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Tourism Planning in the Northern Bahamas

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Tourism Planning in the Northern Bahamas

Cover Page Footnote

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Summary

Tourism is a complex system of hosts, travelers, stakeholders, and business interests, all bound by site conditions, resources, policies, laws and differing motivations. To plan and create successful tourism experiences can be challenging. Though there is no one simple (or even complex) method or tool for creating a successful tourism plan, there are some tools which can address a portion of the tourism planning puzzle.

The Abaco region of the northern Bahamas is in the midst of a tourism planning shift. This region's tourism role is evolving within the Bahamian tourism industry, but in a much different way than the nation's capital Nassau, which is established as a well-known tourism destination. Abaco is developing its niche as a nature-based tourism destination with a wealth of natural and cultural attractions such as beaches, snorkel and dive sites, blue holes, cultural features, trail systems, a vibrant history, and colorful towns and artistry.

Part of this effort is the development of the Abaco Trail, which will highlight regional attractions and link them together for visitors to explore as a self-guided experience as their interests and availability allow. This effort is spearheaded by Friends of the Environment (FOE), a local non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the cultural and natural resources of the Abacos.

Through conversations with FOE, it was considered that Tourism Opportunity Spectrum (TOS) information may aid in the process of assembling tourism site conditions and function to assist this trail effort. To this end, TOS data was collected on ten sites in the Abacos and summarized for FOE. During preliminary discussions with stakeholders, it was realized that there existed a proposal for a 44-slip marina in the southern Abacos' Little Harbour. Data collection then took into account the possible changes to site conditions this may cause, and how this would affect tourism opportunities for the site.

Results in this paper share the overall scores for all ten sites in the Abacos, and also provide individual condition scores for each attribute on the TOS scale for Little Harbour. Results also show the estimated scores for each individual condition based on what changes would occur if the proposed marina is developed at Little Harbour. Overall, results indicate that the site conditions in the Abacos fall into the more Primitive end of the spectrum, however proposed changes to Little Harbour would push site conditions well into the Urban end of the TOS. These results are arguably the more interesting contribution of this paper, as they allow readers to see and understand how TOS can be used to predict changes to a site, based on proposed alterations in the tourism arena.

1.0 Introduction

The phenomenon of tourism has been a focal point of much attention over many

years. Because it includes travel and the many amenities that enable people to live and experience distant locations, it can become complicated quite quickly and proper planning is essential to ensure sustainability. Mathieson and Wall (1982, para. 3) define tourism as "the temporary movement of people to destinations outside their normal places of work and residence, the activities undertaken during their stay in those destinations, and the facilities created to cater to their needs." According to Macintosh and Goeldner (1986), tourism also includes all the phenomena and relationships that arise from and between tourists, businesses, governments, and host communities while they attract and host these visitors. It also includes the marketing of enjoyable and/or attractive features of a travel destination, and provision of facilities and services for travelers (Mathieson & Wall, 1982). Tourism can also include those traveling for business as well as leisure pursuits (Crossley, Jamieson, & Brayley, 2012).

1.1 Positive Impacts of Tourism

Tourism can have many positive impacts on a community's economic, social, and environmental conditions. It can provide jobs within a community, such as for tour guides, hotel workers, local agriculture, food production, retail, transportation, and restaurant services. This can provide an economic boost to the businesses related to these industries and the residents of the community (Graci & Kuehnel, 2010).

Tourism can also create a sense of pride for a community as residents realize that people travel, sometimes great distances, to experience what their region has to offer. Additionally, tourism may include celebrations and ceremonies of local or cultural traditions. This may function as a method for preserving these customs if it is well-planned and provides economic benefits that encourage local traditions to carry on.

Tourism can have direct benefits to small businesses, while simultaneously improving the tourism experience. The money that comes into a community via tourism dollars, can be reintroduced into the local economy as local business owners now have expendable cash for other purchases. Some estimate that each tourism dollar is spent over again multiple times in the local economy.

Much of this creates what we refer to as the tourism industry, which is comprised of those businesses that are there to serve tourists or travelers (Crossley, Jamieson, & Brayley, 2012). This also includes travel agencies, tour companies, hospitality businesses, local commercial recreation providers, and transportation carriers (Crossley, Jamieson, & Brayley, 2012).

Much of the Bahamas tourism industry is based on *nautical tourism* which includes the navigation and stay of tourist-sailors on vessels (yachts, small craft) for personal or commercial use (Lukovic, 2013). This tourism includes these visitors' stay in and around ports, the journey to and from these locations, related maritime

activities, as well as the service of recreation, sports, entertainment, provisions, yacht repair and maintenance, and other needs (Lukovic, 2013). This type of nautical tourism can have major economic contributions to the host communities (Horak, 2013).

