Progress in Tourism Management

Progress in visitor attraction research: Towards more effective management

Anna Leask

School of Marketing, Tourism and Languages, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, EH14 1DJ, UK

ABSTRACT

Visitor attractions (VAs) play a crucial role in the success of a tourism destination, where they act as key motivators for visits and as resources for local communities. The range of stakeholders involved means their effective management is of key importance in the destination and in the overall success of a country’s tourism product, yet they are an under-researched sector of the tourism system. This Progress in Tourism Management paper reviews and reflects on research publications in relation to this sector. It sets the wider research context and identifies the key management issues experienced at VAs. The paper identifies the limitations of current work in this field and establishes how factors such as ownership and visitor volume help to explain the complexities encountered in managing VAs. The paper then covers a set of themes to structure discussion of previous research activity and offers a model of factors involved in the effective management of VAs. The paper concludes with the development of a research agenda for VA researchers.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to review existing research publications in relation to the effective management of visitor attractions (VAs). A visitor attraction is defined as ‘a permanent resource, either natural or human-made, which is developed and managed for the primary purpose of attracting visitors’ (Hu & Wall, 2005:619) or as a ‘permanently established excursion destination, a primary purpose of which is to allow public access for entertainment, interest or education…open to the public for published periods each year, and should be capable of attracting tourists or day visitors as well as local residents’ (English Tourism Council, 2000:11). The term VA is used in this paper in preference to tourist attraction, as this emphasises the role of the day visitor market in the successful operation of attractions, rather than simply focussing on the overnight tourist.

The paper sets the visitor attraction research context and establishes why visitor attraction research is important. A review of existing research publications is used to develop the main themes of previous visitor attraction research. The themes identified are deliberately selective, focussing on the key management issues rather than all associated research. These themes are used to identify the key factors that influence management practice and to explore the use of management tools to improve the management of VAs. The paper then establishes why the effective management of attractions is crucial for their survival in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Effective management is deemed to be the successful achievement of management plans and objectives as set by stakeholders involved in the management of the VA, the consequences of ineffective management ultimately being the closure of a site or irrecoverable damage to a resource.

The paper synthesises the findings of existing publications to establish the drivers and measures of effectiveness that stakeholders use and the management tools that enable site managers to achieve their varying objectives. A model of factors in the effective management of VAs has been developed on the basis of the combined findings of the publications reviewed. The paper concludes with the development of a future research agenda for VA researchers.

2. Visitor attractions – why are they important?

2.1. Definitions and classifications

Even the matter of arriving at a universally accepted definition for visitor attractions is a challenge and is indicative of the variety of issues influencing the management of VAs. Those offered above in Section 1 are in common use and combine the key features of others purported by visitor attraction researchers in relation to the permanence of the attraction, the elements of the product and its primary purpose (Gunn, 1972; Hede & Hall, 2006; Leiper, 1990; Lew, 1987; Pearce, 1998). Identification of the relevant definition is important in research projects due to the variety of terminology...
internationally. For example in Canada, golf resorts and marinas are included in definitions of VAs, while casinos also feature in other countries, but not usually within UK or European categories.

As a result researchers have considered aspects such as the primary purpose of a site as determining its status as a VA, for example the inclusion of outlet shopping malls (Timothy & Butler, 1994), street markets (Kikuchi & Ryan, 2007) and establishments such as Harrods in London. Associated issues with this aspect include the many VAs where the site has been changed from its original use or shares use with a potentially conflicting use, for example places of worship such as Notre Dame, Paris. The permanence of an experience and visitor motivations have also been used to define sites. Middleton and Clarke (2001) refer to attractions as being permanent resources managed for visitor enjoyment, entertainment and education. However, where would dark tourism sites that might include sites of major disasters, individual death-related sites and prisons fit into this definition (Henderson, 2007; Stone & Sharpley, 2008)? One definition that does overcome this is from Pearce (1991: 46), who states that an attraction is a ‘named site with a specific human or natural feature which is the focus of visitor and management attention’.

Issues such as ‘the size, the aesthetic appeal, the management regime, the popularity, the shape and the commercial emphasis of the feature of interest have all been seen as important in defining what are and what are not tourist attractions (Pearce, 1998: 1)’. Wall (1997: 242) proposed a classification of tourism attractions into ‘points, lines and areas’, encouraging consideration of the specific attributes of the resource, visitors’ behaviour and spatial distributions, the potential for commercial exploitation, and associated planning and management strategies. As originally commented on by Lew (1987) it is still difficult to differentiate between what are classed as attractions and non-attractions, with some definitions encompassing sites that others might consider out with their reach, for example predominantly retail or sporting ventures or events associated with designations such as European Capital of Culture.

Benckendorff and Pearce (2003) determined not to include festivals, wineries and retail establishments in their study of Australian sites, due to their temporary and sporadic nature, in common with similar decisions taken by Garrod, Leask, and Fyall (2007). McKercher, Mei, and Tse (2006) researched this debate in relation to cultural festivals in Hong Kong, recognising that they possess attributes that make them appealing to tourists and assessing their role in attracting non-local international visitors. The conclusions drawn state that in these cases, the festivals did not perform as attractions in that they did not attract significant numbers of international visitors.

The debate continues with regards to the inclusion or otherwise of events as visitor attractions. The focus of this paper is on those sites with permanence and a primary focus on attracting visitors, though it is acknowledged that the boundaries of the definitions remain blurred.

