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The Influence of Social Milieu on Tourism Development

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-- The influence of social milieu on tourism development

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Topic: Tourist planning and management at the local and regional level

Destination planning and development has been at the forefront of tourism academic and policy attention in recent years. Despite its importance, the factors that cause tourism development remain under researched. While models such as Butler's (1980) tourism area life-cycle model provide a conceptual framework for explaining the life cycle of a tourism area (Agarwal, 1997), few articles comprehensively explain the factors that lead to successful development. Some factors which have been discussed are the importance of local participation and local control (Gormsen, 1981), transport hierarchies, speciality and co-operation, (Miossec, 1976), and location and physical attributes of the area (Lundgren, 1982). However findings in other related literature suggest other factors might also have a role to play.

Literatures on regional development in economic geography, (e.g. Marshall, 1920, Pyke and Sengenberger, 1992; and Dei Ottati, 1994), have identified social relations as key factors in regional development. Social milieu looks at how firms and communities can be bound together by a common identity (Mottiar, 1997). The existence of a social milieu facilitates and encourages trusting relations between firms, individuals and local institutions in an area. It can lead to a pervasive atmosphere of support and trust that is evidenced through business and social networks and social cohesiveness, which are key factors to enhancing regional growth. This article argues that the existence of a social milieu can also be an explaining factor in tourism destination development. Inter-firm relations, co-operation, networks and trust are consequences of a social milieu and are identified as having a strong influence on economic development (Zeitlin, 1992). This paper presents an overview of the significance of social milieu on tourism development in a developed tourism area in Ireland.

The research reports the findings of a quantitative and qualitative case study undertaken in Killarney, County Kerry, a developed tourism area in Ireland. Killarney has a history of tourism activity dating back to at least the 1800s and is acknowledged as being one of the longest established tourist areas in Ireland. In its classification of tourism areas in Ireland, the Irish national tourism development agency categorises Killarney as a 'developed', as distinct from a 'developing' or 'specialist' tourism area.

The findings point to the existence of a strong social milieu within the tourism area and indicate that this has had a profound influence on tourism development. The industry is characterised by a myriad of personal contacts that is significant in that it has resulted in strong ties between tourism suppliers that has influenced their willingness to co-operate with each other for mutual benefit. It is argued that the social milieu evident in Killarney in terms of social cohesiveness and informal and formal inter firm relations has played a significant role in the development of this destination and has resulted in, for example, the development of marketing groups, the emergence of new tourism products and services, and referral systems between hotels and other smaller businesses.

The research answers questions such as: How has the existence of a social milieu influenced tourism development in Killarney? What are the conditions that have resulted in this social milieu and in what way is it evident? In summary, it explains the way in which a social milieu has played an important role in the development of tourism in Killarney and these findings are important for both the discussion on destination development within Eastern Europe and for destination development in general.

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