

TOURISM POLICY. AN AUTONOMOUS POLICY ARENA

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The aim of the present text is to contribute to the debate on the nature, content and instruments of tourism policy, by expanding the scientific approaches to this issue and furthering the understanding of public decisions related to tourism. The analytical perspective of Policy Analysis is used to propose an operative definition of tourism policy, enumerate the constitutive elements of this type of public action, and describe the instruments available to public decision-makers in order to reach the intended objectives.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a relatively young phenomenon which involves the development of a singular economic sector. The economic dimension of tourism is key to understanding the dynamics it generates, and yet tourism is more than an economic sector. It is therefore unwise to consider tourism policy as another branch of a country's economic policy.

This underlying view might explain why tourism policy since the 1960s has failed to adequately address some of tourism's most persistent problems, generally related to the social, cultural and environmental dimensions of the phenomenon.

There is no doubt that the analysis of tourism policy can be approached from an economic perspective. In this case the rationality of public policies is explained through the idea of the market's failures with regard to public assets, and effectiveness and efficiency as the reference values (Weimer and Vining, 2005). Our aim is to contribute to that analysis from a political science approach, which would explain the rationality of the policy by means of the idea of legitimacy and political arguments, and where the prevailing values are negotiation and consensus (Majone, 1997).

But there have been few examples of analyses of public tourism policy conducted from a political science approach. This absence explains why research into tourism policy has so far failed to incorporate issues of power, public policy-making process and the mechanisms of participation into this particular arena.

DIFFICULTIES IN ADVANCING THE ANALYSIS OF TOURISM POLICY

Tourism grows and develops at the same moment that the State diversifies and expands its policies. It is difficult to compare tourism and public policy because both issues belong to very different spheres of reality, but both share similar methodological difficulties in their study.

1. Tourism and tourism policies are issues which have only recently come to the fore, and thus have to compete for the attention of a scientific community which is accustomed to dealing with far more established study objectives. The tension between traditional and new objects of study can be seen across all disciplines, in which incorporating new objectives for analysis is not a priority.
2. Both categories can be studied from a range of different disciplines, and the sum of all the reflections will enrich the resulting analysis.
3. Tourism has a multifaceted nature and all its component aspects maintain essential relationships with all the others. But the important point for research is not so much to build a universally accepted definition of tourism, but rather definitions which make sense to each one of the disciplines which may engage in an analysis of the phenomenon. Only with significant definitions will it be possible to advance our understanding of the subject.

VARIOUS CONCEPTS FOR ADVANCING IN THE ANALYSIS OF TOURISM POLICIES

Based on reflections from previous works, we propose three basic concepts: (1) the constitutive elements of tourism policy; (2) a definition of tourism policy which makes it possible to advance in a singular analysis of this policy; and (3) a set of effective instruments for use by public decision-makers in each specific tourism policy.

The following conclusions can be drawn from a consideration of these concepts.

a. The need to reinforce the analysis of tourism policy from the political science approach

Tourism policy is a substantial field of work. We believe that if we start with the assumption that tourism policy is a branch of a larger economic policy there is a risk of overlooking certain dimensions of the problems which are an inherent part of tourism.

This does not preclude the addition of contributions made from other disciplinary perspectives. Quite the contrary, we consider that differing initial positions will lead to greater knowledge of the content and dynamics of this specific policy arena which has tourism as its objective.

This will make it necessary to consolidate a tourism policy research within the discipline of political science, as there are few studies on this subject to date. The results of these investigations will extend and enhance the analyses which are currently available.

b. A useful definition of tourism policy in order to expand the approach used so far

A definition of tourism policy should extend the analytical limits of this field and provide a better understanding of the public action it entails. This definition should conceive the phenomenon from a dynamic and reticular viewpoint; and also outline an operative public policy containing the minimum elements which characterise this type of specific action.

Our proposal is to define tourism policy as the set of actions which drive public actors –sometimes in partnership with non-public actors– with the goal of achieving a series of objectives related to the wide variety of phenomena and relationships deriving from the processes whereby citizens are attracted to, stay, and take up occasional residence in a particular territory.

c. The elements constituting tourism policy

A public policy is a series of decisions or actions which all respond to a specific nature. Not everything enacted by government is public policy, nor is everything currently purporting to be public policy actually so.

In order to be considered public policy, tourism policy must be seen to be a series of consistent actions, or at least actions which are designed to be consistent; it must go beyond the sphere of mere political intention and be materialised into a programme of real actions involving the use of public resources; it must be led by legitimate actors within the scope of their competences –although it does not necessarily need to be exclusively promoted and implemented by actors in the public sphere; a tourism policy must describe actions which go beyond the level of theoretical reflection and propose channels for specific intervention; and finally tourism policy must consider the whole series of phenomena and their relationships which converge in tourism as a fact.

d. The main instruments of tourism policy

There are six differentiated categories of instruments which can be used by public decision-makers to promote tourism policy: organisational instruments, programming instruments, regulatory instruments or instruments for the ordination of the sector, financial instruments, research and prospection instruments, and communication instruments.

Not all of these instruments need to be used, or used at the same time, although the conclusions of other analyses indicate that the combination of several is usually more fruitful than the use of only one. This is because each instrument has its own distinctive character and is geared to a specific objective being pursued by a government through its tourism policy.

Table 1
INSTRUMENTS FOR PUBLIC POLICIES

	NATURE	PURPOSE
<i>Institutional arrangements</i>	Binding for the government	Self-organization
<i>General plans</i>	Programming	Designing and planning
<i>Programmes</i>	Voluntary for those involved	Planning in a specific policy area
<i>Regulatory instruments</i>	Compulsory	Regulation and ordination
<i>Financial instruments</i>	Voluntary for those involved	Promotion and encouraging
<i>Instruments for improving knowledge</i>	Voluntary	Dissemination of knowledge, training and information
<i>Communication instruments</i>	Symbolic	Dissemination of values

Source: author's own compilation, Velasco 2007.

These categories are intended to be a tool, based on a review of the methodology, for researchers interested in analysing the contents of the policy. They are intended to assist in the understanding of a specific policy and make it possible to collect information using a descriptive approach similar to a case study. It would be interesting in subsequent research to study various tourism policies using these same categories in order to make a comparative study. This will be the objective of a forthcoming work.