

Model for the Development of a Specialized Dark Tourist Product

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Dark tourist facilities are a modern tourism phenomenon. Although *dark* tourism is conceptually associated with the legal inconsistency of tourism, it is based on content related to human suffering. Tourist interest in *dark* tourist products is growing, and such contents have become a part of standard tourist packages in the markets where such offer exists. Despite their proven contribution to destination differentiation and competitiveness, potential resources for the development of *dark* tourist facilities are often neglected due to tourist workers lacking the knowledge requisite for the development of specialized tourism products. Unsustainable approach to the development of specialized tourism products results in focus on content, that ignores the broader benefits of an integrated destination product. In the case of *dark* tourism products, socio-cultural and tantalogic consequences are particularly problematic, as *dark* tourist offer is

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particularly sensitive to the ethical standards of the general public. The result is that visitors and organizers of such tourist packages are frequently given negative publicity. In spite of the growing global interest in the *dark* tourism offer, its development is slow and modest due to the above-mentioned risks and insufficient education in the tourist industry. The existing global supply often ignores some of the potential benefits of implementation of such content into a destination's and national integrated tourism product. In an attempt to clear up doubts, and provide examples of positive and negative experiences from the global tourism practice, the authors carried out several studies based on which they devised a framework model for the development of a *dark* tourism product with recommended variables of significant impact.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Subject of the Research and Research Problem

Contribution to the originality of a competitive integrated destination product is significantly increasing (Anholt, 2011; Šerić, Jurišić, 2014; Kesar, 2015; Prorok et al. 2019). The attractiveness of destination offers is increasingly dependent on the number of specialized tourist products (Bornhost et al. 2010; Šerić, 2019). In the 3rd millennium, specialized tourist products are often based on rare and unusual resources (Tarlow, 2005; Hosany et al. 2007; Kladou, Kehagias, 2014; Šerić, Marušić, 2019). Unusual resources are also the platform for the development of *dark* tourist products (Stone, 2006; Šerić, 2017). *Dark* tourism, though conceptually assimilating the legal mismatch of the offer, is actually based on content related to accidents, deaths and other testimonies of human suffering (Sharpley and Stone, 2009). The interest of

tourists in specialized tourist products based on *dark* content is growing (Stone, 2013). *Dark* content is increasingly included in standard tourist packages (Drvenkar et al., 2015).

The potential of *dark* tourism stems from the multidimensionality of motivation (diversity of perceptions of tragic events) of contemporary tourists (Kesar, 2015). However, in real life, the development and management of such content is frequently carried out at an elementary level (Rašetina, 2010). The subject of this research is the contribution of *dark* tourism to the competitiveness of a destination's integrated offer. Research problem is the concept of development and management of *dark* tourist products.

The optimization of any specialized tourist product requires systematic development and management throughout its lifecycle (Šerić et al., 2020). The implementation of *dark* content into an integrated destination product entails commitment to a particular category - *dark* subject matter, *dark* exhibitions, dungeons and penitentiaries, cemeteries, locations of military conflicts, concentration camps, etc. (Stone, 2006). The mission and vision of a destination's tourist development should be defined. Isolated development of *dark* tourist content can result in its hijacking of a destination's image, which is not rational if there are resources to develop a variety of specialized tourist products (Campelo, Aitken, Gnoth, Thyne, 2009, Hanna, Rowley, 2011; Šerić, Batalić, 2018).

Arguments in favor of the development of *dark* tourism offer are its year-round potential and independence from weather conditions (Joly, 2010; Šerić et al. 2020). Based on the analysis of selected global experiences with the *dark* tourism offer, the authors conducted a primary research on the potential for the development of this offer in Dalmatia in the Republic of Croatia in order to extract potential variables and offer a model for the development of *dark* tourist products for wider real life application.

1.2. Research Methods and the Basic Research Question

Based on the findings of the survey study, a desk research was conducted (Šerić and Jurišić, 2014). Research findings have helped define the guidelines for the implementation of primary research based on the opinion of a sample of knowledgeable subjects (opinion of experienced tourism workers on the potential for the development of this offer, and the opinion of loyal visitors of Dalmatia (Croatia) on the attractiveness of *dark* tourist facilities). The sample excluded individuals who failed to demonstrate relevant competences or interest in the problem and subject matter of the research. The fundamental research question was: What are the key variables of the model for the systematic development of the *dark* tourist product?

