Planning for the Great Unknown: The Challenge of Promoting Spectator-driven Sports Event Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Sports event tourism has rapidly evolved into one of the most fashionable facets of the 21st Century. As a result, staging high-profile fixtures are increasingly being seen as a prominent method of strengthening a destination’s domestic and international image. Despite the plethora of academic interest in special event management, there remains an apparent lack of knowledge surrounding the role played by public sector tourism planners. This paper examines narratives from representatives of New Zealand-based regional tourism organisations responsible for maximising the local benefits associated with hosting the 2005 British and Irish Lions Tour. While the ‘once in a lifetime’ nature of the six-week nationwide series was undoubtedly its biggest selling point, it was equally to blame for a multitude of hurdles encountered by regional operators. The findings identify a host of logistical and resource-based challenges, along with the manner in which such threats were overcome. Several recommendations are introduced, highlighting the need for consistent, yet flexible, approaches to regional sport event planning. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

The continued increase in tourism-related activity being generated through the staging of ‘elite’ sporting competitions has effectively cemented sport event tourism’s emergence as one of the fastest growing niche markets found within today’s global travel industry (Chalip and McGuirty, 2004; McCartney, 2005). As a result, the economic benefits or social opportunities associated with high-profile, spectator-driven sporting occasions continues to be well documented in a number of public arenas (Ritchie and Adair, 2004). Despite its increasing status as an independent field of academic enquiry, the driving forces behind the growing demand for sport event tourism (both international and domestic) remain somewhat unknown (Weed and Bull, 1997; Gibson, 2005). Likewise, from an industry perspective, there also appears to be a lack of practical understanding with regards to the planning issues faced by supply-side operators (Pigeassou et al., 2003). Little has been written, for example, about the logistical challenges faced by public sector tourism operators responsible for promoting ‘spectator-driven’ sports event activities within the host region (Higham, 2005). This paper attempts to discuss the practical implications of this void, exploring the complexities involved in both predicting the demand and, subsequently, planning the supply of elite sports event tourism at a local level. More specifically, it examines the hurdles faced by regional tourism organisations (RTOs) in the build-up towards the 2005 British and Irish Lions Tour of New Zealand (to be referred to as the ‘Lions Tour’ or ‘Lions Series’ from now on). The difficulties encountered while identifying and subsequently monitoring local-level impacts are discussed, along with the logistical
value of developing generic regional strategies for immediate implementation. The active involvement and assistance provided by key national and regional stakeholders during the planning process is also evaluated. The paper concludes with several recommendations encouraging continued investigation into sports event tourism planning and network development at a local level.

PLANNING ELITE SPORTS EVENT TOURISM

Hall’s (1992) work on special interest tourism was clearly influential in the initial advancement of niche markets involving sports and events-related travel (Smith, 2001; De Knop, 2006). Tourism-generating events are generally perceived to be distinguishable from other forms of natural and/or man-made attractions located within a destination (Getz, 2003). Unlike permanent products or exhibitions, special events are primarily ‘one-off’ occasions of limited duration, created to generate short-term visitation and to increase public attention (Getz, 1997; Collier, 2003). Essentially, they are based specifically around what is happening, as opposed to what is always available (Hall, 1989). Elite or ‘spectator-driven’ sports events are perceived to be those in which the number of passive participants in attendance (i.e. spectators/supporters) significantly outweighs the number of participants taking part or involved in the physical sporting activity (i.e. competitive athletes) (Hinch and Higham, 2004). Unlike ‘non-elite’ events, in which the number of active participants is larger than the number of spectators, these typically high-profile occasions can prove extremely challenging to plan or promote, especially from a tourism development perspective (Higham, 2005). Arguably, the biggest difficulty facing elite event planners arises during the pre-event stages and involves the need to forecast visitor numbers and calculate the potential economic activity likely to emerge from hosting a spectator-driven event (Gratton et al., 2005). While the number of pre-registered participants (i.e. competitors and officials) is likely to be known, it is not so straightforward to predict the exact number of spectators guaranteed to attend. Gratton et al. (2005) comment on the growing tendency to overestimate the potential financial benefits gained through hosting spectator-driven sports events. They also acknowledge a number of factors that can influence the number of people who actually attend, including the venue(s) chosen, the timing of the event, the cost of attending, the strength of media representation (local, national and international) and the success of promotional or ticketing campaigns (Gratton et al., 2005). Likewise, uncontrollable and equally unpredictable external factors such as the weather can also have a noticeable, potentially critical, effect on attendance levels (Hinch and Higham, 2004).

