Cross-Border Regions and Sustainable Tourism Development

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Abstract
This paper examines the implications of cross-border cooperation for sustainable tourism development. It first highlights the important concept of scale, suggesting ways in which places collaborate across political divides at global, regional, bilateral and inter-local scales. Each of these scales is examined as it pertains to sustainable tourism, and the ways in which cross-boundary cooperation contributes to sustainable development through tourism is discussed, including environmental management, cultural resource management, operations management and marketing/promotion.

Zusammenfassung
Grenzüberschreitende Regionen und nachhaltige Tourismusentwicklung
1. Introduction

Even before formalized borders were established, frontier areas, or marches, as they were known in ancient days, existed in territories where sovereignty was ill-defined between polities. These nebulous spaces and later formalized international boundaries have long been important convergence points between societies, economies, and cultures. Since the emergence of nation states, however, political boundaries have created barriers to trade, travel and other forms of human interaction.

This is how almost all borders remained until early in the 20th century, when a vision of formalized cross-border cooperation and trans-frontier regions was realized with Luxembourg and Belgium signing a 1921 agreement, known as the Belgium-Luxembourg Economic Union. This treaty laid the groundwork for the future formation of the European Union, but it had the immediate effect of aligning the two countries’ currencies and removing many of the economic and trade barriers between them. Although there had been informal collaboration between kingdoms and principalities during the medieval period, efforts to work together for a common good across geopolitical lines truly began in the 20th century. The 1921 agreement in Europe instituted a new approach to formalized cross-border cooperation that has had far-reaching and lasting effects in the contemporary world, not least of which is the notion of furthering sustainable development in tourism and other socio-economic realms.

This paper examines the notion of cross-border cooperation at various geographic scales and how it does, and has the potential to contribute to more sustainable forms of tourism development.

2. Borders and Cross-Border Cooperation

Political geographers have long been interested in international boundaries and their forms, functions and effects on contiguous societies. Borders mark the limits of national sovereignty and often delineate socio-economic, cultural and political differences between adjacent societies and cultures. As noted earlier, for centuries borders have curtailed the free flow of goods and persons, and diverging policies on opposite sides have resulted in notable differences in how natural and cultural resources have been managed or exploited. This has resulted in many ecosystems and cultural groups being partitioned and dealt with quite differently on opposite sides of the political divide, sometimes with the result of overexploitation of resources and maltreatment of some peoples on one side or the other, or both.

Border regions throughout the world tend to have a fairly common set of characteristics. With only a small number of exceptions where capital cities and large population centers are located at or near international borders, borderlands (the areas adjacent to borders) tend to be peripheral in relation to the state core where most of the population lives and where most commerce takes place. Because of their peripheral locations, many border areas have been ignored by national governments. Development budgets are commonly devoted to more central regions, or core areas, where larger populations exist. Thus, being on the edge of national territory, borderlands are often economically disadvantaged compared to other parts of the state (VODEB 2010), and they are often ignored socially and physically by centralized bureaucrats. In many cases, they are relatively untouched by the reach of the state machine in terms of infrastructure and human settlement and thus remain among the most ecologically healthy and culturally distinct regions of the world (TIMOTHY 2002). This is sometimes what makes them both challenging and appealing as tourist destinations (e.g. IOANNIDES ET AL. 2006; MORITSCHE AND ZIMMERMANN 1998; ZIMMERMANN 2000, 2001; ZIMMERMANN AND KUBIK 2003).

A central notion of the contemporary geopolitical world in social, economic and ecological terms is cross-border cooperation. With the development of supranational alliances and trans-boundary collaboration in many socio-economic areas, cross-border cooperation is becoming an ever more salient way of dealing with mutual problems in bi- or multinational regions. Scale is a crucial concept in understanding the role of cross-border cooperation in tourism, with cooperation occurring at global, regional, bilateral and inter-local levels (TIMOTHY AND SAARINEN in press; TIMOTHY AND TÊYE 2004). However, cooperation, collaboration and integration are crucial to successful cross-border resource management and tourism development throughout the world.
At the grandest scale are global coalitions whose memberships are comprised of the majority of the world's nations. The World Trade Organization, the United Nations with its large numbers of sub-institutions, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development are three of the best known examples. Their primary purpose is to assist the countries of the world in developing socio-economically, to protect human rights, and to assist in peacekeeping efforts where needed.