2. THEORETICAL APPROACH

2.1. Theoretical Groundwork

Natural disasters, sites of battles, military conflicts, mass murders, terrorist attacks and cemeteries where popular politicians, intellectuals or musicians are buried are becoming increasingly attractive to visiting individuals and groups (Lennon and Foley, 2010). Cemeteries, monuments to war victims, historical events related to nation, culture and ideology and their marketing are useful content for tourist products (Ashworth, 2008). Concentration camps from World War II attract millions of tourists (Rašetina, 2010; Filipović, 2017). Since *dark* tourism is developing on the resources of historical tourism, such contents can be concluded to have been recorded since the 19th century (Sharpley, 2005). In that respect, it cannot be considered a new form of specialized tourist offer. Although the first research on this tourism phenomenon was conducted in the 1970s, its subject matter has only come to be systematically analyzed in the 1990s (Stone, 2013).

Dark tourism can be defined as systematic integration of travel-based tourism products in a place associated with death, tragedy and suffering (Tarlow, 2005). Analyzing the modest theoretical opus of the developmental concepts of *dark* tourism, we have identified the variables of the immediate and spontaneous nature of sensational tourist contents, and the difference between intentionally created attractions and the promotion of interpreted experiences (or re-emerging events or acts related to death and suffering). Another relevant component of a *dark* tourist story is the anticipated range of tourist interest in actual suffering (Stone, 2013). Along with these recognized variables, primary research instruments were created for this paper. The starting points were defined as in Stone (2006), as shown in Figure 1.

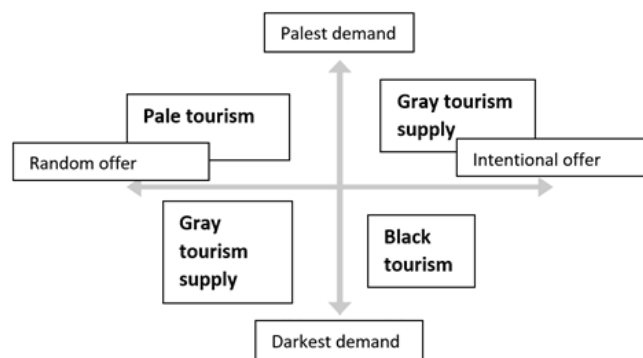


Figure 1.
Dark tourism shades - matrix approach.
(Source: Stone, 2006).

2.2. Current scientific knowledge

Some authors (Bieger, 2000, Bigne, Sancez, Sanchez, 2001, Vargas-Sanchez, Porrás-Bueno, Plaza-Mejía Bigne, 2011, Angelevska Najdeska, Rakicevik, 2012, Tsung Hung, 2013 etc.) warn that when creating specialized tourist products in accordance with the standards of sustainable tourism development, particular attention should be paid to access to the commercialization of links between the past and the present. In the case of *dark* tourism, this is manifested in the relationship between the victims (and their present descendants) and visitors.

When conceptualizing the relationship between sites and resources serving as the basis for the development of *dark* tourist facilities, observance of the heterotopic standard (Stone, 2013), stressing the need to identify the critical level of social acceptance of particular content, is advisable. According to Stone (2013), *dark* tourist sites are places of contradiction and division. They can be the sites of real events, but their significance could be artificially intensified, places characterized by deviant behavior of former residents, etc. In some of these places, restrictions with respect to the intensity of tourist visits should also be defined (Tarlow, 2005). Regardless of the historical context and the complexity of human tragedies, the introduction of heterotopic standards will contribute to the appropriateness of content implementation into the contemporary *dark* tourism offer. The need to differentiate individual *dark* tourism sites and related segments of visitors, and take the gradation of the *dark* side of human behavior and indirect crimes into account necessitates the identification of sites for which even additional standards for designing *dark* tourist contents are recommended to ensure an acceptable understanding of a particular tragedy. Ethical and moral standards, media and promotional implications and issues of the political interpretation of content on which the *dark* tourist product is based should likewise be taken into account (Aas et al., 2005; Edgell et al., 2008; Vargas-Sanchez et al., 2011; Armenian et al., 2012; Šerić et al. 2015). Especially in *dark* tourism, such contents are frequently used as tools of political interpretation of history (Joly, 2010; Šerić and Jurišić, 2015).

As the political dimension of the interpretation of historical content imprints on collective consciousness, the issue of the ethics of using this variable as an integral component of *dark* tourist offer should be examined (according to Hankinson, 2007).

Finally, a number of quoted and other authors (Haughland et al., 2011, Ringer, 2013, etc.) also point to the need to regulate the standards of behavior of tourists in such places, to address potential socio-cultural and tantalogic issues. Finally, it is advisable to evaluate the role and potential of *dark* tourism in the wider secularization of society, especially as persons connected with it either individually or collectively are faced with sadness

and trauma, and their relationship to death and dying needs to be examined (Stone, 2006).

