

To bond and bridge: The expression of collaboration and social capital in a developed world ecotourism destination.

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This paper explores social capital in the context of a social network designed to promote ecotourism among local businesses in an area known as the Greenbox in northwest Ireland. The Greenbox was developed as an ecotourism destination, situated in a geographically and economically marginal rural area on the northwest border between Ireland and Northern Ireland. The initiative, which existed from 2003-2007, was funded primarily from European Union sources and administered by a management board consisting of representatives of local authorities, national tourism bodies, regional and rural development groups, and ecotourism providers. An ecotourism provider network was also established. The International Ecotourism Society definition of ecotourism was adopted and modified slightly for use by the project and the EU Flower was selected as a method of certification.

Coleman (1988) defines social capital as a feature of social structure that exists in relationships, and is mobilised by individuals in their actions, as a method of accessing resources. The paper recognises what Putnam (2003) discusses as 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital and how communication and involvement in groups can have positive implications for individuals. Bonding social capital relates to trust between homogeneous groups including the support of collective aims. Bridging social capital relates to external connections to groups or individuals (Putnam 2000). Social capital has been used in a variety of ways to explore development options (McGehee et al 2010). The focus in tourism research has, at times, been placed excessively on economic benefits and the need for social relations is somewhat undermined (Macbeth et al 2004). However, social capital has an important role in tourism. It is easier to be productive and achieve aims when bonding social capital exists. Vertical associations and bridging also have important roles to play in this context (Macbeth et al 2004). Social capital has been used as a construct to understand ecotourism, in a developing world context (Jones 2005).

The research followed a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Representatives of support organisations (21) and ecotourism providers (37) were selected purposively for face-to-face, semi-structured interviews of approximately 1.5 hours in duration. All of the interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and entered into a database. Analysis was conducted following thematic principles (Bryman 2004). Textual statements were analysed qualitatively using an iterative approach in order to identify key themes and sub-themes. In a developed world context, the Greenbox network and its members exhibited levels of bonding and bridging social capital in both the management and provider networks. Examples illustrate how the principles of ecotourism and EU Flower certification are combined with expressions of bonding and bridging social capital, to create experiences that draw on local natural and cultural resources in benign ways. Findings highlight that provider's demonstrated active bonding social capital but exhibited limited evidence of collaborative bridging, in terms of marketing and promoting ecotourism. Further evolution of bonding and bridging social capital is evident in a new network The Greenbook, established in 2011 by former provider members of the Greenbox.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Social Capital, Bonding, Bridging, Ireland, Northern Ireland.