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STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN THE PUBLIC PLANNING PROCESS – THE CASE OF THE PROPOSED 12 APOSTLES VISITOR CENTRE[1]

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STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT IN THE PUBLIC PLANNING PROCESS – THE CASE OF THE PROPOSED 12 APOSTLES VISITOR CENTRE

Abstract

A range of stakeholders should inform planning processes if these processes are to be consistent with best practice principles. This paper examines the case of the 12 Apostles Visitor Centre, a tourism development which was proposed to be located in a National Park in Victoria, Australia. Limited opportunities were provided for meaningful stakeholder input during the planning phase. Despite the prevailing view amongst all major parties that some development of facilities would be appropriate, an absence of genuine consultation was experienced prompting a substantial redesign of the development concept as originally conceived (in 1996) and to project delays which postponed the commencement of the development into 2000 by which time a new State Government was in place.

Introduction

Tourism activity and its associated infrastructure, has assisted in the economic and social development of communities, regions and nations internationally (Lankford 1994, Sreekumar and Parayil 2002, Tooman 1997). Despite the wide and well documented range of potential benefits that arise from tourism, it has been observed that these are often shared inequitably across the various stakeholder groups (Dearden 1991). Developing initiatives that are capable of achieving all stakeholder goals and objectives may be difficult if not impossible (Wood and Jones 1995). This may be the case in certain circumstances, because the interests of all parties are not given equal consideration, with broader social and environmental goals being traded off against economic concerns (Huang and Stewart 1996). This may lead to short-sighted opportunism, in cases where a narrowly focussed economic perspective is adopted (Tosun and Timothy 2001). If real long-term benefits are to be achieved for all stakeholders, tourism developments must be sustainable across a wide range of indicators.

The goal of sustainable tourism development is not readily achievable, partly because the concept of sustainability means different things to different stakeholders (Eccles and Costa 1996). Some groups view sustainable tourism as a means of protecting the natural and cultural environment for future generations. Others view sustainable tourism as a means of ensuring an ongoing flow of tourists both short and long-term. The "economic rationalist" perspective may downplay the interests of those stakeholders least able to protect themselves. This is often encountered in the case of the natural environment and local communities particularly in developing countries. Ideally there should be proper recognition and protection of the rights

of nature (Starik 1995). However, pinpointing the critical stakeholder group with major responsibility for the protection of the natural environment is highly contested. Many groups may claim this role as their responsibility (Jayawardena 2003). For this reason it is important to identify the stakeholder consideration, and to define a consensus amongst the relevant groups. For example, there is widespread and ongoing debate amongst environmentalists in Victoria and elsewhere regarding the suitability of wind farms. While some groups promote wind farms because of their capacity to supplement traditional energy generation thereby reducing greenhouse gasses, others argue that the harm to ecosystems and visual pollution does not warrant their introduction (Haskell 2002). When one of these views is incorporated into the planning process, the other party may complain that their interests were inadequately addressed. Whilst this example illustrates the difficulty of achieving unanimity of purpose and views amongst stakeholders, it should be noted that the primary purpose of national parks is conservation and that this has long been enshrined in legislation. This is indicative that the dynamics of the current case are distinct from those of the development of wind farms in non-protected areas.

In the context of tourism planning, there is a growing recognition that decision-making should consider a wide range of stakeholders (Gregory and Keeney 1994, Pforr 2002). The inclusion of multiple internal and external stakeholders within the context of policy development has also been discussed widely within the broader business literature (Altman and Petkus 1994, Hastak et al. 2001, Polonsky et al 1999). Within the broader sustainability literature it has been shown that the management of complex networks of stakeholder relationships can lead to positive environmental outcomes (Lober 1997). This said, the presence of effective stakeholder networks alone is not necessarily sufficient to bring about positive outcomes (Stafford et al 2000). The determination of appropriate approaches, strategies and practices for dealing with complex business networks, is a growing area of interest in the management field (Rowley 1997) and the marketing field (Polonsky et al 1999, Wilkinson and Young 2002). Similar principles may be applied to the implementation of tourism policy. There is also an extensive tourism literature focusing on how various stakeholders interact during the planning processes (for example, Bramwell and Lane 2000; King, McVey and Simmons 2000; Pforr 2002, Tsoun and Timothy 2001).