3. RESEARCH RESULTS

Research findings indicate that many *dark* tourism products are currently not systematically designed, but have been identified as useful resources that are estimated to attract the attention of certain tourist segments (Lennon, Foley, 2010; Šerić et al. 2020). The commercialization of potential *dark* resources often does not have the characteristics of a specialized tourist product (Šerić et al. 2020), especially since the marketing potential of the development and management of their commercialization is neglected. The implementation of marketing in specialized tourist facility supply management increases both the attractiveness of that facility and the competitiveness of the destination as a whole (Dwyer et al., 2004; Crouch, 2007; Šerić, 2012a; Šerić 2012b). Although interest in *dark* tourist facilities is encouraged especially by the media (Filipović, 2017), marketing activities are key to long-term efficient valorization of these tourist facilities. They need to be adapted to the particularities of *dark* resources, respectively – the story on which a specific specialized tourist offer is based (Oppermann, 2000; Pike, 2008; Šerić and Perišić, 2012). Tourists find it difficult to find concrete explanations for the attraction of *dark* content, as confirmed by neuro-marketing research (Šerić, 2016). Given that the sensationalism of media reports on accidents and casualties is subject to public rebuke, tourists who visit these places independently could also be viewed negatively. If *dark* tourist facilities are offered as a component of an integrated destination product, the public condemnation of visitors usually transfers to the organizers (Rašetina, 2010), which simplifies decision-making when it comes to interest in visiting such places, which is an increase in annual turnover. Shaping the content of disaster and human suffering into a *dark* tourist product currently entails creating a connection between a tourist story that provokes a specific emotional response in visitors and the tour program (Stone and Sharpley, 2008).

Current global tourism trends indicate growing interest in all *dark* content shaped into a specific tourist offer (Sheng, 2012). Cemeteries, places of individual and mass murders, sites of historical battles and possessions by deceased persons of global renown, mausoleums etc. are being increasingly commercialized for purposes of development of such tourist products. While Lennon and Foley (2010) emphasize specific emotional consequences for visitors, interest in visiting such places is on the rise. Such tourist facilities can also be used for educational purposes, to improve the perception of added value of an integrated tourist product. Depending on the intensity of impact on a specific location, *dark* tourism products can be shaped

for different tourist segments (Stone, 2006). Not all people are equally sensitive to sites of human suffering.

The following business incidents of *dark* tourism were explored to determine the intensity of *dark* content commercialization: Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Aogikahara (Japan), the World Trade Center (USA), Pompeii and the ridge of the Costa Concordia (Italia), forced labor camps (Russia) and Auschwitz concentration camp (Germany). In the cases analyzed, *dark* tendencies stemmed from the intensity of local heritage, history, political consequences, as well as from playing up the visitors' fears, even though not consciously. The earliest content implies a detailed historical basis, educational meaning and authenticity of the site without significant implementation of the targeted political influence. The same elements are identified as exploitable variables of transformation of potential *dark* resources into the *dark* tourist product.

In addition to the variables mentioned, the potential of technological and socio-cultural factors should be emphasized as these can significantly contribute to the attractiveness of *dark* tourist offer. Technological factors contribute to public awareness of *dark* content, and socio-cultural contributions to the social acceptability of such tourist contents. In the business cases analyzed, the vision and mission of the integrated destination product were not defined in the process of development of the idea of *dark* tourist product commercialization. The vision should be aligned with the direction of tourist development of the destination within which the *dark* content is being commercialized.

Growing secularization and individualization, combined with weakening influence of religion on the public, simplify the delineation of the moral framework for the commercialization of such content. This is an important point, as *dark* tourism assumes a modern moral platform graded depending on the intensity of suffering relating to a particular *dark* content. Promotions also contribute to the media by creating a state of moral panic (Seaton and Lennon, 2004). This condition is the result of moral debates in the context of globally known *dark* contents. Since moral panic is a symptom, rather than a consequence of *dark* tourism, the potential of marketing in the development and management of such tourism products is evident.

3.1. Model Proposition

Primary research was carried out in the Croatian region of Dalmatia. This geographic area has historically been characterized by frequent migrations and military conflicts on land and at sea, as evidenced by a number of historical artefacts, as well as a

variety of exploitable stories and legends (Hitrec, 2012). Despite this, the potential of *dark* tourism is only modestly used in the development of specialized tourist products (Filipović, 2017; Šerić et al. 2020). Findings of the conducted primary research have pointed out the limitations and opportunities for the development of the *dark* tourist offer.