With their unrivalled ability to generate global interest and international media coverage, periodically held ‘elite’ sports tournaments are one of the most frequently explored examples of tourism-generating ‘mega’ events (Allen et al., 2001; Waitt, 2001; Madden, 2002. However, while the modern day Olympic Games tend to take place in, or at least around, one core (urban) location, this is not the case for a growing proportion of other, equally high-profile, elite sporting events. While the Olympic Games may be the most recognisable global sporting brand (Waitt, 2001), many of the major World Cup Competitions (i.e. soccer, rugby and cricket) are not only lasting much longer in duration (due to their continued increase in size), but are also increasingly taking place over a much wider geographical area. The 1999 Rugby World Cup, the 2002 Soccer World Cup and the 2007 Cricket World Cup, for example, were all co-hosted by neighbouring countries over the space of at least four weeks. In addition, professional sports that follow a pre-selected global circuit are also seen as suitable examples of ‘recurring’ elite events that have proven to have had a major impact on the various hosting destinations (Getz, 2003. De Knop (2006), for example, claims that when it comes to generating tourism revenue through spectator-driven support, the Tour de France is unmatched by any other elite sporting event, annually attracting several million visitors along its 2500-mile route. Clearly the spatial and temporal elements of any elite sporting event can play a significant role in the degree of impact witnessed within the host destination.
Kurtzman (2001) estimates the net worth of attending sports events to be approximately 30% of all international tourism-generated revenue. However, due to their temporary and rare nature, elite sports events can often require a substantial degree of investment (Jones, 2001). The need to develop (or redevelop) local resources and upgrade current infrastructure becomes of major importance. The increasing use or reliance on public funding and/or local government support is another issue that needs to be managed and reported carefully. To help subsidise the growing costs, many elite sports events are increasingly being complimented by the development and promotion of permanent and temporary attractions and smaller supplementary activities, including displays, parades and festivals (Getz, 1997; Hall, 2001; Bull, 2005). Similarly, the leveraging and bundling of commercial products and additional event-related activities have also become lucrative methods of increasing the events’ appeal to a wider audience (Green, 2001; Brown et al., 2004; Chalip, 2004; Hinch and Higham, 2004). The diversity of products and experiences now offered by sports-related event tourism has undoubtedly facilitated its emergence as a major force within the world’s tourism industry (Bjelac and Radovanovic, 2003; Pigeassou, 2004). It is regarded as a largely unique opportunity for host destinations to generate substantial global media attention, while attracting a significant amount of short-term, but high-yielding, visitors at the same time (Hall, 2001; Getz, 2003).

With the increase in sport event tourism activity, strategic planning must be regarded as a fundamental, yet particularly complex, feature of its continued development (Getz, 2003; Hall, 2005). Likewise, as the potential positive implications become more apparent, a locations’ logistical ability to plan and successfully host elite sporting events has become a powerful avenue of destination promotion (Bramwell, 1997; Sofield, 2003). The accessibility of the location, the nature of the resources available and the demographic make-up of those who reside in or around the region must be considered as highly influential factors when assessing the feasibility of planning to host an event. Getz (2003, p. 84) believes ‘With the right vision and plan, sport event tourism can also bring major benefits to area residents through urban renewal, new and more efficiently operated sport facilities, more entertainment and sport participation opportunities, and heighten community pride’. Jones (2001) cites the dangers and risk associated with outside influences restricting local ‘ownership’ when hosting special sports events. Hall (1997) concludes that the willingness to be actively involved in such occasions can be heavily dependent upon the perception of whom the event is primarily aimed at and subsequently, who the main benefactor or what their participation will be. For example, a sporting event of major significance and appeal for one location (or local authority) can easily seem less significant and appealing to a neighbouring region (Jones, 2001).

When discussing sport event tourism from a planning perspective, it soon becomes clear that there are a number of different levels of authority, each spread across various political and/or spatial boundaries (Hall, 2005). Clearly, an integrated approach should assist regional tourism planners with the maximisation of the positive socio-economic impacts (Hall, 2000). However, for this to occur within sports event tourism, it requires a significant amount of co-ordination and cross-sector communication and co-operation at a number of different, often competing, levels (Getz, 1997, 2003; Hall, 2005; Higham, 2005; Jones, 2005) Higham (2005) acknowledges that cross-sector partnerships and networking agreements are essential within the field of sports event tourism planning and monitoring. Clearly, staging any event requires stakeholder collaboration and communication, which can lead to the much needed sharing of, often limited, human and/or financial resources (Webb, 2005). While a combined effort appears to make a lot of sense, it still remains extremely difficult to find detailed examples of cases where public and private sector organisations, from both the sport and tourism industries, have joined together and formed lasting working relationships (Weed and Bull, 2004).

A number of event management texts illustrate the breakdown in working groups and general communication channels that tend to emerge soon after events have been staged.
In general, many of the stakeholder collectives formed during the planning stages of major sports events also appear to have disbanded soon after their common goal or objective has been attained (Weed and Bull, 1997; Jones, 2005). It also appears extremely difficult to find any substantial evidence of long-term sports event tourism monitoring and/or any detailed evaluation of the benefits attached to the various stakeholder networks/partnerships that emerge during the sports event planning stages (Swart, 2005). As a result, a number of critical questions remain unanswered, particularly those surrounding the issues of strategic regional tourism planning, local stakeholder relationships and long-term implications of hosting major sports events (Wright and Mitchell, 2006). Having provided a brief review of literature available on planning tourism related to elite sports events, the focus now shifts towards sports events and regional tourism planning from a New Zealand perspective.