At the regional level are supranational alliances, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement, the European Union, the Economic Association of West African States, the Union of South American Nations, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the Caribbean Community, the African Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. There are dozens of these kinds of multinational, regional alliances and organizations that have come about since the mid-twentieth century, and several are currently being formed in an effort to promote regional unity in areas of defense, economic growth and trade, migration, and culture. These are more geographically concentrated in nature than the global alliances mentioned above, and they usually involve at least three signatory countries. Other common terms used to designate these regional supranational groups are customs unions, economic communities, trade alliances, integrated unions and free trade areas.

Down the cooperation scale further is the idea of bilateral agreements, such as the Belgium-Luxembourg Economic Union mentioned in the introduction. These are formal treaties between countries that facilitate cross-border collaboration in a variety of arenas. All of the smallest microstates of Europe have bilateral agreements with their larger counterparts. San Marino and the Vatican City have agreements with Italy for their defense, and by treaty there are no customs or immigration procedures between Italy and its two smaller neighbors. Monaco and France, and Liechtenstein and Switzerland have similar arrangements. In 1988, the USA and Canada signed the Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement, which abolished many trade barriers for goods and services between the two countries. In 1994, the bilateral treaty was replaced by the North American Free Trade Agreement, which included Mexico.

The smallest geographical scale of cross-border collaboration is characterized by inter-local efforts. This entails small regions or areas, including cities and towns, extending their collaborative networks across an international boundary to work with adjacent communities. Because sovereignty, including the right to negotiate transborder agreements, rests with national governments, these local-level arrangements are typically carried out in a more ad hoc and informal manner. Two examples are the twin towns of Tornio, Finland–Haparanda, Sweden, and Valka, Latvia–Valga, Estonia. Tornio and Haparanda have reciprocal agreements regarding school attendance, fire brigade services, and other public services (Prokolla 2007). In Valka–Valga, residents benefit from health care and fire services on both sides of the border, and public libraries and sport centers can be used by anyone living in either of the two communities (Timothy and Saarinen in press).

3. Sustainability, Tourism and Cross-Border Cooperation

Since the 1990s, a great deal of scholarly writing has examined the complex concept of sustainable development in tourism. Experts agree on several key principles that underscore the most socially and ecologically sustainable forms of tourism. These include, among others, the preservation of cultural and ecological integrity, holistic development and management, equity and balance, harmony and cooperation (Bramwell and Lane 1993; Hall and Lew 1998; Weaver 2006). Butler (1999) argued that there is a significant difference between sustainable tourism and sustainable development within the context of tourism. He notes that sustainable tourism is not necessarily positive or a desirable outcome for all destinations, because it can entail the growth of an unhealthy and exploitative tourism industry that can be ‘sustained’ or maintained far into the future. Sustainable development within the context of tourism, on the other hand, is desirable because it adopts the essential principles of sustainable development as a guide for tourism.

Cross-border cooperation as noted earlier is now widely viewed as a tool for supporting many of the principles of sustainability (Timothy 1999; Zimmermann 2004, 2006). From a tourism perspective,
trans-frontier collaboration is particularly crucial in ongoing natural resource management, cultural area management, operations management and marketing, to name but a few.

3.1. Environmental Management

Cooperation across political lines is especially important in protecting ecosystems and specific natural resources (Turnock 2001; Zimmermann 2006). Natural environments do not respect human-imposed boundaries, and in many parts of the world, international borders run through natural landscapes of high aesthetic, ecological and scientific value that are of interest to tourism. Most frequently, cross-frontier environmental management efforts occur at the global, regional and bilateral scales. On the global scale are examples of UN-led efforts to retard human contributions to global warming (via the Kyoto Protocol), to freeze the over-harvesting of rainforests in South America and to help protect areas of high biotic value via the UNESCO World Heritage List.

At the regional level, most supranational alliances have integrated policies that target ecological sustainability. ASEAN, for instance, requires its member states to identify areas of outstanding natural value and establish protected areas for nature conservation and tourism (Timothy 2003). The Association has also established protocols for monitoring the impacts of tourism on the natural environment and set up programs to improve public awareness of the importance of conservation and sustainable forms of tourism.

