

Title - Assessment case study: understanding the development and implementation of sustainable tourism policies and practices in Scotland's first National Park

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Group - Advanced Level Module in Sustainable Tourism Planning and Development, a core unit for all Tourism degree programmes within the University and an option for students following business management-related programmes.

Activity - A case study assignment based on a field visit, focusing on developing and planning for sustainability in Scotland's first National Park.

Aim - To provide students with the opportunity to explore tourism and recreation impacts in a protected area, and to consider the way forward for developing sustainable tourism policies and practices.

Context / Background - Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park was launched in 2002 and its eastern boundary is within half an hour's drive of the University of Stirling. The Park area has always been popular with visitors and a number of tourism-related conflicts and challenges exist. With the opportunities offered by its new status, the area is a fascinating location to study the development of sustainable tourism policy and initiative within the wider policy frameworks that are being developed by the National Park Authority (NPA).

The module co-ordinator was seconded to work with the National Park Authority in 2004 and, as a result of the working relationship established, the opportunity to develop a live case study arose at the beginning of 2005. Students were able to observe and find out about tourism conflicts and opportunities, and work, at the same time as the National Park Authority, on deriving a set of sustainable tourism policies to guide the development of the area. The module is a relatively new one, as Tourism courses started at Stirling in 2001.

Example - Groups of three students were commissioned as consultants to assist the NPA in developing a Sustainable Tourism Plan for the Loch Lomond Area.

As a new body, Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority is in the process of writing its first Draft Park Plan and a number of other strategic documents that will set National Park policies in place, with regard to a range of diverse activities such as housing, transportation, economic development,

forestry, landscape protection, heritage, development control and tourism and recreation. The NPA has designated this area as the Loch Lomond Destination. However, there are many key issues and problems that require a strategic approach in terms of deriving solutions to tourism usage, community pressures and improved management practices.

The objectives of the assignment were to:

- Gain an insight into a specific geographic area and the nature of tourism impacts
- Understand how sustainable tourism policies are developed and implemented
- Apply theoretical knowledge of sustainable planning and development principles to a live case study
- Produce a report to a professional standard within a team to simulate a real-life working context

Students attended a one-day field visit to the Loch Lomond micro-region of the National Park on which they would focus their assignment. Visits were made to three distinctive sites, where the range of visitor behaviours, natural and social environments, and visitor infrastructure could be observed. A number of key speakers from the National Park Authority attended the site visits and provided an overview of the main issues. The field visit also acted as a chance to ask questions, make observations on actual and potential problems, issues and opportunities for sustainable tourism development; take photographs, and confer in their groups.

On return to the University, students were given access to the key data, documents and publications associated with the National Park and its development. Normally, students would find it difficult to obtain the range of supporting information and data and would not be able to produce meaningful report material. However, as the Module Co-ordinator was able to provide access to key information and personnel as appropriate, the students were drawn more closely into the realities of devising a sustainable tourism plan, with its inherent social, environmental, economic and political difficulties. Students were given an outline of the elements of a sustainable tourism plan using Best Practice Guidelines from the Grampian region of Scotland, were encouraged to find examples of international best practice and were also asked to apply a more theoretical understanding of sustainable development to the case study.

The length of report requested was 3,500 words excluding appendices and the students were given 4 weeks in which to complete the work. The format requested incorporated the following points:

- A definition of the area in the strategy
- A clear recognition of the parameters of sustainable tourism
- An assessment of the area's assets, infrastructure, tourism patterns and general circumstances (e.g. social/economic aspects)

- An assessment of current issues and problems, indicating the most pressing issues for the area
- A set of strategic objectives for the development of sustainable tourism in the area, including for example:
 - Conservation and protection/enhancement of the environment and heritage
 - Economic and social development for local communities
 - Visitor management and product quality issues
- An action plan relating to key sites visited, which put the strategic objectives into context, aiming to have at least five actions for each site visited.

The organisation of the group was the responsibility of the students and it was expected that each group member would make an equal contribution to the report. The groups were self-selecting to minimise any potentially problematic working relationships. To ensure consistency, the report was requested to be presented using the same style.

The group of students described in this case study was small and well-motivated. With a more diverse group of students, or where it is desirable to assess group-working skills, peer assessment could be utilised.

Results / Feedback - The quality of work produced demonstrated that the students learned effectively through this case study, having been introduced to the complexities of developing the policy framework for sustainable tourism. The amount of time involved in arranging the field visit, and the efforts in supervision were not insubstantial, and required good knowledge and understanding of the area, as well as exceptional links with the National Park Authority staff. The field visit was appreciated and enjoyed by the students, and the feedback was that they gained a great deal of insight from visiting sites that were either under pressure, or subject to under-/over-utilisation problems.

In future it is hoped to involve key players in the National Park Authority in a more simulated consultancy environment, where students present their findings in a verbal format. Although planned for, availability of staff at the appropriate time did not permit such an event.

The case study assignment met all of its objectives and brought to life all the elements of the course content, from the development of environmental concern and recognition of tourism impacts, through to tourism planning and tools for environmental management. The assignment rigorously tested a range of student skills, including the ability to distil a large number of diverse information sources, to demonstrate an understanding of sustainable development in theoretical and applied terms, to work together in a group situation and to produce a professional-style consultancy report.

Further Information - Students were asked to produce one report, the grade awarded for which was shared by all group members. Students were required to see the Module Co-ordinator well before the assignment hand-in date if any

difficulties occurred in working relationships within the group. To simulate a real-life project working group, it was suggested that students in each group of three should delegate specific tasks, but work together to ensure a consistent approach.