Framing strategic storytelling in the context of transition management to stimulate tourism destination development

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A B S T R A C T

This article frames strategic storytelling in the context of transition management in order to analyse how strategic applications of storytelling stimulate destination development. This analytical framework is applied to two cases of storytelling projects aimed at fostering the destination development of the regions Hondsrug and Friese Meren, the Netherlands. We discuss how considering destination development as a long-term spatial transformation process (transition) and adopting a multilevel perspective (MLP) allows 1.) to pinpoint how strategic storytelling contributes to regional development and 2.) to identify factors that positively and negatively influence this contribution. We conclude that using storytelling in the context of transitions benefits from an adaptive approach of continually evaluating and adjusting actions – including storytelling. This allows for reinforcing existing ties and establishing new ties between actors so to effectively mobilise and unite public and private actors on multiple governance levels and result in actions that contribute to destination development.

1. Introduction

Storytelling is gaining attention in the field of strategic planning and place management in general (Throgmorton, 1996; Sandercock, 2003; Van Hulst, 2012; Van der Stoep & Aarts, 2012; Bulkens, Minca, & Muzaini, 2014) and destination development in particular (Mossberg, 2008; Olsson, Therkelsen, & Mossberg, 2016). Storytelling can be defined as the normative, discursive and political process of creating a story; it articulates what is wrong, how it can be resolved, and how to convince or persuade actors to agree, unite and engage in a collective action process (Van Dijk, 2011). It is about framing a situation in a deliberate and selective manner to prepare for the future (Dormans, 2008; Throgmorton, 2003; Van Hulst, 2012). The interest in storytelling fits in with in discourses and approaches in planning theory and practice that address inter-subjectivities, uncertainties and complexities inscribed in the relational processes driving spatial change (Healey, 2003; Innes & Booher, 2010). These take on board that there are multiple and potentially conflicting perspectives on reality related to a variety of ambitions, interests and opinions regarding spatial quality and development. Moreover, actors' preferences and perceptions of reality usually change over time (De Roo, Hillier, & Van Wezemael, 2012; Zuidema, 2011). Storytelling, in this context, has been considered

as a promising planning tool for sense-making and fostering collective action towards a certain direction (Mandelbaum, 1991; Van Dijk, 2011).

In the Netherlands, the capacity of storytelling to act as a catalyst for regional development is also recognized, particularly for tourism destination development (VROMraad, 2006). In several projects both public and private actors have chosen to use storytelling to foster destination development: the on-going socio-spatial transformations triggered by the influx of activities and development projects related to tourism, recreation and leisure (cf. Bunce, 2008). In this context there are high expectations of strategic applications of storytelling. It is seen as a goal-oriented planning tool that is able to foster the process of destination development by bringing people together, connecting perspectives, synergizing resources and instigating projects that contribute to tourism product and destination development. However, destination development is often a complex and long term process of gradually transitioning from areas of production to areas of consumption (Hartman & De Roo, 2013). Stimulating this process requires the congregation of a variety of stakeholders and their different ambitions, interests and worldviews (Getz, 2008). Whether the expectations of storytelling are justified in the context of the complexity of fostering destination development has yet to be analysed and evaluated, and

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serves as a major motivation for this research.

The article therefore examines whether current Dutch practices of strategic storytelling actually serve as a destination development catalyst. Contributions to literature on storytelling and transitions are brought together for conceptual and analytical support. Literature on storytelling is reviewed to discuss the capacity of storytelling to change actors' priorities and decisions. We examine how storytelling can be used strategically to persuade actors to engage in a particular collective action (Beauregard, 2003; Gunder & Hillier, 2009; Throgmorton, 1996, 2003; Van Dijk, 2011; Van Hulst, 2012). Literature on transition management is reviewed to conceptualise destination development as a long term, multi-actor and multi-level transition process (Hartman, 2016a, 2018a; Loorbach, 2007; Rotmans & Loorbach, 2009). By taking this approach, this article goes beyond current contributions on storytelling and contributes in multiples ways to the theoretical debate. First, the literature review brings together contributions on storytelling and provides an overview of specific key elements of storytelling that can be applied in a strategic, deliberative manner. Second, by framing storytelling in the context of transitions it further operationalises storytelling as well as provides an enhanced understanding of ways to analyse the process and impacts of the initiatives that pursue strategic storytelling for destination development. Third, the introduction of storytelling as a promising concept into the (research) field of destination development is critically reviewed.

The combination of theories on transitions and (strategic) storytelling provides several analytical dimensions which are applied in case study research. These are used to analyse how strategic storytelling contributes – intentionally applied in the case studies as a potential destination development catalyst – to areas transitioning from areas of production to areas of consumption. The regions 'Friese Meren' and 'Hondsrug' were selected in which storytelling has deliberately been used as a strategic tool with the intention to foster destination development. The former is a privately initiated project by a group of entrepreneurs with a relatively small budget whilst the latter is initiated by governmental officials with a relatively large budget. By analysing these projects this article also expands the still limited number of contributions examining practices of strategic storytelling that are deliberately initiated to stimulate destination development at the regional level (Mossberg, 2008; Olsson et al., 2016).