Fundamental constraints are the financial resources required for the development of such tourist facilities, the lack of professional staff for the creation and management of *dark* tourist products, the need to modify the promotion of destinations in which *dark* tourist facilities would be commercialized, the complexity of the implementation of the *dark* tourist offer into an integrated destination product (mixed feelings of the local population on the subject of tourist interpretation of the *dark* content), the limited interest of local tourist stakeholders in marketing investments in *dark* tourism, mixed feelings of the local population about historical events and other (author's research, 2017-2019).

Potential benefits include opening of new emissive markets, modification of potential higher level *dark* contents for tourist consumption, contribution of the *dark* content to the preservation of neglected heritage and identity constituents, increased number of tourists, networking of various local entities into an integrated tourist offer, encouraging additional training of local tourist workers (summer or winter tourism), long-term sustainable positioning of the integrated destination offer, etc. (author's research, 2017-2019).

The geographic region of Dalmatia abounds with sites suitable for the development of *dark* tourism. Given that the *dark* tourist facilities contribute to the strengthening of the recognizability and competitiveness of the integrated tourist product, there is no justification for continued neglect of the resources suitable for the development of *dark* tourism in Dalmatia. Research findings have confirmed that most tourist segments find *dark* tourism appealing, since no segment of respondents indicated they would not visit such places in Dalmatia due on ethical or other grounds. All respondents agreed with the statement that the introduction of such tourist facilities would be beneficial for the tourist season in the analyzed geographic area.

Despite the constraints, the investments needed to develop *dark* tourist products are economically justified owing to the high rate of return (findings of this research) and their contribution to the destination's differentiation and competitiveness. Following the research conducted and the findings of primary research, the recommended model for the creation of a *dark* tourist product for wider application illustrated in Figure 2 was formulated.

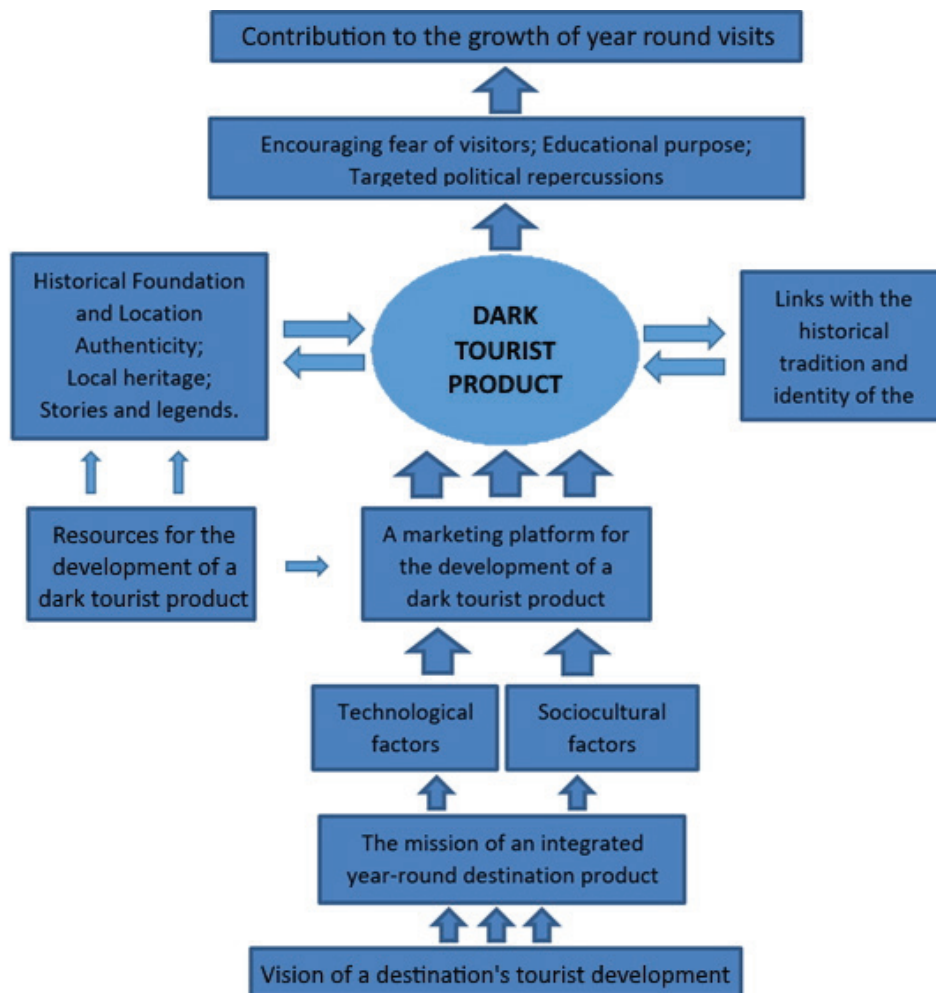


Figure 2. Recommended model for the creation of a dark tourist product for wider application (Source: Authors, 2019).

