

New approach on creating shared value in corporate social responsibility: Effective engagement with Indigenous stakeholders for community empowerment

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Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) to manage environmental, social and economic impacts has been widely researched in tourism. CSR in tourism can make a contribution to sustainability, but the key to sustainable development is the inclusion of local communities in the planning and development processes. Huang, Botterill & Jones (2006) claim that ‘a socially responsible tourism organisation will fully consider what impacts on communities and the environment will result from...better balancing the needs of all stakeholders.’ (p.1). However, as Gilberthorpe & Banks (2012) argue, ‘the rise in CSR has meant safer technologies and better stakeholder engagement...there is little evidence of any real socio-economic development at the grassroots.’(p.185). There is criticism of the lack of non-western, local perspectives in tourism planning and management, and of poor delivery of CSR in practice (Alessandri, Black & Jackson, 2011; Filimonau, 2016; Gilberthorpe & Banks, 2012; Nunkoo, Smith, & Ramkissoon, 2013; Visser, 2014). Limitations on stakeholder engagement are central to these concerns as are the various research approaches that can be used for engagement.

One of the major challenges associated with tourism development is that tourism planning has typically followed a top-down approach that fails to listen to the voices of local residents and, therefore, does not accord with the principles of sustainable tourism development (Mowforth and Munt 2016). This paper reports on a study conducted with the Wagiman Aboriginal community in Pine Creek, in the Northern Territory, Australia which addresses stakeholder engagement from the local, Indigenous tourism stakeholders’ perspectives. The focus of this paper is to understand the relationship between CSR and the ways by which tourism researchers, planners and managers can effectively engage with Indigenous stakeholders during research. We argue that various methodologies and research approaches should be considered, and culturally appropriate and relevant uses of language should be explored.

While there is increased scholarly interest in Indigenous research methodologies, there is little research on these being put into practice with Aboriginal communities (Denzin, Lincoln & Smith, 2008; Goodson & Phillmore, 2004; Nunkoo et al, 2013). Indeed, few studies address engagement methodologies for interacting with Indigenous stakeholders when conducting ethnographic, qualitative research.

Qualitative methodologies and mixed-method approaches are increasingly used for empirical evidence-based knowledge. Some argue that as qualitative data is based in contextualized life experiences, it therefore provides a more reliable basis for in-depth analysis of tourism phenomena than quantitative data (Denzin, 2009; Goodson & Phillmore, 2004). Also, Goodson & Phillmore's (2004, p.31) inquiry paradigm in qualitative research methods stresses the need to examine not only the type of approach in qualitative research, but also the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Lepp (2007, 2008) argues that adopting more local research methodologies can strengthen these relationships and can build trust between the researcher and the local participants. Arguably, such in-depth, contextualised data, analyses and local engagement can generate deeper, more transparent and authentic understandings of local, Indigenous knowledge.

Transparency and authenticity in data generation and analysis are central to CSR (Font, Guix & Bonilla-Priego, 2016; Garcia, Pinto-Rodrigues, Gibbon, Bernaudat, & Omedo, 2013). Thus, qualitative methodologies (such as, semi-structured interviews) and Indigenous methods (such as, storytelling) can generate comprehensive data while also empowering Indigenous people to manage and/or direct the research process (Lepp, 2007, 2008; Liamputtong, 2009; Smith, 2012). These types of processes tend to be multi-disciplinary in nature and can include anthropological methodologies as well as sociological, linguistic, tourism-related and other fields of research methodologies (Filimonau, 2016; Franklin, 2007; Nunkoo et al., 2013; Smith, 2012).

Crick's (1982) work on the 'anthropology of knowledge' employs qualitative and mixed-method approaches with a call for more linguistic methodologies to the concept of "knowledge," which includes "action, feeling and ideology" as well as "rules, values and beliefs" (p.287). Crick (1982) explains that these aspects are vital to the structure of social life and identity - how linguistic knowledge has to include cultural knowledge as well. As language and knowledge are strongly correlated, it is important to examine the effectiveness of the language used between the researcher and the local when conducting ethnographic research. Such research can further CSR by Creating Shared Value (CSV) in sustainable tourism planning and development.

Literature suggests that CSV effectively and transparently engages others for the purpose of value creation and product differentiation, with proactive and respectful attitudes amongst stakeholders in tourism (Alessandri et al., 2011; Font et al., 2016; Garcia et al., 2013; Gilberthorpe & Banks, 2012; Nunkoo et al., 2013). Digital options create more opportunities for longer-term product sustainability, heritage conservation, authenticity and indigenisation

of the tourism sector (Cardamone & Rentschler, 2006; Carson, 2008; Christen, 2005,2006; Nunkoo et al., 2013). Furthermore, limited research on theories of indigenized methodologies being successfully put into practice utilized digital options for knowledge sharing and tourism product development (Christen, 2005, 2006; Hunter, 2014; Yeager & Steiger, 2013). Sustainable development that utilizes Indigenous knowledge sharing can also advance Indigenous community empowerment and policy (Cole, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Denzin, 2009; Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006, 2008, 2010; Nunkoo et al., 2013; Zeppel, 2006).