Continued global development of VAs will entail further debate in relation to sites that could potentially be classed as VAs, for example the seemingly ubiquitous development of observation wheels such as the Singapore Flyer, casino developments within theme parks such as Vertigo Theme Park in Colombia, street markets (Kikuchi & Ryan, 2007) and gaming zones such as Magi-quest at Lagunasia, Japan.

A further factor is the distinction between heritage and general VAs, significant when researching the differing issues and management practices entailed in their management objectives, management skills and ability to adopt new practices (Leask, Fyall, & Garrod, 2002). Heritage VAs account for the majority of the whole VA supply (Boyd, 2000) and are defined for the purposes of this paper as those containing an aspect of historical interpretation. The majority of these heritage attractions are museums and galleries, mainly in the public sector and operated on a not-for-profit basis (Lennon & Graham, 2001; Smith, 1998; Watson, McCracken, & Hughes, 2004). It should be recognised that many museum and gallery sites are significant also in their intrinsic value and societal role, for example the clear statement from the Greek authorities in the form of the new museum at the Acropolis, clearly in anticipation and readiness for their desired return of the Elgin Marbles.

There has also been discussion in relation to the differentiation between visitor attractions and destinations, with Swarbrooke (2002: 9) stating that ‘attractions are generally single units…easily delimited geographical areas based on a single key feature. Destinations are larger areas that include a number of individual attractions together with the support services required by tourists’.

Leask (2008) developed a classification of VAs that identifies the principal features of attractions and the diversity of their product internationally, demonstrating the breadth of resource, visitor markets and objectives involved. It is an inclusive classification, one that acknowledges the nature of the resource on which the attraction is based, the type of ownership, market features and resultant products. This model is often used as the standard context setting for VA discussion (Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert, & Wanhill, 2006; Hemmington, Bowen, Wickens, & Paraskevas, 2005; Holloway & Taylor, 2006; Sharpley, 2007).

The classification attempts to highlight the aspects that make each VA site or resource distinctive. For example, the category of ownership will dictate often conflicting management objectives. Many museums do not consider themselves to be VAs at all, rather that their primary concern is academic research. However, changing political and economic conditions have resulted in a need to re-evaluate these positions. Similarly distinctions between free and paid admission sites are becoming blurred, with many ‘free’ sites now actively charging for temporary exhibitions or encouraging substantial donations at point of entry.

The classification also raises the sphere of visitor influence that an attraction creates in targeting and meeting the needs of local, day, domestic and international visitors. While this paper focuses on the management aspects in relation to VAs, it is essential to consider these in light of visitor experience and satisfaction (McBoyle & McBoyle, 2008; Milman, 2001; Richards, 2002).

Several authors have sought to classify VAs on the basis of the resource itself, with Sternberg (1997) suggesting them as either natural, historical, popular culture or fantasy environments. Pearce (1998) suggested categories of natural environment feature; cultural or historical feature; or commercial feature. This type of classification is also popular in consultant (Keynote, 2001) and public sector (VisitScotland, 2006) studies where standard categories are based on resource/product type, for example castles, places of worship and gardens.

Table 1 offers a summary of the generally accepted categories of VAs.

It is important to establish the purpose and planned use for the definition and classification categories selected, whether it is for statistical purposes to allow for comparable analysis of trends, for marketing and promotional drivers or academic study. This significance is important since key management objectives vary significantly and can include education, conservation, profit generation and entertainment, often determined by the ownership category of private, public or voluntary body (Benckendorff & Pearce, 2003; Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

2.2. The importance of VAs

The importance of visitor attractions can be viewed from several perspectives – those of individual visitors, individual resources and
in regards to their role in destination development. Individuals may visit for a variety of motivations including nostalgia, entertainment and education. The decision to develop a visitor attraction may depend on the desire by an individual or group to conserve and provide public access to a resource. Support for the development of visitor attractions may link closely to tourism destination development or economic regeneration of an area or community (Connell & Page, 2009; Darnell & Johnston, 2001; Henderson, 1999; MacCannell, 1976; Silbergh & Falconer, 2004; Walsh, 1994). The role of VAs and tourism within the development of a destination and wider destinational or regional development.’

As Sharpley (2009:145) states:

‘it is recognised that a wide variety of factors underpin the successful development of tourism destinations, an essential ingredient remains the provision of what are collectively referred to as visitor attractions. As an integral element of the tourism product and experience, visitor attractions are the focus of tourism activity, not only as reasons for tourists to travel and stay in destinations but also as generators of income, employment and wider destination or regional development.’

The role of VAs and tourism within the development of a destination and the influence of policy can be seen in the example of the UK, where the sector came into the public gaze in the late 1990s due to the failure of some high profile projects (Hemmington et al., 2005), the advent of the National Lottery and changing government policies (Johnson & Thomas, 1998; Stewart & Walsh, 1992; Walsh, 1994). The management revolution taking place in the public services had implications for the operation of VAs, with a significant number being owned or managed by the public sector (Cutler & Waine, 2000; Silbergh & Falconer, 2004; Walsh, 1994; Wilson & Boyle, 2004). New Labour policies included the introduction of free admission to national museums, introduction of new concepts such as best value, performance management and commercialisation, and sites became under increased pressure to move towards the corporate management of cultural products as commodities (Foley & McPherson, 2000; Wilson & Boyle, 2004). This shift took place in the context of declining visitor numbers and in an environment of growing supply and reduced public funding sources (Baxter, 2004; Lennon, 2004). The impact of policy can be seen in the decisions to place outreach museums across the UK, such as Tate St Ives and the Royal Armouries in Leeds, continued support for annual national VA surveys and the free admission to national museums policy. Winter (2009) makes the call for Asian tourism stakeholders to recognise the need for protection, presentation and interpretation of Asian heritage resources through nuance, differentiation and sensitivity.

