MANAGING A SUSTAINABLE WINE TOURISM INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

This study is part of an on-going qualitative research project into sustainable wine tourism, looking at developments in the wine tourism industry in the Hunter Valley, NSW, Australia, and particularly its sustainable development (SD). For this paper, the official Internet presence of selected wine tour operators offering vineyard-tours as well as tastings was assessed by checking home pages and related sub pages for comments relating to SD issues. The study shows that the majority of tour operators do not make any mention of SD issues on their web pages though there were some exceptions. Furthermore, the emphasis in developing SD practices within the wine tourism industry is clearly on environmental aspects though a sustainable development of tourism will require a three pronged approach of economic as well as environmental and social sustainability.

Keywords: wine tourism; sustainability; Hunter Valley
1. WINE TOURISM AND SUSTAINABILITY

This study looks at developments in the wine tourism industry in the Hunter Valley, NSW, Australia, and particular its sustainability. In the following sections the article will provide a short introduction to the term ‘Sustainable Development’ (SD) and outline contemporary wine tourism in the Hunter Valley before discussing experiences with sustainability in the wine tourism industry. Finally, it will discuss the case studies of several tour operators with differing commitment towards SD as indicated by their official web presence.

Wine tourism is being developed in many regions around the world (see Getz, 2000; Hall et al., 2000) including the Hunter Valley. The Hunter Valley is a significant contributor to the NSW economy (Department of State and Regional Development, 2009) and its sustainability is a concern (Hunter Valley Vineyard Association, 2009). Contemporary wine tourism can include such diverse activities and locations as Wineries, Attractions and Galleries, Events, Tours, Accommodation, and Restaurants. Overall, there are around 120 wineries and cellar door that offer tastings, sell wine and local produce, and offer catering and/or tours (Hunter Valley Wine Country, 2009a). The issues in developing and maintaining a sustainable rural tourism relate both to a more sustainable wine production as well as destination sustainability (social, moral, economic, agricultural and infrastructural impacts).

The Australian wine industry and grape growers seem well aware of the environmental and political issues surrounding wine and wine tourism, and the Winemakers’ Federation of Australia Incorporated (WFA), the national peak body with voluntary membership representing more than 90% of the wine produced in Australia, states its commitment “to the continual improvement of its environmental performance. Accelerating the adoption of ecologically sustainable practices throughout all aspects of its operation is critical to its future success and will ensure the needs and expectations of the wider community and customers are met” (WFA, 2009). The organisation developed a Wine Tourism Strategic Business Plan 2000-2005, building on the previous work done on the National Wine Tourism Strategy (1998) and National Wine Tourism Implementation Plan (1999) as well as maintains a central database of wine tourism publications and research, and publishes a series of fact sheets providing practical information for winery operators, and participates in a wine tourism workshop programme.

The need for radical changes to address some of the extreme economic, social and environmental imbalances in modern development has been postulated for years. The increasingly popular idea of
SD suggests a holistic approach to (at its most extreme radically) modify the current socio-economic situation to allow an enduring and just living standard for humanity and its co-inhabitants on Earth. The term was first used in forestry where its principle postulated to take only as many trees as could be grown in a certain time unit (Eblinghaus and Stickler, 1996). In the 1970s the United Nations started discussing the concept in a more general way (Tosun, 1998) and eventually defined it as a development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations, 1987). It seems it is no coincidence that the opposing terms of (‘positive’ as ecological) sustainability and (‘negative’ as industrial) development were merged (Wichterich, Zillmann, Sibum and Quistorp, 1997) to signal that economic growth and environmental preservation were not to be seen as mutual exclusive (compare Gwynne and Silva, 1999b). Either way, the term was popularised during the Earth Summit in 1992 and since then has increasingly gained popularity among experts (Wichterich et al., 1997) as well as the general public. SD has developed into a guiding principle for global as well as regional developments (Brand, 1997) and consequently has relevance for the tourism industry. Yet elaborations on what exactly SD encompasses are diverse (compare Schröter, 2002; Wichterich et al., 1997), which is at least partially due to the political nature of the international debate (see Brand, 1997).