Aim

The overarching aim of this paper is to analyse the factors influencing the quality of methodologies being used to effectively engage with the Wagiman Aboriginal Community in Pine Creek. This paper examines the successes and failures of engagement with this Indigenous community based on three factors: (i) localization of discussions; (ii) specificity of tourism related activities in discussions; and (iii) the range of options available for participation in tourism development. Conservation of the social, cultural and environmental heritage of the Pine Creek area is a priority for the Wagiman community. Digital options for tourism product development and conservation of heritage are explored in the context of effective and transparent stakeholder engagement for CSR and CSV.

Method

Fieldwork for this study was conducted in Pine Creek throughout July and August, 2015. Interviews were held with the Indigenous community, non-Indigenous community, local government officials and tourism operators. However, different questions and uses of language were applied when carrying out discussions between these groups.

One objective of the study is to develop strategies for effective engagement with the Wagiman community in the planning and development of tourism in the area. The non-Indigenous, non-Australian researcher went prepared with a list of typical, semi-structured interview questions used in academia, industry and policy. Goodson and Phillmore's (2004) inquiry paradigm soon became apparent when these questions turned out to be ineffective in generating valuable responses. Consequently, through discussions with the Wagiman community, the wording and language of questions were reviewed. Importantly, increased local content and more specific content were included to contextualise the questioning for the Wagiman interviewees. This revised question structure led to greater insights into the Wagiman community and into the development of the Indigenous tourism product in the area as well as stronger bonds between the researcher and the participants. The results, presented below, provide insights for tourism researchers, planners and managers committed to effective engagement with Indigenous stakeholders for sustainable tourism development that empowers local communities.

Results

The research reveals that four factors were effective in interviews with the Wagiman: (i) on-site vs off-site discussions; (ii) discussions of technological applications of knowledge vs. use of said technology during the interviews; (iii) discussions of specific activities vs discussions of general activities; (iv) Discussions of specific types of tourists vs discussions of tourists in general.

The type of language used in the research questions was found to be a significant factor in gaining valuable information about tourism product development in the area. It was also found that direct questioning was less useful than engaging Wagiman participants in discussions that allowed for ‘yarning’ and storytelling. The following questions, for example, were ineffective in generating a responsive answer:

Ineffective language use

Researcher: What is your role in the community?

Indigenous elder: Uh...?

Or,

Researcher: What do you call this tree in Wagiman?

Indigenous elder: Uh?

Consequently, engagement with the stakeholder led to a review of the structure of questions whereby local content and specific content were included.

Effective language use

Researcher: I am still learning about how you are all related here in Pine Creek. Could you tell me a little bit about your family?

Or,

Researcher: What you call ‘em tree in language?

These questions generated more successful and extensive discussions on family histories including one’s role within the community, as well as Indigenous names and significance of plants and animals. This, in turn, provided more Indigenous input on local life, identity and culture of the area. By applying more local culture and language into the research process and questions, more successful responses could be generated.

After reviewing the type of questions and language used, the aforementioned four influential factors in interviewing this Aboriginal community could be found. Being on-site, at the place of discussion, was found to be most significant in generating active engagement from Indigenous participants. For instance, Umbrawarra National Park and Gorge is a popular tourist destination located 29km outside of Pine Creek. It is also, however, a significant bio-cultural site and destination for the Wagiman community of Pine Creek. When asking

questions about Umbrawarra Gorge and the tourism activities there, it was more successful to go to Umbrawarra Gorge and see what the tourists and locals were doing there rather than talk in Pine Creek about such activity at Umbrawarra Gorge.

Question in Pine Creek about Umbrawarra Gorge

Researcher: What do you think about putting a lookout at Umbrawarra Gorge?

Indigenous elder: Um, ya. That would be good.

Question at Umbrawarra Gorge about Umbrawarra Gorge

Researcher: Do you think we should put a lookout here? (while pointing to a flat top above the gorge only a few metres away.)

Indigenous participants: Yes! That would be good. We could also put some shelter, a BBQ,...

They continued to converse between themselves and the researcher on some tourism development options for the lookout.

However, as much of the knowledge of the Wagiman community in Pine Creek is provided by the elderly, and many places of interest are not easily accessible during most of the year, more off-site, digital options need to be explored. Interviewees were responsive to visual digital technology, such as Google Earth, which facilitates off-site engagement. Google Earth and other similar applications can facilitate off-site engagement due to its interpretational, participatory, open-sourced, knowledge-sharing capabilities. An exploration of digital options for engagement resulted from a discussion on technology which proved ineffective with older people of the community.

Question discussing the use of technology

Researcher: How good are you with designing digital maps for websites?

Indigenous elder: Uh...?

Discussions about websites in a general, abstract manner were also carried out with the same elderly participants. One interviewee was aged between 60-70 years and the other, a slightly younger interviewee, was aged about 50-60 years.

