

**Planning nature based tourism aftermath of Hurricane Harvey:  
A case Study from Coastal Texas**

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## **Background & Educational Story**

Hurricane Harvey made landfall in coastal Texas and Louisiana in August 2017 as a Category 4 storm with maximum sustained winds of approximately 200 km h<sup>-1</sup>, causing catastrophic flooding and property damage in the coastal region of Texas and Louisiana (Jonkman et al. 2018). It has a devastating impact on the coastal economy as Harvey made a hurricane that resulted in excessive flooding in these states. The hurricane affected 13 million people and damaged 204,000 homes with the rainfall as much as 60.5 inches in Texas (Amadeo 2018). The Hurricane affected the entire region as thousands of south Texans were deprived of electric power for a few days.

The category 4 winds of the hurricane hit over the city of Rockport exposing the small town of Fulton with the strongest winds with significant damage to structures and residences in the city and surrounding areas. Since nature-based tourism plays an important role in the economy of coastal areas, it is imperative to understand how hurricane Harvey affected nature-based tourism (retailers, fishing guides, hotels, and the restaurant) in this region. Therefore, the overall goal of this case study is to highlight the issues that need to be considered for the short-term and the long-term nature-based tourism planning hurricane through a case study. The case study is primarily built on my discussion with Mr. Randall L. Freeze, intergovernmental coordinator for Aransas County Long-term Recovery Team along with supplemental information from news outlets and other published literature.

## **Management/Leadership Considerations**

Long-run recovery efforts bring unique managerial and leadership challenges. The Rockport-Fulton area, a region largely dependent upon tourism, was economically destabilized due to reduced tourist visitation (Zavar et al. 2019). Therefore, collaborative efforts between government officials, tourism operators, and other NGO partners are needed to ensure employment and income-generating opportunities for the local people. This requires inclusive governance practices in infrastructure planning and facilities construction such that deleterious environmental impacts are minimized.

I have attempted to diagnose the situation of natural resource tourism recovery in coastal Texas through the lens of leadership framework postulated by Bolman and Deal (2013). This framework envisions four frames namely structural frame, human resources form, political frame, and symbolic frame. In the following paragraph, I highlight how these frameworks are well suited to describe the situation of long-run recovery in Texas as it relates to natural resource tourism.

## **Structural Framework**

A successful tourism product requires high-quality facilities and services that provide comfort and a sense of security to the visitors. Long-run recovery efforts need to create an environment where tourism operators feel safe to invest in residential (e.g. hotel, restaurants) services. Since prior-hurricane infrastructure was damaged, long-run recovery efforts are geared towards maintaining and upgrading road conditions, internet access, cellular phone tower maintenance, among others. Within the structural framework, my focus is to consider how the previously established organizational structure might have changed to adapt to new infrastructure and facility needs as they relate to nature-based tourism. Here are common questions that fit into the structural framework.

- Did the intergovernmental coordination exist before Hurricane or was felt necessary aftermath in Aransas county?
- How previously established structure for nature-based tourism promotion in Rockport changed after Hurricane impact?
- Based on the mission of the intergovernmental recovery group, do you have a realistic timeline to achieve the goal?
- How your team coordinates with non-governmental partners, entrepreneurs, and private citizens?
- What is the best way for information to be disseminated under this new structure?

## **Observations through the lens of Structural Framework**

We noticed that there was informal coordination between intergovernmental partners, which was evident from the story telling that we witnessed during our meeting between County Judge, City Mayors, Police Chief, and Extension professionals. Although, it was felt that there was a fair degree of criticism on federal response (FEMA) to hurricane response. Since the post of intergovernmental coordinator was established aftermath of hurricane, this led us to believe that need of formal structure was felt necessary.

## **Human Resource Framework**

Since Hurricane Harvey resulted in widespread community impacts, efficient recovery efforts are only possible if needed human resources to revive natural-based tourism are integrated with other recovery needs. Aransas County was modified to accommodate recovery efforts as they relate to nature-based tourism. Here is a list of some questions that fit into the Human Resources Framework.

