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# An Integrative Model-As-A-Tool for Decision Making in Tourism

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## Abstract

To administer destinations is a hard and challenging task because the tourism phenomenon implies complex interactions and processes between different actors in, often, vast territories. Experience shows a fundamental conflict between academic research and tourism management in practice. Researchers opt for scientific, in-depth approaches, which is sometimes at the expense of the broad, holistic and pragmatic view, needed by destination managers. Supporting decision making in practice with a more systemic and integrative approach therefore relates to regional development given that destinations are configured by the mobility of visitors linking diverse territories and actors. Those territories often have fragile cultural and natural heritage that require well based managerial decisions. Further, the popularity generated by some destinations creates the risk of over-visitation, putting pressure on the exceptional and fragile value of some places, and generating problems for the host societies. Destinations could thus benefit from innovative tourism-specific tools that support effective decision making for planning and management to better understand what happens at the destination and operationalize decisions.

The article therefore introduces an Integrative Model for Decision Making, presenting it as a research based model-as-a-tool for tourism management in practice. The article contributes to the strengthening of the conceptual and methodological basis for the study of tourism as a complex phenomenon and to support decision making in tourism destinations. The model is structured around phases that describe the emergence of the tourism phenomenon and the functions performed by the actors involved. This work proposes 1) to address tourism as a dynamic complex system that integrates the visitor-facilitator interactions to generate experiences, and 2) a model-as-a-tool with a methodology for empirical application to support decision making and continuous monitoring. The model can be used to analyze different issues for tourism development, and to focus on different perspectives such as social capital, governance, the value chain, environmental management, among others. The integrative model offers therefore a way to explore and describe the destination in a guided manner, evidencing its dynamics, actors' interactions, causes and potential outcomes. One special characteristic of this tool, is that it allows users to zoom in their analysis from the general to the specific or backwards, without losing the track of the whole picture.

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The integrative model is developed by synthesizing long experience on destination management in Ecuador and Belgium in the light of the fundamental elements of tourism drawn from the wider tourism literature. An explicit description of the key features of the tourism phenomenon allows to explore the principal relations and interactions between actors in an integrated form.

We distinguish three pillars: a) tourism as a phenomenon emerging from a dynamic system of interactions, b) the visitors and the facilitators' perspectives in terms of performed functions, and c) the methodology to analyse diverse cases from different aspects of interest, as to support understanding and decision making in practice.

The model helps, in a guided and systematic way, to reflect on what is there already, what is lacking or not functioning well and how to tackle the problems. One of the final products is a well-structured, simplified and summarised outlook of the destination. That, in turn, creates a strong basis for decision-making on several aspects, such as: policy, strategies, budgeting, interventions, integration of stakeholders, empowerment of locals, visitor management or improvement of the experience.

We consider the proposed model therefore as an instrument that connects theory and practice for regional tourism development with a usefulness beyond the Ecuadorian and Belgian cases.

**Keywords:** Tourism, integrative, complexity, model, methodology, decision making, practice