

The role of tourist icons for a destination: the case of the closure of the Outeniqua Choo Choo train in the Eden District Municipality in the Western Cape Province, South Africa.

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Abstract

Attractions are a major component of the tourism industry and often exert considerable influence over individual travel priorities. Attractions are one of the main motivators for tourist trips and are the core of the tourism product. Without attractions the destination would not need other tourism sectors and services. The uniqueness of attractions becomes an issue of greater significance in travel motivation for the visitors as they seek these unique tourism experiences around the world. The main aim of this paper was to look at the impact the closure of the Outeniqua Choo Choo train had to the tourism industry of the Eden District Municipality (EDM) better known as the Garden Route and Klein Karoo region in the tourism industry. The train was considered to be an iconic attraction due to the unique experiences it offered to the tourists.

The research used questionnaires as a survey technique to collect primary data and the questionnaires were emailed to all the tourism businesses that were registered at the Eden District Municipality (EDM) database during the time of the train operations. One hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed to the businesses and only one hundred and twenty were received back and none of them were spoilt and this represent 80% response rate. The study found that across the different businesses in the tourism industry of the Eden District Municipality, majority of them did benefited from the train operation and they would like to see the train revived back to operation. The strategies they would like to see being used to revive the train operations are municipal fund raising and private business raising funds themselves.

Keywords: Outeniqua Choo Choo train, Tourism industry, Iconic attractions, Garden Route region, Eden District Municipality, Western Cape Province.

Introduction

The Outeniqua Choo Choo (see figure 1) was the last remaining continually-operated passenger steam train in Africa, ending operation in June 2009. The history of the Outeniqua Choo Choo train dates back to 1922, when the South African Railways and Harbours Board suggested the construction of a railway line linking the two towns George and Knysna. The railway line between these two picturesque towns on the world-famous Garden Route is 42 miles long. The building of this historical railway line

started in 1924 and was officially opened on 17 October 1928. By 1992 the George-Knysna railway line was carrying about 40,000 passengers a year and was officially declared a preserved railway line although it was only officially handed over to the Transnet Foundation Heritage Preservation in 1993. Ten years later this line was carrying 115,000 passengers a year of which 70% were foreign tourists. Unfortunately in August 2006 severe storms hit the Southern Cape causing extensive damage to the railway

infrastructure and numerous landslides smothered the railway line between George and Knysna. Transnet, the state-run owner, was forced to close the line as

the damage ran into millions of dollars and would require major construction work and the rebuilding of the line in many places.

Figure 1: Outeniqua Choo Choo train.



Defining iconic attractions

The notion of being iconic is a relative one i.e. the iconic status of attractions can be judged relative to each other, but it is difficult to pinpoint the precise dividing line between an iconic and a non-iconic attraction. The definition of an iconic attraction used in this study comprises of eight elements and they are:

- **Brand bigger than location** – the attraction's brand becomes better known than the precise location of the attraction.
- **Visitor numbers**, particularly in terms of drawing visitors from outside the region.
- **Spirit of the place** – attraction is in a unique location, which is the very essence of what they are.
- **Propensity to draw new visitors** - the attraction becomes the purpose of the visit rather than incidental to the visit.
- **Longevity (historic)** - successful significantly iconic attractions stand the test of time (although this may

require on-going investment and in this case on-going investment was no longer available to support the train).

- **Nationally recognised** – draw a greater proportion of national visitors than others in its class.
- **Regionally recognised** – well known within the region, with the potential to become more significantly iconic.
- **Flattens seasonality** – draws visitors outside the traditional holiday periods as well as during these periods.

Tourist icons are major pull factors of a destination that attract the attention of potential tourists. For many years, many destinations have capitalised on major tourist attractions, for example, New Zealand has capitalised on tourist icons such as Milford Sound, Maori culture and geothermal attractions at Rotorua, the Waitomo glow-worm caves, and Mount Cook Becken (2004). The existence of tourist icons, are important as a pull factor to bring in tourists to the destination.

What are tourist icons?