REGIONAL PLANNING AND SPORTS EVENT TOURISM IN NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand’s RTOs have been defined as ‘... quasi-sector public bodies ...’ whose ‘... conception, existence, disappearance (in some cases) and re-emergence have depended directly on or at least had been influenced by, the actions of the government and national bodies’ (Ryan and Zahra, 2004, p. 81). According to the Ministry of Tourism (2005), they assist regional development, providing a direct link between private operators, public bodies and government agencies at various levels of authority. At the time of writing, New Zealand’s RTO network covers 30 different areas of governance, providing local development support and promoting their region (both domestically and internationally) (Collier, 2003; Collier and Harraway, 2003).

To date, sports events are clearly seen as one of the most feasible, cost-effective and potentially lucrative avenues for sustainable development within New Zealand’s ever-expanding portfolio of tourism-generating activities and attractions (Collins 2000; Hall and Kearsley, 2001; Ryan, 2002; Collier, 2003). According to Mason (2003), the continued provision and regular upgrading of recreational sport and communal leisure facilities has been a strong focus point of many regional planning and local government development schemes. At the same time, the global success of both the nation’s professional sports teams (such as rugby, cricket, netball and sailing) and individual athletes (in golf, athletics and rowing for example) has significantly helped to strengthen New Zealand’s profile as a popular international destination (Higham and Hall, 2003). Although competitive sport has always been valued as an important and deep-seated part of New Zealand’s society (Fougere, 1989; Nauright, 1995), the increasing amount of tourism generated through hosting elite sports events is still a relatively recent phenomenon (Collier and Harraway, 2003; Collier, 2003). However, with the success of hosting major events such as the 1990 Commonwealth Games and two America’s Cup Regattas (1999 and 2003), the sports event industry is undeniably now a highly visual sector in the nation’s economy (Campbell-Price, 2002).

METHOD

To date, the majority of the existing elite sports event tourism studies, found within a wide array of management and social-scientific disciplines, have tended to focus heavily on case study research. Likewise, the collection and subsequent evaluation of quantifiable data remains the preferred method of choice, often utilised in an attempt to calculate the actual ‘value’ of staging one or more sporting events (Bramwell, 1997; Gratton et al., 2005). Arguably, one of the key advantages of adopting an exploratory case study is the ability to collect and compare rich evidence from a variety of sources, usually gathered from personal observations, official documents or during face-to-face interviews (Eisenhardt, 2002; Yin, 2003). Nicholson and Pearce (2001, p. 450) define comparative research as ‘the investigation of a problem in two or more places (or points in time), using a common research design so that equivalent data may be systematically collected, analysed and interpreted’. The principle findings for this paper emerged from the analysis and comparison of
narratives gathered, face-to-face, from the 11 pre-selected interviewees. Although the lack of generalisability and/or objectivity was identified as a potential weakness (Maxwell, 2002; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003; Decrop, 2004), the qualitative approach effectively allowed for social understandings to be investigated through the collection of perceptions and professional opinions, regarding past activities and personal behaviours (Denzin, 2002; Lincoln and Guba, 2002; Cassell and Symon, 2004; Phillimore and Goodson, 2004). Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most suitable and effective manner in which to collect the primary data. Although a certain degree of basic structure was deemed necessary to avoid the respondent drifting too far from the topic, the semi-structured format was preferred, allowing both the researcher and the respondent some flexibility and freedom to develop their own narratives during each interview (Riessman, 2002).

All of the respondents were identified several months prior to the 2005 Lions Series. Initial contact was made through a one-page letter, providing background information on the researcher, the aim of the study and several potential implications of the research. All subsequent communication was made via email or telephone and the interviews were carried out across New Zealand during the weeks that immediately followed the departure of the Lions. Additional correspondence provided the respondent with an information sheet reiterating the aims of the study and all necessary contact details. In addition, a declaration was signed by the respondent which allowed the meeting to be taped using a micro-cassette recorder. The 11 interviews varied in length, with the shortest being 40 minutes and the longest taking just over an hour.

The first issue covered related to the pre-event planning conducted and the promotional campaigns implemented by the various RTOs. The second, focused on unforeseen challenges or hurdles that may have emerged throughout the entire planning process. The third and final avenue of discussion was based on the local impacts witnessed and the personal perceptions surrounding the long-term implication of hosting elite sport events. The analysis of the data involved the systematic process of sifting, charting and sorting material according to emergent issues and themes found within the transcripts from each interview (Ritchie and Spencer, 2002; Thomas, 2004). In addition, the collection of personal field notes, plus observations, provided the researcher with the opportunity to triangulate non-verbal material (Denzin, 2002). Follow-up communication was necessary on several occasions, enabling the researcher to clarify certain issues directly with the respondent in question. This process in itself is also considered a suitable form of investigator triangulation analysis or ‘member checking’ (Decrop, 1999).

DISCUSSION

Despite the historical and cultural significance of hosting numerous Lions Tours throughout the 20th Century, especially with regard to the global advancement of rugby union in the Southern Hemisphere, there appears to have been a surprising lack of interest in the socio-economic impacts of such a high-profile international sporting fixture. The only noticeable attention given to the periodic trips to Australia, South Africa or New Zealand has tended to focus on the nostalgic sentiment attached to past on-field sporting battles and the reflective diaries of former participants. Overall, very little, if any, academic research appears to have been conducted on the off-field activities of both active and passive participants.