3. Visitor attractions in the research literature

3.1. Research context – the development of visitor attraction management research

Early writings in the area of attractions identify ‘tourist attractions as the first power... the real energiser of tourism in a region’ and that ‘without attractions, both inferred and developed, there would be no need for other tourism services (Gunn, 1972: 24)’. Gunn goes on to identify three zones in relation to the spatial layout of an attraction, including the central nucleus with the core attraction, the zone of closure with the ancillary services associated with the attraction and the inviolate belt that separates the core attraction from the commercial aspects of the zone of closure. This early discussion was within a planning context, supported later by Pigram (1983), establishing their central role by stating that without attractions tourism would not exist. MacCannell (1976) also identified three elements that comprise an attraction – a tourist, a sight and a marker – the latter being the information that stimulates the consumer’s decision to visit the attraction. As discussed by Page and Connell (2006) the focus of MacCannell’s work is on the site or nucleus of the attraction, while Leiper (1990) proposed the notion that the attractions form part of a system and related the product of

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<th>Theme parks/amusement parks</th>
<th>Dubailand, UAE</th>
<th>Nickelodeon Universe, USA</th>
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<tr>
<td>Water parks, amusements, themes</td>
<td>Mayan Adventure, Mexico</td>
<td>Transformers, Universal Studios, Singapore</td>
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<td>Museums &amp; Galleries</td>
<td>Guggenheim, Bilbao, Spain</td>
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<td>Art, cultural, historical, collection-based, virtual, open air museums</td>
<td>Athens Acropolis Museum, Greece</td>
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<td>Natural</td>
<td>Tellus Science Museum, Georgia</td>
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<td>Gardens, national parks, forests</td>
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<td>Animal</td>
<td>Grand Canyon WHS, USA</td>
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<td>Safari, farms, zoos, aquariums</td>
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<td>Visitor Centres</td>
<td>Eden Project, Cornwall, UK</td>
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<td>Cultural, industrial, transport</td>
<td>Longleat Safari Park, England</td>
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<td>Religious Sites</td>
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<td>Heritage</td>
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<td>Castles, forts, historic houses, visitor centres</td>
<td>Ngong Ping Cultural Village, Hong Kong</td>
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<td>natural parks, forests</td>
<td>Rosslyn Chapel, Scotland</td>
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<td>Notre Dame, France</td>
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<td>Visitor Centres</td>
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<td>San Francisco Literary Tour, USA</td>
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<td>Heritage</td>
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the attraction more to the motivation of visitors than to the draw of an attraction feature. The research identified that at least one of the three types of markers (generating, contiguous and transit) influences the tourists to be ‘pushed by their own motivation towards places where they expect their needs will be satisfied’ (Leiper, 1990: 380).

Lew (1987) set out the typologies of how tourist attractions had been researched, determining that previous research fell into one or more of three categories -- the ideographic listing, the organisation or the tourist cognition of attractions. He used this framework to discuss and evaluate previous research. While recognising the individuality of attractions and the need for typologies to reflect these, he reveals a high level of consistency in the general categorisation of attractions and proposes a framework for their further discussion.

Pearce (1998:1) observes that the study of tourist attractions has 'not received the same prominence as other suppliers and that is deserves multidisciplinary research effort'. This is followed up in Benckendorff and Pearce (2003), who identify the 'early stage' of tourist attraction research and in Richards (2002), observing the lack of study in the VA area, further echoed by Leask and Fyall (2006). Xiao and Smith (2006) observe that the tourism research field has experienced rapid changes in research focus and methodological sophistication. However, in Ballantyne, Packer, and Axelsen (2009) VA do not feature as a separate category in their overview of tourism research, while events and destinations do. This, despite the growth in academic literature and a growing research community in the sector, as demonstrated in the following literature review.

A review of the literature demonstrates that papers are often in relation to categories such as location, product type, management issue or visitor experience. Academic debate focuses on issues of defining VAs (Leiper, 1990; Prentice, 1993), managing visitors and the resource (Boyd, 2000; Moscardo, 1996), exploring visitor characteristics (Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2006), tourist experience (Nowacki, 2009; Okello, 2005; Pearce, Benckendorff, & Johnstone, 2000; Vittersø, Vorkinn, Vistad, & Vaagland, 2000) and human resource management aspects (Milman, 2003; Watson et al., 2004). Milman (2001) comments on there having been no major empirical study in relation to the management perspective at attractions, with most work focussing on the visitor viewpoint, a view supported by Gilmore and Rentschler (2002) and Richards (2002). That said, VA management research into some sub-sectors of VAs has been published in relation to categories such as zoos (Ryan & Savard, 2004; Turley, 1999, 2001); gardens (Connell, 2004; Fox & Edwards, 2008); sacred sites (Andriots, 2009; Nolan & Nolan, 1992); theme parks (Braun & Soksin, 2008; Johns & Gynoth, 2002; Kent, 1993; Mayer, 2002; Milman, 2001); industrial (Coles, 2004; Wanhill, 2000; Xie, 2006).

Hall and Pigg (2002) and Johnson (1999) consider the relevance of taking a service operations view in the management of VAs. Several authors have viewed VAs from a more consumer oriented perspective (Connell, 2004; Hemmington et al., 2005; Turley, 1999). Austin (2002) and Poria et al. (2006) argue that visiting attractions is such a social phenomena that it requires further research on visitor behaviour, though it could be argued that it is also necessary to consider the management perspective in relation to visitor management and site attributes, a view supported by Benckendorff and Pearce (2003) and Timothy and Boyd (2006).

