Case study

Ecotourism and the empowerment of local communities

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Abstract

This research note considers ways in which we may better understand how ecotourism ventures impact on the lives of people living in, and around, the environments which ecotourists frequent. From a development perspective, ecotourism ventures should only be considered 'successful' if local communities have some measure of control over them and if they share equitably in the benefits emerging from ecotourism activities. An empowerment framework is proposed as a suitable mechanism for aiding analysis of the social, economic, psychological and political impacts of ecotourism on local communities. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Ecotourism

Ecotourism is the fastest growing sector, with an estimated growth rate of 10–15%, of one of the largest industries in the world: tourism (Panos, 1997). Ecotourism has been defined as

environmentally responsible, enlightening travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996).

According to this definition, ecotourism can involve both cultural and environmental tourism and, in addition, benefits to the local population should be an integral part of the activity.

The demands of increasingly affluent consumers for 'remote', 'natural' and 'exotic' environments have created an upsurge in ecotourism ventures, particularly in developing countries. Concurrently, within western countries wilderness areas and lands occupied by indigenous peoples have been opened up to the tourism industry. Of

concern is the fact that it is precisely these more remote, less developed tourism areas that ecotourists seek which are most vulnerable to cultural disruption and environmental degradation (Cater, 1993).

While some writers emphasise the potential for ecotourism to promote the well being of both local peoples and their environments, (Hoenegaard, 1994) others caution us from uncritically accepting ecotourism as a common good (Boo, 1990; Ziffer, 1989; Cater & Lowman, 1994). As Cater (p. 85) notes, '... there is a very real danger of viewing ecotourism as the universal panacea, and the ecotourist as some magic breed, mitigating all tourism's ills' (Cater, 1993). Yet romantic notions about the virtues of ecotourism do still seem to guide much of the interest in this sector:

... many governmental agencies and tourism academics have been caught up in the 'sexy', supposedly 'new', forms of tourism such as ecotourism and cultural tourism. There is...a somewhat mistaken belief that these forms of tourism are somehow ethically superior (Hall & Butler, 1995, p. 105).

In practice, with the terms ecotourism and cultural tourism often being used merely as marketing tools, (Thomlinson & Getz, 1996) such forms of tourism are sometimes ethically *inferior*. When business is the main driving force behind ecotourism it is not surprising that the ventures which emerge may serve to alienate, rather than benefit, local communities. In the South Pacific, for

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example,

> ... the concept of ecotourism ... has been promoted within a particularly narrow band of conservation and business thought which has often failed to appreciate the role of social and political values within sustainable tourism development (Rudkin & Hall, 1996, p. 223).

Apparently, therefore, there is a need for an approach to ecotourism which starts from the needs, concerns and welfare of local host communities.

2. Community-based ecotourism

Some writers have suggested that the term 'community-based ecotourism ventures' should be used to distinguish those initiatives which are environmentally sensitive, but which also aim to ensure that members of local communities have a high degree of control over the activities taking place, and a significant proportion of the benefits accrue to them (Liu, 1994; Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). This is in contrast to ecotourism ventures which are controlled wholly by outside operators, and it is also distinct from contexts in which most of the economic benefits of tourism accrue to the government (Akama, 1996). For example, while the slogan for East Africa of 'wildlife pays so wildlife stays' is apt (Ziffer, 1989, p. 2), to date it has mainly 'paid' for governments, foreign tourism companies and local entrepreneurs, rather than returning benefits to local communities.

A community-based approach to ecotourism recognises the need to promote both the quality of life of people *and* the conservation of resources. It is now recognised in parts of Africa, for example, that local people should be compensated for the loss of access to resources they suffer when wildlife parks are created. For example, the Narok Country Council which has jurisdiction over the Masai Mara park puts money into a trust fund which is used to fund schools, cattle dips and health services which benefit the entire community (Sindiga, 1995). In New Zealand, meanwhile, Maori communities are using ecotourism as a means of sustainably utilising physical resources at their disposal in a way which can provide employment options. Ngai Tahu, for example, are training local tribes people to deliver information to compliment tourist activities such as a highly successful Whale Watch venture. They aim to ensure that Ngai Tahu people are well trained so that ecotourism can be both socially and economically sustainable, reviving respect for traditions and enhancing local livelihoods by providing an income for many previously unemployed people (Anon., 1993).

While ecotourism rhetoric suggests that there is much support for community-based ecotourism ventures, it is difficult to find successful cases of this in practice. For example, Woodwood discovered that even the most en-

lightened South African ecotourism operators involved local communities primarily in terms of their public relations value (Woodwood, 1997). There was little commitment to supporting the rights of indigenous peoples to benefit from their traditional lands and wildlife.

A useful way to discern responsible community-based ecotourism is to approach it from a development perspective, which considers social, environmental and economic goals, and questions how ecotourism can '... meet the needs of the host population in terms of improved living standards both in the short and long term' (Cater, 1993, pp. 85–6). This perspective differs somewhat from those approaching ecotourism predominantly from an environmental perspective. Buckley, for example, devised a framework which proposes that ecotourism is based on nature tourism which is sustainably managed, includes environmental education and supports conservation (Buckley, 1994). While Buckley's framework helps us to understand that ecotourism is much more than just a product, nature, he fails to consider whether the quality of life of local communities will be enhanced by ecotourism activities. Meanwhile, Lindberg et al., take an economic perspective when they examine ecotourism case studies from Belize (Lindberg et al., 1996). While they consider the extent to which ecotourism generates economic benefits for local communities, they do not account for how the greater amount of money entering communities might be distributed, or how communities are being affected socially and culturally by the ecotourism ventures. Even where ecotourism results in economic benefits for a local community, it may result in damage to social and cultural systems thus undermining people's overall quality of life (Wilkinson & Pratiwi, 1995). Community-based approaches to ecotourism therefore need to acknowledge the importance of social dimensions of the tourism experience, rather than primarily focusing on environmental or economic impacts.

