The Functions and Planning of Visitor Centres in Regional Tourism

Philip L. Pearce

Abstract
Visitor centres are distinctive purpose-built tourist facilities and their multiple functions are important in fostering sustainable regional tourism. The key attributes which define a visitor centre are specified. The analysis then proceeds by articulating a “Four Plus” model of visitor centre functioning, and suggests ways to enhance visitor centre functioning among and within centres. The possibilities for research addressing community participation and acceptance, as well as longitudinal studies on visitor centre effectiveness including responses to refurbishment are identified.

Introduction
The values of any specific society can be interpreted from the functions of the physical infrastructure it develops. Cultures which are sport-oriented will support massive stadiums, those with spiritual concerns maintain great cathedrals, mosques and shrines, and those with environmental concerns create physical structures to celebrate and protect the places they value. In the world of tourism, it can be argued that visitor centres are a new multi-functional item expressing the values in physical infrastructure of societies trying to use and manage tourist attraction resources. Unlike hotels, highways and transport nodes, the visitor centre is typically purpose built or at least refurbished just for tourism (Knudson, Cable & Beck, 1999). There are numerous centres in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia and they appear to be emerging in many European and Asian destinations (Asia Travel Guide, 2004; Tan-Collis, 1999). Importantly visitor centres along highways and in smaller towns and communities are often a major focus for regional tourism promotion and management (Fesenmaier & Vogt, 1993a,b; Hobbin, 1999). This paper will direct attention to providing a framework for undertaking visitor centre function in regional tourism and further, attempt to outline some desirable practices to fulfil these functions.

The meaning of the term visitor centre needs to be defined carefully in any international context or forum. The kind of facility which is being referred to in this paper can be defined here as:

A clearly labelled, publicly accessible, physical space with personnel providing predominantly free of charge information to facilitate travellers’ experiences.

Dr Philip Pearce is Professor of Tourism, School of Business, James Cook University, Australia.
In this designation, a visitor centre is different to a travel agency because of the dominant commercial emphasis of the latter. Additionally, a visitor centre is not to be equated with a regional or district museum where the emphasis is on the display and presentation of artefacts rather than the travellers’ experiences. Further, a visitor centre requires a human presence, so an information kiosk or booth, even those rich in interactive computer facilities, will not be considered in the ambit of the present paper. Nevertheless, the reach of the present interest is extensive. According to one’s national context and the core purpose of the facility, the terms used to describe the centres vary and include: welcome centre, tourist information centre, interpretive centre, and visitor resource centre (Fesenmaier & Vogt, 1993a, 1993b; Moscardo & Hughes, 1991; Stewart, Fesenmaier & Anderson, 1993). The facilities may have a commercial component or they may be largely driven by community and civic imperatives. In the latter case, the symbolic value of the visitor centre as a community signal that the area is serious about tourism may be of considerable importance.

Visitor centres are not just central city or downtown phenomena but appear in transport nodes such as airports and railway stations, in or on the outskirts of small towns and near major attractions and environmental sites. It is especially the regionally based visitor centres, their purposes and planning which are the focus of the present concern.

The emphasis in this discussion is on the goals of the centres rather than financial and human resource management issues. The latter topics are important and structure the scale and operating circumstances, but not the functions of the centres considered here (Barrow, 1996; Bath, 1996).

The “Four Plus” model of visitor centre functioning

In an effort to bring a systematic understanding to the topic of visitor centres and problems, the goals or objectives of such facilities and the people who serve in them need to be considered. In earlier work Pearce (1991) and Moscardo (1999) identified four interlocking features of visitor centres. The analysis presented in this paper extends the earlier work with the newly entitled “Four Plus” model of visitor centre functioning. The extended model (the plus function) draws in particular on the work of Fallon and Kriwoken (2003) and Simpson (2001) who emphasised the community functions and acceptance of the visitor centre. The important components and features of this model are considered in turn.

Multiple overlapping functions

It is proposed that all visitor centres have multiple functions, undertaken to differing degrees. The functions are promotion of the area, orientation to and enhancement of the area’s attractions, control and filtering of visitor flows and substitution for on-site visits. Additionally, visitor centres should be considered as having additional functions; the ‘plus’ in the Four Plus model title. These additional functions do not serve visitors but instead represent the goals of visitor centres in such directions as providing a community centre, displaying the pride and political achievements of the area and serving as the administrative and research home for local tourism management.