The various literatures have clearly identified that the management of stakeholder relationships is complex (Pforr 2002, Tosun and Timothy 2001). As was suggested

previously, it is not necessarily easy to identify the full range of relevant stakeholders. Even after the groups have been identified successfully no consensus view may emerge, especially where competing interests are evident. Business groups may wish, for example, to stimulate the business base associated with tourism, whereas environmental groups seek to maintain the integrity of the locations/sites and ecology. Local government may wish to ensure that balanced goals are achieved and that systematic processes are applied to evaluate the most appropriate use of resources (Jayawardena 2003). In other situations, there may be disagreement over who is responsible for the environmental problems that need to be addressed (Kavallinis and Pizam 1994). This makes it difficult to develop solutions and allocate responsibility to relevant groups and individuals. Developing systems that allow for effective tourism planning requires processes that ensure adequate consideration for all network or stakeholder interests (Pforr 2002).

The challenge of achieving constructive engagement within the tourism development process is exacerbated in the case of public assets managed by various levels of government on behalf of the citizenry, though in the present case, responsibility was vested in the state-based authorities (Altman and Petkus 1994, Mundt 1993). On the one hand governmental bodies may have the "authority" to coordinate the planning and determination of resource uses. However they still need to make "tradeoffs" between the competing stakeholder interests, as well as ensuring that the community's longer-term goals are achieved (Gregory and Keeney 1994). It is most likely that the planning process will be effectively managed in cases where governmental bodies are viewed as impartial referees.

In tourism planning, governments often take on the responsibility of managing natural assets on the grounds that intrinsic values should be maintained for the benefit not only of today's users but also for future generations (King et al 2000, Murphy 1985). However other parts of government are primarily concerned with ensuring the economic prosperity of local communities and may not regard ecological sustainability as fundamental to that. Within this process the multiple roles of government may periodically be viewed as reflecting (consisting as) a conflict of interest in instances where different arms of government take on the role of both regulator and stakeholder. Such concerns about the role of government may also arise in cases where stakeholders regard government "responsibilities" as impinging on their interests. The complex and frequently divergent group interests may include; adjoining communities, associated businesses whose survival depends on attracting visitors, indigenous communities

with a spiritual connection and/or traditional ownership of the adjoining lands and relevant environmental lobby groups. Establishing a degree of consensus amongst these diverse interests is no simple task (King et al 2000, De Lacy and Boyde 2000, Pforr 2002, Ritchie 2000, Timothy 2000, Starik 1995). The multiplicity of interests explains in part why conflict frequently arises in planning related to tourism activities.

With a view to examining the issue of stakeholder involvement in the tourism planning process, this paper first examines examples of government planning for tourism-related developments that have adopted an active engagement with stakeholders. It then looks in detail at an example in South Western Victoria where a failure to consider such views compromised the eventual outcome. The lessons learned from this failed process are then discussed.

Stakeholder Collaboration and Tourism Planning

Tourism planning issues encountered across a range of settings have attracted considerable interest from academics. Such settings have included the developed countries (for example, Jayawardena (2003) and Bramwell and Lane (2000)), in the least developed countries (for example, Gregory and Keeney 1994, Kavallinis and Pizam 1994 and Sinclair and Jayawardena 2003) and in countries underdoing transition (Tosun and Timothy 2001). Eccles and Costa (1996) have suggested that there are different emphases within the tourism planning process in different settings (eg. the extent to which power is vested in local government authorities) thereby impacting differentially upon stakeholders. These authors did not however focus on the processes that have been used. Other authors such as Tosun and Timothy (2001) have outlined a set of nine different shortcomings affecting tourism planning. Several of these have suggested that not all stakeholders were considered, that there was excessive centralization, an excessive focus on supply or demand and the lack of a community-based approach.