Rugby union represents much more than ‘sport’ to many New Zealanders. It is more a way of life or national tradition (Fougere, 1989; Laidlaw, 1999). The first tour to visit New Zealand took place in 1888 and lasted approximately nine months, including a 14-week return sail journey (Lions Rugby, 2005). In comparison, the 2005 ‘event’ was New Zealand’s first since rugby union’s professionalisation (in 1995), and it lasted over six weeks. Although the duration and frequency of the tours have been heavily reduced over the past century, the number of people travelling to attend these fixtures has exploded. An estimated 20 400 travelling supporters followed a team of almost a hundred active personnel (Vuletich, 2005). In total, the 2005 Lions squad contained over 50 full-time professional athletes and a backroom support crew of over 30,
including various coaches, lawyers, chefs, press agents and medical staff (Hinton and Johnstone, 2005). The official Economic Impact Assessment (EIA) for tourism activity generated exclusively by the Lions Series claims the 11-match tour generated somewhere between $131 and $135 million for the national economy (Vuletich, 2005). This comfortably made it New Zealand’s most high-profile and financially rewarding elite sporting event since the America’s Cup defence in 2003 (Hobbs, 2005).

With the New Zealand Rugby Union’s (NZRU) bid to host the 2011 Rugby World Cup already shortlisted alongside South Africa and Japan, the 2005 Lions Tour was clearly seen as a golden opportunity to gain global support and potentially influence the International Rugby Board’s (IRB) final decision (due in November 2005). The Lions Tour was seen by several respondents as ‘a very good forerunner’ with regard to the pending 2011 IRB Rugby World Cup bid. Another RTO representative noted that it needed to be utilised ‘to test the country in a number of areas’. Furthermore, coming at the start of a traditionally quieter shoulder season, a number of national tourism stakeholders (e.g. the Ministry of Tourism and Tourism New Zealand) were ‘equally keen to show the watching world that we [the entire country] could still host such a high profile sporting fixture’. Interestingly, while it was fairly straightforward to identify the key national stakeholders involved from the outset, the extent of regional planning being conducted remained elusive and less obvious. Ultimately, it was this lack of knowledge that directly led to the development of this study and, subsequently, forms a significant part of the discussion.

As a whole, the Lions Series was largely seen to be a high-profile social event for the entire nation, rather than a collection of regional elite sports fixtures. For example, a noticeable part of the pre-event planning focus was on the potential benefits for the entire nation, as opposed to an individual region. The primary goals of the 11 RTOs showed a strong unified/collective desire to ‘cash in on the good will for New Zealand’. While environmental implications were generally overlooked, the principal short-term targets all tended to be financially motivated. In addition, the long-term objectives were much more focused on the maximisation of the future social benefits, especially those attached to ‘the extensive global media coverage’ expected to ‘closely follow the Lions Tour’. Likewise, the generation of future business and tourism-generating opportunities was also very high on the agenda. All of the respondents acknowledged the perceived need to maximise both visitor expenditure and global media exposure. However, it could be argued that many of the individual regions considered the post-event implications to be considerably more important than the pre-event promotion itself. The importance of the UK market to New Zealand’s inbound tourism industry was heavily emphasised on several occasions. Several aimed to ensure that all the overseas visitors returned home as ‘walking brochures’ or ‘potential returnees’. The elite sports event was often described as a ‘fantastic’ opportunity. Finally, one respondent was determined to make sure it accurately showcased ‘New Zealand’s regional diversity to one of the nation’s biggest overseas markets’.

Although the NZRU had a team of over 30 working on the Lions Series, the RTOs generally delegated the responsibility (of Lions Tour-related activities and promotions) to one full-time employee. A couple of the larger, urban-based, operations were able to justify the allocation of two employees, while another smaller RTO could only allow relevant projects to be conducted on a part-time/ad hoc basis. Although it was barely evident within the public domain, the majority of RTOs actually began to put the planning wheels in motion around 12 months before the tour was due to commence. The first regions started planning over a year and a half before the Lions Tour was due to arrive. In these cases, the early promotion was perceived by one respondent to be based around the recognition that some ‘non-mainstream’ peripheral region would inevitably have to ‘fight a bit harder for the visitors then the more established destinations’. Many of the smaller operations gratefully acknowledged the prompts given by the local Rugby Football Union and Tourism New Zealand. However, at this early time in the process, some admitted to being cautious, and
even a little sceptical, when it came to actually allocating their own resources. Many were content to wait until closer to the time and were not prepared to delegate responsibilities until all the potential benefits (and risks) had been fully assessed. Several respondents admitted to being reluctant to act on the 'mixed messages' being distributed by commercial operators, especially those originating from outside their own region. One respondent strongly supported the idea of 'waiting to see what the other guys [regions] were doing'. He justified their initial hesitance, claiming the tour was 'one of those once in a lifetime speculative type events' that made it 'extremely challenging to plan for'. Ultimately, in terms of the actual regional tourism activity likely to materialise, it was perceived to be a case of planning for 'the great unknown'.