1.2 Negative Impacts of Tourism

Although tourism can bring advantages and opportunities to communities, some debate remains as to whether tourism truly promotes community development, and if it is a strong way to build a community (Scheyvens, 2002). The tourism industry, because of its dependence on air travel, is one of the world's largest fuel consumers and polluters (Goldblatt, 2011). There are issues that can plague a community when tourism is not well planned, such as over populated destinations, overburdened facilities (Dickinson & Vladmir, 2007) as well overbuilding of hotels, polluted beaches, cultural conflict, and dissatisfied tourists. Improper planning and overly fast growth often compound these problems. "Tourism is a very complex industry involving numerous stakeholders (sometimes with opposite interests) and requiring significant amount of resources" (United Nations, 2015). In short, it is difficult to get it right.

Additional potential negative impacts of poorly planned tourism include ecological imbalances, outbreak of diseases, congestion, economic inefficiencies, deterioration of natural and artificial environment, resentment toward tourism, increase in criminal activities, and destruction of the host community. Often when negative impacts develop at a destination, they can have lasting effects on how a destination is perceived and because of this, tourism planners must be aware of both the possible positive and negative impacts.

1.3 Tourism Opportunity Spectrum

In order to understand the possible impacts, a planner must familiarize themselves with the site, stakeholders, hosts, and visitors. One tool that has been developed to better understand a tourism site is the Tourism Opportunity Spectrum (Butler & Waldbrook, 2003). The Tourism Opportunity Spectrum (TOS) is used to classify different attributes of a tourism site by measuring several site conditions. It works in much the same way that the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) is used to measure particular attributes of a site (Clark & Stankey, 1979) but by measuring slightly different conditions that are more tourism-related. A TOS inventory measures tourism site conditions of *Site Access* (e.g., how is the site accessed, how easy or obtainable is access); *Compatibility of other Uses* (e.g., what are other uses on or near the site and are they compatible with the tourism experience); *Visitor Control* (e.g., control of the visitor experience through things like rules, regulations, permitting, etc.); *Tourism Impacts* (e.g., environmental and social impacts); *Onsite Management* (e.g., how heavily managed, patrolled, altered is the site); and *Social Perceptions* (e.g., visitor to host relationships, visitor to visitor relationships).

These factors combine to give an overall “score” or numerical rating of a site, for each factor. These scores are then characterized into six different classes and range from Urban (U), Suburban (S), Rural Developed (RD), Rural Natural (RN), Semi-Primitive (SP), and Primitive (P).

This classification of site conditions (from Urban to Primitive) can then be used to a) depict current site conditions, b) use current conditions as the basis for future planning, and c) use future planning efforts to establish management or development guidelines. Recently, a scale has been developed to help collect TOS site condition information more efficiently (Carroll & Hession, 2015), facilitating more accessible and widespread use of the TOS instrument. Furthermore, TOS site conditions can be depicted on colorized maps (Carroll & Hession, 2015) to help illustrate site conditions in order to facilitate better planning.

1.4 Abaco Tourism

In this study, the TOS scale was used to collect information on 10 different sites in the Abaco Islands. The Abacos are a small group of islands and cays in the northern Bahamas that form a 120-mile-long chain stretching over 650 square miles. Although there are a few airports and roads for transportation, the Abacos are a popular boating destination, which results in a majority of people traveling by private boat or public ferry to reach their destinations once arriving in the Bahamas.

Not surprisingly, tourism has had both positive and negative impacts in the Abacos, but it has remained a much quieter destination as compared to its more southerly counterparts, namely Nassau. In the Abacos it is not uncommon to find litter in some areas, businesses struggling with the cyclical nature of tourism, lasting effects of hurricanes, displaced Bahamian workers due in part to recent Haitian immigration, and sometimes a sense of hopelessness among community members. Additionally, the Abaco islands struggle with creating their own identity in the tourism arena. In contrast to Nassau, Abaco tourism planners are trying to attract tourists while maintaining a nature-based experience. To this end, one major effort that is currently being explored is the development of The Abaco Trail, which will tie together specific parks and designated locations throughout the Abacos and provide a link of natural and cultural attractions. These include attractions such as snorkel sites, beaches, cultural experiences, historic sites, museums, blue holes, wildlife, natural features, and scenic vistas. The trail is intended to also help support local businesses while raising awareness of the natural and cultural resources of Abaco, and foster local support for sensible tourism and environmental stewardship.