One prominent bilateral Asian case is Baekdu Mountain (in Korean) or Changbai Mountain (in Chinese) with its volcanic caldera. This volcanic peak is an extremely scenic location that is growing in importance as a tourist attraction both in China and in North Korea. For all Koreans the mountain is considered very sacred and shrouded in nationalist sentiment. South Koreans can access the mountain on the Chinese side of the border, while a small number of foreign tourists and North Koreans are permitted access via North Korea. The divided nature of the mountain and lake has created some conflicts. Primary among these is the argument by several South Korean nationalist groups that the current boundary is illegitimate and the entire mountain is Korean territory (Choi 2004). Many in South Korea also see China’s efforts to build infrastructure, develop tourism, and nominate the peak as a UNESCO World Heritage Site as provocative actions that sidestep friendly relations.

Both China and North Korea approach the environmental management of Baekdu/Changbai differently. For example, timber harvesting policies and laws differ markedly between the two countries. According to a study by Zheng et al. (1997), owing to differing environmental policies, the rates and patterns of forest cover loss are different on the two sides of the border in the Changbai Mountain Reserve. On the North Korean side, extensive deforestation took place early on, with much of the land being cleared before 1972 and continuing until today. On the Chinese side of the border, forest cutting appears to have happened on a large scale only after 1972. From a strictly tourism perspective, China has devoted considerable amounts of money developing the tourism infrastructure in the area up to the borderline, while North Korea has spent relatively little. While little is known about tourism conservation efforts in North Korea, some observers have argued that China’s zealous tourism development program in the area has deteriorated its side of the mountain preserve by endangering vegetation and wildlife, and harming the area’s aesthetic value (Zhu and Wang 1999). The Korean side is far less developed and has not likely undergone such dramatic environmental changes.

The boom in transfrontier conservation areas, including international peace parks, since the 1970s is a result of the growing awareness of the importance of managing ecosystems holistically, regardless of human-defined boundaries that might intersect them (Noe 2010; Timothy 2000; Wolmer 2003). While dozens of these international protected areas exist in all corners of the globe, the prospect of protecting larger segments of the environment has resulted in some cross-border preserves overlapping the political lines of three or even four countries.

Cross-boundary cooperation for the ecological good of natural areas has the potential to alleviate many environmental concerns associated with tourism. It can help halt the overutilization of resources and eliminate some of the environmental inequities that exist on opposite sides of the boundary. Conservation policies can be better syncho-
nized when equal partners work together across political lines for the greater good of the environment, which can have long-term implications for tourism and other forms of economic development.

3.2. Cultural Resource Management

The best example of global-scale cooperation for cultural resource management is the UNESCO World Heritage List, which at the time of writing included 725 cultural and 28 mixed cultural and natural properties in 142 countries. While UNESCO does not provide funds for signatory states to develop tourism or even protect their heritage sites, it does provide expert consultation, helps develop policies, and provides a brand image that is becoming more recognized throughout the world as places that are worthy of conservation for the greater good of humankind.

Several EU initiatives (e.g. INTERREG) have emphasized cultural heritage in Europe’s borderlands as being suitable of protection and tourism-based development (Faby 2006; Halkier 2010; Nilsson et al. 2010; Zimmermann 2006). The Council of Europe works closely with the EU on various culture-related initiatives, particularly those that deal with cross-border cooperation for cultural preservation and heritage development. One of the most pertinent projects is the Cultural Routes Europe program, which was initiated by the Council in 1987 to link the varied cultures of the continent together and emphasize a broader pan-European heritage. Nearly 30 long-distance routes have been identified and developed with the aim of raising awareness of Europe’s cultural identity, encourage intercultural dialogue, protect the cultural past and improve quality of life through social and economic development, and promote sustainable heritage tourism (European Institute of Cultural Routes 2011).

At the bilateral level there are many examples of heritage attractions, cultural sites, and human-made recreational attractions that lie astride an international boundary. One of the most literal examples is the ancient ruins of Santa Maria de Panissars, a medieval Benedictine Monastery, which is located precisely on the French-Spanish border. The area is rich in history, as the Roman road, Via Augusta, traversed the Pyrenees at this location, and the Battle of the Col de Panissars was fought here in 1285 between France and Aragon. The boundary markers of the modern states of France and Spain lie amid the ruins of the monastery, and local heritage authorities in both countries are responsible for the joint management and interpretation of the site.

The twin cities of Tornio, Finland, and Haparanda, Sweden, have long worked on an inter-local basis to promote tourism and manage common resources. The best example of this is the Green Zone – a golf course that was built on the international borderline. The line zigzags between holes and putting greens, which requires players to cross the international boundary and a time zone multiple times during a single round of golf (Timothy and Saarinen in press).