Planning for the great unknown

The biggest challenge facing the RTOs surrounded the difficulty of estimating how many international supporters were going to arrive. More specifically, the respondents knew very little about know how long visitors may stay, what standard of accommodation they would be expecting and the best manner in which to entertain the supporters during their stay. With the answers to these questions unknown, most of the RTOs were forced to base their entire plans on either 'total guess work' or the 'unsubstantiated figures' given by private operators based outside of their region. Respondents were desperate for 'reliable statistics' and 'quantifiable data', especially with regard to campervan hire or the number of free independent travellers (FITs) likely to be making their way around the country. While some official inbound tour operators were able to provide details of the extent of pre-paid package deals sold, it was estimated that approximately 61% of the 20 400 international visitors had chosen to travel independently, without any pre-arranged itinerary or agenda (Vuletich, 2005).

Many of the respondents referred to the 2005 Lions Series as a 'unique' social event which presented their organisation with a 'tough logistical challenge'. Many of the RTOs believed that they were somewhat forced into taking 'a particularly cautious or conservative stance' by the lack of available information. For example, only three of the 11 RTOs were able to base their approach on past experiences learnt from hosting previous spectator-driven sports events. In general however, even these respondents admitted exercising a great deal of caution when considering the applicability of using existing event management plans on a sporting fixture 'as high profile and rare' as a Lions Tour. Many of the other respondents perceived their own regional event strategies to be 'still in their infancy' or 'totally inappropriate for an event of such magnitude'. Finally, there were even a couple of regions whose existing event-planning policies were described as being 'out-dated' despite having 'never actually been fully tested'.

The America's Cup Regattas of 1999 and 2003 were often regarded as being the most suitable New Zealand-hosted elite sports event on which to base demand predictions and/or supply-based action plans. Other annually held sports events mentioned included the Taupo Ironman Competition, the South Island Coast to Coast Multi-Sport Challenge and the New Zealand Master's Games. When discussing past and current elite rugby fixtures, the annual Ranfurly Shield fixtures, Trans Tasman (Bledisloe Cup) Test Matches and the Wellington International Rugby Sevens Tournament appeared within many of the narratives. However, once again, many felt the continual need to re-emphasise the fact that 'nothing could be directly compared to the enormity of a Lions Tour match, whether it be [a] Test Match or [a] provincial game'. Furthermore, The Lions Tour was frequently described as being 'much more [important/significant] than any other rugby match'. Many of the respondents were also equally quick to discard the relevance of previous Lions Tours to Australia, South Africa or New Zealand. Likewise, the last International Rugby Tour (i.e. the South African Springboks in 1994) was also seen as being inappropriate due to the 'substantial changes that have taken place [within the game of Rugby Union] over the past 12 years'. The professionalisation of rugby union in 1995 and the subsequent growth of the sport’s World Cup were seen as ‘fundamental’ and 'irreversible' advancements
that had ‘effectively killed the relevance of the traditional Rugby tour’. Finally, when asked about the future implications, respondents were equally adamant that the impact of the 2005 Tour would inevitably have little bearing on the way the next New Zealand-hosted Lions Series will be prepared for when (or ‘if’) it took place in 2017. Despite making it into the final three, at the stage of conducting the interviews, New Zealand was also largely perceived to be the rank outsider when it came to winning the rights to host the 2011 World Cup. Many of the respondents commented on the likelihood that the hallmark tournament would be going to Japan, believing the sport needed to open itself up to new and developing markets.

Due to the lack of experience and/or reliable data, the first course of action taken by the RTOs often involved the development of regional working groups or steering panels. These locally-constructed groups included representatives from both the public and private sector. The extent to which the RTOs were actively involved in these groups heavily depended on their size and the resources available. Tourism New Zealand was largely credited with being the main nationwide catalyst behind the unified promotion of the 2005 Lions Tour, with particular focus on its potential for long-term tourism-related activity. While the role of stakeholders from the various different ‘scales’ and ‘public structures’ were clear to see, the RTOs planning prerogative was often strictly focused on producing the best localised tourism package with the limited assets available. Therefore, many of the smaller regional operations were content to let other public and private stakeholders deal with the logistical side of the elite sports event.

All respondents raised serious concerns over the uncertainty and lack of useful information, especially in relation to predicted visitor numbers or travel behaviour. The domestic market was largely neglected or overlooked during the initial pre-event planning process, with most of the attention heavily focused on predicting, managing and monitoring the potential impacts related to the international supporters. As the date of the event got closer (i.e. about two weeks beforehand), some noticeable attention was then given to raising awareness and interest among the various host communities. The lack of any detailed forecasts or general local-industry understanding of what to expect during the Lions Tour definitely troubled the various RTOs. Having said that, all of the respondents appeared to accept the fact that everyone was in the same position and it was not perceived that vital information was being deliberately held back or purposely withheld by other stakeholders. It was often described as a ‘frustrating period’ caused by the ‘unbelievable’ fact that ‘nobody knew how it was going turn out’. The most important information required to plan for the event was deemed to be ‘literally non-existent’.

