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ICONICITY AND 'FLAGSHIPNESS' OF TOURIST ATTRACTIONS

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 (e.g., Miles 2005; Plaza 2008), as they increase local appeal to visitors and quality of life for residents (Law 2002). Their impact has been often defined in the professional jargon as 'effect', such as the 'Eden Effect' in Cornwall, UK (South West Regional Development Agency 2005) and the 'Guggenheim effect' in Bilbao, Spain (Vicario and Monje 2003; Plaza 2008). Factors that lead to their deterioration or destruction have detrimental effects upon destination management, as visitors may seek substitute attractions or alternative destinations (Jenkins 2003; Becken 2005). Considerable public funding has been made available for development of major attractions in several countries (Dybedal 1998), often with insufficient knowledge on the potential impacts of these attractions at local and regional scales, and far-reaching consequences including the need for ongoing public funding to keep them operational.

Flagship and iconic attractions/projects suffer from the definitional problems common to most tourist attractions (Leask and Fyall 2006) and the terms are often used interchangeably. This definitional debate can have ramifications for development planning policies, mechanisms and outcomes. Flagship is "the best or most important thing owned or produced by an organisation" (Oxford English Dictionary 2006, p. 539). A major attraction is defined as 'flagship' when its appeal is 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 economic impact (Law 2002), such as Euro Disney in France and Lego Land in Denmark. In urban areas, there may be several flagship attractions, whereas in rural areas, often only one major attraction has such appeal and uniqueness (Dybedal 1998). The Eden project in Cornwall, UK, is the largest "greenhouse" in the world, and has dramatically increased the number of domestic visitors to Cornwall from the rest of the UK and from overseas, improving the regional economy and attracting investment (South West Regional Development Agency 2005).

An iconic cultural feature is "a person or thing regarded as a representative symbol, especially of a culture or a movement; a person or an institution considered worthy of admiration or respect" (Oxford English Dictionary cited in Holt 2004, p.1). In tourism, these elements of authenticity and mental perceptions construct the image of iconic attractions (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Woodside, Cruickshank and Dehuang 2005; Tang, Morrison, Lehto, Kline, and Pearce 2009), such as Mount Fuji, the Eiffel Tower, the Great Wall of China and the Taj Mahal, which serve as universally recognised symbols or representation of their location or culture/heritage and evoke a powerful positive image among both tourists and local residents" (Sternberg 1997; Jenkins 2003). Iconic attractions are similar to iconic brands, which "...cast a halo on other aspects of the brand [other attractions]" (Holt 2004, p.10), and as 'upgraded' brands, they carry extraordinary identity value when conferred in the form of a story or a myth (Holt 2004). The process of 'writing' or making of icons (i.e. iconography) is "...the activity of making products saleable by imbuing them with desirable images" (Sternberg 1997, p.95) and identified myths (Holt 2004), which appeal to both residents and tourists. Iconic tourist structures including attractions, projects, institutions (used synonymously in the literature) have been designed in an attempt "...to symbolise the changing character of the area, to provide a memorable image that potential visitors will associate with it and to create footfall with attracting visitors" (Maitland and Newman 2004, p.16). Attractions promoted as tourist icons are common in destination positioning, and often the result of a long-term marketing process, involving various stakeholders (Becken 2005).

The difference between *flagshipness* and *iconicity* has implications for the management of attractions and destinations and this research note proposes a conceptual clarity to distinguish between the two. *Flagshipness* is about the suppliers' ability to generate desirable economic development outcomes by attracting a sufficient number of visitors to the attraction with a positive impact on the destination area. *Iconicity* underlies a dialogue over history, space and identity, values between marketers and consumers about authenticity, and is directly affected by social and cultural objectives (Grayson and Martinec, 2004) and products' marketability. *Flagship appeal* refers to the ability of a tourism production to draw a large number of visitors to the specific attraction while iconic attractions may not necessarily draw the largest number of visitors, but increase the overall number of visitors to a destination because of their image. Differences in these aspects as well as in size, nature of markets, and relationships with other tourism businesses may have implications for planning and marketing strategies. For example, British Airways London Eye is the most visited paid attraction in London with 3.7 million visitors, compared to almost 1 million visitors in 2004 to the Houses of Parliament (Visit London 2009). London Eye is considered a flagship attraction, while the Houses of Parliament are much more iconic and are unique, authentic and more representative of London than the London Eye. There is a need to clarify the meanings of *iconicity* and *flagshipness* amongst attractions and to explore their ramifications, as overall tourism appeal rather than actual visitor numbers may influence the allocation of public subsidies. Delineating attractions as either iconic or flagship may affect promotional strategies, and design of publicity material, such as maximising the impact of a destination brochure by displaying an attraction with the greatest spillover effect, e.g. the Opera House, Sydney an iconic attraction is used for marketing Australia.

This research note suggests that the various characteristics and criteria that endow attractions with *iconicity* or *flagshipness* should be explored further. It also acknowledges that there is no strict dichotomy between them, and major attractions could have both high and low levels of *iconicity* and *flagshipness*, and these may be lost or gained over time, depending on factors such as the quality of the tourism product, over-crowding, quality deterioration, and new competitors. Conspicuous objects initially unrelated to tourism but with high visibility may become iconic tourist attractions (e.g. Big Ben in London). The relatively new British Airways London Eye has become inextricably linked to London's skyline and may be on the way to gaining iconic status. However, attractions may lose their iconicity as a result of environmental deterioration (Weaver and Lawton 2007) or a new competitor endowing the same or a rival destination with similar iconic attributes. The establishment of a higher observation point in London may decrease the iconicity of the London Eye. This research note calls for further studies on the associated issues of definition, management strategies, social and environmental effects, as well as the dynamic process of the creation and loss of iconicity and *flagshipness* of major tourist attractions.

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