WORKING WITH PEOPLE AT TOURISM'S EXTREME MARGINS: A REVIEW OF HUMAN RESOURCES ISSUES IN REMOTE DESTINATIONS

Tom Baum
Professor of International Tourism and Hospitality Management
Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management
University of Strathclyde
94, Cathedral Street
Glasgow G4 0LG
Scotland
E-mail: t.g.baum@strath.ac.uk

Leonie Lockstone
Victoria University
8-213, Sunbury
Melbourne
Email: leonie.lockstone@vu.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to address a neglected consideration in the development of tourism in remote and extreme destination areas, that of the recruitment, training and management of people in the right quantity and of an appropriate quality to meet the needs of increasingly demanding and sophisticated international travellers and "adventurers". Issues addressed include the impact of seasonality on work in remote areas; the recruitment and initial training of tourism staff, both local and from outside of the community; retention and career development opportunities; and the role of public sector agencies in supporting the tourism sector in meeting its service delivery requirements through people in remote areas. Keywords: Human Resources, Remote Destinations, Labour Market, Recruitment, Retention and Training.

INTRODUCTION

The growth of tourism, worldwide, has been characterised by increasing interest by visitors who are seeking to access many of the more remote locations on the globe, in many cases, places that are characterised by extremes in terms of access, climate or terrain and, in many instances, all three. Thus, demand for tourism to desert regions, including the Australian outback (Krakover and Gradus, 2002), mountains (Godde, Price & Zimmerman, 2000), arctic environments such as that in the Antarctic (Bauer, 2001) and remote small island locations, both cold-water and tropical (Conlin & Baum, 1995; Baldacchino, 2006) have grown significantly in recent years. This, in turn, has created challenges with respect to the delivery of tourism services in these demanding environments. These services relate both to the requirement for specialist skills within the context of the destination (survival, climbing, extreme winter sports, water-based) and to the delivery of core tourism services such as hospitality and guiding. These are considerations that have been widely ignored in the literature on the development of tourism in remote areas. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the issues that relate to the role of people in delivering services to visitors in remote locations.

Nevertheless, the human resource dimension is one of the most important elements of any industry sector, none more so than in a service sector such as tourism, which is characterised by high levels of human involvement in the development and delivery of services or vacation experiences (Baum, 1995). Whatever means are employed to deliver tourism services to the customer, the role of human intervention (as individuals and groups) is almost universal. In this context, the management and development of employees is a critical function and one that, ultimately, determines whether a tourism organisation is competitively successful or not. Highly successful tourism organisations, particularly in the high-touch and luxury end of the marketplace, invariably place considerable emphasis on the engagement, education and empowerment of their employees at all levels to deliver services that define or differentiate the organisation from others in the field. At the same time, parts of the tourism sector, alongside other parts in the economy, are making increasing use of technology substitution and the creation of an e-service environment within which human mediation in the service process is reduced or eliminated. Electronic ticketing and check-in with airlines and hotels are examples of this process at work.

In an era of increasing emphasis on quality in the delivery of tourism services, service quality and the human support such service demands, can be looked upon as a competitive opportunity as well as a strategic issue. Consideration of the role of human resources in creating quality and its efficient management has widely been recognised as one of the most important methods to improve quality and competitiveness. At the same time, the tourism industry, worldwide, is characterised by ambiguous attitudes to investment in human capital, inflexible employment practices and an unsustainable approach to its development (Jithendran & Baum, 2000). Often perceived purely in operational terms (Baum, 1993), the management and development of human resources in tourism is readily described as an example of *adhocism*. It is also an area of activity that has repercussions far beyond the operational domain in organisations and clearly impacts on the marketing and financial effectiveness of tourism organisations.

This generic analysis with respect to the role of human resources in tourism is of direct relevance in the context of tourism services and experiences which are located in what can be described as extreme tourism destinations, whether extremity in this context relates to remote location, insularity or climate or, indeed, a combination of all three. Indeed, this paper will endeavour to demonstrate that the challenges faced by organisations operating within extreme tourism destinations with respect to their
- labour market features;
- sourcing and recruitment of staff to work in the sector;
- employee retention;
- training and development; and
- career progression.

are different in both kind and extent from the issues faced by destinations located in more "normal" tourism environments.