There is a substantial literature on tourism policymaking. Typically this literature emphasises the role and functions of government in tourism, though the part played by pressure groups including industry, the voluntary sector and the non-government organizations has been given the increasing coverage (Elliot 1997). Policymaking has been considered as a technical activity by some authors (Sessa 1983) whereas other such as Hall, have given a greater

emphasis to the exercise of power through decision-making (Hall, Jenkins and Kearsey 1997). There has been increasing interest in comparative policymaking across different nations and jurisdictions, with a view to identifying both similarities and differences. In Australia for example some authors have compared the various approaches adopted by Australian states and territories towards tourism-policymaking, suggesting there needs to be a more consistent approach (Lamb 1988). In this context the findings of studies such as the one reported in this paper are useful for informing the wider debate about approaches adopted in particular state locations.

Bramwell and Lane (2002) have focused on the deployment of collaborative approaches in various international settings including natural areas and have suggested that successful tourism planning requires extensive stakeholder collaboration. Since the decision network generally involves several public policy making units at both national and local levels, collaborative networks involving stakeholders are characterised by complexity. These collaborative networks may also involve statutory bodies whose jurisdiction extends across national boundaries. Timothy (2000) has examined US-Canadian partnerships in relation to national parks and has shown that the number of parties and issues involved is multiplied across boundaries and requires cooperation amongst park-related organisations in matters such as policing, taxation and migration. Multi-national collaborative networks appear to involve greater complexity than those confined to a single jurisdiction or state.

The enhancement of destination attractiveness is a central concern of tourism management and this involves collaboration between the public and private sectors. Given this important interface it is unfortunate that most investigators of the role and function of stakeholder coordination have paid minimal attention to the generic stakeholder management literature. The early tourism literature had a strong focus on the relationship between the planning process and communities where a diverse range of resident concerns and interests must be considered (Murphy 1985). It is only more recently however, that a number of tourism researchers have begun to view such concerns and interests specifically in the context of stakeholder analysis (Bramwell and Lane 2000).

The balancing act that occurs within statutory planning associated with land-use has some parallels with the way in which stakeholders are managed within public and/or private organizations (Roberts and King 1989). In both cases, a network of stakeholders needs to be

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considered in the process of determining outcomes although more structured procedures appear to apply in the case of the public planning process (Murphy 1985). Even where processes are in place, there is a tendency to give inadequate consideration to the complexity and unintended consequences of the associated decisions. Regardless of which process is adopted, it is critical that stakeholders that are identified have their views considered and that an appropriate outcome is determined. There is in fact not one approach for integrating stakeholders into the decision process. Zoller has proposed several approaches, which may engage the involvement of key stakeholders (1999). These include Steering Committees, Round Tables, Citizen Panels and Consensus Conferences as well as adhering to statutory requirements for a process which incorporates public exhibition and/or consultation.

According to Zoller an appropriate stakeholder process should: a) involve stakeholders who are willing to learn from one another; b) be characterised by a shared interest in the issue under consideration; c) involve the allocation of adequate resources to facilitate the communication process; d) ensure the receipt of sufficient and comprehensive information; e) be flexible in terms of process/issues and allow for progressive change; f) involve early dialogue so no options are precluded; g) be facilitated by a neutral party; and g) involve all stakeholders from the beginning.

Within the tourism planning literature a variety of processes have been explicitly identified for managing stakeholder participation (Timothy 2000, Ritchie 2000). Broadly in line with those proposed by Zoller (1999), common features have included the following:

1. All relevant stakeholders need to have a capacity to provide input into the process.
2. The groups need to be willing to listen to other points of view, with a view to gaining a basic understanding of the perspectives of other stakeholders.
3. The processes should be iterative, with a view to facilitating ongoing dialogue where parties discuss potential directions.
4. An element of centralized coordination is required since information flows should occur between the various stakeholders.

In the management focused literature on stakeholders the firm is identified as the focal unit in the decision-making process, although it has been argued that each stakeholder within the network *could* be considered a focal point in its own right (Polonsky et al 1999, Rowley 1997,

Wilkinson and Young 2002). The tourism stakeholder literature has identified governmental departments, independent coordinating bodies, and organizations aiming to progress various activities as focal points. Some groups outside the normal consideration set may regard themselves as the appropriate focal point of the decision-making process thereby adding to the potential for conflicting expectations. In practice, any decision may be interpreted from the particular perspective of any member of the network. Within the management literature, this issue has been widely considered though no attempt has been made as yet to consider the merit of designating multiple actors as focal units (Polonsky et al 1999, Rowley 1997, Wilkinson and Young 2002). The multi-dimensional aspect of the network (eg public, private and voluntary) may go some way to explaining why governmental involvement is central to tourism stakeholder networks (King et al 2000). Governments are responsible for planning and managing public assets as well as for arbitrating any disputes between parties and for making trade-offs between the interests of competing stakeholders (Gregory and Keeney 1994). Governments may also be best placed to take a wider range of issues into account and be less preoccupied with the achievement of profitability, although in the context of the present study government was widely viewed as an advocate of a commercially focussed outcome. In some senses they may be better viewed as managing the stakeholder process rather than as being stakeholders themselves.