The article has the following structure. Section two reviews contributions to literature on storytelling and transitions, brings them together and presents a framework for the analysis of the development catalyst function of strategic storytelling (SST). Section three examines how SST is introduced in the Netherlands, how it is applied in the cases of Friese Meren and Hondsrug and assesses whether it acts as a destination development catalyst for these regions. The final section concludes that using SST for destination development concerns engaging in a potentially long term transition process. Moreover, it explores how an adaptive approach to storytelling can strengthen its function as a development catalyst.

2. Strategic storytelling to stimulate transitions towards tourism destinations

Using storytelling to stimulate destination development is not straightforward. Whether regions develop as tourism destinations depends on the actions of many firms, societal organisations and institutions that are dispersed over multiple governance levels and often have different ambitions, interests and worldviews regarding issues at stake (Getz, 2008; Hartman & De Roo, 2013; Milne & Ateljevic, 2001; Parra 2010; Urry, 2002). As such, aligning actors on different governance levels and connecting existing land uses with the large variety of tourism, recreation and leisure forms is a complex, gradual process that usually takes time and covers several phases (Bunce, 2008). Bearing this in mind, we bring on aboard theories of transitions and transition management to develop the argument that applying SST to foster

destination development involves a long term, multi-actor and multi-level process of transitioning from areas of production to areas of consumption. Moreover, it allows us to draw attention to key analytical dimensions which are useful to apply in case study research to examine whether strategic storytelling functions as a development catalyst.

2.1. Destination development as transition management

In this article we adopt the perspective that regions that are in the process of becoming destinations for tourism and recreation are exhibiting a transition, shifting from areas of production to areas of consumption (Bunce, 2008; Hartman & De Roo, 2013; Hartman, 2016a). Transitions can be defined as processes of gradual change from one system state to another which result in the transformation of the structures, institutions, cultures and practices of a society (Loorbach, 2007; Dewulf, Termeer, Werkman, Breemen, & Poppe, 2009; Rotmans, Kemp & Van Asselt, 2001). The concept of transitions is used today in several settings, for instance to describe changes in socio-technical systems of energy and transportation (Geels, 2010), to examine how the structures and functions of urban regions and socio-spatial systems evolve (Rauws & Van Dijk, 2013) but also for tourism area development (Hartman, 2016b; Hartman & De Roo, 2013).

For transitions to occur factors need to interlock and mutually reinforce in multiple systems or domains such as the economy, culture, life styles, institutions, technology, ecology, and belief systems (Geels & Schot, 2007; Kemp & Loorbach, 2006). As such, as Dewulf et al. (2009) argue that transitions are rather complex processes as they generally involve multiple actors, multiple (governance) levels, multiple domains, multiple timescales and multiple goals. The complexity of transitions means that these processes cannot be managed in terms of command and control (Rotmans & Loorbach, 2009). Instead, as no single actor is in control, managing transitions involves a subtle process of influencing and adjusting. Accordingly transition management can be defined as forward-looking, adaptive, multi-actor governance aimed at long-term transformation processes (Kemp & Loorbach, 2006, p. 103) and contributions on transition management elaborate on strategies to influence the speed and direction of transitions.

The aim of initiators of strategic storytelling projects is very comparable: to stimulate the shift from areas of production to areas of consumption, contributing to destination development. In the following section we elaborate on how stories can have an impact (to identify strategic elements of storytelling), what the impact could be (to understand the potential influence of storytelling on destination development) and what could influence the impact (to understand factors that are relevant in the context of transitions). We summarize the findings into several key dimensions that can be used as guides in the analysis of (our) case study research to examine whether strategic storytelling functions as a development catalyst.

2.2. How can stories have an impact? Strategic elements of storytelling

Storytelling is a tool to transfer knowledge whereby stories help people to share experiences or viewpoints, and to learn about and from the experiences and viewpoints of others (Mandelbaum, 1991; Myers & Kitsuse, 2000). When storytelling is applied as a strategic tool, stories are used not only to inform, share or learn but also to persuade. Stories in strategic storytelling are deliberately produced and used to 'persuade one another about what the future should and can bring, as well as convince others to agree on and engage in a trajectory of actions' (Van Dijk, 2011, p. 124). It is about effectively persuading others to adopt a different or new perspective or vision but also to alter ways of doing and acting (Throgmorton, 2003; Van den Brink, 2009). Whether stories are effective in doing so depends on the following factors that contribute to their 'mobilising capacity' (Benford & Snow, 2000, p. 620):

- *Actions of signifying agents:* Signifying agents are key persons or

groups that take initiative and actively pursue storytelling and are fundamental 'to mobilise potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support' (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198). Stories can serve a bonding function by reinforcing ties between actors and a bridging function by establishing new ties between actors (cf. Putnam, 2000).

- *Credible and salient stories:* Credibility includes empirical credibility, credibility of articulators or claims-makers, and consistency between beliefs, claims and actions. Salience concerns whether ideas or visions presented through stories are essential and meaningful to the concerned actors i.e. if they offer solutions to daily life issues (Benford & Snow, 2000).
- *Strategically selective stories.* Stories are often selective or partial in order to comply with particular believes or to captivate (Salmon, 2010). This is used to emphasise and engage in a (by the initiator) desirable development path. However, when stories are too selective or specific they may exclude particular actors, ideas and perspectives and become contested and distrusted (Polletta, 2009, xi). Stories then lose credibility and salience (Sandercock, 2003; Shove & Walker, 2007).

From this section we take that analytical dimension no. 1 includes *how signifying agents strategically use stories and contribute to destination development.* To further develop this dimension, we need to understand what the effect of strategic storytelling could be in the context of destination development.