Discussion of issues relating to human resource management and development in the extreme tourism context in the literature is very limited. Indeed the majority of contributions to what is a growing body of knowledge in the field of remote area tourism make little more than passing reference to the employment and skills environment within such destinations. There are some exceptions. Baum and Conlin (1994) and Conlin and Baum (2003) explore some of the practical issues faced by tourism organisations in such locations in terms of the impact of seasonality, limited

skills within the local labour market and issues of access to formal education and training for the tourism sector. These general points about human resource challenges within tourism are demonstrated specifically in the context of one small island environment, that of the Aland Islands in the Baltic, by Baum (1996). Baum and Lundtorp (2000) address the impact of seasonality on the sustainability of employment in tourism and the challenges which attendant problems present for service and product quality in more remote and highly seasonal destinations. The impact of seasonality on employment in small islands in the North Atlantic is explored by Baum and Hagen (1999).

This paper looks at the management of development of people within the context of extreme tourism destinations against key areas of human resource practice and activity, as identified above.

Labour market features of extreme tourism destinations

A discussion of the human resource characteristics of extreme tourism destinations must be underpinned by recognition of the typically weak labour market features that operate within tourism generally (Riley, 1996). Riley is useful in his application of the weak-strong internal labour market model to illustrate the relationship between the wider labour market and a number of key characteristics of tourism work, notably educational requirements, points of entry into the workforce, workplace pay differentials and level of trade union membership. This analysis has important ramifications for the status of tourism work and the perceived attractiveness of the sector both for employment and educational/training opportunity. Keep and Mayhew (1999, p.8-9) summarise a list of the characteristics of tourism work that confirm Riley's weak internal labour market attribution:

- Tendency to low wages, except where skills shortages act to counter this.
- Prevalence of unsocial hours and family unfriendly shift patterns.
- Rare incidence of equal opportunities policies and male domination of higher level, better paid work.
- Poor or non-existent career structures.
- Informal recruitment practices.
- Failure to adopt formalised 'good practice' models of human resource management and development.
- Lack of any significant trade union presence.
- High levels of labour turnover
- Difficulties in recruitment and retention.

The skills profile of tourism, in turn, is influenced by the labour market that is available to it, both in direct terms and via educational and training establishments. The weak internal labour market characteristics in themselves impose downward pressures on the skills expectations that employers have of their staff and this, in turn, influences the nature and level of training which the educational system delivers. There is an evident cycle of down-skilling, not so much in response to the actual demands of tourism work or of consumer expectations of what it can deliver, but as a result of the perceptions of potential employees and the expectations that employers have of them.

Extreme locations, that do not always conform to the wider generalisations addressed above but, nevertheless, do exhibit labour market characteristics that create real challenges for the delivery of quality tourism products and services. Tourism is characterised by extreme seasonality, possibly

depending on operating seasons of two to three months per year. The tourism sector is also relatively immature in most extreme destinations, responding to market demand for new forms of tourism in locations, until very recently, totally off the beaten track for all but the most intrepid travellers. In such situations, the tourism labour market cannot be seen as an embedded part of the wider employment environment for a significant number of the resident population. Rather, employment in tourism is a transitory activity which is taken up either

- by local residents who work in tourism enterprises alongside other economic activity or periods of extended economic inactivity or unemployment. However, the immaturity of extreme destinations in terms of their tourism experience means that the resident workforce is frequently not well equipped to avail of opportunities demanding more than the most basic of skills levels; or
- by "incomers" who choose to migrate to such destinations for the short season from mainland locations or from other seasonal locations in search of work or to participate in some of the lifestyle activities which the destination has to offer. Adler and Adler (2004) describe such transitory, lifestyle-seeking tourism workers in some detail in their exploration of hotel work in Hawaii (hardly an extreme location, admittedly). They talk of a substantial number of tourism workers who spend part of their year working and playing in ski resorts in the USA and Canada and the balance surfing and working in Hawaii. "Incomers" such as these satisfy both their personal, usually sporting ambitions and their economic needs while also providing a range of skills which may be unavailable within the resident labour market. In extreme forms, this lifestyle form of incomer migration means that worker motivations for being in a destination can mirror those of the paying guests and the two become almost indistinguishable for much of their respective stays. Arnould and Price (1993) discuss the context of white-water rafting and reveal that experiential themes - personal growth, self-renewal, communities and harmony with nature - are significant in explaining the underlying dimensions of satisfaction for both tourists and many of those who work with them as guides and instructors. This motivational convergence between guests and employees is a theme that is emergent within wider tourism (Baum 1997), particularly in what might be called the aesthetics of labour, within which it becomes difficult to distinguish the two in terms of interests, behaviour and appearance (Warhurst et al, 2000). Baldacchino (2006:249) likewise describes the proximity of guests and employees in the cruise ship context and their shared experiences.