- What are the current and future staffing needs to ensure efficient recovery plans in place?
- How intergovernmental recovery team members are paid?
- Is there separate personnel hire to accommodate tourism-related coordination?
- What are specialized training needs for the employees?
- What are your plans to retain employees who might face new challenges?

## **Observations through the lens of human resource framework**

Seeing the issue through the lens of human resource framework, I felt that executive leadership of the county, the County Judge, has done an excellent job in handling the crisis. Although I do not have firsthand information about hiring process, the review of Aransas county long term recovery plan report suggests that needed staff for the recovery team was hired through state assistance (Sea Grant and Texas Work Force Commission). The future staffing needs for recovery plans are outlined in the recovery plan report.

## **Political Framework**

The political frame is an important consideration as rehabilitation efforts of this magnitude are interwoven within the efforts between government, non-government, and the private partners. In particular, since elected officials are rewarded or punished depending upon their role in disaster management, intergovernmental relationships between federal, state, county, and city governments as well as their relationship with other partners has changed the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. In meeting with government officials, I noticed that there was a strong sense of collaboration between city, county, and state government partners. However, local government officials seemed to express dissatisfaction with the process-oriented bureaucracy at the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Within the political framework, my focus is to understand how the political relationship between government, non-government and private sector partners was modified to accommodate recovery efforts as they relate to nature-based tourism. Here is a list of some questions that fit into Political Framework.

- How much power and influence state and federal government has on reshaping rehabilitation and long-term recovery efforts?
- How intergovernmental team cultivate a relationship with the private sector in a way that is mutually beneficial?
- With the new goals of the intergovernmental task force, how do you reach back out to private sector and non-governmental partners to rebuild relationships?
- What new relationships will need to be built to ensure stakeholder support regarding long-term recovery?
- Which sectors of nature based tourism were most at risk?
- Are there any organizations such as NGOs working towards rehabilitation without coordination with your team? If yes, What efforts have been made to coordinate recovery efforts?

## **Observations through the lens of political framework**

Since the United States Congress appropriates the federal disaster response through agencies like FIMA or USDA, federal government is the key player in the recovery efforts. Since we did not meet federal government representatives in our meeting, tactical planning at their end was

not evident. However, review of the long term recovery report suggests meeting between local and federal government partners. Likewise, NGOs such as Sid Richardson Foundation are at the forefront of recovery efforts. More coordinated efforts are likely to develop new relationships. The County Judge, who hold exclusive executive and judiciary power in Texas, was the central figure of the recovery efforts.

### **Symbolic Framework**

Hurricane Harvey has brought multi-faceted societal changes such as out-migration, the arrival of the new people and businesses, loss of tourist attractions as well as amenities. The large-scale evacuation, new engineering projects during rehabilitation, rebuild and self-organization are life events with long-run ramifications. Therefore, adaption requires major cultural changes in the organization, which can be well-described within the symbolic framework. Here is a list of some questions that fit into Symbolic Framework.

- How the public perception of tourism has changed due to ongoing recovery efforts?
- Will Rockport-Fulton remain the same family-friendly tourism destination after recovery?
- Will the arrival of new businesses change long-established relationships within the community?
- What intergovernmental recovery team is doing to preserve the cultural value of Rockport-Fulton as a tourism destination?

### **Observation through the lens of Symbolic Framework**

Our discussion with the County and the City leadership suggests that many residents and low-income renters moved from the area due to housing shortage and the affordability related challenges. The outmigration like this causes shift in socio-demographic dynamics in any area. A strong 'Texas Pride' and determination to 'bring back business as usual' was evident within local leadership as they would often reemphasize that 'they were not ready' to see the area being seen like a 'developing country'.

### **Summative Assessment**

#### **Combined**

- How might the activities of the intergovernmental recovery team be leveraged to revive the tourism?
- What are best practices, as they relate to long-run recovery, to preserve the brand value of area as a premier tourism destination in Texas?

#### **Synthesis**

- You have been hired as a consultant to build a long-run recovery plan. As a group, develop a proposal for intergovernmental recovery team that addresses the questions from above.

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