Academic tourism research has paid little attention to the organisational characteristics of attractions (Benckendorff & Pearce, 2003) and what does exist is mostly on a site basis, limiting the opportunities for broader comparison and conclusions (Coles, 2006; Poria, Butler, & Airey, 2004). Walsh-Heron and Stevens (1990) noted that attractions are prime motivators for visitors to a destination, highlighting the importance of the role of this sector in destination development and, while this work raised the prominence of work in the attractions field, it focussed on the nature and purpose of attractions, with relatively little work published on what makes attractions successful (McKercher & Ho, 2006).

There is little published work involving international comparison of management issues, management techniques and best practice (Hu & Wall, 2005). In spite of their theoretical and practical importance, academics have commented on the lack of theory and depth evident in research within this sector (Benckendorff & Pearce, 2003; Lennon, 2004; Richards, 2002; Swarbrooke, 2001), remarkable given the importance of the sector for economic regeneration and destination appeal.

3.2. Visitor attraction benchmarking research

When compared to the wider tourism literature, little has been written specifically in relation to visitor attraction research, though this paper demonstrates the range of publications written and research projects undertaken. While case study approaches offer deep insights into the individual nature of a site, a clear contribution of larger scale international research projects is in the provision of empirical data from a management perspective and in the investigation of the use of benchmarking1 as a research tool.

In the 1990s an academic debate took place in relation to the use of benchmarking as an approach to realising business goals by looking out with the immediate environment, identifying best practice and enabling the exchange of information between the public and private sectors (Dorsch & Yasin, 1998; Spendolini, 1992). Originally used to identify performance gaps and to then improve operational performance it was also seen to provide the opportunity to set critical performance factors and allow for their measurement. Benchmarking is increasingly used by national tourism organisations as a means of situational analysis though it is now moving to involve the measurement of key areas, adoption of best practice and the identification of critical success factors (Lennon, 2006). The public sector agencies saw benchmarking as an appropriate method of improving performance at VAs, as seen by the commissioning of several consultancy run reports (English Tourism Council, 2000; Scottish Enterprise, 1997; Scottish Enterprise, 2004). One point to note here is the distinction between the knowledge generated by analysts and knowledge fitting the needs of managers (Pearce & Benckendorff, 2006).

Historically the success of VAs has been predominantly measured in simple volume and value terms, but this does not take account of their individuality and broad range of objectives, which naturally impact on their management and performance (see Table 2). Benchmarking can do this by highlighting examples of best practice from organisations sharing similar operating environments. It is important that the research process should create mechanisms to use the identification of best practice to allow for an appropriate set of performance indicators to be formed for a visitor attraction (Mayer, 2002; Reichel & Haber, 2005). Benchmarking would appear to be an appropriate mechanism for researching VAs as it facilitates the setting of standards to allow for the individuality of the VAs to be considered, whilst enabling comparison.

That said, while international benchmarking does afford insights into management practices, the duplication of general,

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1 Benchmarking is a ‘continuous process for evaluating products, services and work processes of an organisation that are recognised as representing best practices for the purpose of organisational improvement’ (Spendolini, 1992).
international best practice might be suitable in other sectors but not necessarily in VAs. This is due to their very individuality in terms of resources, management skills and fluctuating patterns of demand. Also observed by Pearce and Benckendorff (2006), the diversity of VAs creates challenges in the selection of comparable properties, particularly for international study. However, what it does allow for is the ability to engage with a fragmented supply situation and provide baseline data with which to establish the key priorities within a broader perspective and of mutual benefit to the attractions. Therefore benchmarking is an appropriate form of research for VAs, but results need to be used as appropriate to the individual sites, determining operational factors such as ownership and the operating environment, rather than adopted across the spectrum. It is particularly useful in overcoming issues of commercial sensitivity, though it is important to select suitable comparison organisations. Another aspect of relevance here relates to the ethical issues in public agencies and academics using this mechanism to offer high quality, freely accessible information that private companies can easily use for commercial gain. Phillips and Louvieris (2005) state that tourism practitioners are sceptical about the value of best practice benchmarking from outside the UK due to the nuances of the tourism infrastructure and markets within the UK. However, research by Leask and Fyall (2006) shows that the opportunity to broaden the scope of comparative sites, plus the individual nature of the resources, means that the opportunity to access international businesses is worthwhile, not because they are international per se but because they offer the opportunity to learn from competitors and tailor to visitor needs. As suggested by Pemberton (2005), the profit in the future will not be from growing numbers but from working assets. Academics have concluded that benchmarking does have the potential to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness for both public and private businesses and have called for further research to balance academic and practitioner needs (Boyne, 2002; Dorsch & Yasin, 1998; Longbottom, 2000).

### 3.3. International visitor attraction management practice research

#### 3.3.1. VA characteristics – location, size and type

In common with other tourism research, the international dimension and perspective of researchers is critical in determining the value of the output. Authors differ in their conclusions on how management practice research can be used to improve visitor attraction performance. Garrod, Fyall, and Leask (2006) argue that management practice does vary across the different destinations but that the nature of it is not based on the characteristics of the destination as a whole, rather on the visitor volume, turnover and ownership factors of the individual site itself. They go on to argue that it is not a case of any one country employing ‘better’ management practice than another, more that individual sites had identified management tools appropriate to the individual resource and context relative to the site. One recommendation would be for VAs to adopt an internally focussed, quality-orientated strategy to counter the future challenges that they face. This approach is in contrast to Stevens (2000, 2003) who suggests an outward focus with the development of major new assets that can compete head on with other leisure activities. Competition within the VA and broader leisure sector has been the focus of several papers in relation to theme parks (Braun & Soskin, 1999; Braun & Soskin, 2008; Milman, 2001) and with other sub-sectors, such as zoos (Turley, 1999, 2001). Findings, in relation to management practice, appear to suggest an increased need to
focus on meeting visitor expectations through recognising visitor motivations (Connell, 2004; Milman, 2001; Richards, 2002), product development (McBoyle & McBoyle, 2008; Whitfield, 2009) and collaboration with other VAs and tourism bodies (Fyall, 2008; Hede & Hall, 2006; Jaffe & Pasternak, 2004).