2.3. What could be the impact? Stimulating development by strategic storytelling

Reviewing literature on managing transitions and complex development processes (Caffyn, 2000; Foster and Barnes 2012; Kemp & Loorbach, 2006; Loorbach, 2010; Lowndes & Skelcher, 2002; Quinn & Cameron, 1983; Voss & Bornemann, 2011) with a focus on stages to which strategic storytelling can contribute to and hence have an effect on, has resulted in the following set of six 'transition stages'. Stage 1 concerns the establishment of a small actor network of frontrunners. Stage 2 concerns drafting a transition agenda that serves as a policy frame for collective action. Stage 3 concerns the mobilisation of resources. Stage 4 concerns executing projects that contribute to tourism product and destination development. Stage 5 concerns enhancing enhance regional and external connectedness. Stage 6 concerns establishing the adaptive capacity to revisit stage one to five through monitoring and evaluating progression and by revisiting and reorganising actor networks, transition agendas, projects, and mobilising additional resources. The latter is relevant for sustaining the impact of SST on destination development. These stages provide a framework to examine various ways in which strategic storytelling can act as a development catalyst. However, since we conceptualised destination development as transitions we need to further frame strategic storytelling in the context of transition to better understand what factors could influence the effect of strategic storytelling on destination development.

2.4. What could influence the impact? Framing strategic storytelling in the context of transitions

Contributions that aim to theorize the concept and further operationalize the concept transitions and transition management draw attention to a multi-level perspective (MLP) that allows to conceptualise the emergence of transitions as a result of the relations and interplays between events at a macro, meso and micro level:

- The macro (or 'landscape') level consist of often slow changing factors in society such as global trends in the macro economy, socio-technical systems, demography and the natural environment (Dewulf, Termeer, Werkman, Breemen, & Poppe, 2009). These

include factors that enable destination development such as economic growth and an increase of welfare, disposable income and free time to travel as well as innovations in technology, transportation, mobility and information provision that ease travel. Also, for rural places the industry cluster of leisure, tourism and recreation is getting increasingly important for liveability and development in the context of demographic shrinkage, clustering of services in cities and the mechanisation of agriculture (Hartman & De Roo, 2013)

- The meso (or 'regime') level concerns the dominant physical and immaterial infrastructures in combination with actor-networks and institutions (Kemp & Loorbach, 2006). Systems of governance and planning may support developments related to tourism, recreation and leisure. For instance via pro-development strategic plans, investments plans and subsidy schemes. Systems of politics, governance and planning can also be inhibiting forces when the development potential of a region for tourism is not recognized or not considered compatible with ecosystems, heritage, industries, agriculture, etc. For instance, local zoning plans might be very strict and offer little to no room for development, planning procedures might be extensive and bureaucratic, procedures for building permits or licenses for activities might be difficult or complicated to get. Loorbach (2007) and Dewulf et al. (2009) stress that regimes at the meso level have the capacity to inhibit early stage transitions but may transform over time to enablers when successful niche-innovations arise.
- The micro level concerns the actions of individuals, companies and small groups of actors and local practices that produce innovations in niches of tourism and recreation. When niche-innovations are successful more similar initiatives may emerge and, as a collective, may receive support to gain further momentum. As such, innovations in niches work their way up to larger scales and over time change the structures and functions of socio-spatial systems. For instance, many coastal areas that were once small-scale and regionally oriented agricultural or fishing communities have gradually been transformed, step-by-step through a process of increasing returns into (sometimes large-scale, international) tourist destinations. This process is what we refer to as destination development and drives the transition of areas of production to areas of consumption.

The MLP is a way to show that transitions depend on a large set of interrelated forces. On the one hand, it emphases that transitions can be inhibited for instance by vested interests, constraining forms of regulations, and political preferences that constrain the possibility to deviate from development trajectories of the past (Hartman, 2018b). Transitions are therefore generally complex as they do not come about easily and may take multiple decades (Geels, 2010; Loorbach, 2007). On the other hand, the MLP draws attention to how transitions gain momentum (Loorbach, 2010). Macro-level pressures lead to tensions and open windows of opportunity, paving the way for niche-innovations (cf. Hajer, 2003 on institutional voids; Geels, 2010). Examples of these pressures are the increasing competition for attracting visitors to places, local issues with liveability as a result of declining economies that call for new economic drivers, the interest of macro-scale governmental institutions in storytelling (see also section 3.1). These open windows of opportunity for the introduction of strategic storytelling and for innovations in niches of the industry cluster of tourism, recreation and leisure.

2.5. Dimensions for analysis in case study analysis

The combination of theories of transitions and storytelling draws attention to several important dimensions that we include in the analysis of storytelling projects. These dimensions are used to structure our case study research as follows:

- *Paving the way for strategic storytelling.* The MLP draws attention to

the interplays between macro, meso and micro levels that affect transition pathways. This dimension emphasises to analyse storytelling projects 'in context' (include multiple levels and include the past and present) to identify the case-specific enabling factors for introducing and using SST for destination development

- *How signifying agents strategically use stories to stimulate transitions.* We identified and interviewed key actors to examine their roles and strategies in relation to initiating and executing projects that involve SST. We related the findings to the six transition stages (2.3) as well as to the mobilising capacity (2.2.) of SST: how the mobilisation of actors and resources relates to the strategically selectivity, credibility and salience of stories.

