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‘Drought Tourism’ as Compassion

“The Big Dry: ‘See us, hear us, help us” (ABC Rural, 2018)

INTRODUCTION

Australia is experiencing a drought that for many farmers is the “worst they’ve experienced in their lifetime ... the worst in 400 years” (Bedo, 2018). The negative effects of drought on rural communities is well documented (Edwards, Gray, & Hunter, 2015), as is the potential for knock-on effects to impact on the viability of tourism destinations and their constituent industries (van Dijk et al., 2013). In spite of this, however, there is also recognition of a role for tourism in the promotion of rural community resilience (Gibson & Gordon, 2018). In Australia, regions affected by drought are endeavouring to portray themselves from a tourism perspective as “open for business” (Ennion, 2019).

With the media attempting to raise the profile of the drought affected regions and communities (e.g. Reardon, 2019), the focus of this paper is to consider media’s opportunity to frame and promote a different type of tourist engagement with drought. Higgins-Desbiolles (2006) has argued that tourism discourse needs to look beyond its industrial nature and instead also explore tourism’s role in ensuring the wider public good. Forms of tourism including volunteer tourism have been recognised for their potential to aid the plight of the disadvantaged (Wearing & McGehee, 2013). Drawing on a representation of volunteer tourism in a drought-affected region (see Power, 2018), this paper will consider the role of the media in promoting a richer and deeper host-guest connection.

TOURISM IN A TIME OF DROUGHT

Daugstad and Kirchengast (2013) have observed how farm hosts often fulfil their dual roles as farmers and hosts by arranging a “temporal front stage in the guise of a backstage ... [one that would allow them] to negotiate notions of authenticity and heritage with the tourists” (p. 170). Such approaches make sense for farmers motivated by opportunities for income diversification.

However, what happens when farmers in drought-affected regions are suffering the effects of social isolation and have other motivations for attracting travellers, for example “a farmer out west offered free stays for children because his children did school of the air and rarely saw other kids their age” (Power, 2018)?

Drought in Australia is a ‘fact of life’, with one in every three years of European settlement being characterised by drought conditions (West & Smith, 1996). Since the mid-1990s, the effects of the Millennium Drought (1996 to 2010) have made drought part of the national consciousness. Debate has developed in the wider community over issues including drought proofing through dam construction, agricultural investment in drought affected regions and mechanisms for providing drought assistance to farmers. Bell and Moller (2006) have argued that whilst the effects of drought are often predominantly rural; water restrictions, rising food prices and drought appeals are increasing urban consciousness.

With people in the urban centres increasingly seeking to understand what they can do to aid with the national drought response, there is a need to consider the media’s role in message dissemination. Schweinsberg et al. (2017) drew attention to the ability of media to influence societal discourse in complex protected area settings. The rural communities affected by the drought are similarly complex in that they are characterised by long standing pioneering histories, whilst to different extents geographically isolated and facing long term external and internal threats to their economic, social and environmental futures (Tonts, Argent, & Plummer, 2012). It is into this mix that the idea of a sharing economy (see Baumber, Scerri, & Schweinsberg, 2019) has entered, enabling farmers to offer urban travellers an opportunity to stay on their properties (see Power, 2018; Thomas, 2018). Large numbers of Australians recognise the importance of spending money in the bush, as well as donating to rural causes – *buy a bale of hay, Parma for a farma* etc. However, beyond pushing money into drought-affected regions, there is a common regret that “we can’t do more for them” (Pezet, Gorman, & Shields, 2018).

In the next section of this paper, we will consider one media representation of how it may be possible to do more. Drawing on Schweinsberg et al. (2017), we will show how the narrative in Power (2018) frames tourism as part of the solution to the drought. In doing so, the benefits of drought tourism may extend beyond providing an opportunity for income diversification to be a vehicle of societal hope through the exchange of compassion from urban dwellers to rural drought settings.

‘DROUGHT TOURISM’ AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR COMPASSION

Schweinsberg et al. (2017) argue that the media’s ability to frame a debate depends on their ability to frame both the object of inquiry (i.e. what is to be studied), as well as how stakeholders relate to the phenomena in question. Studies into the nature of media coverage of drought tend to emphasise themes of societal benevolence and the publicising of news worthy aid events (Ward, 2005). In this sense, the reporting in Power (2018) represents a departure from the norm. Power (2018) describes the experience of two families from Sydney who visited a superfine merino and cattle property in western New South Wales to provide practical assistance to drought-affected farmers whilst educating their children on the effects of the drought.

The active and respectful compassion shown by the participants in the story demonstrates that a different type of tourist engagement is possible with the drought. Compassion has been defined as the “feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help” (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010). To date, compassion has received minimal attention as a theoretical framing tool by tourism scholars (see Weaver & Jin, 2016). Where it is observed in the context of volunteer tourism (e.g. Mostafanezhad, 2013) there is often evidence of a “patronising attitude of western tourists, ... [as well as] a dualism that promotes self – interest as the complementary counterpart to altruism or other interest” (p. 661). We would argue that ‘drought tourism’, as portrayed in Power (2018) presents a contrast to these traditional forms of volunteer tourism with respect to its potential to elicit compassion. Drought tourists are directing compassion not simply at a

group of people that they deem to be disadvantaged and thus worthy of their benevolence, but rather at a group of people they deem as being part of an issues the tourists themselves are facing as members of the Australian community.

In this way, the reporting in Power (2018) provides a practical illustration of Weaver and Jin's (2016) sustainable tourism compassion-scape. Weaver and Jin (2016) argued that compassion involved a mixture of context, encounter and response variables. Weaver and Jin (2016) acknowledge the media's role in the development of "compassionate individuals" (p. 661). The context of drought has already been covered in depth in the literature with evidence suggesting that the socio-economic disadvantage in rural communities (Cheers, 2019) could make them 'worthy' of compassion from urban tourists. Where Power (2018) attempts to change the framing of the debate is through the portrayal of reciprocal benefits from volunteering for both tourists and hosts. Power (2018) portrays the compassion encounter as based on mutual respect, one where the tourists are seen as self-effacing, mindful of the realities of their temporary situation and motivated by a desire to give back. Power (2018) is thus portraying a perspective of drought and tourism where the latter is seen as a vehicle through which society can provide a re-affirmation of "social morality and solidarity in the face of an unexpected and unprecedented challenge from nature" (West & Smith, 1996, p. 93).

CONCLUSION

Tourism is vulnerable to the effects of drought. However, could it also be a vehicle of hope for drought-affected regions? In this paper, we have sought to demonstrate not only the ability of forms of volunteer/share economy tourism to enable feelings of compassion amongst tourists, but also the important role of news media in ensuring that these stories are told to national and international audiences. The statistics of devastation connected to the drought are telling with respect to the increasing number of suicides, farm foreclosures and the like (see Schwartz, 2019). While policy makers continue to debate the best approach to drought adaptation and mitigation, local solutions are also possible. Future research should seek to consider the nature of interactions between media,

communities and tourists in the development of locally responsible and sustainable compassion-scapes. This research would be useful in the development of a drought conscious destination image for rural regions, whilst also helping to ensure that the future direction of tourism in rural Australia is framed based on local conditions (see Higgins-Desbiolles, Carnicelli, Krolkowski, Wijesinghe, & Boluk, 2019).

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