The Abaco Trail project is being spearheaded by Friends of the Environment (FOE), a local non-profit organization located in Marsh Harbour, Bahamas. “Friends of the Environment works to preserve and protect Abaco’s terrestrial marine environments in order to achieve sustainable living for the wildlife and the people of

Abaco” (O. Patterson, personal communication, November 19, 2015). Patterson is a program coordinator at FOE and also noted that the general purpose of the trail is to help promote sites and encourage visitation throughout Abaco to support local businesses and raise awareness of the Abaco environment. “I would not say that the sites will receive formalized protection, but more along the lines of benefits... anti-littering campaigns and trash pickup (at some of the smaller sites), educational signage, recognition, management plans for some of the smaller sites that aren’t national parks” (O. Patterson, personal communication, November 19, 2015).

Friends of the Environment is working closely with the Bahamas National Trust (BNT) which functions similarly to the National Park Service in the U.S. The BNT was established in 1959 and is charged with the conservation of the cultural and natural resources of the Bahamas. They are the governmental agency instrumental in designating and managing the Land and Sea Parks throughout the Bahamas. The Abaco Trail project is dependent upon the leadership of FOE and governmental support of the BNT.

Therefore, the purpose of this project was to gather tourism information that may be valuable in understanding some of the sites along the proposed Abaco Trail. Specifically, this project aimed to take the recently created Tourism Opportunity Spectrum (TOS) scale and use it in Abaco, Bahamas to depict the current conditions found at several tourism sites. To this end, this project also intended to develop and introduce new additional mapping symbols to be used to depict each of individual TOS site characteristics. These symbols are color-coded on the maps and portray the setting characteristics of Site Access, Visitor Impacts, Visitor Control, Onsite Management, Social Perceptions, and Compatibility of Other Uses. The fourth (and likely the most important) contribution this paper will make is to show how TOS information can be used to visually depict how proposed changes to a site will impact and change the TOS scores, and consequently the tourism opportunities and experiences found there. This study is unique in that it takes place in an area with a large scale marina proposal currently on the table, with a lot of divergent attitudes about the proposed development. This study measures current TOS conditions, but then also depicts the future TOS conditions that would exist if the marina is built. This information was gleaned from discussions with local non-profit organizations aimed at protecting the natural resources of the Abacos, local business owners, local residents, and the BNT officials, as well as other visitors to the region.

2.0 Methods

In order to help understand and categorize some of the proposed sites of the Abaco Trail, we partnered with Friends of the Environment and the Bahamas National Trust to utilize the Tourism Opportunity Spectrum to collect information that may be useful in their tourism planning efforts. Data collectors consisted of thirteen

university students and one professor. The students were all Recreation, Parks, and Tourism students, with a concentration in Tourism and Special Events. Students were chosen and trained in the TOS conceptual foundation as well as use of the instrument before arrival in the Bahamas. The professor was a Recreation and Tourism planning professor, with an M.S. in Recreation Management, and a Ph.D. in Natural Resources, Recreation and Tourism, with over 10 years of experience working with and developing tools such as ROS, WROS, and TOS.

Ten sites were identified for the TOS inventory based on conversations with FOE staff as well as itinerary and access constraints. Data collectors visited each site for a period of about 24 hours and used the TOS scale (Carroll & Hession, 2015) to guide their analysis of each of the six site conditions. They also spoke with local tourism professionals and local residents to foster a more complete understanding of the site conditions during different seasons, and any emerging trends in use or other recent changes. Data collectors then discussed their findings and shared any additional information from their analyses, interviews, and conversations with tourism operators. Data collectors then indicated their score for each of the site conditions on the TOS scale.

A mean of the resulting scores was taken and each mean score has an associated classification (e.g., 1 = Urban, 2 = Suburban). If a score fell between whole number, they were rounded in typical mathematical fashion (e.g., a 2.4 = 2; but a 2.5 = 3). These classifications were then represented on color-coded maps (Figures 1 and 2). This study expanded the mapping of TOS information and developed additional symbols to represent each of the individual site conditions (e.g., tourism impacts, site accessibility, and so on) to provide more detailed information on each map (Figures 3 and 4).

3.0 Results

The region of Abaco that was studied was split up by northern and southern sections. The northern section included Treasure Cay, Great Guana Cay (bayside), Great Guana Cay (seaside), Fowl Cay, Man-O-War Cay, Sandy Cay, Mermaid Reef, and Marsh Harbour (Figure 1). The Southern section included Hopetown and Little Harbour (Figure 2).