In relation to visitor management practice, Fyall, Garrod, and Leask (2002) argue for managers to concentrate on getting each visitor to consider their behaviour in relation to the resource rather than on the overall control of visitor numbers. This is substantiated by Phelps (2002:199) who comments that in the struggle to maintain numbers, ‘improving the experience of existing visitors may act to hold them within the audience but will not necessarily help to reclaim visitors already lost to other activities’. The critical role of visitor volume and turnover in management practice at sites is noted in papers by Benckendorff and Pearce (2003); Boyd (2000) and Lewis (1998).

### 3.3.2. Visitor management

Management plans for VAs rarely contain guidance on visitors let alone the use of management tools such as pricing, visitor impacts or mechanisms for management. This may be attributed to the individual nature of VA resources and sites, which inhibits the uniform adoption of visitor management techniques. Research has also identified the extent of the gap between use and awareness of specific management tools. Mason (2005:181) states that the ‘conventional approach to visitor management is largely about minimising negative impacts with little research undertaken regarding the visitor experience’, a view which highlights the need to identify appropriate techniques such as revenue management, in conjunction with other aspects such as education and interpretation. These views are also seen in other research (Hall & McArthur, 1996; Shackley, 2001) where it is argued that there are ways to manage visitors other than controlling numbers and modifying resources, these being primarily by determining basic market and general information on visitors, and by then developing appropriate marketing, promotion, revenue management and codes of conduct to suit.

Both Richards (2002) and Shoval and Raveh (2004) identify the significance of information available to visitors prior to their visit to a destination, noting that many decisions are taken pre-visit. Therefore the role of the VA within the destination (Dredge, 1999) and participation in collaborative activities to communicate their resource and visitor experience, becomes vital in managing visitor demand and expectations (Hede & Hall, 2006; Howley & Van Westering, 2008). This is the case at destination level, where in Singapore with the search for balance in the development of wartime heritage within the wider destination product (Henderson, 2007). It is also seen at site level, where visitor data in relation to characteristics, perceptions of value and experience can be used to aid visitor satisfaction (Andriotis, Agiomirgianakis, & Mihiotis, 2008).

Lawson (2006) investigated the use of computer simulation as a tool for planning and management, though established that there was potential for it to help but only if forecasting was done for individual sites, a condition that could be considered necessary for the implementation of other visitor management practices. Buhalis, Owen, and Pletinckx (2006) consider how technology can assist in heritage management, linking aspects such as interpretation and reservation systems to the overall management approach, or in overcoming challenges experienced in providing equal access for all to heritage sites (Poria, Reichel, & Brandt, 2009).

### 3.3.3. Management and staff skills

In practice much of the published work on visitor attraction management originates from the museums sector, a feature perhaps of its response to changing government attitudes, policies and legislation (Baxter, 2004; Gilmore & Rentschler, 2002). The need for major change in viewing cultural services as predominantly economic, as opposed to social entities, was significant in recognising their need to extend their appeal beyond traditional markets in order to respond to this new dynamism. The growing role of the consultant was seen in the commissioning of several UK and international VA surveys (Deloitte Touche, 1998; Keynote, 2001; Scottish Enterprise, 1997), though these are based on very small sample sizes and their value is questionable (Lennon, 2004; Pearce & Benckendorff, 2006).

With specific regard to the Scottish VA environment, which has been the focus of several key publications, the public sector enterprise company recognised the need to support VAs. This resulted in several consultancy research projects often critical of management practices within destinations and attractions, instead stating the need to look overseas to identify best practice (Scottish Enterprise, 2004). The Scottish VA sector has nearly 900 sites generating over 42 million visitors per annum (VisitScotland, 2009). Patterns of demand are highly seasonal and indicate a heavy reliance on the overseas visitor market. According to VisitScotland (2006: 5), ‘what remains clear is that management information systems remain at an early stage of development for many attraction operators’, with 38 percent still relying on manual counting methods for visitor analysis. This fact alone demonstrates how challenging it can be for many sites to adopt management tools, such as revenue management which requires detailed operating data for implementation.

Public sector research into the management of VAs has been limited in recent years, though government concern to maintain international tourism numbers necessitates the continued support for existing sites. In the UK, a House of Commons Select Committee (2006) recorded the serious shortfall in funds and the imbalance in funding available to private operators, who generally cannot access Lottery or public funding sources. New attractions (Wilson, 2004:178) are not a priority for funding so need to ‘revitalise to survive and need to build quality management frameworks, service delivery and enable attractions to be better prepared for vagaries of market environment or face closures’, but it is debatable as to whether or not the sector has sufficient reliable data on which to base their decisions (Fyall et al., 2002; Leask & Hood, 2000).

