Leading Change for Environmental Management
Practices in Tourism: the case of SMEs in South West England

Submitted by
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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between leadership and knowledge transfer regarding environmental issues in tourism businesses through the lens of small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the South West of England. Within the tourism industry, sustainable development is a dominant paradigm and policy makers in the South West strongly encourage the implementation of sustainable management practices within tourism businesses through a wide range of ‘best practice’ manuals, case-studies and guidelines. As a result of these efforts the South West is leading within and beyond the region with regards to sustainability. However, a lack of understanding exists about the underlying reasons why tourism businesses and in particular SMEs embed sustainable management practices. This has the result that the diffusion of best practice at a local or regional level is often assumed to be present rather than understood. To ensure long-term competitiveness and survival of organisations in tourism – as well as in other sectors – the ability to change and alter one’s business practices is vital. In this regard the importance of leadership has been highlighted within the general management literature. However, although leaders within organisations introduce, enact and are accountable for change, research on leadership in tourism is sparse.

Accordingly, an extensive survey (n=193) was conducted with in-depth semi-structured interviews (n=18) of owners and/or managers of serviced accommodation providers in Torbay. The results demonstrate that the leadership style exhibited by owner/managers outside their establishment strongly influences the extent to which sustainable management practices are implemented within their businesses. Moreover, different leadership styles also have a strong influence on promoting behaviour change through knowledge transfer outside their establishment. To a small number of owner/managers, the benefit of sharing knowledge and expertise is clearly understood, but the majority of participants had only started to identify potential benefits for their businesses. Additionally, the results highlighted that a refinement of the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) was required. The standard three-fold model of the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT), consisting of transformational, transactional and laissez-faire, could not be replicated as transactional leadership style dispersed into two strands – leadership through active management-by-exception and contingent reward. Four distinct clusters of leadership behaviour were identified among the owner/managers in Torbay, of which ‘Convinced Transformational Leaders’ are the most important as they are responsible for driving change through the tourism industry at a local level. Therefore, this study confirms that, instead of a ‘one-size-fits-all’ policy to encourage widespread sustainable management practices, a more differentiated approach is needed to inspire change and deliver action on the ground.
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