Broad proposals for the functioning and planning of component parts of the tourism system require commentators to consider the issue of the true generalisability or applicable range of the ideas being proposed. It has already been suggested that visitor centres as defined earlier in this paper are prevalent in a number of western countries. It can be suggested that the “Four Plus” model being proposed here is most applicable to these developed tourism destinations and their promotional and managerial systems. The wider applicability of the proposed Four Plus model to other contexts will be considered in the closing sections of this paper.

The main visitor linked functions of the centres can now be spelled out in more detail.

The Promotion Function

This role refers to the active promotion of the city, area or region. It involves a forceful agenda of what to do in the area and where to stay. Essentially this role is about stimulating tourist demand and often seeks to increase visitor expenditure in a defined area (Gitelson & Perdue, 1987). Commercial activities associated with this function are common and include the provision of booking services and local retail of the region’s products. Following Gartner (1993) this function can be seen as providing an overt, induced information source which is trustworthy and not excessively self-serving. The efforts towards accrediting visitor centres and guaranteeing the quality of their services is essential to maintain the assurance of unbiased representation of the information provided (Fodness & Murphy, 1999; Hobbin, 1999).

Orientation and Enhancement Function

The second function of a visitor centre sees a concentration on the quality of the experience for the visitor. It attempts to provide displays, suggest new locations and generally inform visitors about features of the region to promote responsible behaviour. It is about more than simply stimulating demand and involves shaping that demand towards
sensitive appreciation according to sustainable tourist behaviour principles. It is a common theme in those centres with a natural environment emphasis but can exist in all types of centres. This function is consistent with basic planning principles for interpretive practice (Benson & Baird, 1979; Carter, 1997; Hobbin, 1999).

**Control and Filtering Function**

In this role, visitor centres seek to control the flow of visitors so that resources and settings come under less pressure. Typically such centres act as gateways and central points for visitor use of an area. This function may include suggestions for times of the day to visit set locations, alternative locations for less crowded experiences and the partial use of the centre in conjunction with other activities such as guided tours or films to concentrate visitor numbers away from fragile sites or viewing areas. Visitor centre staff working in a centre where this function is dominant will often have a strong stewardship role in relation to the resource. On this occasion visitor centre design and staff behaviour are adopting a more powerful and potentially controversial role in limiting public behaviour (Hardy & Beeton, 2001; Sugden & Saunders, 1991).

**The Substitution Function**

A fourth function of visitor centres is to be a substitute for the tourist attraction or at least to be a substantial attraction in its own right. Visitors centres emphasising this function are often called interpretive centres or more simply are labelled as tourist attractions such as a Wildlife Centre. They occur in settings where the resource is inaccessible for many visitors (marine and demanding terrestrial environments) or where the resource is scattered and hard to appreciate from its component points (such as agricultural activities or historical battle sites). Substitution functions are particularly important when a large number of visitors are frail, are ill equipped physically or are lacking knowledge to access and understand the resource. The style and content of the interpretive material and displays in the substitution function of visitor centres attracts considerable debate. There are key values expressed in the choices made to describe places, their history and the people who live and work there (Ballantyne, 1995; Scheyvens, 1999; Simpson, 2001; Stewart, Hayward, Devlin, & Kirby, 1998; Uzzell & Ballantyne, 1998).

**The Plus Functions**

In earlier appraisals of visitor centre functions the non visitor services components were not included. Yet, visitor centres can act as community facilities for a range of local cultural and social events, particularly where the space contains a theatre or meeting room. Further, it can be argued that the more symbolic function of a visitor centre to

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Figure 1: Different functions of visitor centres according to location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Large “Gateway to a City” Visitor Centre</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Function 1: Promotion</td>
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<td>Function 2: Enhancement</td>
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<td>Function 3: Filtering</td>
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<td>Function 4: Substitution</td>
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<td>Plus: Community Integration</td>
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<th>Smaller Visitor Centre along a Scenic Highway</th>
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<td>Function 1: Promotion</td>
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<th>Visitor Centre at Fragile Cultural/Historical Site</th>
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<td>Function 1:</td>
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signal the importance and significance of a town or site for tourism is a major reason for the existence of many centres. When the physical appearance of the visitor centre is challenging and unconventional, and its displays make powerful political points, there can be a community backlash (Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Flanagan, 1996).