Either way, the term has found its way into mainstream debate as well as into tourism debates (e.g., Cohen 2002; Collins 1998; Holden 2003; Teo 2002). A statement by the World Tourism Organisation (WTO) proposes that “sustainable tourism development guidelines and management practices are applicable to all forms of tourism in all types of destinations, including mass tourism and the various niche tourism segments. Sustainability principles refer to the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development, and a suitable balance must be established between these three dimensions to guarantee long-term sustainability” (World Tourism Organisation, 2004). The emphasis on balancing all three dimensions is notable as the SD discussion is often shortened to economic or environmental aspects.

The Australian wine industry and grape growers seem well aware of the environmental and political issues surrounding wine and wine tourism (see Winemakers’ Federation of Australia Incorporated, 2009). Furthermore, a shift in consumer behaviour to more environmental conscious behaviour could advantage those wineries that adopt and successfully communicate sustainable practises to their respective customers. In order to establish the extent of sustainable practises and their possible
role in marketing, a sample of promotional materials of selected wineries of the Hunter Valley was conducted and qualitatively analysed.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is part of an on-going qualitative research project into sustainable wine tourism, looking at developments in the wine tourism industry in the Hunter Valley, NSW, Australia, and particular its sustainable development (SD). For this paper, the official Internet presence of selected wine tour operators offering vineyard-tours as well as tastings was assessed by checking home pages and related sub pages for comments relating to SD issues. The Hunter Valley Wine Country organisation (2009d) lists more than 20 categories of activities, of which the two categories ‘Wineries Offering Wine Tours’ (8 operators) and ‘Cellar Door Tasting’ (19 operators) have been surveyed in greater detail. The web presence of all listed operators was investigated, with a special focus on homepages and ‘about us’-pages. The major limitation is that only publicly accessible information could be evaluated, which might not always give the ‘full picture’ of an organisation’s involvement and commitment towards SD. Thus a follow-up study has been initiated.

This follow-up study will examine how knowledge in regards to sustainable practices circulates within the tourism industry of the Hunter region. This will involve an examination of (1) the role values play in adapting more sustainable practices and (2) the role of knowledge ‘gatekeepers’, particularly in relation to successful initiations and implementing of more sustainable practises.

The main expected outcome is the development of a critical understanding of the current developments and issues regarding sustainable tourism in the Hunter region including an identification of the key players (through literature research, trade publications, family tours, and interviews).

For now, the findings of the explorative study will be discussed in the following section.

3. FINDINGS

25 wine tour operators and their stance towards SD are assessed by analysing their publicly accessible marketing of their official Internet presence. This, of course, ‘only’ indicates the individual tour operator’s decision to publicise issues of SD in which they see themselves involved,
while there might be reasons for not mentioning certain management plans and/or actions towards SD. However, as such incidences cannot be investigated properly in the scope of this study, only the publicly accessible information as disclosed through the official web presence of the tour operators has been investigated.

The online assessment indicates an importance that most business seem place on the natural environment as they include (often picturesque) images of their vineyards as well as describing the natural resources they utilize. However, hardly any of the operators talk specifically about issues of SD (see Table 1: Individual Operators in the category ‘Wineries Offering Wine Tours’ and Indicators of Their Involvement in SD and Table 2: Individual Operators in the category ‘Cellar Door Tasting’ and Indicators of Their Involvement in SD).

Table 1: Individual Operators in the category ‘Wineries Offering Wine Tours’ and Indicators of Their Involvement in SD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Operator</th>
<th>Mentioning of SD issues, including environmental issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cruickshank Callatoota Estate</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Creek Wines</td>
<td>yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermitage Road Cellars</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGuigan Cellars</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margan Family Winegrowers</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McWilliam's Mount Pleasant</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Individual Operators in the category ‘Cellar Door Tasting’ and Indicators of Their Involvement in SD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Operator</th>
<th>Mentioning of SD issues, including environmental issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gartelmann Wines</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghost Riders Vineyard</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.ghostriderswines.com.au/about.htm">http://www.ghostriderswines.com.au/about.htm</a></td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glandore Estate</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermitage Road Cellars</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope Estate</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungerford Hill Wines</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter Valley Winegrowers Tasting &amp; Sales Centre</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.huntervalleywinegrowers.com.au/About_Us">http://www.huntervalleywinegrowers.com.au/About_Us</a>.</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IronBark Hill Vineyard
nomark