The majority of information being passed on to the RTOs from outside their own region was heavily reliant on estimated numbers and predicted behaviour based on previous tours, much of which was quickly dismissed as being ‘inappropriate’ and/or ‘of little real value’ to the 2005 Lions Tour. While the uncertainty and lack of knowledge forced many of the stakeholders together, there was also an overwhelming degree of unity generated through the desire to ‘do our region proud’. Many respondents saw this event as an opportunity to establish or re-establish community links and subsequently put a considerable amount of effort into ‘building bridges’ and ‘tackling this as a region’. Arguably, one of the biggest issues facing them during the planning process was the challenge of promoting the potential benefits of hosting the elite sports event, without ‘raising the expectations of the local business community beyond a realistic level’. The national and local media, along with many commercial operators, generally chose to base their own publicity and event-related promotions on the nostalgic social elements of the event. The 11 RTOs, however, all showed a strong desire to deal only with the ‘cold hard facts’, as opposed to getting ‘needlessly swept away by all the unhelpful and largely unrealistic hype’ or, as it was more bluntly put by one respondent, ‘all the sentimental nostalgic crap’. Many respondents admitted to taking ‘total stabs in the dark’, to ‘simply guessing’ or, at best, to ‘reactive, as opposed to proactive’ planning. Overall, no one seemed to have any idea how many people would actually arrive in their region. A lot of the numbers being discussed in the media were
perceived to be ‘optimistic and questionable’ and also appeared to strongly contradict those being passed around by the official tour operators. The numbers also fluctuated on a weekly, if not daily, basis depending on the source of the information. Many of the RTOs were therefore left to make their own ‘g)estimations’ and reactive decisions based solely on the Lions-related activities and impacts witnessed in other regions.

Unlike some of the larger international private tour operators, all of the RTOs were forced to develop campaigns that fitted within their limited annual budgets. Major promotions were therefore kept to a minimum, with the focus of attention falling largely on ‘entertaining the local community’ and/or ‘the unknown quantity of independent travelling supporters’. In general, the local businesses that tried to over-commercialise the event were largely seen as being unsuccessful. Several respondents branded the external publicity generated by domestic and international operators as ‘unrealistic’ and ‘dangerous’. They claim that the visitor numbers being promoted by commercially motivated sponsors were generally ‘way off the mark’ and caused ‘much confusion among local operators’. In their interviews, several perceived that the entire promotional campaign was ‘reckless’ and conducted with little thought or consideration for those smaller local businesses that ‘unfortunately bought into it’. One regional manager spoke about the Lions Tour being hyped up ‘beyond reality’ and knew of ‘...a lot of local people who thought they were going to be able to retire [after the tour] as billionaires’. More significantly, the media messages being sent out by operations such as the Barmy Army were often in direct contradiction to those being distributed from both Tourism New Zealand and the NZRU, creating a significant amount of confusion within the local market place and subsequently making life particularly difficult for the RTOs.

The extensive amount of national and local media publicity being generated during the build-up to the event proved to be a major factor in the way that many of the regions approached the 2005 Lions Tour. While for some, it helped to ‘raise local awareness’ and effectively gave them ‘a platform to work off’, many felt unable to compete with the commercial operators due to the significant difference in financial budgets available. Overall, the respondents were much more concerned about the local implications of the external international publicity than they were about the success of their own regional promotional activity. This concern was clearly evident among all the respondents, highlighting the need for increased communication between stakeholders at a number of different levels and from a range of industry sectors (Wright and Mitchell, 2006). While the national organisations expected the RTOs to focus on raising local interest and awareness within their areas, the respondents wanted to ensure that they did not over-hype or over-sell the spectator-driven sports event to the local community. Those responsible for planning and promoting the Lions Series were much more interested in ‘keeping it real’.

Many respondents were extremely cautious about raising the community’s expectations too high, at the risk of disappointing local businesses. Most of the local-based promotions independently orchestrated by the RTOs were not brought into operation until the start of the tour. Crucial decisions, with regards to how to accommodate the expected influx of independent visitors, were continually being made and subsequently amended or dropped completely. Similar changes were also regularly made with regard to the type of information they made public. For example, explaining to local businesses to stay open later and/or employ more staff was continuously put off until any request could be supported with sufficient evidence to justify their appeal. Venues for various support events and/or additional camper van spaces were also booked and subsequently cancelled or changed at a number of locations. In general, local media (e.g. radio, magazines and newspapers) were often the preferred method utilised by the RTOs not only to get their messages out, but also to raise public awareness of the likely implications of hosting the Lions supporters.
Communities were encouraged to not only ‘warmly welcome the travelling Lions supporters’, but also to strongly support and ‘get behind their local side’. They were also asked and in some cases ‘bribed with special offers and local competitions’ to ‘come along and join the festivities’. Many regions decided the best way to overcome the uncertainty surrounding how many tourists were going to arrive was to organise smaller second-tier events specifically targeting the local market. For example, one respondent explained how their event programme was our key area to get [local] people involved, regardless of the rugby game, they could get involved... meeting Lions supporters or taking part in an event, whether it was touch rugby or the kids playing with the ball, or the ‘undie 500’, or zorb racing in the street. So we were doing it very much on the local crowd and not a rugby crowd. And that worked really well because if they weren’t participating in the sport, they were watching other people do it in town. That created a sense of civic pride. People were just buzzing afterwards.