Despite its importance the role of icons in the tourism landscape has been largely ignored by tourism researchers. Many of the references to icons that are found in the tourism literature refer to specific classes of icons such as animals (Tremblay, 2002) and icons that are featured in movies (Busby and Klug, 2001). Prideaux (2005) observed that "icons have a significant role in promoting flows from specific bilateral partners" and that what might be regarded domestically as an icon may not receive similar recognition by international visitors. Icons are typically the major tourist attractions at a destination; they are 'natural or built assets that are widely accepted by visitors as important tourist attractions or experiences' (Western Australian Tourism Commission, 2002). In other words icons are 'landmarks that are instantly recognisable' (Smith, and Casey, 2001) and often they are 'famous because they are famous' (Urry, 1990). Sometimes other features of a destination reach iconic status, for example destination-specific movies or famous individuals who function as a stimulus to visit the region linked to this person. Pearce, Morrison, and Moscardo (2003) stated that tourist icons are often used in marketing for objective positioning when a destination uses a unique feature (e.g. the Grand Canyon) to position itself in the market. According to Chacko (1997) subjective positioning goes further by utilising these icons to evoke specific feelings, for example awe or admiration. Their impact has been often defined in the professional jargon as 'effect', such as the 'Eden Effect' in Cornwall, UK (Smyth, 1994) and the 'Guggenheim effect' in Bilbao, Spain (Vicario and Monje, 2003, Plaza, 2008).

In one of the few papers to have considered the role of icons in the tourism experience Becken (2004) examined the role that icons play in the tourism industry with specific reference to New Zealand. Becken (2004) described icons as typically the major attractions at a destination. Other authors have described the role of icons as landmarks that are instantly recognisable (Smith and Casey in Becken,

2005) and places that are famous because they are famous (Peace, Morrison and Moscardo 2003). Becken (2004) also observed that the building of icons is a long term process that involves multiple stakeholders including destination marketing organisations (DMOs), tourists, the mass media and tour operators which collectively use images of icons as a key selling point.

Tourist icons are the result of a long-term process that involves marketing agencies, operators and tourists. Mass media and tour operators often use icons to attract the attention of potential customers. Tourists who instantly recognise famous places showcased on a brochure or other promotional material are more likely to purchase the product. (Jenkins, 2003) Icons are those attractions at a destination that have reached 'sacred state' following a five-step process of attraction development (MacCannell, 1989). Building upon MacCannell's work, Pearce, Morrison, and Moscardo (2003) renamed the five sequential stages as resource identification, marketing emphasis, interpretation, sales and merchandising and broader community use. Public and private stakeholders play a role in this process by developing and commodifying an attraction and thereby constructing a 'tourist gaze' (Urry, 1990).

The tourist gaze describes tourists' behaviour to consume primarily visually and 'anticipate intense pleasures' when encountering aspects that are 'out of the ordinary'. Photography is a major factor in the construction of the gaze, because it has the power to reinforce or even construct the gaze associated with a specific site or sight. Crawshaw and Urry (1997) stated that the constructed 'tourist gaze' is standardised in guidebooks in the form of stereotypical sights and routes that appeal to a wide range of tourists. According to Pagenstecher (2003) the process of 'site sacralisation' and the tourist gaze can also be linked to the 'circle of representation' (Jenkins, 2003) in which tourists record their own experiences of famous sites in the form of photographs (objectifying the

experience and allowing reproduction). These photographs are typically shown to their friends or relatives at home, which reinforce the circle by further promoting the icon. The role of photography in creating and sustaining icons has also been noted by a number of researchers (Becken, 2004). In a sense, photos in guidebooks, magazines and increasingly in social media assist in both creating and sustaining icons. As Prideaux and Coughlin (2010) observed that photographs shared by social media sites are becoming an increasingly important element of experience sharing by users as well as a means of promoting iconic attractions. Moreover, the rapid growth in social media with its heavy reliance on photo sharing has extended the scope of the tourist gaze (Prideaux and Coughlin, 2010) from the person on holiday to those who access the tourist's social media networks.

