DEVELOPING THE HIRTHSAL FISH FESTIVAL: THE ROLE OF LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS IN TOURISM INNOVATION

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FOOD TOURISM

It is self-evident that all tourists need to eat and drink when they travel but food and drink are also a fundamental part of the culture and heritage of tourism destinations. Furthermore, activities such as eating, drinking, cooking, shopping, foraging and fishing, can be exciting and memorable travel experiences. Food and drink can therefore be tourist attractions in their own right and there is growing interest in developing so-called ‘food tourism’. Everett (2016:11) defines food tourism as ‘food and drink motivated travel, which reflects any level of desire to engage in an experience involving food and drink away from home’. This could be travelling specifically to visit a Michelin-starred restaurant, going on a tour of a vineyard or simply trying out local specialities when on holiday. She emphasises that many kinds of tourism also include elements of food and drink tourism, such as cultural tourism (attractions and local cuisines), festival and event tourism (food and drink festivals and events), and heritage tourism (museums and places of production).

From the perspective of tourism development organisations, local food and drink products may enhance destination image, support local economic development and encourage sustainable growth. There is also an increasing interest among tourists themselves to experience different kinds of food and drink. Tourism management organisations and governmental agencies in many destinations have therefore worked to develop the connections between food and drink and tourism (Everett, 2016; Gyimothy, 2017).

It is possible to identify three main ways in which policymakers have tried to develop links between food and drink industries and tourism activities (James and Halkier, 2016). The first is destination branding where local culinary/food-related practices are highlighted in order to market the destination on the basis of their particular qualities (authentic, exotic, creative, etc.). The second approach is the creation of new food related experiences. This could involve adding more local dishes or ingredients to restaurant menus, supporting food fairs, or establishing visitor ‘trails’ through the destination to locations associated with particular food or drink (Blichfeldt and Halkier, 2013; Gyimóthy and Mykletun, 2009; Montanari and Staniscia, 2009). Finally, a third
A group of initiatives aim to **localise food consumption** so that purchases by visitors have a higher content of food products from the local area. This might require the creation of local networks, either between food producers to increase their market profile, or between suppliers and caterers/retailers to promote direct trade (Holloway et al., 2006).

One of the key challenges for policy makers who want to develop food and drink tourism in their destination is that it requires the mobilisation and coordination of many different kinds of stakeholders, ranging from farmers and food producers, to restaurant owners, supermarkets, food distributors, museums and other attractions, tour guides and local residents. All these stakeholders have different interests and ideas about what aspects of food tourism to develop and how it should be done.

The following case study of a local food festival in the northern region of Denmark illustrates the many different stakeholders that might be involved in developing food tourism experiences and how different their perspectives and ambitions can be.

**CASE STUDY: HIRTSHALS FOOD FESTIVAL, NORTH JUTLAND, DENMARK**

In 2016 the North Jutland Growth Forum funded a project called Smagedage (Taste Days), which aimed to strengthen collaboration between food producers, restaurants and tourism businesses with a focus on the sea and fjord. Food festivals formed a key part of the project. It was hoped that greater collaboration between several food festivals in the region would help with marketing and improving the festival experience for guests. Other aims of the project were to strengthen domestic and international gastro-tourism in the region through collaboration with Food Organization of Denmark and to brand North Jutland as the Food Region through a cooking competition for professional chefs. One of the festivals involved in the project is the Hirtshals Fish Festival.

Hirtshals Fish Festival was established in 2009 and is an annual event which runs over three days at the beginning of August. Approximately 15,000 visitors come to the festival every year, taking part in activities which are run by local volunteers and businesses. These include:

- Stalls with samples of fish
- Schnapps & pickled herring of the year competition
- Fish auction & evening buffet
- Games & educational activities for children
- Sailing trip around harbour
- Cooking competition for local restaurants
- Talks by staff of the Oceanarium & local museums
LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS AND DEVELOPMENT PATHS

There are four main stakeholder groups who have an interest in the development of the festival:

- Fishing industry
- Volunteers and local clubs
- Restaurants and chefs
- Tourism related organisations

The stakeholders’ views on how the fish festival should be developed in the future are closely linked to their understanding of its purpose and value. The festival was originally established by the local fishing industry. These businesses, located primarily at Hirtshals harbour, together with the local aquarium, see the festival as a means to teach local residents about marine wildlife and encourage them to buy and eat more fish. The fishing industry is the main financial backer of the festival and has therefore steered its development until now. This has meant that the festival has focused exclusively on fish and other seafood, rather than drawing in other local products or attempting to expand the type of tourist experiences offered.

Despite some financial support and ticket sales covering the main costs of running the festival, it is nonetheless dependent on volunteers who set up and run stalls and run other activities. The volunteers make up the main workforce of the festival and it could not be held without them. The volunteers are usually connected to a local club or association and they became involved in the festival because they see the festival as a local event for residents, which showcases their town and is a fun and social event. For the volunteers the festival is simply a local event which might attract tourists but is not primarily aimed at them.

By contrast, restaurants and local chefs see the festival primarily as a way to promote their businesses and attract more customers. They play a key role in the festival in several ways. Firstly they participate in various competitions such as ‘pickled herring of the year’, and the cooking competition that takes place during the festival. They also serve fish dishes and the winning recipes during and after the festival. The event enables them to showcase their cooking skills and network with others in the hospitality industry. For them, tourists are an important market and they would like to see the festival grow and attract more visitors. This view is shared by tourism organisations, including the local and regional DMOs, which take the lead role in marketing the festival. They see the festival as a tourist attraction which could be used in many different ways to promote the town as a tourist destination and attract more visitors. For them the festival is part of a development strategy which includes branding the region as a ‘foodies’ destination with high quality seafood and hospitality.
These different viewpoints on the role of the festival in relation to local business and residents create both opportunities and challenges in relation to its development. Each group of stakeholders play an important role in relation to the festival and the event could not be held without their input and support.

The most fundamental question is whether the festival should be developed at all, or whether it should remain as a primarily local and regional event aimed at residents of Hirtshals and North Jutland. Many of the stakeholders involved in the festival are happy with the current situation and would prefer to preserve the festival’s local character. Many of the volunteers who work at the festival hold this opinion – they do not see tourists or economic development as a priority. The danger is that if the festival becomes larger and more commercialised the volunteers could become disengaged, which would not only change the character of the festival but might threaten its existence.

Among stakeholders from the fishing industry, there is a desire to develop the festival and attract more visitors. This could mean holding the festival over a longer period of time, for example. However, this group is less interested in expanding the festival’s experience ‘offer’ to include, for example, other local food products which might complement fish. For this group, the main challenge is to find a wider range of actors who can put resources into the festival so that it can become bigger. However, the narrow focus on fish means that it might be difficult to attract more businesses.

A third group of stakeholders – led by organisations and businesses directly involved in tourism – would like to expand and develop the festival to attract a greater number and wider range of visitors. In particular they would like to include other types of local food and drink in the festival as well as a wider variety of activities, especially for families with children. However, this ambition cannot be realised without the support of other stakeholder groups, such as the fishing industry, which is the largest financial backer of the festival, and the local volunteers and businesses who participate in the event. This group of stakeholders must therefore find new resources to develop the festival but also negotiate with other groups who have a different vision for the future.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What is food tourism and why do many destinations see it as an opportunity for development?
2. What challenges face organisations who want to develop food tourism?
3. Think about a food or drink product from your region. What kinds of tourism activities could be developed around it? Which stakeholders would need to be involved?
REFERENCES