- *Sustaining the impact of SST on destination development.* The MLP emphasises that circumstance may change and transition stage 6 emphasises that adaptive capacity is needed to be responsive to such change for instance by revisiting the stages one to five to make necessary adjustments in the storytelling approach. This is important when acknowledging that destination development concerns a complex and potentially long-term transition wherein no single actor is in complete control and managing transitions involves a subtle process of influencing and adjusting. Based on our findings we discuss elements in place that aim to sustain the impact of STT.

These dimensions that are based on reviewing literature on storytelling and transitions provide us with useful guides in the analysis of our case study research to examine whether strategic storytelling functions as a catalyst for destination development in the regions Hondsrug (section 3.2.) and Friese Meren (section 3.3). Section 3.2 and 3.3 start with an introduction to the storytelling projects. In line with the dimensions that are discussed above, the subsequent parts reflect on the contextual development that paved the way for SST, analyse how signifying agents use stories, and examine whether storytelling can serve as a development catalyst. First, section 3.1 elaborates on contextual developments on the macro level and the meso level of regimes that were important for opening windows of opportunity in our two selected regions for introducing SST to stimulate destination development.

3. Strategic storytelling in the Netherlands

3.1. The emergence of strategic storytelling

The interest in combining storytelling and destination development relates to macro-level forces that drive the importance and development of the 'leisure economy' – a container concept used in the Netherlands to refer to the growing industry cluster of tourism, recreation, leisure, wellness and exurban living (Hartman, Rauws, Beeftink, & De Roo, 2011). On the one hand, the industry cluster gains importance in contemporary society and brings new development opportunities. For rural areas, such as our case-studies, the industry cluster appears as a socio-economic alternative to a declining of job opportunities in agriculture and manufacturing. On the other hand, it has evolved into a globally interconnected and differentiated economy. Consumers enjoy the ability of selecting from a wide variety of travel options, destinations and activities. In response, actors from the rural world direct efforts to enhance regional cohesion, regional profiling and destination management as a means to develop and brand localities, activities, the routes connecting them, and their socio-cultural and landscape (hi)stories (Buhalis, 2000; Hall, 2008; Olsson et al., 2016). The characteristics of the industry cluster call for cooperation among stakeholders, sharing of ideas, and alignment of worldviews and actions. Strategic storytelling, as further examined through the case-studies of Friese Meren and Hondsrug, might play a positive role in the creation of this cohesion.

The emergence of planning projects that revolve around strategic storytelling is also strongly inspired by the meso level of regimes. In 2006, the VROMraad – a leading and respected governmental advisory board – drew attention to the potential of storytelling to stimulate

development at the interface of spatial quality and destination development (VROMraad, 2006). In 2008, the 'Toerisme Brief' [Letter on tourism development] by the state secretary of economic affairs urged provincial authorities to explore the potentials of storytelling and announced public support for storytelling through an innovation program. The government agency 'IPO' [inter-provincial agency for coordination] held meetings to inform provincial authorities about storytelling and selected six pilot projects for the state innovation program. In 2009, the organisation 'STIRR' [Foundation for innovation, recreation and spatial development] was created to facilitate initiatives combining tourism, recreation and spatial development.[1] For the period 2010 to 2012, the state commissioned STIRR to execute an innovation program on storytelling supporting the six pilot projects selected by the IPO.

These contextual developments at the macro and meso level open a window of opportunity at local levels, enabling government agencies, coalitions of entrepreneurs and public-private partnerships to introduce and use SST to stimulate the development of Hondsrug and Friese Meren. The following sections examine the extent to which SST functions as a catalyst for destination development. Data for the empirical study is the result of a document analysis of key strategic policy documents and development plans from which we derived key processes and events on various levels, and semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten key persons such as initiators and project stakeholders who are or where actively involved in initiating or executing the planning projects that involve strategic storytelling. Respondents were entrepreneurs, tourism planners and strategic policy advisors from the provincial authority of Drenthe and the provincial authority of Friesland, independent policy advisors and landscape architects, and representatives of societal organisations and entrepreneurial associations. All interviews were held on various locations in the Dutch provinces of Drenthe and Friesland, recorded, transcribed and analysed by making use of the analytical dimensions as discussed in section 2.5 as a structuring framework.

3.2. Stimulating transitions in the 'Hondsrug'

In the Hondsrug project SST is used to develop the Hondsrug region, located in the Dutch province of Drenthe. The name Hondsrug refers to a moraine, a ridge in the landscape that is formed during an ice age, and is characterised by prehistoric megalithic tombs. A coalition of local and regional governments and governmental agencies selected storytelling as a strategic tool to raise awareness about the Hondsrug's heritage and to utilize the potentials of historic features for recreational and tourism development. The project includes the ambition to acquire the status of 'Geopark[2]' and therefore features framing the region as Geopark Hondrug. The project was executed between early 2011 to early 2014 with a total budget of 2.27 million euro.

3.2.1. Paving the way for strategic storytelling

The transition perspective makes us aware that the catalyst function of SST should be considered in the context of developments of the past. In the pre-development phase of the Hondsrug project we can identify the stages of establishing actor networks, agenda setting and mobilising in-region resources (transition stage 1–3). Initiators of the project build on these developments of the past, which thereby had a major effect on paving the way to select and pursue storytelling.