The importance of iconic attractions

Tourism is a key economic sector in the South Africa which means that there is public sector support for the development of the sector. Therefore, there are two ways in which the sector's contribution to the regional economy can be improved – through an increase in size, and an improvement in productivity. Growth in output and productivity of the tourism sector will help to achieve economic and quality of life aspirations for the South African economy. Recognising the importance of one or a few icons that represent a country, the South African Tourism (SAT) has started to search for a national icon that symbolises the country in tourism marketing campaigns (Ntuli, 2003). The SAT has settled on the national flag as an icon that is carried in all the tourism marketing campaigns. The reason for this is that the flag show the country as a rainbow nation, working together to heal the past divisions and discrimination. This process involved local authorities, the tourism industry and other stakeholders, and was a top-down approach to icon development. Similarly, the Western Australian Tourism Commission (WATC, 2002) emphasised

the importance of tourist icons as most effective attractions to generate economic activity in the wider region. Major attractions (iconic or flagship) are considered as tools for economic development and as catalysts of urban regeneration, social change, and rebranding in urban and rural settings (Miles, 2005; Plaza, 2008), as they increase local appeal to visitors and quality of life for residents (Law, 2002).

Iconic attractions are identified as important to the region both in terms of output growth in tourism and in terms of broader image (South West Tourism Towards 2015, 2005). Iconic attractions generate an exponential level of benefit compared to levels of investment, and help to change perceptions of the region. Their benefits are more significant than those derived from non-iconic attractions and include:

- More additional visits to the South Africa & Eden District municipality;
- An impact on perceptions and the image of the South Africa and Eden District municipality; and
- A more sustainable set of benefits.

According to South West Tourism Towards 2015 (2005) iconic attractions generate more economic benefit than non-iconic attractions. Their direct economic benefit can be seen in a number of key areas:

- In attracting a greater number of visitors to the South Africa and specifically Garden Route in the Eden District municipality, for whom the iconic attraction is one of the key reasons for their visit to the region. Generally, visitor numbers are a good proxy for economic impact. However, because iconic attractions are more likely to attract new additional visitors to the region, they have been shown to cause positive displacement i.e. these visitors then go on to visit other South African attractions which they otherwise would not have visited.

- Iconic attractions also generate a higher level of net economic benefit than non-iconic attractions i.e. their overall benefit to the South Africa is greater. Key areas of differentiation between iconic and non-iconic attractions are: a higher socio-economic profile of visitor; less seasonal employment because of extended tourism season; more trips to the South Africa influenced by these attractions; less competition; more media profile; more impact on inward investment attractiveness; greater influence on local regeneration; greater linkages with local suppliers; better quality of jobs; and more likely to have an educational impact.

Iconic attractions support sustainable development by improving year-round employment opportunities, by being viable over the long-term and by complement the natural environment.

Commercial viability of Iconic attractions

Most iconic attractions are in the not-for-profit sector, through public or charitable ownership and depend on some form of subsidy. This is a similar pattern to the

most iconic attractions in South Africa and the Choo Choo train was owned by government. Many iconic tourist attractions did not start life as tourist attractions (e.g. sites of historic interest, places of worship, natural environments, etc.), and this impacts on their commercial viability. At the same time, their relative uniqueness and heritage status mean that costs involved in their upkeep are high. Iconic attractions rarely, if ever, become commercially self-sustaining enterprises i.e. independent of any non-commercial funding streams.

Research methodology

According to Altinay & Paraskevas (2008) surveys are a commonly used for collecting data in the tourism industry and for purposes of this research, a descriptive survey was conducted. The same authors Altinay & Paraskevas (2008) indicated that descriptive surveys are concerned with particular characteristics of a specific population and are predominantly used to gather information about what people do or think. In terms of this research this strategy proved the most useful to determine how the business owners in the tourism industry in the Garden Route were affected by the closure of the train operation.

Data analysis and results

Table 1: Location of the business

Location of the business of the respondent	Count	Percent
Mossel Bay	24	20.0
Knysna	15	12.5
George	63	52.5
Oudtshoorn	13	10.8
Plettenbergbay	5	4.2

The results in table 1 above show that the highest response came from George city at 52.5% followed by Mosselbay at 20%.