Ivanhoe Estate Vineyard
nomark

Keith Tulloch Wines
nomark

Kelman Vineyard
nomark

Krinklewood Vineyard
yes (biodynamic)
http://www.krinklewood.com/

Lindemans Wines
nomark

Littles Wines
nomark

Macquariedale Estate
yes (biodynamic)

Majors Lane Wines
nomark

McGuigan Cellars
nomark

McLeish Estate
nomark
The very low number of operators addressing issues of SD and/or environmental managing programs is surprising, especially seeing that the Hunter Valley Wine Country, the official Tourist Information Website for the Hunter Valley, actually mentions organic and biodynamic production on its homepage (Hunter Valley Wine Country, 2009b).

However, some relevant information regarding a pro-active stance towards SD is deeply hidden in sub pages and thus nearly inaccessible to the browsing tourist. For example, some operators participate in the ‘Hunter Cleaner Production Program’ that offers businesses a method to achieve environmental best practice and economic efficiency, and involves reducing the use of energy, water, and material resources to minimise waste and increase operational efficiency (Department of Environment and Conservation and the NSW Department of State and Regional Development, 2009). First Creek Wines, for example, is participating in this program to “improve the efficiency of its operations and achieve substantial cost savings; reduce its demands and impact on the environment; strengthen the commitment of its workforce to cleaner production practices; gain a competitive edge in the local market; and enhance its ‘clean, green’ credentials as an Australian wine producer” (First Creek Wines, 2009). It is not clear how many other operators might be participants in this program though a information request to the Department of Environment and Conservation and/or the NSW Department of State and Regional Development would bring more details up.

Furthermore, there are several Organic Wineries, including Hermitage Road Cellars, Hunter Valley Cellars, Macquaridale Estate, Savannah Estate, Tamburlaine Wines and Windarra Winery. And while these wineries only present a small percentage of the overall numbers of wineries in the Hunter Valley (see Figure 1: Percentage of Organic Wineries in the Hunter Valley), it can be surely assumed that SD issues play a crucial part in the decision to convert to Organic and/or Biodynamic operations.

![Percentage of Organic Wineries](image-url)
A further complication is that wineries might have developed personalised and often hard to measure attitudes and practises that might well align with sustainable practises. Kurrajong Vineyard, for example, talks about its own approach to Sustainable Agriculture (SA): “It is important to note that sustainable and organic farming are not necessarily the same thing. Some practices can be sustainable but not organic, and vice versa. One area where this is particularly true is weed management. In areas of higher weed pressure organic practices require a lot of energy and therefore produce a lot of greenhouse gases, either because many passes of mechanical treatment are used, or steam or flame methods must be used. In comparison, the use of a synthetic herbicide may result in much less energy use, and thus be a more sustainable practice when the bigger picture is looked at” (Kurrajong Vineyard, 2009).