The project start-up relates to the work of two thematic 'working groups' on tourism, and heritage and geology. These would later in time

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[1] Inspiration to do so relates to the report 'Kansen voor het Platteland' [Opportunities for rural areas] published in 2005 by an advisory commission for socio-economic affairs and the 'Manifest van Hattem' [Manifesto of Hattem] published in 2006 by a group of pioneering entrepreneurs.

[2] 'Geopark' is a status awarded by the European Geopark Network (EGN) that operates under the auspices of UNESCO to areas that include geological heritage and a sustainable (tourism) development strategy.

unify and provide the signifying agents that advocated the use of SST for destination development. The heritage and geology group explored the concept of Geoparks and by doing so identified how stories can be used to raise awareness about the uniqueness and importance of geological elements. This group was created in 2006 in the context of heritage gaining a more dominant position in European, Dutch national and provincial policies on spatial development. The tourism group identified that, on study trips to the regions Verdun, France and Ruhr, Germany how local histories supply place based spatial qualities that can be used in stories to create tourism experiences. This group was created in 2009 in the context of tourism destination development becoming an increasingly important factor in enhancing liveability in the Hondsrug region in terms of sustaining employment, maintaining public facilities, retail, and infrastructure. Several members of both of the working groups took part in interprovincial networks and attended meetings on storytelling by STIRR and IPO. These organisations were among the Dutch national institutions emphasising the potential of strategic storytelling for the development of tourism and recreation. A call for project proposals by a regional subsidy program formed a major stimulus for the members to join forces, collaborate and write a substantive and integrative project proposal to increase their chances of success.

Articulating stories became a major part of the project design as it could strike a chord between the ambitions of preserving heritage and developing the tourism industry. Funding for the proposal was granted because of the following factors. First, the project pursues synergies between spatial qualities and socio-economic development, being in line with provincial policy documents on spatial development and heritage. Second, the stories were supported for being (pre)defined in consultation with credible experts and for covering the region from a historical and geographical perspective. The latter was included deliberately to meet the interests of the various project stakeholders. Third, the use of storytelling was endorsed because credible institutions (VROMraad, IPO) were actively drawing attention to the potential of the approach and its similarities with successful strategies encountered abroad. Fourth, the Geopark status and the EGN and UNESCO offer internationally renowned brands and platforms for marketing purposes and raising awareness. Fifth, the two provincial representatives that are politically responsible for environmental and economic affairs committed themselves to the idea of Geopark Hondsrug and operated as intermediaries by chairing meetings with local municipalities and societal organisations to garner (co-financial) support for the project. These factors contributed to the start of the project 'Geopark Hondsrug' early 2011 with a budget of 2.27 million euro.

These factors show the complexity of introducing storytelling. It requires amongst others knowledge of storytelling to be widely disseminate, resource availability, political support, actions by signifying agents, well-crafted and credible stories and salient project outcomes (more tourists, linkages to international brands and platforms). Moreover, mobilising (governmental) actors and (public) resources for strategic storytelling requires organising capacity and benefits from ideas that fit in with governmental policies and political ambitions. Theories of transitions and transitions management argue that when this is the case, the actions of actors in different domains have a greater potential to interlock and reinforce one another, thereby increasing the potential of stimulating the transition of regions that are in the process of developing as tourism destinations.

3.2.2. How signifying agents strategically use stories and contribute to destination development

The Hondsrug project mainly revolves around articulating a set of eleven stories[3] (transition stage 4) and enhancing regional and external

connectedness (transition stage 5). Articulating stories contribute to destination development in a variety of ways, for instance by means of signage, landscape art, landscape design and infrastructure development. When articulated, each story tells the tale of a specific part of the area's past (e.g. Ice Age) and ties together a set of sites, histories, expositions, activities, events and facilities. Geographically, every story is connected to either a museum or visitor centre that serves as the main node in a local network of places of interest. The stories are therefore used as *products* to enhance societal awareness about heritage values and to attract recreationists from the region and the (inter)national tourism community. Stories are also used as *tools in a process* to trigger local communities, entrepreneurs and their associations, governmental institutions and organisations at different levels to adopt the idea of Geopark Hondsrug and contribute to its development. How stories are used as products and as tools in collaborative processes is discussed in detail below.

A small project agency was made responsible for elaborating the eleven stories and entrusted with the task to unite actors and persuade them to further develop the area as Geopark. The agency could start immediately because its members were involved in writing the project proposal. This made them knowledgeable about the project, familiar with the region, its origin and history, and well embedded in the organisational and institutional fabrics of the region. Moreover, the content for three stories largely pre-existed (Ice Age, Peat and Prehistory). Results could therefore be generated and communicated in an early phase of the project. The stories are used strategically for the purpose of bridging and bonding (cf. Putnam, 2000).

The strategy of bonding concerns using storytelling to reinforce the existing connectivity between actors. Politicians and governmental officials are invited periodically for events or study trips such as to other Geoparks. A partner network has been established to strengthen the ties with entrepreneurs and societal organisations. The project agency interacts frequently with societal organisations and entrepreneurial associations and uses various media channels for information dissemination. The purpose of these efforts is to inspire and enthuse actors in order to reproduce commitment, mobilise additional resources and trigger tourism developments. As such, the project agency operates as an intermediary organisation that reinforces connections between various actors, organisations and institutions at different governance levels.

