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Research Paper

A chaos theory perspective on destination crisis management: Evidence from Mexico

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ABSTRACT

It is recognised that tourism destinations are vulnerable to some form of crisis or disaster. Consequently, attention has long been paid to the nature and consequences of tourism crises and disasters, whilst, more recently, a number of tourism crisis management models have been proposed in the literature. Such models may, however, be criticised for their structured, linear and prescriptive approach to the management of crises, which tend to be unpredictable in their occurrence and evolution. Therefore, identifying the limitations of contemporary crisis management models, this paper proposes an alternative, chaos theory-based approach to crisis management. This is then considered within the context of the AH1N1 influenza crisis in Mexico. The research revealing not only that the unfolding of the crisis followed many of the tenets of chaos theory, but also that chaos theory provides a viable framework for the management of tourism crises.

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1. Introduction

For tourism destinations, a key success factor is the ability to provide a safe, predictable and secure environment for visitors (Volo, 2007). Tourists are typically risk averse and, thus, any actual or perceived threat to their health, safety or security is likely to influence their decision to visit a particular destination (Sönmez & Graefe, 1998; Lepp & Gibson, 2003). Indeed, it has long been recognised that tourism is highly susceptible to political, environmental, economic and other influences. As Prideaux, Laws and Faulkner (2003, p. 475) note, tourism flows 'are subject to disruption by a range of events that may occur in the destination itself, in competing destinations, origin markets, or they may be remote from either.' Irrespective of the source of such events, however, the subsequent reduction in tourist arrivals may have significant economic and social consequences both for the destination and the wider economy (Santana, 2003; Ritchie, 2008).

Of course, the 'tourism crisis' is not a new phenomenon. The history of modern tourism is replete with well- (and lesser) known examples of natural disasters, economic downturns, political turmoil, health scares, terrorist activity and other events that have impacted negatively on the volume and direction of tourism flows. Moreover, as tourism has continued to grow in both scope and scale, such events appear, perhaps inevitably, to occur with increasing frequency, to the extent that 'tourism destinations in every corner of

the globe face the virtual certainty of experiencing a disaster of one form or another at some point in their history' (Faulkner, 2001, p. 142). It is not surprising, therefore, that the susceptibility of tourism destinations to crises and disasters is widely addressed within the literature, albeit with a predominant focus on economic and financial crises (Hall, 2010). At the same time, and following the publication of Faulkner's (2001) seminal work on the subject, increasing academic attention has been paid in particular to the management of tourism crises and disasters (for example, Glaesser, 2006; Hystad & Keller, 2008; Ritchie, 2004, 2009).

Nevertheless, despite the growing body of research related to tourism crisis management it has been observed that many tourism destinations and organisations remain unprepared for a crisis situation (Beirman, 2003; Ritchie, 2009). That is, there has been an apparent reluctance or failure on the part of the much of the tourism sector to adopt the crisis management models or strategies proposed in the literature. On the one hand, this may reflect a challenge facing the tourism academy more generally, namely, the need for a more effective articulation between tourism academic research and the needs of the tourism sector (Sharpley, 2011). On the other hand, and as this paper suggests, it may reflect the limitations of these proposed models and strategies as practical responses to potential or actual crises that tourism destinations may experience. In other words, the extent to which contemporary models of crisis management may deliver satisfactory solutions to the challenges presented by tourism crises or disasters remains questionable. Drawing as they do on theories of risk and crisis management within the business organisation, these models in general propose a linear, prescriptive framework from prediction through to post-event recovery as a

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