Extensive efforts to incorporate pre-construction community views are a clear imperative to manage the substitution elements and the plus function of visitor centres (c.f. Bramwell & Lane, 2000; de Araujo & Bramwell, 2000; Jamal & Getz, 1999; Robinson, 2000). Certainly, the plus function cannot be ignored in trying to improve visitor centre functioning since it constitutes a powerful political force influencing how centres may be changed or reshaped. It is about designing the centre to achieve administrative and civic goals for the whole community (c.f. Fallon & Kriwoken, 2003; Simpson, 2001).

It is important to stress that the Four Plus model enables visitor centres to be described as varying in the emphasis they place on the functions. In Figure 1, three examples of visitor centres in different locations with varying roles are depicted.

The analysis of visitor centre functioning in the Four Plus model serves to introduce and structure a sequence of actions required to enhance visitor centre functioning in a region. The core argument of this paper is that the best practice principles for visitor centre planning design and management can be understood within the framework of the Four Plus model. Importantly, the framework and the principles taken together could guide the evaluation and redesign of existing centres. It can be suggested that in newer destinations where there are few visitor centres all steps in this approach could be implemented. For situations where multiple centres already exist, a reconsideration of the existing network within the framework outlined may be appropriate. It is regional and state level tourism bodies which must forge the actions and take the initiative in these assessments because only such organizations can provide the external view to see each of the visitor centres in context. Nevertheless, once the initiative is taken collaborative efforts to make the centres work in harmony are pivotal secondary steps involving the full input of the centre managers and stakeholders.

**Enhancing visitor centre functioning**

Four stages can be considered in the design and use of visitor centres. There are principles of good practice and sometimes substantial existing research evidence to support the underlying suggestions for this good practice (Blahna & Roggenbuck, 1979; Field & Wagner, 1973; Knudson et al., 1999; Mack & Thompson, 1991; Moscardo, 1998, 1999; Roggenbuck, 1992; Serrell, 1996; Tilden, 1977). Figure 2 outlines the four stages which can be seen as a sequence of planned action.

The central points itemised in Figure 2 can be expanded as follows.

**Setting out a regional overview, determine functions**

Figure 3 represents a regional plan for the location of several centres.

A regional plan drawn up by state or provincial level bodies
can be useful to avoid unnecessary repetition of content, ensure all the important topics are covered, build up a coherent message, and provide a diversity of experiences for visitors. Such an overview should take into account the features of the region to be interpreted and the current and anticipated flow of visitors through the region (Pearce, 1991). Importantly a mechanism for collaborating with community stakeholders should be established in this first planning phase (Jamal & Getz, 1999; Robinson, 2000). This will guide decisions on both the best functions for centres and the mix of objectives for each interpretive centre within its local and regional context. The further possibility exists that continuing research and planning in this specific area could link the visitor centre functions to the work on dominant destinations in a region. For example Lue, Crompton and Fesenmaier (1993) outline en-route, base camp regional tour and trip chaining patterns which could form the basis of integrated regional visitor planning. Similarly Parolin (2001) working in the region south of Sydney developed a typology of trip patterns which could underpin centre design and functions. Such functional overviews may be difficult to achieve and implement. They remain a worthy goal and individual centre managers can at least consider their regional position even if a full scale overview and provincial system is not yet in place.

Establish a signage plan and ensure easy access

Effective interpretive centres are easy for visitors to find and access (Fodness & Murphy, 1999). One of the ways to ensure visitors can find and use a centre is to have a signage plan (Serrell, 1996). Signs on the roads visitors use to access the centre, signs near the entrances to the centre and signs at other access points that might be used such as bus and train stations should all be incorporated in the plan (Moscardo & Hughes, 1991). Ensuring easy access means considering the inclusion of turning lanes on adjacent roads, large enough car parking areas with clear entrances, space and ramps for visitors with physical disabilities, and spaces for buses and caravans.