Marsh Harbour is the center of Abaco, with the main (but very small) airport, and it is the largest town in Abaco. It is a working harbor, with a large grocery store, a few seaside restaurants, a Moorings Charter hub, and several fishing and charter boats. There are several small resorts, and associated tourist amenities. Hopetown is the next largest town in Abaco and is artfully planned, with walking streets, mostly golf cart transportation, small resorts, restaurants, and a small but well-protected harbor filled with rental moorings and slips for charter and private boats. It is located on Elbow Cay, which forms the outlying reef that protects the Sea of Abaco.

Guana Cay is a small outlying island that has remained fairly quiet with small boutique shops, a couple of restaurants and bars (the world famous Nippers being one), one small harbor, and a few reasonably well-protected anchorages for smaller yachts. Man-O-War Cay is very small and is most well-known for its boat building industry. It also has a canvas shop, a few boutique shops, and a small but well-protected harbor. Treasure Cay is predominantly a resort location with a stunningly beautiful beach that has served as that area's main attraction. Its calm, iridescent blue water attracts visitors from around the world. It also has a well-protected harbor. Little Harbour is the famous site of the Randolph Johnston bronze foundry. This still functions as a working foundry and Randolph's son Pete runs a sandy beach bar and grill there as well. The anchorage is sometimes difficult to enter because of shoaling, but it is a well-protected and has space to anchor or rent a mooring. It maintains a funky, artsy vibe that attracts cruisers from afar. Fowl Cay, Sandy Cay, and Mermaid Reef are all small coral reef locations for snorkeling or scuba diving with no other attractions or amenities other than the reef itself and a couple of day-use moorings for small dive boats or skiffs.

In the northern Abacos (Figure 1) the overall TOS scores indicate that Treasure Cay falls into the Rural Developed category based on site conditions, as does Marsh Harbour. Guana Cay bayside, Man-O-War Cay, and Mermaid Reef were all Rural Natural, and the most remote or Semi-Primitive sites were Guana Cay seaside, Fowl Cay, and Sandy Cay.

Figure 1. Overall Tourism Opportunity Spectrum (TOS) scores for the northern Abaco sites.

For overall scores in the southern Abacos (Figure 2), results indicate that

Hopetown and its surrounding area was a Rural Natural site. The more remote Little Harbour area yielded a Semi-Primitive classification score.

Figure 2. Overall Tourism Opportunity Spectrum (TOS) scores for the southern Abaco sites.

When we look more closely at the individual conditions for each site we can glean more detailed information. Each symbol on the map is also color-coded to depict its classification. For example, Little Harbour's overall TOS classification is Semi-Primitive, but when we look at each condition individually, we see that although *Site Access*, *Onsite Management*, and *Visitor Impacts* were indeed Semi-Primitive (as indicated by the yellow background on their square symbol), its *Visitor Control* and *Social Perceptions* were actually Rural Natural (as indicated by the blue background on their square symbols), and its *Compatibility of Other Uses* was Primitive (as indicated by the green background on its square symbol).

Figure 3. Tourism Opportunity Spectrum scores for existing conditions at Little Harbour, Bahamas. Map depicts both overall score and individual site condition scores of current conditions.

Furthermore, this information can also be used to estimate site conditions based on proposed future changes. For example, there is an existing proposal to put in a 44-slip marina at Little Harbour that would include a fuel dock, and a dredged channel (Roberts, 2014) to enter the protected anchorage. TOS information for the existing conditions at Little Harbour indicate that Site Access, Tourism Impacts, and Onsite Management all fall into the Semi-Primitive category. This means that access, impacts, and management are difficult, very low, and not often encountered (respectively). Social Perceptions, and Visitor Control both fall in the Rural Natural category, indicating they are also toward the more primitive end of the spectrum. This means that visitor-to-visitor and visitor-to-host contacts are generally friendly and enjoyable, while visitor control is also relatively low and a good sense of freedom remains. Finally, Compatibility of other Uses was scored as Primitive, meaning that any other uses of the area are currently very compatible with the tourism experience.

The researchers also depicted “hypothetical” results based on the proposed marina and its changes to the site. These changes and their impacts were most fully understood based on conversations with Bahamas National Trust personnel, Friends of the Environment staff, local tourism providers, and local residents. Based on this knowledge, TOS results were also calculated based on what conditions would exist if the proposed marina was built. These results help tourism planners see how proposed changes would affect the current site.