The expedition lecturer is a highly privileged person. A few make the major part of their living on board cruise ships; some are semi-retired or have other means of support at universities and museums; and others, particularly the Expedition Leaders, may spend equal time at head office planning new itineraries, contacting shore agents and guides, hiring staff and working to ensure that the ship and activities all meet and exceed environmental and safety standards. Lecturers are paid and their expenses covered. On board ship, lecturing staff dine with the passengers and are provided a comfortable (shared) cabin. They accompany the passengers throughout the trip and enjoy the same experiences. Because they combine the roles of tour guide, personal companion and boat driver, the character, skill, and knowledge of the expedition staff directly affects the quality of the passengers' cruise experience.

In many extreme destinations, the "incomer" role is played by workers from a mainland location with close cultural and political ties to the island. Thus Danes fulfil this role in Greenland; British workers do likewise in the Falkland Islands; and continental Americans are most commonly found in remote Alaskan tourism destinations.

Seasonality impacts upon the extent to which the resident community is able to provide specialist skills required in extreme tourism destinations. Some of these may be closely associated with the day-to-day lifestyle of such communities – marine activities (fishing, wildlife viewing), mountain activities or winter sports – but others have little in common with other economic and leisure activities in the destination, notably those related to the delivery of hospitality and service. Thus, the labour market in extreme tourism destinations frequently suffers from a tourism skills deficiency and this, in turn, may have serious consequences for the ability of the destination to compete in the international tourism arena.

Tourism businesses in extreme destinations are, characteristically, micro to small operations, employing few staff and are often family owned (see, for example Baum, 1996, writing about the Aland Islands). The impact of larger, multiple operations (hotels, local travel companies) is virtually non-existent in most extreme small locations. Smaller tourism businesses, universally, have characteristics in their operations and organisation that have wider labour market implications in terms of the sustainability of the work that is on offer, opportunities for career progression and their investment in the skills development of those who work within the businesses (Baum, 1999). Small tourism businesses frequently operate alongside or as part of wider economic activities such as agriculture or fishing, in a family context and there is a merging of personnel between the two functions, often as a result of differing seasonal demands.

The characteristics of the labour markets within which tourism businesses in extreme destinations operate, therefore, dictate to a significant extent the manner in which more specific human resource management functions are carried out in such locations, notably the impact of seasonality, their immaturity as tourism destinations, a dependence on external labour and the size and structure of the locally based tourism businesses that are able to operate.

Sourcing and recruitment of staff to work in the sector

Extreme tourism locations have small and constrained labour pools upon which to draw when developing tourism as an area of economic activity. The immaturity of the sector and seasonality of its operation means that tourism does not always offer attractive opportunities to residents of such locations. In this context, as suggested above, "incomers" with lifestyle motivations, may be more willing and able to seize the more attractive employment opportunities offered within the tourism sector. Creating greater business and employment viability within the tourism sector is frequently a challenge addressed by public sector authorities as they seek to embed tourism within the local economy. Diversifying product as a means to extend the tourism season beyond the core summer period is a common response and is one that can be successful. Iceland, although perhaps not the most extreme such destinations, has developed its urban tourism product in Reykjavik and, to a lesser extent, Akuyeri, so that shoulder and off-season winter tourism in the form of short breaks and cultural tours are now important complements to the main season. Such measures provide opportunities for longer and more sustainable employment and, therefore, assist in enhancing the recruitment "offer" within the resident community.