4. CONCLUSION

The conducted research confirms the importance of *dark* tourist content for the differentiation, competitiveness and growth of the number of year-round visitors to the destination in which they are offered. However, in the current global tourism practice of *dark* content development and management, their mismatch with other receptive components is overwhelmingly focused on *dark* content. Socio-cultural and tantalistic issues are often neglected, making the *dark* tourist offer vulnerable to the ethical standards of the public. Consequently, both interested tourists and tour operators offering such contents are frequently subjected to condemnation by a part of the public.

Tourist workers who are insufficiently educated to develop and manage specialized tourism products neglect potential sources of *dark* tourism development in many geographic areas.

The fact that such sites attract tourists year-round, regardless of the hydro-meteorological conditions in the micro location is frequently disregarded.

The development of a sustainable competitive integrated destination tourism product implies the valorization of all potentially usable resources for the development of specialized tourist facilities. However, sustainable tourism development requires the systematic development of all specialized tourist products, including *dark* tourist products. Each category of a specialized tourist product is based on certain influencing variables. In case of *dark* tourism products, research has shown that these variables are: historical foundations, site authenticity, and local heritage. In regions that have been inhabited for centuries, migrations, continuous warring and the loss of stories and legends are also useful variables. In addition to the aforementioned findings, the research has also demonstrated the

effect of technological and socio-cultural factors on the reduction of the risk of negative publicity of the commercialization of *dark* tourist contents. The variable of a destination's historical traditions and identity also provides a useful feedback for the *dark* tourist product. Finally, it is also important to establish the *dark* tourist contents in the vision and mission of the destination in which they are offered. All these variables are rationally linked through the marketing platform that ultimately aims to create *dark* tourist content that plays on fear, educates visitors and achieves targeted political goals with respect to the interpretation of *dark* tourist content. The *dark* tourist product thus created can ensure the growth of tourist visits year-round. In the end, the extent to which the defined political objectives of the *dark* content used for that purpose left the impression on the general tourist public is doubtful. The fact is that the potential of such unconventional approach to the development of *dark* tourist products for increasing the number of total tourist visits has yet to be realized.

Considering the economic consequences of *dark* tourist products and the possibility of realization of targeted political goals using concrete *dark* content, a systematic approach to the development of this offer at the level of each state and national entity is more than desirable.

With respect to the Croatian region of Dalmatia, owing to the centuries of military conflict, there is a variety of potential resources for the development of *dark* tourist facilities. Findings based on the opinions of a sample of loyal tourists indicate that the number of visits to such amenities in the area would increase, regardless of time of year. Attracting new and keeping old tourists, preserving social resources and historical heritage, networking different tourism stakeholders and creating the image of a multicultural tourist destination are just some of the benefits illustrating the potential and importance of the development of *dark* tourism in Dalmatia and the wider region. However, it is always advisable to bear in mind the ethical rights of those whose death such offer is capitalizing upon. We should strive for positive publicity and affirmative political perception, which can also influence the collective consciousness. Such approach to the development of *dark* tourist products is an expression of political maturity and understanding of historical events.

Creation of a *dark* tourist product should be based on respect for the victims and observance of the current socio-cultural criteria. Ignoring the potential of *dark* tourism or neglecting to develop such tourist content in destinations which have the resources for their development will leave them silent witnesses and hostages of the past. On the other hand, the development of *dark* tourist facilities contributes to the growth of a year-round tourist visits, irrespective of weather conditions. In the end, systematic management of a *dark* tourist product can contribute to the reconciliation of people and the creation of a new image of local and national communities. An image that promotes multiculturalism, understanding and the development

of good neighborly relations based on people's association and *dark* tourism.

The growth of global interest in the *dark* tourist facilities is an incentive for new investments and further education of tourist workers and gives tourist an additional motivation to travel and visit destinations offering such content. However, to ensure a systematic approach to the development and management of *dark* tourism products, influencing variables from the presented model need to be taken into account.

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