The use of information technology in the management of visitor attractions is rarely discussed unless in relation to interpretation. However, Watson and McCracken (2002) found that key informants viewed the development of IT skills as critical, while VAs managers thought it only moderately important. This is one example where skills development could be critical in enabling the use of more sophisticated operations management. Research into the associated issue of the use of volunteers in heritage attractions was undertaken by Deery, Jago, and Shaw (1997), Holmes (2003) and Rhoden, Ineson, and Ralston (2009).

The size and type of the VA impact on the management practice and ability to plan strategically; notably one of the issues highlighted is the low level of access to and use of computers, which naturally impacts on attractions’ ability to analyse visitor data and revenue management (Benckendorff & Pearce, 2003; Garrod et al., 2006). Best practice performance measurement presents significant opportunities for SMEs, particularly when an international dimension can be added to offer alternative approaches (Phillips & Louvieris, 2005). The nature of attractions, for example restricted staff and financial resources, make it difficult for SMEs to simply implement management tools. However, there is potential for them to adopt practices from larger organisations due to their more adaptable business environment and relative lack of bureaucratic management.
The category of ownership of a VA is significant in the management style and practices in place on site (Fyall et al., 2002), where this may depend on what can be negotiated with stakeholders including trustees, volunteers, public sector organisations, curators, archaeologists, members, private owners and other interested parties such as the visitor.

3.3.4. Yield management and pricing

Yield management practice at VAs has been one theme of recent research, in exploring the application of the concept of yield management within VAs. Historically, academic research into the use of yield management in tourism has focussed on its use in the airline and hotel sectors (Chiang, Chen, & Xu, 2007; Kimes, 1997). That said, a 1995 European Commission report stated that ‘developing these tools and skills would benefit [SME] businesses in many ways’ though many currently lacked the ‘prerequisite information tools and analytical skills to conduct yield management (Andersen, 1997: 16)

It has been established that developing knowledge management and exploiting secondary spend opportunities are becoming increasingly important in the VA context. Leask and Yeoman (1999) concluded that heritage VAs do, to some extent, meet the core necessary conditions identified by Kimes (1997) and argued that they could therefore implement revenue maximising techniques. Hoseason (2004) states that the highly seasonal nature of the market necessitates revenue management techniques being applied to main season activities, with more specialised activities being introduced during low or out of season periods for the maximisation of revenue.

One point to note is the distinction between revenue and yield management, where revenue management relates to the gross figures achieved, while yield management relates to the net figures following the deduction of marginal costs. In contrast to the potential obstacles to the adoption of yield management in this sector, identified by the CBI (1998) report, Leask and Yeoman (1999) argue that the use of yield management depends on demand variables, capacity and conservation aspects particular to the VA site. The lack of sector specific data and manager reluctance act as inhibitors to revenue management practice (Lennon, 2004), however it could be argued that while sophisticated customer forecasting may be beyond the scope of some sites at present, the use of basic revenue management systems are not (Leask, Fyall, & Goulding, 2000).

It has been seen that visitors are willing to pay more to access experiences available at a premium price, or to instigate admission charges at public sites, as often exist for other leisure services, in order to alleviate congestion, meet funding shortfalls and tackle pricing imbalances within the sector.

3.3.5. Marketing – collaboration and designations

Marketing theory states that effective marketing management assists the achievement of VA objectives (Rentschler, Hede, & White, 2007). The issue with VAs and particularly heritage is in determining what marketing activity is appropriate for the resource. It has been argued that the leisure and tourism industries exploit heritage sites, turning them into attractions for commercial gain and contributing to the process of commodification (Henderson, 2007; Misura, 2006; Stone & Sharpley, 2008). However, the benefits of this engagement with tourism activity have also benefited the sector as a whole, by establishing a network of attractions with lobbying power to push for policy support and through increased access to central funding sources previously out with the reach of heritage due to their lack of audience development (Fyall, Leask, & Garrod, 2001).

In recent years there has been an increasing academic and practitioner discussion in relation to the benefits of collaboration. Authors such as Costa and Buhalis (2005), Richards (2002) and Sautter and Leisen (1999), state that collaboration among key players is a fundamental ingredient in a sustained development effort, although they note that participants can be reticent to share sensitive management information. Fyall et al. (2001) explored the concept of collaboration and investigated the opportunities for VAs, determining that operators welcomed the possibility of greater inter-organisational collaboration, particularly regarding joint marketing and overcoming industry fragmentation. Based on a series of principles identified by Kanter (1994), including the shared convergence of strategic goals while competitive ones diverge and a balance of market power and size between partners, it was seen that effective collaboration could be an appropriate management tool for VAs.

Just as destinations often compete in a saturated marketplace, so do VAs, entailing the need to identify and develop unique characteristics (Hassan, 2000). Designations and awards are often perceived as offering attractive marketing opportunities. Research has been conducted into the impacts of UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) designation, though the main focus appears to be on the marketing opportunities afforded by this international accolade (Boyd & Timothy, 2006; Buckley, 2004; Hall & Pigg, 2002; Winter, 2002). These clearly establish that while conservation of the resource is at the heart of WHS nominations, designation entails a need to effectively manage the tourism activity on site. This status has significant implications for the effective management of a site not least as designation often results in increased visitor numbers and increased focus on site management, with clear opportunities afforded by management tools such as the identification of individuality or competitive advantage.

It should be noted here that there may be other areas of academic study in relation to visitor attractions that are not covered in this paper, as the focus of this paper is to review the visitor attraction research in connection to management practice and the development of effective management styles.

