



Climate Change and Canada’s Municipal Destination Marketing Organizations

A Summary of Findings by Dr. Rachel Dodds & Gregory J. Kuenzig

Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) are positioned to play an important role in working with the Canadian tourism industry to tackle the issue of climate change. DMOs are primarily responsible for marketing their region to travel consumers and travel trade intermediaries (Choi, Lehto & Oleary, 2007). This role has uniquely equipped DMOs to identify shifts in the marketplace, such as increased demand for climate-friendly tourism options, and to provide guidance for industry to meet the demands of new climate change legislation. In addition, DMOs link the interests of travelers and the industry to government policy-makers, thereby placing them in a unique position to address climate change in our industry.

In 2009 The Icarus Foundation, led by Dr. Rachel Dodds, conducted a survey of Canada’s municipal DMOs to determine their levels of awareness and action with regard to climate change.

The survey compared the opinions of municipal-level DMOs throughout Canada on the opportunities and challenges that climate change mitigation poses for Canada’s tourism industry. A response rate of 70% was obtained (12/17). The organizations were chosen to ensure inclusion of Canada’s largest cities, in addition to Canada’s provincial capitals. In instances where a province lacked a municipal-level DMO, the provincial-level DMO was included.

The respondent DMOs were:

Calgary
Edmonton
Halifax
Montreal

Northwest Territories
Ottawa
Quebec City
Saskatoon

Toronto
Vancouver
Whitehorse
Winnipeg

FINDINGS

High Concern and Awareness

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of climate change as it impacts the future viability of the tourism industry on a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being extremely important. Most of the respondents agreed that climate change was an important issue. Twenty five percent of respondents believed that climate change was extremely important (10). Conversely, 17% of respondents believed that climate change was of lower importance (4.5 and 5). The mean response was 7.8 which indicates that overall climate change is considered very important by DMO’s.

Results suggest geographic differences in attitudes regarding climate change. Generally, respondents who identified climate change as extremely important also showed a heightened awareness of the impacts of climate change and identified environmental-sensitivity in their regions. For example, some respondents identified specific tourist attractions that were threatened by climate change such as the Aurora Borealis in the northern regions of Canada, while coastal cities expressed concern over sea level rise.

Threats and Challenges

Respondents identified a variety of threats and challenges posed by climate change to the tourism industry, including environmental and economic impacts. Unpredictable weather patterns and the impact on seasonal tourism, in particular on winter tourism, was the most commonly identified environmental threat.

Respondents also showed concern about the potential regulation of the airline industry and the increased costs that could be incurred as a result. At the time of the survey, a recession and economic crisis weighed heavily upon the tourism industry. Several respondents saw the economic crisis as a major threat because businesses were less inclined to adopt costly mitigation strategies.

Several respondents felt the challenge posed by climate change on the tourism industry was a lack of awareness and action, both within the industry and among consumers. Respondents expressed concern that they did not know the best practices to mitigate impact, and did not have the appropriate skills and training to educate their client-members.

Opportunities for the Canadian Tourism Industry

Again, the responses to whether or not climate change posed any potential opportunities for the Canadian tourism industry indicated geographical contradictions. Respondents from regions that were not dependent upon winter tourism expressed hope that warmer weather in the shoulder season could improve tourism numbers, while Canada's reputation as an eco-friendly tourism destination was also seen as a competitive advantage. Respondents felt that Canada's tourism industry was less susceptible to climate change than other nations, and Canada could become a more appealing destination as such. As temperatures become warmer, potential for new tourism opportunities could develop. Some felt that the northern region would benefit economically from the opening of the Northwest Passage. Whitehorse has experienced an increase in tourists to see polar bears and the arctic, because there is fear the natural world as it exists today is disappearing. One respondent noted: *"Many times we see people from the United States come ... because there is no snow on the Northeast part of the United States."*

Every respondent agreed that consumers are showing heightened awareness of the impact of climate change than in the past. However, the results also indicate that travelers may not be changing their behaviors as quickly their perceptions. Eco-friendly services were still seen as a niche market or a *'tie-breaker'* between two otherwise similar destinations.

Little Specific Action

Although DMOs were aware of the threats and opportunities, there were few specific actions for the mitigation of climate change within their organization, or among their client-members. Most efforts were limited to internal 'greening committees' which sought to reduce wasteful practices within the organization. Twenty five percent of respondents stated that they have taken no actions to reduce their impact. Efforts were more pronounced in Canada's largest cities, where organizations have instituted efforts such as carbon offsetting for internal travel.

A third of the DMOs have offered client-member education programs in the past to improve awareness of climate change and to encourage best practices- however most of these efforts were just providing links on their websites rather than detailed or specific information to members. Overall, the DMOs feel they lack the adequate training or personnel to provide such educational services, and that there needs to be more demand from client-members to justify devoting resources. When asked if the respondent organizations were sufficiently well-briefed on the topic of climate change to

develop internal policies and action, half of respondents (50%) felt they were not sufficiently informed. Seventeen percent of respondents felt that it was not the priority of a DMO to develop environmental policies and that the task should be left to government regulatory agencies. One DMO noted “...*climate change is what I term a ‘luxury issue’. When we have time, we’ll move forward and deal with it’*”.

DMO’s see themselves as primarily market led and sales oriented. As they are chiefly marketing organizations, they feel they lack the skills set or resources to dedicate to environmental initiatives.

Looking for Guidance

It is clear from the results that the industry is looking to the Canadian government to provide guidance on climate change initiatives. The DMOs involved believe that business will move faster when there is either a financial or legal call to take action. The question was also raised by respondents regarding the need for a certifying body to review environmental practices throughout the industry, and provide consumers with accurate information. Several competing green certification schemes that are of varying quality and questionable value were noted and respondents noted they wanted some uniformity and market research on the demand for green tourism. Interestingly, DMO’s seem to see climate change as a ‘green tourism’ issue rather than a threat to the very competitiveness of what they are selling.

Conclusions

DMOs are uniquely situated to provide climate change education to the wider tourism industry. However, the results of this survey show that while climate change is considered an important issue among Canada’s municipal DMOs, the organizations have yet to take significant action to mitigate their impacts either directly or through the education of their client-members. Guidance is necessary to assist DMOs, and the wider industry, develop an appropriate plan of action. As public-private partnerships, Canadian DMOs represent the varied interests of many tourist sectors within their geographic region, and therefore they are keenly aware of the impacts wrought by changes in the regional marketplace, and by policy changes on their client organizations.

DMOs are also positioned well to assess the threats posed by climate change on their region. Previous research has illustrated the need for a holistic approach to climate change mitigation that balances tourism activities with other activities (Dodds & Graci, 2009). Canadian DMOs are uniquely situated to act holistically, as educators to their client-members on the issue of climate change, and as planners for future threats to the industry. The responses provided by the DMOs for this research illustrate a clear need for more communicative and policy-based action with regard to mitigating the effects of climate change. The DMOs believe their industry is looking to the government for guidance. Respondents showed a willing to work with the government to meet standards and regulations, but without regulatory benchmarks, the industry at large is reluctant to respond.

Cited Works

Choi, S. Lehto, X.L., and O’leary, J. (2007) "What does the consumer want from a DMO website? a study of US and Canadian tourists' perspectives". *International Journal of Tourism Research*. 9, 59-72.

Dodds, R & Graci, S (2009) “Canada's tourism industry- mitigating the effects of climate change: a lot of concern but little action”. *Journal of Tourism and Hospitality Planning and Development* v.6, 1, p. 39-51.