The strategy of bridging concerns using stories to establish new connections. First, stories are disseminated via different strategies (Table 1) to provide information to inhabitants and visitors about the regions' unique histories and characteristics, for reasons of preservation and to display tourism activities. Second, the project agency seeks frequent interaction with entrepreneurs and societal organisation to discuss the Geopark concept and progress of the project to inform, enthuse and invite these actors to use the stories and link their activities to the stories and the Geopark concept to contribute to the goals of the agency. A representative from the agency mentioned that it remains difficult because entrepreneurs active in the tourism industry tend to focus on operational matters at the business level over strategic planning at the regional level. Third, the agency tries to use other projects that relate to geology and spatial development to enrich the contents of the stories and generate publicity. Examples are the EU Leader project 'HINT' (Heritage Interpretation using New Technologies) and the development of the 'Veenvaart' (a new canal crossing the moraine). Fourth, the stories were successfully used as part of a plan to apply for the Geopark status. The status was awarded in September 2013 and allows the use of an internationally renowned label (Geopark) and offers connections to new networks (EGN, UNESCO). These are important platforms for raising awareness and branding, and reinforce both the bridging and bonding function of storytelling.

3.2.3. Sustaining the impact of SST on destination development

The transition perspective also draws attention to iteratively revisiting the transition stages and developing an adaptive approach to

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[3] Stories and year of completion: Ice ages, 2012; Peat, 2012; Prehistory, 2012; Farmers, 2013; War and peace, 2013; Forestry, 2013; Nature and landscape, 2013; Artists, 2013; Water, 2013; Belief and disbelief, 2014; Folk culture, 2015.

Table 1

Strategies for raising awareness and information dissemination (based on interviews with initiators).

- The creation of a corporate identity to link actions and activities to the Geopark Hondsrug concept.
- The dissemination of information through websites, traditional and social media, an application for mobile devices, augmented reality technology, brochures, signage, events, expositions, public media database.
- The installation of the Hondsrug academy to offer lectures and courses related to the stories.
- The commissioning of (public) art to (re)produce awareness and generate (media) attention. Examples are the display of recovered monoliths from the ice age in public spaces throughout the region, and an art project to add new polished stones to various places in the landscape.
- The organisation of yearly events: a 'geology week, a symposium to present and reflect on (prospective) achievements, revealing (newly discovered) geological monuments.

storytelling (transition stage 6). In the Hondsrug case we found that stages are revisited. Already during the project stories are used to reinforce actor networks and garner support for the project's aims. This strategy contributed to the decision of local and regional governmental agencies to continue the Hondsrug project and provide funds until 2016. Moreover, the organisational structure will be revised after the project period to better include representatives of entrepreneurs and inhabitants in an advisory board, and to install a scientific committee to continuously enrich, renew and expand the stories.

Such an adaptive approach is also important to manage the dynamic environment wherein storytelling takes place. For instance, the institution at which the Hondsrug project was formally registered was disbanded during the project period which created financial insecurity and delayed the project. Also subsidy cuts are prospected in the cultural sector for museums and visitor centres. This may affect the project outcomes as the storytelling strategy draws on the viability of various cultural facilities that are used as main nodes in a network of places of interest. Losing the Geopark status could also inhibit the destination development of the Hondsrug region. Potentially, the status could be repealed which might negatively affect resource allocation and development momentum. Furthermore, articulating captivating stories and garnering support needs to be organised and funded. An interviewee sees that entrepreneurs in the tourism industry are unable to do so on their own, and argues that "*in the long term I see a need for governments, for public funding, especially to sustain the project agency and organisational networking*" (interview, employee Hondsrug project agency).

3.3. Stimulating transitions in the 'Friese Meren'

In the Friese Meren project SST is used to develop the 'Friese Meren' area, situated in the province of Friesland, the Netherlands. Friese Meren is a lake district and is known as a hub for water sports. A coalition of tourism entrepreneurs introduced storytelling as a strategic tool to stimulate investments that enhance Friese Meren as a destination for tourism and recreation. Their aim is to develop a shared and enhanced understanding of the tourism industry and to highlight a sense of urgency to act and improve the region its competitive position. The project was executed between early 2010 and early 2011with a total budget of 0.15 million euro commissioned by the province of Friesland as part of a large scale water infrastructure program. The use of strategic storytelling revolves around the process of defining stories, which contrasts to the Hondsrug case where stories were largely predefined prior to the start of the project.

3.3.1. Paving the way for strategic storytelling

The transition perspective makes us aware that the catalyst function of SST should be considered in the context of developments of the past. In the pre-development phase of the Friese Meren project we can identify efforts aimed at establishing actor networks, agenda setting

and mobilising in-region resources (transition stage 1–3). These allowed the initiators of the project to build on and benefit from a set of developments of the past and had a major effect on paving the way to select and pursue storytelling.

The selection of storytelling is the result of a sequence of actions by an actor network of tourism entrepreneurs, operating as signifying agents. A key moment in the formation of this actor network was a regional marketing project for the lake district, supported by local municipalities and executed between 2005 and 2008. An interviewee argued that in hindsight the project was important because it '*hugely expanded and broadened everyone's network*'. Moreover, it made entrepreneurs recognize that '*the region was a comfortable size and scale for cooperation*' and revealed that '*we had too little knowledge of the region as well as of leisure as a phenomenon*' (interview, tourism entrepreneur). Subsequently, to expand their knowledge about destination development and to explore the potentials of storytelling, the entrepreneurs contacted the authors of the 2006 VROMraad report on storytelling (see section 3) – one was involved in the preparation of the report and became inspired. Multiple meetings and a study trip to 'Heuvelland' (cf. Boelens, 2010) motivated the entrepreneurs to further pursue storytelling and search for partners and resources to do so.