Identify all users and their uses

A consideration of the needs of all users is pivotal to good visitor centre design (Bitgood, Benefield, Patterson & Nabors, 1986). An inventory of all possible uses can then guide decisions about what to include in the centre and how to design it for maximum effectiveness (Blahna & Roggenbuck, 1979; Knudson, Cable & Beck, 1999). Three typical groups of users to consider are:

1. Visitors
   - Who are the likely visitors to the centre? What kinds of market segments have to be considered?
   - Will visitors require access to information or facilities out of hours?
2. Staff
Staff need space for non public duties.

Interpretive displays and activities need space for preparation and storage.

In some places staff may need areas for emergency coordination.

3. Local Communities
The functional use of the centre by community groups as well as its symbolic and semiotic value both need to be considered.

Design for the future

Visitor centres are often substantial buildings which are used over extended periods of time. Extending and upgrading centres to cope with increased visitor numbers and changing user needs and/or interpretive objectives can be very difficult. A consideration of options to alter the space available for users will be much appreciated by those responsible for the centre in the future years. Some options to consider include easily moved internal divisions, outdoor areas than can be easily enclosed, landscaping that can be easily changed, and leaving a band of space or inviolate zone around a centre (Gunn, 1994; Poon, 1993).

Be a model for ecological sustainability

Good centres fit into the setting and they have an architectural style that either fits with the local area or ensures that they blend easily into the landscape. Additionally good centres make the most of the setting incorporating key features of the environment such as views or access to special sites. They also have efficient energy use and waste disposal systems, use local materials and services wherever possible, and stimulate local community employment and pride (Lane, 1991; Moscardo, 1998).

Have a good physical orientation system

Several features can assist visitors to find their way around a centre easily (Bitgood, Patterson & Benefield, 1988). A clear pathway through the centre, the placement of text panels so that the flow of reading from one panel to next is from left to right, a pathway that does not require backtracking, an introductory panel or display that sets out an overview of the centre, visual barriers that prevent visitors from seeing too much of the display ahead so that they are not distracted or overloaded, directional signs or arrows at key points, and clear entrances and exits are all useful orientation devices.

Design for variety

The easiest way to lose visitor attention is to bore them with repetition. Effective interpretation offers a variety of experiences. Variety can be built into an interpretive display in a number of ways:

1. Use a wide range of media such as text, graphics, static models, dynamic models, audio visual, interactive and computer based displays (Serrell, 1996). In particular it is desirable to avoid a heavy dependence on text.

2. Encourage visitors to use all their senses through different participatory activities.

3. Use a range of colours and lighting effects to create different moods in different areas.

4. Cover as wide a range of topics as appropriate to the centre and its objectives.

Use themes

The use of a single theme as the linking concept or one large idea which connects a set of facts, topics or examples was first proposed by Tilden (1977). A theme is a single message that can be described in an active sentence:

Example 1: the topic is octopi, the theme is “Octopi are not what you think” and the display uses text and graphics to demonstrate how a number of stereotypes about octopi are inaccurate.

Example 2: the topic is worms, the theme is “A healthy worm community provides many surprising benefits to humans” and the displays demonstrate all the soil based functions of a worm colony.

Example 3: the topic is ant ecology, the theme is “An ant colony is like a large city” and the information and examples are a series of analogies matching the roles of ants and their work to the interactions in a city.

Make personal connections to the visitors

Personal experience often shapes and directs visitor attention (Moscardo, 1999). There are a number of ways in which interpreters can make personal connections to visitors. It is possible to use examples which are connected to the everyday lives of visitors. Additionally, using a conversational style in the text and using similes to explain facts in everyday terms adds a human dimension to the interpretation. For longer lasting effects practices such as introducing historical or local figures, and including suggested at home actions may generate lasting impressions and have consequences (Moscardo, 1998).

Allow for different visitor needs and interests

Designing for variety and making...
personal connections can encourage visitors to find ways to match the interpretation with their needs and interests (Blahna & Roggenbuck, 1979; Christiansen, 1994).

The other major option available is to use layering in the interpretive displays. Layering means having several levels of detail within each topic, panel or display area. The panels or layers might promote new actions or suggest the time needed to participate. A core message (related to the theme) is the first layer and visitors with limited time and interest can easily browse the display picking up only these messages. A second layer which expands on this core message can then be added for visitors with higher levels of interest and/or more time. A third layer of quite detailed information is also often included and visitors with special interests can access these. The key is to remember that layers should offer more detail, not more difficulty (Mack & Thompson, 1991).