The lowest response came from Plettenbergbay at 4.2%. George city is the industrial centre of the EDM and hence it

is well developed and has the highest rate of business activities in the tourism industry in the region and therefore

justifies the high response rate from this city.

Table 2: Business affected by the closure of train operation

	Count	Percent
Yes	109	90.83
No	11	9.17

The results in table 2 of the study also show, when respondents were asked whether the closure of the Outeniqua Choo Choo train has negatively affected them, that 90.83% were negatively affected by the closure while on 9.17% were not negatively affected. These

results may infer that there was a reduction in demand of the use of tourism products and services from the tourists in those businesses that were negatively affected. In the affected businesses, this may have been seen in the drop of sales from an economic point of view.

Table 3: Comparison between businesses affected or not affected by the closure of the train based on location

Comparison between businesses affected or not affected by the closure of the train based on location			
Town in which the business is located	Businesses affected by the closure of Outeniqua Choo Choo train		Row
	Yes	No	Totals
Mossel Bay	24	0	24
Row %	100.00%	0.00%	
Knysna	11	4	15
Row %	73.33%	26.67%	
George	59	4	63
Row %	93.65%	6.35%	
Oudtshoorn	11	2	13
Row %	84.62%	15.38%	
Plettenbergbay	4	1	5
Row %	80.00%	20.00%	
Totals	109 (90.83%)	11 (9.17%)	120
Chi-square	9.85	df=4	p=.0431
Cramer's V	0.29(Small)		

It was also important to test the statistical significance of the views of business owners on the closure of the Outeniqua Choo Choo train based on where they are located. The results in table 3 yielded a

degree of freedom at 4 with the chi square statistic of 9.85 and a p-value of .0430. The p-value of .0431 is below the conventionally accepted significant level (.05), it meant that there was a statistical

significant on the views of those affected and those not affected by the closure of the Outeniqua Choo Choo train. However the Cramer's V was at 0.29 which indicated a small practical significance of

this finding which indicates a weak relationship between the location of the businesses and whether it was affected or not by the closure of the Outeniqua Choo Choo train.

Table 4: Business that benefited and those that did not from the operation of the train

Location	Business that benefited and those that did not from the operation of the train		Row
	Yes	No	Totals
Mossel Bay	21	3	24
Row %	87.50%	12.50%	
Knysna	11	4	15
Row %	73.33%	26.67%	
George	56	7	63
Row %	88.89%	11.11%	
Oudtshoorn	12	1	13
Row %	92.31%	7.69%	
Plettenbergbay	4	1	5
Row %	80.00%	20.00%	
Totals	104 (86.67%)	16 (13.33%)	120
Chi-square	3.14	df=4	p=.53441

The test for the businesses that benefited and those that did not benefit from the train whilst in operation yielded a weak relationship based on the location of the business. The results in table 4 above yielded a degree of freedom at 4 with the chi square statistic of 3.14 and a p-value of .53441. The p-value of .53441 is above the conventionally accepted significant level (.05) which indicates a large practical significance of the finding, in other words,

there is no statistically significant difference in the proportion of those that benefited and those that did not benefit whilst the train was in operation. It therefore means that regardless of the location of the business, majority of the business did benefit from the operation of the train represented by 86.67% whilst only 13.33% did not benefit from the operation of the train.

Table 5: Strategies to use to raise funds for the revival of the operations of the Outeniqua Choo Choo train

Location of the business of the respondent	Strategies to use to raise funds for the revival of the operations of the Outeniqua Choo Choo train				Row
	Community fundraising	Municipality fundraising	Attractions fund should be opened	Tourism businesses should raise funds	Totals
Mossel Bay	1	15	3	5	24
Row %	4.17%	62.50%	12.50%	20.83%	

Knysna	1	5	3	6	15
Row %	6.67%	33.33%	20.00%	40.00%	
George	9	19	11	24	63
Row %	14.29%	30.16%	17.46%	38.10%	
Oudtshoorn	3	6	1	3	13
Row %	23.08%	46.15%	7.69%	23.08%	
Plettenbergbay	1	2	2	0	5
Row %	20.00%	40.00%	40.00%	0.00%	
Totals	15	47	20	38	120
Chi-square	14.79	df=12	p=.25326		