Partners and resources were found largely within the realm of governments. Multiple factors were important for a public-private coalition to agree on and select storytelling as a strategy to stimulate destination development. First, entrepreneurs experienced the potential of storytelling in practice during study trips. Second, Dutch national institutions emphasised the potential of storytelling (see section 2). Third, the idea of storytelling found resonance in the context of an investment program in the water infrastructure of the province of Friesland. The board of the water infrastructure program was knowledgeable about storytelling, as it represented the province of Friesland in the interprovincial coordination body (IPO). In this position, board members successfully suggested the Friese Meren project as one of the pilot cases to be included in a state supported innovation program on storytelling (see section 2). Moreover, the program ambitions to redevelop waterfronts and improve connections between the water and the mainland aligned with the potentials of strategic storytelling. The program offered the supportive funding opportunities and the board of the program could mobilise (public) resources for a storytelling project.

The actions of state institutions, local entrepreneurs and board members of the provincial investment program linked local, regional and national governance levels, and paved the way for a storytelling project. Nevertheless, a key event that strongly increased momentum took place in 2009. Again, the tourism entrepreneurs contacted the authors of the 2006 VROMraad report, this time inviting them to the region to explain to regional stakeholders that storytelling could be concretized in a project and result in a set of feasible business concepts. Amongst these stakeholders were tourism entrepreneurs from the region, governmental officials, and the provincial representative responsible for recreation and tourism. The event motivated this actor network to pursue storytelling, pool resources and commission a 0.15 million euro project.

These findings reveal, in line with the Hondsrug case, the complexity of introducing storytelling. It requires knowledge of storytelling to be widely disseminate, resource availability, political support, actions by signifying agents, networking activities, etc. It once more stresses that mobilising (governmental) actors and (public) resources requires organising capacity and fitting in with governmental policies and political ambitions. Then, the actions of actors in different domains may interlock and reinforce one another, thereby stimulating the transition of regions that in the process of developing as tourism destinations.

3.3.2. How signifying agents strategically use stories and contribute to destination development

The Friese Meren project uses mainly on the process of defining credible and salient stories about desirable future situations to inspire

tourism entrepreneurs and governments to further stimulate destination development. In doing so the emphasis is on establishing a regional actor network (transition stage 1) and defining a set of project plans and business concepts to influence development agendas (transition stage 2). A project group was created to execute the project in the period between early 2010 and early 2011. A coalition of high-end, credible consultants designed the process of articulating stories. One entrepreneur and a governmental official from the province of Friesland related a large scale water infrastructure program were included to operate as intermediaries between the consultants and a broader group of entrepreneurs, politicians and governmental agencies. This composition was deliberately chosen to stimulate a multi-actor, collaborative process and to ensure that outcomes would be considered salient and credible by the various parties. The design of the process included the following steps:

- First, an area analysis was executed by the consultants to articulate competitive elements and relevant stakeholders, using as a point of departure a prior analysis of the regional agency for rural projects ['Plattelânsprojekten']. "*There were good ideas*" but some findings were less credible for being "*too distant from the region*" (interview, tourism entrepreneur).
- Second, a strategic meeting was held with a mixture of public and private actors from within the region. The meeting enhanced mutual awareness about agendas for socio-economic and spatial development and revealed that many actors found themselves in a common enterprise.
- Third, multiple thematic workshops were held with entrepreneurs from different sectors and from within and outside the region as means to elaborate stories and feasible business concepts to stimulate destination development. These workshops yielded two stories: 'Sailing School of Europe' and 'Clean and Pure'. The stories found resonance for portraying desirable outlooks on the future and for building on regional characteristics such as the lake district, water sports, and distinctive spatial and socio-cultural factors that provide for a sense of authenticity and emphasise quality of life.
- The action plan 'Nieuwe Markten Zuidwest Fryslân' [New Markets for southwest Friesland] published early 2011 marked the end of the project. The plan distinguishes thirty project plans and business concepts to stimulate destination development. The action plan also recognizes the importance to further invest in knowledge development, in enhancing connectedness through entrepreneurial networks that contribute to organising capacity, and in regional partnerships that tie together public and private actors and resources. As such, the plan suggests a set of follow-up steps that may persuade actors to initiate projects and contribute to destination development.

The contribution of SST is mainly on an organisational level, contributing to the formation of regional actor networks and agenda setting. The process of generating stories serves a bridging purpose of reaching out to more external stakeholders and a bonding purpose of strengthening in-region ties and institutionalising entrepreneurial networks. These steps concern stage 1 and 2 of stimulating transitions, and provide a foundation for follow-up actions that relate to stages of mobilising in-region resources, executing projects and furthering regional connectedness (stage 3–5). The project could be seen as an intermediate step in a larger, longer term transition process.