Like nature, cultural resources can be better managed, conserved and interpreted through cross-border collaborative efforts. Cultural resources are non-renewable resources; once they are gone, they are gone forever, so their protection is vital. Transfrontier partnerships can help develop common protective measures and visitor use policies. It can also diminish some biases that exist on opposite sides of a border by portraying a more accurate and balanced account of the history associated with an area. Increased global visibility of cultural heritage has also been found to increase public support and community pride in the past as a resource that deserves to be protected and promoted to outsiders (Timothy 2011).

3.3. Operations Management

There are many elements of managing tourism destinations from a borders perspective, although the majority of these are done on a bilateral or regional basis. Relatively few examples exist of cross-border efforts to develop a physical infrastructure for tourism. In this regard, borders have acted as strong inhibitors to common development, and thousands of examples exist where airports, highways, ports, and railway stations can be found in duplicate, only a few hundred meters apart in some cases, paralleling each other but not serving two sides of a border. This is very common along the U.S.-Mexico border and the Israel-Jordan border for instance.

Several examples show exceptions to this trend, however. The EuroAirport Basel-Mulhouse-Freiburg
is the international airport serving three large cities in Switzerland, Germany and France. Built in the 1940s and 50s, it is the official airport of Basel, Switzerland, but is located entirely on French soil, and it is operated jointly by France and Switzerland. This has created some tricky customs and immigration policies that were resolved through bilateral agreement between the two countries in the 1940s (Walker 1994). Until Switzerland joined the Schengen group of European states in 2008, the airport had a Swiss section and a French section, so that people arriving in Basel would pass through Swiss customs and passport control in France and could thereafter proceed directly to Basel without having to pass through border formalities again. Today the terminal is divided into Schengen and non-Schengen areas.

Similar examples exist in North America and Southeast Asia. The Tanjong Pagar Railway Station is one of the most recognizable binational infrastructure-related showcases in the world. Until 1998, Singapore and Malaysia, by mutual agreement, processed customs and passport control for entrance and exit to both countries at the Tanjong Pagar station in Singapore. In 1998, Singapore moved its immigration and customs station for trains to the border station at the causeway, but Malaysia maintained its checkpoint at the downtown railway station in Singapore until May 2010. A similar bilateral relationship exists between Argentina and Uruguay, where ferry boat passengers traveling between Buenos Aires and one of Uruguay’s port cities clear Uruguayan customs and passport control before boarding in Argentina.

Comparable arrangements have been made between the United States and Canada, where eight of Canada’s busiest airports host U.S. preclearance facilities. In these situations, passengers flying to the United States clear U.S. customs and immigration before boarding the plane in Canada. The facilities are staffed by U.S. Customs and Border Protection employees. These officials are authorized to carry out their customs, passport and visa-related duties, but they are not empowered to arrest anyone on Canadian soil. If they suspect someone is behaving illegally or in possession of an illegal substance, they are required to turn the suspect over to Canadian authorities. The United States also has preclearance treaties with the Bahamas, Bermuda, Ireland, Aruba and the Dominican Republic. The advantages of preclearance arrangements are severalfold. Flights arriving in the U.S. are treated as domestic flights, which allows precleared planes to use domestic terminals in the United States. This reduces the likelihood of passengers having to change terminals to connect to other domestic flights and allows shorter connecting times, as people do not have to stand in line for customs and passport control on their arrival in the U.S. This helps maintain more efficient air operations and reduces some degree of the workload of the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency.

As for efforts on a regional scale, supranational alliances are continuously trying to reach a higher level of integration and cross-border collaboration. In the area of common currencies, a few alliances have been successful (e.g. the EU’s European Monetary Union and eight of the nine members of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States), although several have plans to synchronize their banking systems and fiscal structures and adopt a common currency in the near future. A common passport has been developed by the European Union and issued by each member state, and the Schengen Agreement, which most EU member states have signed, in addition to three non-EU countries – Switzerland, Iceland and Norway – provides a common external visa. Within the Schengen Area, border controls have disappeared and passports are no longer necessary for Europeans or non-Europeans traveling between Schengenatory states.

In Central America, the 2006 CA-4 Border Control Agreement between Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua established a system of free human mobility across the four countries’ borders without checks or restrictions. In theory, foreign travelers arriving in any one of the four states can travel to other member states without requiring additional visas or undergoing border inspections. Thus a harmonized visa regime was established, but on the ground this has yet to be fully operationalized by all four signatories.