Hastak, Mazis and Morris (2001) have proposed a six-stage model of the policymaking process and the role of survey research at each stage, which allows a diverse range of stakeholder interests to be considered, even though they did not focus on this issue. The stages included problem identification, building a policy mandate, exploring policy options, executing, then evaluation and finally enforcing the policy. The case study described in the present paper focuses on the "building a policy mandate" stage. It is suggested that lack of communication with stakeholders led to this component being inadequately addressed.

The following example involves a planning process, which may be regarded as a failure from the perspective of most stakeholders. A single governmental body, Parks Victoria, took responsibility for coordinating the development of a proposed asset, the 12 Apostles Visitor Centre, which was to be located in Port Campbell National Park, Southwest Victoria.[2] In this case, the State Government of Victoria embarked upon a process in its capacity as the relevant

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[2] The relevant State planning authority was the Department of Conservation but as a result of a management re-organisation, Parks Victoria assumed responsibility for the development and implementation of management plans.

authority. However the approach that was adopted failed to consider the fundamental principles of stakeholder participation and circumvented the legislative protection which applies to the land in question. The flawed process gave inadequate attention to the legislative requirements associated with land-use and the planning process. When assessed across a range of criteria, the process manifestly failed to integrate stakeholders or their interests. The aim of documenting the case is not to attribute responsibility or blame, but to demonstrate how avoidance of the need for open, inclusive discussions will ultimately inhibit public policy makers from facilitating a proper process of tourism planning. It is hoped that the principles learnt may have wider applicability to the wide range of governmental planning processes referred to by Roberts and King (1989).

The Failed 12 Apostles Visitor Centre

To ensure that a full understanding would emerge of the key issues associated with this case, a qualitative methodology was adopted which involved the conduct of semi-structured interviews with all the various relevant stakeholders. The various questions were formulated around a pre-determined interview schedule. The concepts underlying the interviews were derived from Williams, Penrose and Hawke's Framework and Evaluative Criteria for Shared Decision-Making (1998). The questions were designed to elicit the perspective of stakeholder respondents about the extent to which the principles proposed by Williams' et al were adhered to in the case of the 12 Apostles development. In the Williams' et al model three crucial attitudes are evident. These include a) the clear distinction between decision-making agencies and stakeholder, b) the centrality of citizenship and c) the explicit pursuit of ecological sustainability through the exercise of land use planning. Some of the key issues that were investigated included a) the identification and legitimacy of the various relevant parties, b) the objectives of the overall process and of the participants in particular, c) the structures that were used to facilitate engagement, d) the interactions between key players, e) the decision-making process and f) outcomes including lessons learnt. To analyse the findings, the researchers used a framework based on common themes consistent with the Williams et al framework.

In the early 1990s, several Victorian government departments embarked upon a range of "improvements" to prominent state parks with a view to enhancing the provision of services and providing "world class" visitor infrastructure in attractive natural settings. The

Government sought to develop tourist facilities in the State's key tourism attractions, including along the iconic Great Ocean Road, with a view to enhancing the state's international tourism competitiveness. The Great Ocean Road "Product Region" is significant for domestic and international tourists and is the only regional area in Victoria that is included in the 20 most visited regions and localities within Australia. The $12 million dollar development, which was originally proposed was substantial and was aimed to at enhancing the visitor experience as well as generating revenue for the state and local governments. The case study aims to highlight the deficiencies of the approach which was adopted. A particular failure that is noted concerns adherence to both the spirit and the substance of the National Parks Act, which identifies the primary purpose of such areas as being conservation.

