open from Memorial Day through the end of hunting season in the fall and is staffed by city employees. The resource management agencies share one room for interpretive displays. Information on other local attractions and services in Eagle Valley are located in a separate room. The museum is operated and staffed by volunteers from the Eagle Valley Historical Society.

The city now coordinates the operation and maintenance of the center. The advisory committee continues to function though not meeting as frequently. Most committee members envision the committee continuing in an advisory capacity to maintain and improve the overall operation of the center.

Since the inception of visitor center idea, the partnership has broadened its agenda considerably. From a local initiative, the visitor center has emerged as a regional attraction. With the visitor center now operating, the partners are focusing on new goals. Nature trails, a mercantile store, and paved parking lots are several of the ideas currently being contemplated.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to develop an evolutionary model of tourism partnerships that emphasizes the dynamic, yet fragile nature of these collective efforts. The reevaluation of purpose and broadening focus observed in the study partnerships suggests that special facilitative skills are needed to sustain and nurture tourism partnerships. Constant feedback and reshaping of issues is necessary before these
issues begin to lose their salience.

Despite the interest in integrated approaches to tourism planning and management, it would appear that partnerships are presently underdeveloped in the tourism field. Competition, bureaucratic inertia, and geographic and organizational fragmentation were just some of the constraints to collective action observed during this study. Tourism managers comfortable with the hierarchical decision-making prevalent in many organizations must begin to think laterally, forging partnerships to achieve organizational and collective goals.

This study illustrates the dynamic and complex nature of tourism partnerships. Viewed as a process, we see an intricate balance of interorganizational relationships emerge, influencing and influenced by a diverse set of economic, social, and political forces. Successful tourism partnerships require facilitative skills at each stage of their developmental life cycle. This study begins to identify those conditions necessary at each stage of development to achieve partnership success. Nevertheless, we recognize the limits of our ability as social scientists to describe with precision which levers to pull to achieve success in all situations.

We hope this study will serve as a signpost to other tourism scholars interested in collaborative processes in the tourism field. Emerging partnership theory from the organizational behavior field can provide a conceptual framework to interested tourism researchers (Gray, 1988). Interpretive case studies and longitudinal research designs are needed to capture the complexity of collaborative processes in the tourism field. Research examining tourism partnerships is needed at both the network and organizational levels of analysis. In addition, future scholars should expand the
present sample to examine a diverse set of partnership types. Interest in tourism partnerships raises many interesting and under-researched questions.

For example, how is success defined when we consider tourism partnerships? And, what are the conditions at each stage of partnership development that contribute to partnership continuance and expansion? Another line of inquiry might also develop a typology of tourism partnerships. In addition, the hypotheses implicit in the partnership model developed here require further empirical testing.

Tourism managers that want to promote partnerships should examine the subtle processes of partnership development and manage tourism partnerships with these processes in mind. Social science research can help to illuminate this path.
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Figure 1. "An Evolutionary Model of Tourism Partnerships"