

An Actor Network Perspective on Rural Māori Tourism Development

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Abstract

An actor network perspective is used to reflect on a four year participatory action research (PAR) project to develop Māori tourism in two rural locations in New Zealand. The two locations constituted two case studies, each of which unfolded differently. This working paper emerges from reflecting on the different outcomes in each area.

A number of authors have focused on the role and performance of social networks in tourism development and planning (Dredge, 2006), and on community involvement and public/private partnerships (eg. Elliott, 1997; Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997; Getz & Jamal, 1994; Reed, 1997; Horn, 2002; Richens, 1997). Likewise the concept of integrated tourism (Saxena & Iberry, 2008) now entering the tourism lexicon implies the importance of social networks in the performance of tourism from a supply perspective. This article extends on this literature to look at the range of different kinds of actors involved in the networks and to focus on the network processes.

The study used PAR methods in two case study areas to assist local people to think about and action tourism development in their area. A key tenet of the research project was to develop research that would directly benefit those people involved in it. As part of this, the Māori partner organisations involved had a significant role in the development of the research both through having researchers from the local areas on the research team and through having input through hui that were ongoing through the project.

In the northern area progress towards tourism development has been highly significant, whereas in the south progress has been slower (although other outcomes are evident). The benefit for the research project in having two contrasting case studies has been in our ability to reflect on the different capacities available to the communities and to the project. The slower progress in the south has drawn our attention to the ways in which networks have intersected and performed in the northern area.

Iwi, whenua, reo and tikanga as actor network

In both case studies, ancestral connection to the whenua (land) is a key reason why Māori aspire to live in remote areas and to develop businesses, despite the difficulties that this presents (Carr 2007; Horn & Tahi, in process). The place as an actor, is intrinsic to the identity of Māori and to Māori culture and draws Māori people back to live at home. While culture may be seen emerging from the actor network of land and people, the fact that the Māori language and culture have been threatened by the dominance of the colonising culture, mean that the culture can be seen as an actor in its own right. As such it also enrolls actors (people and land) in the network in its protection and expression. The connections

between place and the need to protect and nurture local traditions reinforce the identity of the Tūhoe or Ngāi Tahu people who live at home. In our study, this actor network underlies the interest of the rural Māori we have been working with in developing tourism and provides the resources on which tourism might be developed. However, these elements must become part of wider regional, national and international actor networks if successful tourism ventures are to develop. Here we highlight the process by which the networks of iwi in Te Urewera have been widened and how actors beyond the Urewera have been enrolled in the project of tourism development in that place.

Connecting actor networks

Critical to the success of the tourism development initiative in the northern case was the participation of key individuals, who were part of actor networks in Te Urewera, in tourism and in government. In particular, development has hinged mainly (but not exclusively) around the one married couple. This couple (one of them an author of this paper) Joe and Joanna returned home shortly before the research project started with the idea of fostering development in the local area. Their plan was also to set up a business based on eco-cultural tourism, both as a model for others to see and as a way of supporting themselves so that they could remain in the area.

As a Tūhoe person with strong local standing and a skilled facilitator, Joe is well connected with whānau/ hapu (family/ extended family) living in and connected with the area. As someone who had worked in government circles for some years, Joe also had a strong working knowledge of government development agencies and political processes. His wife, Joanna had previously worked in international tourism marketing at national level. She had multiple networks in both business and government and a strong working knowledge of New Zealand tourism and international tourism marketing. A third key individual, Brenda Tahī also has strong networks throughout Tūhoe and has had many years living in the local area, some of which has involved working on local development projects. She has excellent networks beyond the area also, but they were not strongly tourism-related and contributed to other aspects of this project.

Essentially Joe and Joanna bridged the local and the national, fostering new linkages and effectively shortening the distance (Young 2006) between Wellington and Te Urewera. For these well networked people, the distance between the remote Urewera and the Capital Wellington was only as far away as a telephone call, and email or a flight. In comparison, for many other actors in Te Urewera the distance was far greater because they did not have the personal connections, nor a working knowledge of the difference in language, values and the ways government agencies work. The bridge provided by Joe and Joanna allowed the people, place and culture of Te Urewera to enrol government agencies into their economic development project. A process of dual enrolment also went on here as government development agencies also want to enrol local people in poor areas in successful projects led by people with the capacity to manage them. So while Jo and Joe have enrolled their govt networks into the local project, so too have the government actors worked to enrol Jo and Joe and their local initiatives into their project.

The process of enrolling the wider tourism networks was led by Joanna who was able to use her working knowledge of the industry, to connect Te Urewera businesses with the world of

international tourism. Working as part of the research team in this project, Joanna like Joe worked with local businesses to incorporate them into tourism networks outside the region and helped them enrol these networks into the local tourism development project.

None of this would have been possible if the couple did not have a strong standing with local iwi. Joanna as a non Māori was able to draw on her connections through husband and children which meant she was able to assist local people with developing their business alongside Brenda Tahi. Brenda also provided a bridge between the world of business and the world of Te Urewera. Being accepted as a member of both networks was important and this became more obvious when we took the work beyond the Urewera into the territory of Ngati Porou.

Here, Brenda, who had familial links to the area and its people, was more easily able to establish relationships with people, while Jo as a non-Māori woman from outside the area struggled to work with some would-be participants. She was more able to assist when when she visited businesses with Brenda.

Overall then the process of tourism development has been one of connecting different networks, of fostering working relationships and utilising those that already exist.

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