Question discussing the use of technology

Researcher: Do you think it would be good to develop a website about your culture for tourists to see?

Indigenous elder: (asked the younger Wagiman participant a question, not understanding the researcher's question.)

Younger Indigenous participant: (said to the elder) You know? Them computer. For people to see stories.

Indigenous elder: nodded.

Later, three interviewees from three different generations viewed digital maps and the website with the researcher, who developed the maps and website. The elder, her daughter (aged about 40) and her granddaughter (aged in her teens) could interact with the researcher and the website and maps. The researcher asked questions based on content.

Question involving the use of technology

Researcher: Do you think we could put Wakdo here on this map for tourists to see?

(The two younger generations pointed to the area on the map and spoke in Wagiman for the elder, who seemed to be having difficulty understanding. Once the younger generations had explained, the elder answered)

Indigenous elder: Ah, Yes...that would be good...and the Hot Springs?

More responsive, collaborative content for tourism product development resulted once technology was actively used during the interview, versus being discussed in an abstract manner. The use of the technology being discussed during the interview also brought older and younger generations together to discuss tourism development, while also enriching the older generations' technological skills.

For the Wagiman community in Pine Creek, knowledge-sharing through digital outputs is a preferred tourism product development option. Younger people had more experience and exposure to digital technologies and so engaged more readily on digital applications for tourism. They also showed an interest in assisting older people with digital technology, thereby promoting overall community involvement. However, the elderly were familiar with mobile phones and expressed interest in mobile applications. This was partly due to limited interests in face-to-face engagement with tourists.

Another effective factor was the use of specific activities of tourists and local, Indigenous visitors to the area. When both on-site and specific questions were used in interviews, the discussions with the Indigenous participations were most significant. Discussions that utilized technology during the interview provided more significant responses than discussing the technology in an abstract manner. Questions about the specific types of tourist were found to be of least significance.

As for questions regarding the types of tourists, these were found to be of marginal significance:

Question about the types of tourists visiting the area

Researcher: What types of tourists would you like to see here?

Indigenous interviewee: Yes. All OK.

Various versions of this question were asked a few more times during the research process sometimes with more specific activities being mentioned:

Question about the types of tourists and their activities

Researcher: Would you be happy to see tourists swimming here? Would you be happy to see people from outside Australia, coming to swim here?

Indigenous interviewee: Yes. OK. That would be good.

The type of tourist did not seem to be a factor of interest or for further discussion for the participants from the Wagiman community.

As much of the current tourism infrastructure, policy and management of Pine Creek is operated by non-Indigenous residents, interviews were also carried out with non-Indigenous local participants regarding the current tourism infrastructure, especially that which promotes Indigenous heritage. Such consultations included those with a local, non-Indigenous representative of the Pine Creek Regional Town Council concerning the deterioration of the town signs and the vandalism of the “walk through time” Indigenous tourism product of the town.

Question about Indigenous tourism with a non-Indigenous local policy maker

Researcher: What happened to the mosaics of the walk through time feature? Some pieces seem to be missing.

Council representative: Ah yes, many of the Aboriginal people were upset with some of the Aboriginal names for animals appearing on the plaque.

Researcher: Why?

Council representative: Because they were not asked about it beforehand. We have learned our lesson now though and will be sure to ask them before doing something like this again.

More frequent and effective consultations with the Wagiman community is needed before implementing Indigenous knowledge into the tourism infrastructure of the town as to avoid any violations of cultural heritage, knowledge and other sensitivities. This interview demonstrates the need to implement better CSR and CSV for sustainable tourism development with more effective Indigenous stakeholder engagement.

Conclusion

There are options for government and regional tourism planners and managers to interact in more productive ways with Indigenous communities and to facilitate cross-generational involvement. Enhanced cultural awareness and cultural capacity is essential for cross-generational engagement which, in turn, is an important aspect CSR in generating transparent and authentic local knowledges.

Research with the Pine Creek community has shown that local engagement, particularly on-site discussions about specific activities, is central to successful stakeholder engagement. The Wagiman community members who participated in the research were positively responsive to digital options for stakeholder engagement and heritage conservation in tourism. Given that the overall socio-economic situation of the Wagiman community is similar to that of many Indigenous communities, this suggests that our findings may be more broadly applicable. Digital options for tourism participation and heritage conservation provide more interactive opportunities for creating shared value between stakeholders in a transparent, participatory manner for the long-term

These findings provide specific responses to the call in much of the literature on CSR and CSV, for improved engagement with Indigenous stakeholders, which can be achieved through greater Indigenous perspectives in CSR and tourism research. It is the responsibility of tourism researchers and practitioners to examine multiple ways to maximise the economic, social and environmental benefits of tourism, at the same time as empowering local Indigenous communities through tourism development. Research, policy and practice must move beyond western perspectives in tourism management and engage Indigenous stakeholders in ways that they want to be involved, if they choose to be involved.

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