Still, the low numbers of tour operators specifically addressing SD issues is somewhat surprisingly low seeing that the media and increasingly also the tourism literature suggest the rise of the ‘green consumer’. This new type of mass consumer is supposed to actively seek more environmentally friendly businesses and/or services. Consequently, organisations communicating such environmental friendliness might gain a competitive advantage. And yet not many wine tourism operators chose to disclose their environmental attitude and/or action. For the time being, the emphasis in developing SD practices within the wine tourism industry is clearly on environmental aspects with no operators mentioning, for example, the ethical (compare Macbeth, J. 2005) and socio-cultural aspects of SD. But it is clear that a sustainable development of tourism requires the three pronged approach of economic as well as environmental and social sustainability. The WTO guidelines seem to acknowledge this by emphasising the scope of issues including viable, long-term economic operations that relate to host communities, community participation and consensus building in tourism planning and development, as well as raising tourists’ awareness about sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices (World Tourism Organisation, 2004).
In Australia further theoretical and applied research is conducted by the Australian Government through Tourism Research Australia and its International Visitor Survey (IVS) and National Visitor Survey (NVS), Australian Bureau of Statistics, the Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Centre (STCRC) with up-to-date summaries of what research is available and others, as well as State and Regional Tourism Organisations, universities, the wine industry and private companies and consultants. Such research shows a trend towards thematic groupings and networks among wine tourism stakeholder (Burton, 2000), urging investigations into ‘how organisations initially establish and extend their networks, along with the underlying communication mechanisms, in order to sustain learning processes, the generation of new knowledge generation and the transfer of acquired knowledge’. It has been argued that “a cohesive, regional approach that incorporates the needs of all stakeholders is required, based on a thorough understanding of visitor needs and expectations. Wineries of all sizes stand to benefit from a strategy that allows them to partner effectively with other tourism attractions and facilities that meets the needs of their target market” (Winemakers’ Federation of Australia Incorporated 2009).

4. CONCLUSION

It has been established before that the contemporary wine tourism industry in the Hunter Valley is a diverse industry, and that there are no binding guidelines across the wine tourism industry nor are there attempts to coordinate SD management plans and actions yet. Instead there are individual attempts towards more sustainable business practises. Many of these are, however, focussed on ‘End-of-Pipe technologies’ of increased fuel efficiency and recycling. In fact, recycling typically the first management action to be adopted in environmental business practice (Michalos, Creech, McDonald and Hatch Kahlke, 2009; see also Arbuthnott, 2009). Critics believe that such End-of-Pipe technologies are not truly sustainable as they represent ‘just’ a technological adaptation without any indication of a change in consciousness (see, for example, Dangschat, 1997). In doing so the current socio-economic system is not changed significantly and truly green technologies and initiatives are ignored. In other words, the challenges to adopt truly sustainable practices that combine the environmental, economic and socio-cultural aspects of tourism development are enormous.

Firstly, the wine tourism industry is located within the wider tourism industry, which in turn is set in a specific socio-economic system that currently thrives on non-sustainable business practises.
Furthermore, it is not clear how the demand side responds to the challenges of SD. Previous “efforts to understand and predict why individuals acting an environmentally appropriate manner have generated a considerable body of literature” (Vaske and Kebri, 2001:16) and so far studies show “no direct relationship between environmental awareness and pro-environmental behaviour” (Hildebrandt, 1997: 237). In other words, while there is much talk about the ‘new green consumer’ there are also indications that nothing much has changed since the Earth Summit and the release of its blueprint Agenda for the 21st Century. There are indications that a ‘green paradigm’ is challenging the dominant western environmental paradigm but the shift in beliefs and attitudes could take decades to complete. In the meantime it is down to individual tour operators to act, and this explorative study showed the great variety in their action and non-action. In the long-term “achieving sustainable development involves a different way of thinking and working. It requires looking after people, taking the long-term view, taking account of the social, economic, environmental and cultural effects of our decisions and encouraging participation and partnerships” (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2003). Or in the words of prominent members of the Australian Wine Industry: “we can’t afford to have business as usual, it’s not a viable option… We need to really think about profitability and sustainability ... for survival” (Smedley cited in ABC News 2009) and “for us it’s about long-term sustainability and ensuring the industry is still viable into the future” (Krieger cited in Page 2009).

However, people can only operate within the given structure and as Arbuthnott (2009) notes, the “barriers to intended actions and social norms have a strong influence on whether or not intended behaviors are accomplished. Thus, changing the physical and social environment to make sustainable behaviors less difficult and more socially valued will enable those with weaker attitude changes to behave more sustainable. In this way, changing contextual factors is likely to have the largest impact on sustainable behavior and development” (Arbuthnott, 2009: 159). Such structural change achieved in a combination of ‘top down’ as well as ‘bottom up’-approaches might be around the corner or not come for years; consequently only the future will show how sustainable the wine tourism industry can and will develop.
REFERENCES