4. Key management challenges faced by visitor attractions

The international VA sector is known to be fragmented in nature, partly due to the geographical location of sites and the historical lack of collaborative activity, since exacerbated by rapid expansion of supply, declining demand and resulting competition (Aas et al., 2005; Carey, 2005; Leighton, 2006; Lennon, 2004).
The context of research is such that the very uniqueness of individual resources and sites has been argued to entail a need to develop management techniques appropriate to each location, an aspect discussed by Leask (2006) and Shackley (1998) with regards to UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Historically, VAs have been predominantly product-led with a move towards recognising the merit of a more market-oriented approach only being seen in the last decade (Baxter, 2004). The appropriateness of a market-led approach for tourism enterprises has been questioned in relation to balancing the needs of sustainable tourism (Font & Ahjum, 1999). The macro forces, often outside VAs' control, shape the micro-environment dominated by small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The decline in public money available to support sites has forced them to become more commercially aware and diversify to generate alternative forms of revenue generation (Baxter, 2004; Garrod et al., 2007; Hausmann, 2007; Lennon, 2004). This is particularly obvious with regards to historic buildings that often carry high capital and revenue costs. Research has also shown there is a management skills deficit, partly due to the dominance of SMEs and the highly seasonal nature of business resulting in high staff turnover and a low skills base (Gilmore & Rentschler, 2002; Graham & Lennon, 2002; Leask & Fyall, 2006; Watson & McCracken, 2002). One of the greatest dilemmas that attraction operators face is that of balancing visitor access with conservation of the resource and its authenticity (Carter & Grimwade, 1997; Garrod et al., 2006; Timothy & Boyd, 2006). VAs operate in an increasingly competitive marketplace, with growing visitor expectations and a perishable product – all within a sector that often fails to recognise the value and diversify product offering.

5. Developing a model for the effective management of VAs

5.1. The factors involved

The above challenges have created a range of symptoms within the sector, alongside a requirement for greater knowledge to inform improved management. The English Tourism Council (2000) identified the need to improve the professional development of the sector, recommending the use of benchmarking to raise standards and tackle the growing competitive situation. Wilson (2004: 148) comments on how ‘effective management and marketing of VAs is crucial in order to sustain competitive advantage and to continue operating viably’.

Several publications have called for improved, successful, efficient or effective management, though they rarely define what is meant by each term (Graham & Lennon, 2002; Hall & Piggott, 2002; Moscardo, 1996; Watson & McCracken, 2002). The move towards a more business-oriented approach or ‘good’ management is typically based on the public sector making use of examples of ‘best practice’ from private enterprises or on the identification of ‘best practice’ in competitor organisations (Cutler & Waine, 2000; Phillips & Louvieris, 2005; Stewart & Walsh, 1992). Managers are often seen as being responsible for the achievement of performance outcomes and therefore their perspective is important in the research process.

Identifying the factors that contribute to the effective management of VAs depends very much on the nature of the resource on which the product is based, the management objectives and the consumer. While Hu and Wall (2006), McKeough and Ho (2006) and Sharpley (2007) suggest factors such as location, distance from visitor flows and competitive advantage are critical, the need to manage the VA resource itself is also fundamental in the sustainable future of a site. It could be argued that concentration on the product alone will not guarantee success and that greater attention should be paid to the management practice in relation to the established objectives of the stakeholders and resource in question. The perceived impacts of VAs vary according to their audience being measured in visitor numbers, the creation of employment or improvements to infrastructure with wider benefits to the community or conservation (Nash, Koyabe, & Stansbie, 2006). While the commercial imperative dictates the measurement of visitor volume and value, this is clearly only one form of indicator.

5.2. A model of factors in the effective management of VAs

The development of a model of the factors in the effective management of VAs is shown in Table 2. The model shows how existing research publications combine to offer a deeper insight into the academic knowledge in relation to the effective management of VAs. It states that there is a range of Determining Factors (DFs) that dictate and shape the management of VAs, a variety of Measures of Effectiveness (MEs) set by stakeholders, and a suite of Management Tools (MTs) that could be used to achieve the objectives. The DFs include aspects such as the category of ownership, the range of stakeholders and the very individual nature of the resource itself. The MEs depend on the objectives of the
stakeholders, for example, return-on-investment, economic regeneration or policy decisions made on the basis of the owners. The DFs and MEs allow operators to select the relevant MTs with which to improve their management, for example by seeking international designations, diversifying their product in light of visitor expectations or simply monitoring patterns of visitor behaviour to allow for better staff planning. As the objectives change for each operator in light of the DFs, so do the measures used to assess their effectiveness, thus creating the opportunity to select appropriate MTs to support the task.

Table 2 advances knowledge in areas identified by Benckendorff and Pearce (2003) and Hassan (2000), mainly the need to identify tools that managers could use to enhance their ability to achieve objectives and develop effective management practices, as appropriate to the VA resource and property. Research has shown that large-scale VA surveys do establish relevant contextual information, but that specific case examples can offer the best mechanism for developing quality provision and effective management at individual sites. Collaborating with sectors other than VAs, for example retailing, might be a way forward. This could be in addition to collaborative work within the sector to move to a more research informed market-orientated, rather than product-led, management approach. While it has been argued that this does not help support sustainable tourism (Font & Ahearn, 1999), this approach does appear to be in keeping with many of the determining factors identified above and the measures used by the stakeholders.

Research on specific management tools such as revenue management established that there are difficulties in transposing revenue management strategies en masse from one category to another and that this is particularly difficult if sites are under different ownership, as this seems to dictate management approaches. The individuality and lack of demand data for VAs makes adoption and implementation of revenue management challenging but appropriate in some categories. The process of benchmarking to identify best practice and its applicability for VAs has established that it is a useful mechanism but that findings need to be applied to the individual site, rather than by destination or sector. The lack of use of management tools and the need to understand the often conflicting roles of resource conservation and visitor access create a need to identify appropriate management approaches for each individual site.