Binational and multinational arrangements that ease border restrictions and facilitate cross-border travel have the potential to increase efficiency in the tourism system and develop more harmonious relations between neighboring countries. The best
example of this is the free movement of EU citizens within the European Union and non-Europeans within the Schengen area without visas or border restrictions. Likewise, human resources in tourism are freer to travel between work and job site if it lies across the border. This helps reduce the psychological barrier effect of international boundaries that have always existed in the minds of travelers.

3.4. Marketing

In nearly all cases, cross-border efforts to promote tourism in a borderlands region are done at the level of inter-local cooperation, particularly as it relates to a specific attraction or event. Endeavors on the regional level tend to focus more on policy matters, although there are many efforts to market supranational regions as larger, more cohesive destinations (THERKELSEN and GRAM 2010; TOSUN et al. 2005).

The golf course on the Finland-Sweden border noted earlier is a good example of inter-local collaboration. At the same destination, Tornio and Haparanda have made a concerted effort to diminish the effects of the international boundary that separates the two municipalities via their promotional efforts. They share a collective tourist information office, located on the Finnish side of the border, but whose online and printed campaigns are truly binational (HAPARANDA-TORNO TOURIST OFFICE 2011). The communities have also begun developing a large leisure facility with shopping and other recreational services directly over the border in an effort to blend the two communities and symbolically dissolve the divide between them.

The twin border towns of Valka and Valga (Latvia and Estonia) currently share a common bus line, and using the Tornio-Haparanda model the two towns are planning to develop a joint tourist office and visitor center. Hundreds of border communities throughout the world work together regularly across their political frontiers to plan events (e.g. volleyball tournaments across the U.S.-Mexico border fence and horse races paralleling the fence), international sport festivals and cross-frontier cultural fêtes.

On a bi-national level, Ireland presents a good case of cross-border cooperation (GREER 2002). Although divided by an international boundary, Northern Ireland (UK) and Ireland function nearly as a single entity in terms of tourism promotion. Both entities liaise to market the whole island as a single destination. Shared promotional material is produced and distributed, most of which ignores the dividing line entirely, and both countries attend international tourism trade shows together promoting Ireland as a single destination.

At the regional level, ASEAN founded its own tourism division (ASEANTA), which is responsible for boosting the international image of Southeast Asia. Campaigns are ongoing to promote the entire region as a single, multi-nation destination, offer themed tour packages, and develop other regional tourism activities (TIMOTHY 2003). Its mandate also includes increasing tourist arrivals to the region and to combine forces with various sectors of the travel industries (e.g. cruise companies and airlines) and individual governments within the alliance to abolish restrictive policies that have hindered cross-border travel. Likewise, given the importance of tourism in the Caribbean, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) has a vested interest in promoting the region as a destination, which it does in partnership with the Caribbean Tourism Organization. This is especially fruitful in creating a ‘Caribbean brand’ and in promoting the entire region to tour operators and travel agents throughout the world (TIMOTHY 2004).

Collaborative marketing and promotion of cross-border attractions and destinations upholds several principles of sustainability. It helps improve efficiency and equity as adjacent communities or countries produce combined promotional materials, web sites, and television ads, which can be more cost effective than two parallel destinations advertising on their own. Larger markets are reached, expenditures shared, and a larger-scale product may evolve that will keep tourists in the area longer and result in additional expenditures. Bilateral advertising campaigns may be an effective recipe for goodwill, as in the case of Ireland, as cross-national partners, some of which might have previously been adversaries, work together to achieve common socio-economic goals.
4. Concluding Remarks

Cross-border cooperation comes in many forms and at many scales, from large, global alliances to small inter-local exchanges that are developed at municipal levels. While there is considerable potential for transfrontier networks to advance the cause of sustainable development in tourism, such endeavors are not without challenges and controversies. Different levels of development and therefore differing socioeconomic priorities often create insurmountable barriers to successful cooperation at every scale. Perhaps most important, however, is a widespread lack of political will. Governments realize that they must give up a modicum of sovereignty to undertake transboundary collaboration for the greater good, but many are unwilling to do that. In some cases, laws, boundary obstacles and cultural differences prevent the networking needed for cross-border success. Regardless of these challenges, more and more countries are beginning to see the value of joining forces with near and distant neighbors to protect ecological and cultural integrity, create more balanced and harmonious relations, and improve economic efficiency. It is likely that such efforts will continue far into the foreseeable future as the traditional barrier effects of international boundaries diminish as the world becomes a smaller place.

References


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