The portrayal of a collective sense of local unity was effectively orchestrated across the various regions through a range of promotional activities that included daily ‘blackouts’ (where New Zealanders were asked to go about their usual activities wearing only black) and special shop-front displays, exhibiting the colours of their local provincial sides and/or the All Blacks. Despite the obvious change in focus towards increasing the extent of local involvement/ownership, the majority of these promotional events were only conducted after the Lions Tour had already begun. Therefore, it could easily be argued that these ‘local-orientated initiatives’ were as much for the benefit of the travelling supporters as they were for the host community. Several RTOs were heavily involved in organising and promoting local concerts and/or parades designed to ‘get the locals out of their homes and interacting with the guests’. Overall, the destinations with the strongest working party also appeared to produce the most successful support events in terms of attendance (both community and visitor) and the amount of media attention received. As previously stated, for many respondents the number one priority was maximising the amount of media coverage their destination gained during the Lions Tour. Interestingly, regional-based promotions directly targeting domestic or international rugby fans was never really perceived to be a major feature of the planning process. Respondents appeared confident that these markets were going to attend the matches regardless of how extensively they were promoted. For example, one respondent noted how ‘there was not a lot of point in doing a lot of extra promotion around it [the Lions Tour] when they [the rugby fans] were coming anyway’. Another interviewee questioned the need to waste their limited budget on a ‘self-generating’ sports event; especially when other national operators (e.g. Tourism New Zealand) had already done so.

Several of the obstacles and potential threats identified by the respondents continued to escalate right up to and, in some cases, even beyond the eve of the event. Furthermore, some resource issues, caused by the total unpredictability of the FITs, even threatened to overshadow the anticipated socio-economic benefits attached with the nationwide influx of overseas Lion supporters. For example, many bars and cafes across the nation were reluctant to open over New Zealand’s Queens Birthday public holiday due to the extra staffing and supply costs attached to trading on a national holiday. This caused a major headache for several respondents whose regions were due to host Lions Tour matches before, during and after this national holiday. Basically, without any accurate predictions or guarantees regarding the number of visitors likely to arrive, many businesses concluded that it would be cheaper for them to observe the public holiday (i.e. close) and avoid the substantial extra cost associated with staying open. Clearly, the problem facing the RTOs was convincing such operators to take the risk despite the uncertainty surrounding how many supporters were going to arrive. In this case, the various RTOs all found, during their post-event evaluations, that the businesses that ‘took the gamble’ and opened were ‘subsequently rewarded with their busiest trading days ever’. Furthermore, those who stayed shut were...
perceived to have ‘definitely lost out big time’. In one destination, the respondent explained how a particular business owner ‘saw the crowds on TV, rushed into town and opened his shop at around 1400 hour but was subsequently forced to close less then three hours later due to a lack of stock’. None of the respondents were able to comment upon the extent of negative reactions or potential damage caused by the reduced number of hospitality services open to the Lion supporters during this period.

The length of the 2005 Lions Series (i.e. six weeks from start to finish) meant that, once underway, detailed information based on actual experiences slowly began to flow through from one RTO to another. Regions were willing and able to pass on helpful advice, allowing other areas the much-welcomed opportunity to change and adapt their plans accordingly. For many, this was the first, and only, time they had received any accurate information regarding the size and behavioural characteristics of the travelling supporters. Several of the regions were able to use this information productively to inform accommodation and hospitality outlets about potential visitor numbers. In one instance, it gave a respondent enough warning to organise and ‘considerably increase the amount of allocated campervan spaces put aside’. Another respondent spoke of having to ‘rush around several bars’ to ‘insure they had enough Guinness in stock’.

While a number of communication breakdowns, and even the occasional conflicts of interest had occurred during the pre-tour period, the RTOs appeared to strongly support each other throughout the entire planning process. Although each region clearly had their own competitive agenda and, as one stated, were always striving for ‘as big a piece of the pie as possible’, there was little evidence within the conversations to suggest any significant ‘place wars’ between the different New Zealand regions (Wright and Mitchell, 2006). In fact, the advancement of personal and professional relationships created between neighbouring destination managers was seen as a positive benefit for future co-operation and cohesion. On this note, concerns were also raised surrounding the fact that it took a unique event of this magnitude to ‘force the key stakeholders together’. However, although many of the respondents spoke about the importance of the networks created, few appeared to have put any long-term strategies in place to ensure that the links continued on a permanent basis after the Lions Tour (Wright and Mitchell, 2006). Similarly, while the respondents discussed their desire to keep the communication and co-operation going after the Lions Series, it appeared, at the time of data collection, that many of the links had already been at least ‘temporarily disbanded’. Furthermore, the general feeling among the respondents was that such a ‘united response’ would be unlikely to emerge again until the next major event ‘appeared on the horizon’.