6. A future research agenda for VAs

The research context discussed earlier demonstrates that this area of study lacks the mature research base necessary to underpin the comparison of international best practice or to provide a national or international benchmark of VA quality. Governments across the globe are searching for ways to improve public services (Boyne, 2003). The increasing need for VAs to be managed more effectively, to ensure their survival and to meet the objectives of their stakeholders, is of relevance to academics, policy-makers and practitioners.

In contrast to Weed’s (2009) findings in his review of sports tourism research, the VA research field has not yet reached maturity. The ‘early stages’ of research, observed by Benckendorff and Pearce (2003), have, however, developed to perhaps mark a move to consolidation in terms of definitional debate, contested areas and an increase in the volume of papers in a range of journal fields and subject areas. However, the field still requires further development of robust methodologies and research methods and the development of an integrated community of scholars with sustained interest in the sector.

The fragmented nature of VAs is also seen in the VA research arena, where a few individuals research extensively in the sector while a larger number of others include it within their research portfolio. It would therefore be helpful to identify a clear research agenda for researchers based on a synthesis of existing research, recognition of the potential of new approaches and likely future priorities.

One example of this is the Balanced Scorecard Approach (Phillips & Louvieris, 2005: 201) that appears to offer opportunities for VA research in using a theoretical framework to ‘explore and elicit critical success factors in performance measurement’. The process requires the identification of categories (for example operations and organisation), critical success factors (for example budgetary control, stakeholder perspectives) and key performance indicators (for example revenue per visit, cross-training staff, mystery guests).

Some academics have stated a need for further quantitative studies, research on the user rather than the operator and investigation into the motivations and experience of the visitor or indeed the non-visitor (Apostolakis & Jaffry, 2005; Hu & Wall, 2005; Phelps, 2002). Others have concluded that more specific research questions should be addressed in relation to the opportunities afforded by management tools such as revenue management and revenue generation (Chiang et al., 2007; Eagles, 2002; Prideaux & Kininmont, 1999; Timothy & Boyd, 2006).

As identified in this paper, there is a need for further academic research into VA management, with the aim of providing sector specific data, in addition to issue or site specific projects. Future avenues for VA research could focus on the following areas:

- To develop tools to establish and evaluate how individual VAs can adopt appropriate management practices for their resource, visitors, individual property and stakeholders
- The use of benchmarking and the development of in-depth case studies to feature specific management practices to inform the wider VA community and stakeholders
- To develop mechanisms for evaluating the contribution of visitor attractions within a destination area
- To identify effective means of disseminating research findings to industry and other researchers
- Researching the wider tourism and service supply side to allow for the identification of specific management challenges and solutions that could then be applied within the visitor attraction sector
- Moving away from descriptive work towards empirical work, leading to the development of models and theoretical knowledge applied within the attraction sector
- Development of further research methodologies of relevance to the VA sector to further the recognition of this significant area of tourism activity, for example further development of the Balanced Scorecard Approach adopted by Phillips and Louvieris (2005).

Stevens (2000) painted a bleak picture stating that traditional attractions are irrelevant to the market and that the unprecedented growth in the years 1980–2000, in conjunction with the intense competition from the emerging leisure product, will result in a new geography and typology of destination attraction by 2010. Other research concurs with some of the thoughts, that ownership dictates much in terms of performance and management practice and that the lack of large-scale private operators in the sector does detract from their future opportunities. However, many of the sites discussed are more leisure products by definition and, while in competition with traditional attractions, these will not necessarily lead to their demise. On the contrary it would appear (Braun &
Soskin, 2008; Fyall & Leask, 2007; Marr, 2008; McBoyle & McBoyle, 2008; Whitfield, 2009) that VAs are responding well to the challenges and significantly improving and broadening their product offering, collaborative practices and range of revenue streams. This blurring of boundaries between VAs, leisure and entertainment is not aided by the continued lack of easily accessible, central data about trends and markets, with a clear contribution required from the public agencies to support regular and rigorous visitor attraction data.

7. Conclusion

This paper has investigated the development of research and knowledge concerning the effective management of VAs. Based on themes emerging from an extensive literature review, the key challenges encountered by the sector have been identified, including the individual nature of the resource, the supply and demand features of the VA sector and the difficulties encountered in balancing visitor access with conservation of the resource. The findings emphasise the importance of the need to appreciate that the VA sector is shaped by the challenges it faces and the need to recognise how these impact on the choice and effectiveness of management practices. A model of Factors in the Effective Management of VAs has been developed on the basis of existing publications in the sector and identifies three categories of factors: Determining Factors; Measures of Effectiveness and Management Tools that could be used as a framework for future research into the effective management of VAs.

The review of publications has established that the VA sector is capable of adopting more effective management strategies by utilising management tools as appropriate to their context. In turn these can contribute to overcoming the challenges that the sector faces and lead to improvements in the overall effective management of the sites. It has been established that international benchmarking and identification of best practice research is of limited use in determining over-arching management techniques that can be applied across categories of attractions – but that it can be useful when matched appropriately and used to upgrade the quality and management practices at similar VAs. In developing this from existing authors, it can be seen that in the future the effectively managed attraction is not necessarily the one with large numbers of visitors, rather the one that engages with its stakeholders and employs specific aspects of management practice as appropriate to the site, the resource and its visitors. The challenge now is to develop the research to support both academic study and practitioner skills in order to appropriately recognise and develop the effective management of visitor attractions.

References