Businesses were also asked about what strategies they feel should be used to raise funds to revive the operations of the train. Table 5 above indicates that 39% of them would like to see the municipality raising the funds whilst 32% would like to see the businesses themselves raising the funds. This finding may imply that there needs to be engagement between the municipality and private business to discuss the implications of the closure of the train operation to the businesses and the economy of the region. It is from this engagement that an accord can

be reached on how both can work together in the quest of reviving the operations of the train. The results also yielded a degree of freedom at 12, which is very high with the chi square statistic of 14.79 also very high with a p value of .25326 which is above the conventionally accepted significant level (.05) which indicates a large practical significance of the finding. In other words, there is no statistically significant difference in the strategies that can be used to revive the train and the location of the business.

Table 6: Strategies that can be used to revive the Outeniqua Choo Choo train

Comparison of views between businesses that benefited from the Choo Choo operation and their views on which strategies to use to revive the train operation.					
Businesses	Strategies that can be used to revive the Outeniqua Choo Choo train				Row
	Community fundraising	Municipality fundraising	Attractions should be opened	Tourism businesses should raise funds	Totals
Yes	9	46	15	34	104
Row %	8.65%	44.23%	14.42%	32.69%	
No	6	1	5	4	16
Row %	37.50%	6.25%	31.25%	25.00%	
Totals	15	47	20	38	120
Chi-square	16.95	df=3	p=.00072		
Cramer's V	0.38(Medium)				

Table 6 above show the responses of those that benefited from the train operation and those who did not and the strategies they prefer to be used to revive

the train. The results infer that 39% of them would like to see the municipality raising the funds whilst 32% would like to see the businesses themselves raising the

funds. The results also yielded a degree of freedom at 3, with the chi square statistic of 16.95 and a p value of .00072 which is below the conventionally accepted significant level (.05) which indicates a strong relationship between the businesses that benefited from the train operation and the strategy they would like to see being used to revive the train back to operation. The Cramer's V is at 0.38 and it indicates a medium practical significance of the finding. In other words, the practical significance of the finding indicates that there is fairly balanced view on which strategies should be used to revive the train back into operation across those whose businesses benefited from the operation of the train before it was closed.

Conclusions and recommendations

Iconic attractions are those attractions whose appeal can be "attributed to distinct qualities, including uniqueness, location, international reputation, and outstanding media attention, making it a 'must-see' attraction and relatively large in size and the significant of its economic impact to a destination. They can also be defined as attractions whose image is constructed by elements of authenticity and mental perceptions which serve as universally recognized symbols or representation of their location or culture/heritage and evoke a powerful positive image among both tourists and local residents. Based on the literature reviewed in this article, the following key recommendations are made:

- Public sector support for tourist attractions should give priority to iconic attractions over non-iconic attractions.
- South African government needs to develop a plan for the support

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of iconic attractions in partnership with other public sector organisations. There needs to be coordination of public sector support.

- Effort should be focused on maintaining the iconic status of significantly iconic projects, then enhancing those with the potential of becoming significantly iconic. Only in exceptional circumstances should investment in a new wholly new start up attraction be considered.
- Linkages and clustering between iconic attractions should be encouraged. Priority should be given to supporting iconic attractions that are located in clusters.
- The public sector should be prepared to support iconic attractions for the long-term.
- Appropriate use of iconic attractions should be made in regional branding and marketing.
- All efforts should be made to maximise the commercial viability of iconic attractions.

The results of the study infer that businesses in the EDM have been negatively affected by the closure of the Outeniqua Choo Choo train. These businesses feel that it is important to find ways of reviving the train back to operation. Given the projected number of tourists who were using the train in 2003 (115 000) of which 70% were international tourists; it is easy to see why businesses want the train back in operation. It is therefore important that EDM together with private businesses work together to find a way to revive the train back to operation.

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