3.3.3. Sustaining the impact of SST on destination development

The transition perspective draws attention to the importance of iteratively revisiting the transition stages and developing an adaptive approach to storytelling. In the Friese Meren case the contours are emerging of an organisational structure that could grow out to become a regional governance system that is capable to revisit and reproduce stories, actor networks, transition agendas, development projects, and mobilise resources (transition stage 6). After the formal end of the project, involved entrepreneurs established the entrepreneurial

association 'Fries Merenland' to operate more cohesively and cooperate more extensively to strengthen their organising capacity. The association allows governments to better connect to what entrepreneurs find salient. This has led to the municipality Súdwest Fryslân adopting large parts of the action plan in their strategic vision on tourism development, published in March 2013. So far, the association took action to start a feasibility study for a regional visitor centre and implement a rental system for electric bicycles. It also co-organises workshops with public and private actors from within and outside of the region, in the context of the state innovation program on storytelling, to share experiences, stimulate in-region knowledge development and ultimately stimulate development projects.

Reinforcing connectedness between actors to mobilise and pool resources (time, people, knowledge, finances) in order to enhance the organising capacity remains problematic, however. The tourism industry consists of many small scale businesses that lack the time, personnel and finances to invest in such connections. An intermediary project agency could take this role, and coordinate and stimulate projects, as is the case for Geopark Hondsrug. In the case of Friese Meren entrepreneurs feel that funding for such an agency needs to come from governments. This inhibits further development because "*[t]he province contributes when municipalities do. That is where it stalls. Municipalities were not well involved from the beginning of the process. That is what we find out now*" (STIRR, 2012, pp. 3–4, translation by authors).

4. Discussion: strategic storytelling as a development catalyst?

The case studies show that strategic storytelling (SST) can act as a development catalyst for destination development. However, this catalyst function is situational as it yields different effects for different regions. Development may manifest itself in terms of spatial development but outcomes could also be less visually perceptible, such as an enhanced connectivity and cooperation between actors within a region. The Friese Meren project is in a relatively early stage, revolving around forming actor partnerships, pursuing agenda setting, and aiming to mobilise resources to execute development projects. More advanced is the Hondsrug project, which is successful in mobilising resources, executing projects, furthering connectedness, and establishing a more permanent organisation to sustain storytelling in the future. The analysis of these projects also draws attention to the following more general factors that contribute to the catalyst function of SST.

Ensure that the potential contribution of storytelling to destination development is known by actors on multiple levels. In the Netherlands, various governmental institutions emphasise the potentials of storytelling to stimulate destination development. The result is that potential initiators ('signifying agents') with a capacity to mobilise resources for storytelling projects become knowledgeable about the potentials and applications of storytelling. Storytelling could then be selected as a strategy at the moment local and regional development issues arise that open up room for new policy proposals.

Use stories to create bridges and reinforce bonds between actors. The bridging function refers to the use of stories to forge new linkages between actors. Stories could be used for awareness raising, marketing and branding purposes to interest, attract and bind visitors, inhabitants and tourism-related businesses from within and outside of the region. Stories can also be used to other public and/or private development projects and programs and to organisations and institutions that operate on larger governance levels, such as in our cases provincial governments, IPO, STIRR and EGN. The bonding function refers to the use of stories (and the process of articulating stories) as instruments to reinforce existing linkages between actors and contribute to more cohesive actor networks. The formation of actor networks stimulates organising capacity by easing information dissemination, reinforcing commitment and mobilising resources. The combination of bridging and bonding contributes to uniting actors, persuading them to mobilise resources, and initiate development plans and projects.

Actively produce, materialise and disseminate stories. The cases show that strategic storytelling also includes investments in organisational capacity and the materialisation of stories. Critical are intermediary actors or agencies that actively produce and use stories to interlink entrepreneurs, societal organisations, business associations, and (semi-) government agencies and persuade these actors to commit to a course of action that underlie the stories. The materialisation of stories concerns for instance infrastructure development, landscape art and all other aspects listed in Table 1. These actions have the capacity to enrich as well as revise stories.

Evaluate and adjust stories and supportive organisational structures. Revising stories is needed to reinforce their salience and credibility in the face of changes in for instance the economy, technology, demography, and politics. These can alter situations and change actors their preferences, interests, intentions, and courses of action. When stories become interpreted as too selective or specific by excluding particular actors, ideas and perspectives, destination development can be inhibited in their transition. In addition, as is shown by the Hondsrug case, adapting systems of governance could be necessary to attract and include new or other actors and resources that are relevant for continuing storytelling. Part of strategic storytelling is the capacity to evaluate and adapt the organisational (infra)structure (transition stage 6).

Including theories on transitions into the analysis of the projects offered the perspective that using strategic storytelling to stimulate destination development is about engaging in a potentially long term process of socio-economic and spatial transformation. These theories help to show that the emergence, design and execution of storytelling projects are influenced by a combination of prior events on multiple governance levels. Furthermore, the set of transition stages were useful to examine and discuss the contribution of strategic storytelling to destination development. In doing so the research learns (future) users of strategic storytelling to carefully consider the particular context of the target region as this can greatly affect how SST can be used and which outcomes can be expected. The research also identifies that using SST in the context of transitions requires an adaptive approach to storytelling in order to maintain and improve its mobilising capacity.

Author contributions

Stefan Hartman is lead researcher. Responsible for research design, fieldwork, analysis and reporting.

Constanza Parra is main co-author. Co-responsible for research design and analysis.

Gert de Roo is co-author. Co-responsible for research design and conceptual support.

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