In late 1995, the Victorian Minister for Conservation launched the *Proposal for the Great Ocean Road Visitor Centre,* following input from the National Parks Service and the State organization responsible for tourism (Tourism Victoria). Almost immediately criticisms were received from stakeholders. Residents, environment and park management advisory groups, criticized the project for failing to consider the views of all interested parties, for being inconsistent with government policy generally and in particular with the National Parks Act (1978).

In early 1996 the Chief Executive Officer of the relevant local authority**,** Corangamite Council, suggested that the proposed development would be in conflict with state and local planning controls and that it would lead to negative environmental impacts. Prior to the main development getting underway elected local councils across Victoria had been replaced with State-appointed Commissioners pending a restructure. Other parties including the Port Campbell National Park Consultative Group, provided negative feedback about what they regarded as the excessive scale and scope of the development. A newly established group "Friends of the Apostles" also opposed what they viewed as the "commercialisation" of the National Park and adopted the view that it would be inappropriate to develop an ill-defined commercial tourist complex overlooking the 12 Apostles. With a view to boosting the already significant visitation, the then State Premier defended the Plan on the basis that the visitor centre, restaurant and 300-space car park would enhance the legitimacy of the site as a "leading" and internationally competitive tourist destination.

In 1997 a meeting of 13 key stakeholders was convened by the Minister for Planning and

Local Government to address key issues associated with the plan. In the lead up to the meeting considerable pressure was brought to bear on government through public meetings and media coverage. The meeting was designed to broaden participation and was requested by the National Trust as part of the formal planning process. It was, however, cancelled at short notice and with apparently inadequate explanation, which left stakeholders with limited opportunity to express their concerns formally and/or to obtain official feedback. In the absence of a forum to express different views, opposition to the government's initiative gathered momentum. Indeed, alliances were made with a number of other parks lobbies across the state and a major "Hands Off Our Parks" public rally organized in the State capital Melbourne involved thousands of individuals and organizations representing a divergent set of stakeholders, all of whom were unhappy with the planning process adopted by the State Government.

Later in 1997 the *Proposal for the Great Ocean Road Visitor Centre* was replaced with an alternative concept involving a relocation of the staffed visitor centre to a site to be negotiated within the nearby township of Port Campbell. Static interpretation and public toilets were provided in closer proximity to the Twelve Apostles, although no commercial outlets were to be established. While the avowed intention was to proceed with what was hoped to be a less controversial, dual development, the Government continued to develop its plans with minimal semblance of stakeholder involvement. The proposed plan involved the toilet/interpretation development opposite the Park, but on leased farmland linked by underpass to the Park and was apparently less controversial. Though the revised initiative was less objectionable and was in fact consistent with the original views of a number of groups, opposition was, however, by no means eliminated. Other stakeholders felt that it did not address their key concern, namely adherence to the principle of prohibition on built structures outside existing settlements within the planning scheme, although there was no opposition to the provision of toilets. The conflict amongst the various parties delayed the project and it was not until 1999 that a final revised plan was proposed for the scaled-down activities. It was found that in terms of the Williams' et al terminology, citizens operating through a hastily assembled local lobby and in conjunction with well-established non-government organizations emerged as the chief public advocates for due planning process and for the ecological sustainability of protected areas. In this context "community" may be more accurately described as "citizenry". This may be related to the emerging discipline of political ecology with its analysis of multiple interests with environmental social and economic outcomes. It was also

found that key state-based stakeholders such as the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA) and the National Trust (Victoria) regarded the 12 Apostles as an example of a general threat to the integrity of the National Parks system. It was also found that the indigenous Community was not given an opportunity to participate in the process and that women were significantly under-represented.

Discussion and Implications

Throughout the planning process, most stakeholders appeared to accept the need to enhance the facilities and tourist experience provided on-site. As frequently occurs in developments of this nature however, conflicting views were expressed about the type of development which would best address local and visitor needs (Gregory and Keeney 1994, Ritchie 2000). Conflict was exacerbated by the perception (reinforced by a range of formal statements throughout the process), that Government viewed development of the National Park as synonymous with a commercial venture that would generate revenue and prestige for the state. It was widely believed that there was less focus on the needs of the natural environment (as required in the National Parks Act), on local stakeholders and on residents. Many of the stakeholder groups appeared to hold a different perspective from the government. Significantly, the local Member of Parliament, who was a member of the conservative Coalition Government, expressed strong reservations about the development of a commercial centre in the Park. He played a crucial and supportive role in liaising between community, government and the media. Despite what is recommended in the literature as good practice, there was little attempt to develop a common understanding of the issues or of the various stakeholder agendas (Lober 1997, Ritchie 2000, Zoller 1999).