Many of the specialist and "authentic" skills demanded by tourists visiting extreme destinations, whether activity-based, sporting or cultural, may be uniquely located within the local resident community but need to be harnessed in a way that is complementary to existing economic activity. Recruitment of, for example, land-based or marine guides, cultural animators, exponents of traditional crafts or extreme sports instructors, for whom such activities may be an extension of their "normal" lives, may require a "selling" of the tourism concept to the community in a manner that goes beyond economic criteria. Persuading the community that opening its doors to tourism is in the general good must underpin and, indeed, precede more formal measures to recruit staff for specific tourism functions.

The small business culture of tourism in extreme destinations has its limitations but also provides opportunity to encourage resident participation, providing core business skills are available within the community. Such participation can be fostered through targeted training in entrepreneurial skills and appropriate business development support to encourage people to use their existing skills within the context of tourism. While not recruitment in the traditional human resource management sense, such strategies increase the labour pool within the community who have an economic and skills commitment to tourism.

Notwithstanding measures to increase the tourism operating season and, with it, core employment, there are limitations to the extent to which sustained work can be offered by tourism businesses in extreme destinations. Therefore, particular focus is required on measures to recruit seasonal staff for the key periods when tourism activity is high and to ensure that they are fully equipped in skills terms to undertake the tasks required of them. The Scottish Highlands and Islands SHEP programme is an example of how the tourism industry, the education sector and public authorities can collaborate to provide a recruitment vehicle for seasonal businesses in remoter areas (Bum, 2006). SHEP is targeted at secondary school students seeking seasonal summer work and provides them with classroom and industry skills training during school time in anticipation of employment opportunities during their main vacation. As a result of this recruitment and training initiative, school students are more likely to remain in their home locations during the tourism season and more likely to opt for tourism work in preference to other areas of employment.

When local recruitment measures do not meet the demand for labour within extreme tourism destinations, external recruitment is inevitable. The "selling" point in this context is frequently lifestyle-related, seeking to attract people, generally younger workers with few family ties, to enable them to combine activity and cultural interests with what in effect becomes a working vacation. The challenge, within local labour markets, of this "incomer" model is that such employees may come to the remote locations with skills sets and experience profiles that exceed that available locally and may be willing and able to work for remuneration and in conditions that are inferior to those demanded locally.

Employee retention

Seasonality is perhaps the main barrier to long-term employee retention in the tourism sectors of extreme destinations. The reality of tourism in extreme destinations is that it is not an economic sector that can offer sustained employment opportunities on a year– round basis, excepting for a very small proportion of staff in management or marketing functions. Thus, retention in the normal use of the term, is not a real issue in that seasonal commitment to employment is generally good.

However, investment in training for seasonal employment can be relatively high and, therefore, there are significant costs attached to the loss of trained staff at the end of the main operating season unless measures are in place to attract them back again the following year. Therefore, in extreme destinations, the concept of retention can take on a meaning which relates to the ability of organisations to attract the same operational team back on an annual basis, whether they are local residents or "incomers". The value of this form of retention lies in savings with respect to training and the ability of such staff to "hit the ground running" and deliver products and services to the organisational standard immediately. Where other industrial seasons complement tourism (as can be the case with forestry, the fishery or agriculture), this form of retention is a realistic proposition and residents of such locations can operate within defined seasons and industrial sectors on a long-term basis. Conflict can emerge when tourism seeks to extend its seasonal activity outside the traditional timeframe because then employees may be torn between two loyalties and opportunities. Another retention model adopted by innovative tourism employers in extreme seasonal destinations is to support employees to seek alternative tourism work during the down season so that they can return the following year with enhanced skills and experience. Hotels in the far south-west of Ireland, for example, have partnered with counterparts in ski destinations in Switzerland in "trading" employees during their respective off seasons to the benefit of both sets of operators.

Training and development

Issues relating to the training and development of tourism employees in extreme destinations are also strongly predicated upon the structure of the sector and its operating cycle. The lack of continuous employment on offer to employees can make both parties (employers and employees) reluctant to invest in training and development beyond the minimum required to meet the demands of the job. At the same time, ensuring that staff are able to meet the service and product standards of the business is essential if tourism operators are to be competitive in the international marketplace. The notion that travellers will accept what they would see as sub-standard services because they are in remote and extreme locations is questionable, given that such locations are frequently high cost in terms of access and destination services. Chan and Baum (2005) explore traveller expectations of accommodation in remote eco-tourism sites in Sabah, Malaysia and note that, while some compromise in terms of luxury is acceptable, core service standards and comfort levels are expected by international visitors. The implications of this are that there are few compromises that can be made with respect to the skills sets of tourism employees in remote locations.