CONCLUSIONS

The ‘one-off’ and/or ‘unique’ nature of events remains not only a fundamental component of their very definition (Ritchie, 1984; Hall, 1992; Getz, 1997), but also one of their most challenging obstacles for those directly responsible for planning, managing and monitoring their success (both short- and long-term). Certainly, as shown in this case study, the high degree of professional concern and undeniable confusion that emerged at a regional planning level prior to the 2005 Lions Tour of New Zealand was principally caused by the perceived impossibility of generating reliable or accurate information. The findings suggest that, despite the unpredictability of special events, from a regional-planning perspective at least, they still need to be looked at as more than a just a ‘one-off’ or ‘unique’ occasion. While many of the respondents were quick to dismiss the relevance and applicability of previous events, they all subsequently acknowledged the need for long-term planning, managing and monitoring procedures, including more ‘multi-use’ or ‘generic’ event-hosting strategies. This apparent contradiction clearly highlights one of the most complex challenges facing event planners. For example, while the individual characteristics of special events will always differ in some shape or form, it can easily be argued that the actual managerial procedures and practical promotional approaches adopted are unlikely to vary a great deal (Getz, 2003). Therefore, to avoid unnecessary confusion in
the future, it is imperative for event managers to keep accurate personal accounts and professional assessments of how all events are strategically approached before, during and after each occasion, regardless of their size or perceived status at the time. This factual data can then be effectively (re)evaluated and (re)used as a platform or formula when bidding or planning for new events. The findings of this study show that larger (typically urban) destinations with both the previous experience and sufficient resources undoubtedly found themselves in a much stronger position than those (often peripheral) areas without. While each region was clearly individually competing for ‘as big a piece of the pie as possible’, they were also more than willing to unite and combine their local resources to target the inbound international supporters. Arguably, despite the sudden shift towards a localised focus, the Lions Tour was always perceived to be a major national event, as opposed to 11 smaller regional fixtures.

Successful sports events clearly need a significant amount of local support and community involvement (Hall, 1997; Murphy and Murphy, 2004). The various RTOs that approached the Lions Tour as a local event appear to have significantly profited, both economically and socially, from greater involvement. They were also much less concerned with the unavailability of information surrounding the number of international visitors expected. The findings suggest that national tourism organisations (e.g. Tourism New Zealand) should focus on the international market and leave the regional offices (e.g. RTOs) free to establish practical working relationships which educate the local community with regard to hosting events and catering to all those in attendance. Furthermore, regional planners also need to pay much greater attention to promoting locally held events to the host communities themselves. In addition, despite being largely overlooked during the entire 2005 Lions Tour planning process, the official EIA for the elite sports event showed that the domestic market still represented a significant amount of the spectators attending the fixtures. Arguably, further research into the impact and implications of attracting the domestic sports event market would allow for more detailed, long-term, analysis into other complex issues not touched upon in this study (e.g. displacement and/or seasonality). Furthermore, a significant amount of effort needs to go into making sure that the strong inter and intra-regional relationships progressively developed during the planning process are maintained and monitored through regular communication and continued co-operation, regardless of what is (or is not) perceived to be ‘on the horizon’.

In summary, the findings show that the lack of practical experience within the various RTOs, plus the high degree of uncertainty regarding actual visitor numbers, was largely overcome through a number of reactive procedures, as opposed to proactive pre-event planning. While numerous intra-regional working groups were established well in advance on the 2005 Lions Tour (i.e. up to 18 months beforehand), most RTOs were unable to effectively implement any local plans until the majority of overseas supporters had arrived. The key reasoning behind the reluctance to act proactively was generally based on the shortage of knowledge and the unwillingness to overestimate demand. However, once the Lions Tour was underway the RTOs became highly active, playing a crucial role in the creation of inter-regional communication channels and the pooling of experiential knowledge. Ultimately, the individual goals of each region were always financially driven. The short-term economic boost, for example, was clearly appreciated and warmly welcomed, especially due to the timing of the tour (i.e. during the slow shoulder season). However, other objectives were based around the long-term social development of regional tourism, through the increased publicity generated and perceived opportunity for repeat visitation. With there being no obvious or plausible way of accurately predicting the behaviour of FITs, many RTOs were quickly forced to turn their attention towards entertaining and embracing the local community. Overall, despite the lack of past experiences or reliable information, the regional event strategies adopted for the 2005 Lions Tour were generally perceived to be extremely effective. More importantly, with the benefit of hindsight, the respondents still perceived them to be fully justified given the
limited resources available. Ultimately, the 2005 British and Irish Lions Tour was seen as a ‘once in a lifetime’ social event that many of the respondents felt ‘lucky to have been a part of’. From a regional industry perspective, it was also a ‘very successful and financially rewarding’ business opportunity that effectively forced competing RTOs to unite and work together in order to strategically overcome all the hurdles placed in their path.

NOTE

1. The Barmy Army traditionally represent the loyal travelling supporters of the English cricket team; but, since gaining increasing global recognition and commercial support, have subsequently branched off to follow several other sports, including rugby union. Their presence was highly visual and verbal in the New Zealand media both before and during the 2005 Lions Tour. However, the majority of supporters spoken to during the event either did not consider themselves to be a member or did not wish to have anything to do with them, especially those from Scotland, Ireland or Wales. It was fairly well known among the respondents that the Barmy Army had been sponsored by a large brewery and had been given the responsibility of promoting the tour to various hospitality establishments across New Zealand. They set up numerous bases at the various locations and also had a large headquarters set up during the event within the Auckland Viaduct.

REFERENCES