In the absence of any emerging shared perspective, there was probably little chance that a comprehensive solution would be reached (Lober 1997). The parties disagreed outright on the appropriateness of the various alternative developments. While such conflict might have been resolved with the help of stakeholder consultation, all parties would have needed to discuss alternatives and develop an understanding of the perspectives of other parties. It appears that this did not occur because the Government underestimated the extent of opposition and how this would be exacerbated by a lack of consultation. The activities of the Government seemed to preclude open discussion quite deliberately, thus heightening anxiety and suspicion amongst the various parties. It had the effect of rallying opposition to the Government's plans.

Stakeholder opposition continued unabated, even when a scaled down version was proposed.

Conflict was not prompted exclusively by external factors. The adopted planning processes involved numerous governmental and quasi-governmental bodies, each acting within different domains of control. Tourism Victoria is primarily concerned with the marketing of the state and with the marketability of significant locations in Victoria. Parks Victoria on the other hand is concerned with the management of natural locations, and has special responsibility for the protection of flora and fauna. The organisational restructure and establishment of Parks Victoria, which arose from the new legislation, brought the agendas of Tourism Victoria and Parks Victoria into close alignment. This apparent coalescence of views may have given a false sense of optimism about the prospects for the proposed development. Parks Victoria was a fairly recently constituted entity and there was evidence of internal conflict over the evolving organisational culture. Even if these governmental bodies had been highly focused on their respective goals, the participation of stakeholders in the planning process would still have been essential.

The implications of inappropriate development are significant from the perspective of both tourism and natural resource management. Though most parties agreed that tourist experiences needed to be improved, apparent reluctance to engage with stakeholders generated conflict, suspicion and delays thereby preventing this improvement from developing. The natural environment around the site may have been harmed by the delay, as the lack of infrastructure and ongoing inappropriate tourist visitation resulted in unchecked environmental degradation. In this sense delays, combined with an absence of collaboration, led to a "lose-lose" situation.

The case demonstrates the need to identify and involve key stakeholders from the start of the planning process (Altman and Petkus 1994). It highlights that in instances where all parties are not involved at the start and where the proponent attempts to approach them later with a view to being "inclusive", it may already be too late. Suspicions may already have been aroused and the genuineness of the approach may be questioned, thereby delaying potential solutions to issues or problems. Stakeholder involvement offers a range of potential benefits. The literature suggests that some stakeholders who believe that they have participated in decision-making may even tolerate blunders or errors on the part of the proponents (Polonsky et al 1999). Stakeholder involvement may form the basis for strong relationships upon which

policy makers may subsequently build.

Additional research is warranted to examine how different engagement strategies between governmental bodies organising the planning process can include stakeholders in a supportive fashion. The literature seems to suggest that a range of approaches has been successfully applied in different situations and analysis of why one process has succeeded and another has failed will allow for more effective policy engagement. It may also ensure that outcomes protecting all stakeholders' interests, including the natural environment, are pursued from the outset. This may require that any policy development incorporates measurable indicators of sustainability from the outset, rather than seeking to incorporate this, sometimes as an afterthought, at the insistence of vocal stakeholders.

The study has identified a gap between the rhetoric of community engagement and the process of development in action. It shows some of the dangers associated with excluding the public from access to key information in the name of commercial confidentiality. As has been observed by Yencken, environment should be treated as "the foundation on which all human wellbeing and activity depends "rather than" as a sectional interest of a minority group" (2000 p14). Some of the problems identified in the 12 Apostles development have been addressed by the installation of a new state government. Nevertheless considerable scope exists to eliminate further impediments to citizen involvement in the planning process. The case demonstrates an example of the unlikelihood of sustainable tourism eventuating in the absence of collaborative and inclusive planning as well as an institutional commitment to enforcement.

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