The small business structure of tourism businesses in extreme locations also mitigates against effective training and development of employees. This is noted as a general issue with respect to tourism training in most contexts of the sector (Baum, 2002). Tourism businesses in general, and smaller operations specifically, do not invest significantly in employee training and development unless compelled to do so by legal or market pressures. In extreme locations, the most common form of training provided to tourism employees is designed to ensure that they meet the basic requirements of the job and little more, with the expectation that most staff will learn through experience once in position.

Few of the extreme tourism locations have the critical population masses within which to provide a full range of pre-entry or in-service educational opportunities in the tourism sector. The smaller the remote community, the greater is the likelihood that potential entrants to the tourism sector will be required to go "off island" in order to avail of educational and training opportunities. While this

may be feasible for young school leavers with ambition to develop a sustained livelihood in tourism, it is not always a realistic option for more mature aspirants or those seeking to enter tourism after experience in another sector of the economy. While similar barriers are faced with respect to educational opportunity for other sectors, combining this reality with other structural barriers in tourism exacerbates this problem further. Furthermore, tourism education and training, especially in applied areas, is not wholly appropriate for delivery via remote technologies and cannot look to such substitutes for direct classroom and laboratory learning.

Career progression

The concept of a career in tourism within extreme destinations must, again, be tempered by the structural and demand-side reality of a highly seasonal industry, with a preponderance of small business operators. In this situation, conventional notions of progressive and developmental careers within "employed" status are unlikely to be of relevance to all but a very small minority. Even sustained employment, as suggested above, is also relatively rare unless there is sectoral complementarity, allowing for movement between work areas on a regular basis.

However, the area where a form of meaningful career can be seen is in relation to self-employment or the development of entrepreneurial employment. Opportunities to create ones own employment and, from this, a career are open within tourism as they are elsewhere and do form an attractive option, particularly in the absence of larger-scale operators. Such opportunity exists within resident communities of extreme destinations but, in practice, are much more likely to be in evidence through the initiative of "incomers" (Lynch, 2005; Tinsley & Lynch, 2001). In the case of entrepreneurial activity, in-coming is often driven by lifestyle considerations (Getz, Carlsen & Morrison, 2003) whereby people from, generally, urban locations choose to relocate to more remote situations and to develop new careers in tourism after working lives in other sectors of the economy. The value of such initiatives to the economy and community development of extreme locations must be questionable.

A need for co-ordination

The development of tourism in remote locations, whether insular or land-based, raises a wide range of issues with respect in ethical, environmental and logistical terms. At the heart of these is consideration of the role of people in the delivery of tourism services. It is clear that, if tourism is to benefit remoter communities in a long-term and sustainable manner (where such communities exist), then the financial and wider economic benefits of such tourism development need to be directed to the people who live in proximity to the remote attractions, rather than an expatriate, imported workforce. Experience, in locations such as Greenland, northern Canada and the Himalayas, suggests that such local benefits are not always forthcoming. There is a strong case to be made for pro-active public sector intervention to ensure both the application of sustainable principles of local community engagement and the delivery of quality tourism services. Baum and Szivas (2008 forthcoming) make the special case for a strong co-ordinating role for the state with respect to human resource development in tourism, based, primarily, on the structure of the tourism sector and its business operations. This case is compounded exponentially in the context of tourism in extreme and remote locations because all the causal factors are considerably more pronounced. If (and it is accepted that this is a tenuous "if"), tourism is to develop and thrive in such locations, government as developer, facilitator and regulator has a major role to play in supporting the delivery of quality services by local people, where possible.

CONCLUSIONS

There is little doubt that the tourism sector in remote and extreme destinations faces challenges and opportunities across a range of business criteria, notably marketing and operations. The operating features of the tourism sector, in terms of remoteness, access, size and, above all, seasonality, place tourism in a really challenging situation when competing with more standard but far less interesting destinations.