Based on the proposed changes to the site, each of the six site conditions would change (Figure 4). *Site Access* would change from Semi-Primitive to Rural Developed because of the dredged channel allowing boats with over a five-foot draft (depth) to enter the harbor, therefore allowing access for larger boats than currently are able to enter. *Compatibility of Other Uses* would change from Primitive to Rural Developed based on the existence of larger cruising yachts, fuel docks, and resort atmosphere, as well as an increase in boat traffic. *Visitor Control* would go from Rural Natural to Suburban based on more congested conditions, channelized markers, and navigational requirements with the construction of the marina and associated developments. *Visitor Impacts* would increase dramatically from Semi-Primitive to Urban based on large increase in visitors, fuel dock presence, and increase in boats and manmade docking facilities. *Onsite Management* would change from Semi-Primitive to Rural Developed because with Marinas comes patrols, 24-hour lighting, length of stay requirements, and often costly accommodations for yachters. *Social Perceptions* would change from Rural Natural to Rural Developed as the Bahamians are known for a welcoming nature, though the increased crowds may turn the existing quiet and remote destination anchorage into a more resort-based, high dollar facility.

Figure 4. Tourism Opportunity Spectrum scores for proposed additions of a 40 slip marina at Little Harbour, Bahamas. Map depicts both overall score change from Semi-Primitive to Suburban, and individual site condition scores if proposed

changes are implemented.

4.0 Conclusions and Implications

Tourism planning attempts to minimize negative impacts to tourism sites and communities, and maximize the positive ones. TOS is a tool that can be used as part of a planning effort to classify site conditions to depict the current tourism opportunities in a more understandable and intuitive way for stakeholders. Furthermore, it provides information that can be useful in future decision making. By understanding current conditions, more informed decisions can be made based on how possible changes may affect these conditions.

In this study, the changes in the setting at Little Harbour based on development of a proposed marina would be significant. This proposal would affect several site conditions, pushing each of them toward the Urban end of the TOS spectrum. As one example, *Site Access* would change from Semi-Primitive to Rural Developed. This is mostly because the current access conditions at Little Harbour consist of a channel of around five-foot maximum depths. This channel is narrow, subject to constant change, and mariners must be aware of this. It currently limits the size and types of vessels which may enter Little Harbour. Information access is also limited, causing mariners to visit only if and when they feel conditions allow. This lends a remote, distant, and exciting atmosphere to visiting Little Harbour.

For example, my wife and I entered Little Harbour for the first time in 2011 on our 36-foot sailboat. Based on conditions, hearsay, and channel depths, I went ahead in a tender with a lead line, taking manual depth measurements every 75 feet or so and reporting back via VHF radio to my wife while she very slowly followed, motoring the larger vessel through the channel. The whole process took over 30 minutes to travel about an eighth of a mile, but we were rewarded with the feeling of discovery when we arrived. The opportunities afforded us at Little Harbour were seen in a different light and indeed more compelling because of the location's remoteness, and difficulty of access. I know this because other cruising friends of ours were not able to enter the channel because of its shallow depths, and so we consequently felt "special," or "lucky" to be able to enter Little Harbour, and the resulting visit became even more significant and lasting in our minds.

So how does one weigh these site conditions, and possible changes that may ensue? Does the TOS instrument provide an ample platform to measure these types of conditions, and make judgments as to how to proceed in tourism and community planning and development? TOS is not a perfect instrument. There can be issues with data collection being merely a snapshot of current conditions, and its limited ability to capture truly qualitative information, though both of these are attempted to be overcome with interviews in the field.

What I think TOS does well is to provide some quantifiable qualitative

information that is easy to collect, and it provides an intuitive visual depiction of the tourism setting characteristics across locations, which then allows the planner to better understand the benefits and potential problems that may arise while planning within the community. TOS can also provide long-term benefits through continued collection of information in order to track development, growth, & changes over longer periods of time. This information is valuable as communities see development, and there is the ever-present movement of sites toward the Urban end of the spectrum (sites rarely move toward the Primitive side). This information, mapped out over time, may allow younger planners to also catch a glimpse of what things “used to be like” and lend a historic perspective of the current site.

Finally, TOS information can be shared with travelers to help them understand the tourism opportunities and settings available at different locations. This could become part of a tourism promotional effort for a region to help visitors seek out destinations that most closely fit their interests and needs. With this in mind, the Tourism Opportunity Spectrum could, as Carroll and Hession (2015, p. 6) state, “provide a useful platform for tourism planning, management, and decision-making.” Furthermore, it helps planners identify the types and direction of tourism efforts that will be most effective based on current conditions and the long term vision for the community, resource, and tourism experience.

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