Management and maintenance

A final but enduring challenge in visitor centre functioning is the management of the facility, including both its staff and its physical condition. There are important and substantial human resource issues in managing staff, creating rewards for volunteers and maintaining the services (cf. Deery & Iverson, 1996). A critical component of this management includes securing budgets for maintaining the quality and appeal of the external and internal qualities of the facility as well as being able to renovate and repair damaged sections. Further, training staff to maintain high levels of attentiveness to customers is a consistent need in all service sectors. In the visitor centre, marketing of the centre’s services may also be needed to influence funding sources and local political stakeholders (Kandampully, 2002).

The detailed principles and suggestions for good practice reviewed in the preceding discussion can be developed into a regional self-assessment system for tourism managers. Such a procedure could involve the following steps. Identify and consider each of the important market segments using the centre. This could be senior self-drive travellers or the local school children. Next identify the relative importance of the Four Plus functions for this market. For seniors, for example, the promotion function may be most important, say 60%, but the substitution function may also be of interest (25%). Then consider how well the full array of centre facilities from access to signage, to text and interpretive activities meets these functions for this market. A systematic appraisal for all markets using these functions may identify important gaps for refurbishment or management action. The particular value of the Four Plus model in this context is that it explicitly recognises that a centre cannot be all things to all people but that its performance is linked to a well defined set of priorities and functions for specific markets.

Further considerations for regional tourism

The core assumption underlying the previous discussion is that visitor information centres are likely to play an increasingly important role in regional tourism. This statement can be substantiated in three ways. First, it appears that there are cohorts of travellers who are becoming more independent and more likely to seek direct personal contact opportunities with their hosts and likely environments (Poon, 2000). Visitor centres provide an immediate, credible personal information source to support the information seeking relevant to independent and repeat travel behaviour (Fodness & Murphy, 1999). Second, many of the management trends in higher density tourism environments will be followed in newer destinations and recent trends in attraction management in regional parts of Asia reinforce this theme of imitation (Lew, Yu, Ap & Guangrui, 2003; Teo, Chang, & Ho, 2001). A third force shaping the potential development or enhancement of visitor centres is directly from the visitor – many of the studies already cited in this paper report high satisfaction from visitors who use such facilities. As the number of visitors who have experienced such centres in well developed settings increases, and further as they begin to travel more in regional areas, it is likely that the demand for such facilities will also grow.

The research to inform better practice and the smart use of resources in visitor centre needs to grow as visitor centres grow. Several kinds of research effort can be envisaged. A topic of leading concern is the documentation of the effectiveness of processes to link communities to their visitor centres (cf. Simpson, 2001). What kinds of cooperative planning inputs produce mutually satisfactory outcomes? Both success stories and accounts of conflict could be described in case study research with the possibility that inductively derived generalisations could emerge in a grounded theory treatment of the examples. Alternatively more empirical treatment of community and stakeholder attitudes could be devised from within an existing theoretical structure such as social representation theory (Pearce, Moscardo & Ross, 1996).

In this approach stakeholders could be asked to rate and assess visitor centre functions and specifics according to such principles as preferred roles, appearance and the treatment of topics. Such an approach would abandon the view that visitor centres are like pieces of art, statements of creative achievement for the architects and
replace this with the newer appraisal that they are functional community and visitor serving buildings (Flanagan, 1996; Grenier, Kaae, Miller & Mobley, 1993).

A range of more pragmatic yet regionally important research assessments can also be suggested. Few studies report how visitor centres work in concert and whether visitors notice or are annoyed by the repetition of themes and information. Additionally, longitudinal studies assessing pre-visitor centre behaviour and post-construction travel patterns and attitudes are missing. As visitor centres age, there is undoubtedly a need for refurbishment. Assessments of refreshed centres could be the source of productive research based advice.

The recommendations for visitor centre planning, management and research made in this paper are, hopefully, timely so that the construction and use of these uniquely tourist-oriented facilities can fulfil their multiple functions effectively.

References


Visitor Centres, Townsville, April 28th-May 1st, 1991. Townsville: Department of Tourism, James Cook University of North Queensland.