This paper has sought to illustrate how these contextual factors impact upon the effective management of the people who are required to deliver products and services across a wide range of business types in tourism. Each of these factors presents challenges (and, in some cases, opportunities) which need to be addressed by both the private sector operators and by public authorities responsible for economic development and education/ training within extreme tourism destinations. Without such consideration, locations of this kind will be unable to compete effectively on the international tourism stage.

REFERENCES

Adler, P.A., & Adler, P. (2004). *Paradise Laborers. Hotel work in the global economy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Arnould, E. J., & Price, L.L. (1993). River magic: Extraordinary experience and the extended service experience. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 20(1), 24-45.

Baldacchino, G. (2006). *Extreme tourism: Lessons from the world's cold water islands*. London: Elsevier.

Bauer, T. (2001). *Tourism in the Antarctic: Opportunities, constraints and future prospects*. New York: Howarth Press

Baum, T. (1993). *Human resource issues in international tourism*. Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Baum, T (1995). *Managing human resources for the European tourism and hospitality industry: A strategic approach*. Chapman & Hall: London.

Baum, T. (1996). Tourism in Aland: A case study. *Progress in Tourism and Hospitality Research*, 1/2, 111-118.

Baum, T (1997) Making or breaking the tourist experience: The role of human resource management. In C. Ryan, *Tourist experience: A new introduction* (pp. 92-111). London: Cassell.

Baum, T. (1999). Human resource management in tourism's small business sector: Policy dimensions. In D. Lee-Ross (Ed.), *HRM in tourism and hospitality. International perspectives on small to medium-sized enterprises*. London: Cassell.

Baum, T. (2002). Skills and training for the hospitality sector: A review of issues. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 54(3)

Baum, T., & Conlin, M. (1994). Comprehensive human resource planning: an essential key to sustainable tourism in island settings. In C. Cooper & A. Lockwood (Eds.), *Progress in tourism, recreation and hospitality management*, Volume 6. London: John Wiley.

Baum, T., & Hagen, L. (1999). Responses to seasonality: The experiences of peripheral destinations. *The International Journal of Tourism Research*, 5, 1-14.

Baum, T., & Lundtorp. S. (2000). *Seasonality in tourism*. London: Elsevier.

> **Comment [VU1]:** Need page numbers

Baum, T., & Szivas, E. (2008 accepted). HRD in tourism: A role for government? *Tourism Management.*

Chan, J., & Baum, T. (2005). Examining ecotourists' experience in Lower Kinabatangan, Sabah, Malaysia. *Proceedings of the APacCHRIE Conference*, Kuala Lumpur.

Conlin, M., & Baum, T. (1995). *Island tourism*: *Management principles and practices*. Chichester: John Wiley.

Conlin, M., & Baum, T. (2003). Comprehensive human resource planning: An essential key to sustainable tourism in island settings (revised). In C. Cooper (Ed.), *Classic reviews in tourism*. Clevedon: Channel View Publications.

Getz, D., Carlsen, J.; & Morrison, A. (2003). *The family business in tourism and hospitality*. Wallingford, Oxford: CABI.

Godde, P., Price, F., & Zimmerman, F. (2000). *Tourism and development in mountain regions*. Wallingford, Oxford: CABI

Jithendran, K.J., & Baum, T. (2000). Human resource development and sustainability - the case of India. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 2/6, 403-36.

Keep, E., & Mayhew, K. (1999a). Skills Task Force Research Group. Paper 6. *The Leisure Sector*. London: DfEE.

Krakover, S., & Gradus, Y. (2002). *Tourism in frontier areas*. New York: Lexington Books.

Lynch, P.A. (2005). The commercial home enterprise and host: A United Kingdom perspective. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 23, 255-271.

Riley (1996). *Human resource management in the hospitality and tourism industry* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Tinsley, R., & Lynch, P.A. (2001). Small tourism business networks and destination development. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 20(4), 367-378.

Warhurst, C., Nickson, D., Witz, A., & Cullen, A.M. (2000). Aesthetic labour in interactive service work: Some case study evidence from the 'New Glasgow'". *Service Industries Journal*, 20(3), 1-18.

Comment [VU2]: Initial of first name needed