3. Empowerment framework

The above discussion has demonstrated that the way in which ecotourism is approached is critical to its success in terms of promoting the well being of both local peoples and their environments. In order that local peoples maximise their benefits, and have some control over ecotourism occurring in their regions, Akama has suggested that alternative ecotourism initiatives are needed which aim to empower local people:

> ... the local community need to be empowered to decide what forms of tourism facilities and wildlife conservation programmes they want to be developed in their respective communities, and how the tourism costs and benefits are to be shared among different stakeholders (Akama, 1996, p. 573).

An empowerment framework has been devised to provide a mechanism with which the effectiveness of ecotourism initiatives, in terms of their impacts on local communities, can be determined (Table 1). It should be of assistance to researchers or development practitioners who wish to distinguish responsible forms of ecotourism from those operated by 'eco-pirates', whom Lew describes as '... people who copy existing responsible tourism products, but in a non-responsible manner – typically offering lower prices, inferior experiences, and detrimental environmental and social impacts' (Lew, 1996, p. 723). While not as elaborate as Sofield and Birtles 'Indigenous Peoples' Cultural Opportunity Spectrum for Tourism' (Sofield & Birtles, 1996), the empowerment framework could also be used by communities and development agencies attempting to plan for appropriate community involvement in ecotourism ventures. This is because it highlights areas to which particular attention needs to be paid if ecotourism initiatives are to avoid the traps of many past ventures which disempowered local communities.

Four levels of empowerment are utilised in the framework: psychological, social and political, as based on Friedmann's writing (Friedmann, 1992) and economic empowerment.

3.1. Economic empowerment

When considering whether or not a community have been economically empowered by an ecotourism venture, it is necessary to consider opportunities which have arisen in terms of both formal and informal sector employment and business opportunities. While some economic gains are usually experienced by a community, problems may develop if these are periodic and cannot provide a regular, reliable income. In addition, concerns may arise over inequity in the spread of economic benefits. It is problematic to assume that a 'community'

Table 1
Framework for determining the impacts of ecotourism initiatives on local communities

	Signs of empowerment	Signs of disempowerment
Economic empowerment	Ecotourism brings lasting economic gains to a local community. Cash earned is shared between many households in the community. There are visible signs of improvements from the cash that is earned (e.g. improved water systems, houses made of more permanent materials).	Ecotourism merely results in small, spasmodic cash gains for a local community. Most profits go to local elites, outside operators, government agencies, etc. Only a few individuals or families gain direct financial benefits from ecotourism, while others cannot find a way to share in these economic benefits because they lack capital and/or appropriate skills.
Psychological empowerment	Self-esteem of many community members is enhanced because of outside recognition of the uniqueness and value of their culture, their natural resources and their traditional knowledge. Increasing confidence of community members leads them to seek out further education and training opportunities. Access to employment and cash leads to an increase in status for traditionally low-status sectors of society e.g. women, youths.	Many people have not shared in the benefits of ecotourism, yet they may face hardships because of reduced access to the resources of a protected area. They are thus confused, frustrated, disinterested or disillusioned with the initiative.
Social empowerment	Ecotourism maintains or enhances the local community's equilibrium. Community cohesion is improved as individuals and families work together to build a successful ecotourism venture. Some funds raised are used for community development purposes, e.g. to build schools or improve roads.	Disharmony and social decay. Many in the community take on outside values and lose respect for traditional culture and for elders. Disadvantaged groups (e.g. women) bear the brunt of problems associated with the ecotourism initiative and fail to share equitably in its benefits. Rather than cooperating, individuals, families, ethnic or socio-economic groups compete with each other for the perceived benefits of ecotourism. Resentment and jealousy are commonplace.
Political empowerment	The community's political structure, which fairly represents the needs and interests of all community groups, provides a forum through which people can raise questions relating to the ecotourism venture and have their concerns dealt with. Agencies initiating or implementing the ecotourism venture seek out the opinions of community groups (including special interest groups of women, youths and other socially disadvantaged groups) and provide opportunities for them to be represented on decision-making bodies e.g. the Wildlife Park Board.	The community has an autocratic and/or self-interested leadership. Agencies initiating or implementing the ecotourism venture treat communities as passive beneficiaries, failing to involve them in decision-making. Thus the majority of community members feel they have little or no say over *whether* the ecotourism initiative operates or *the way* in which it operates.

consists of a homogeneous, egalitarian group with shared goals. The power brokers in any society will have considerable influence over who shares in the benefits of tourism projects (Smith, 1996). Recent studies suggest that local elites, particularly men, often co-opt and come to dominate community-based development efforts, thereby monopolising the economic benefits of tourism (Liu, 1994; Akama, 1996; Mansperger, 1995). In determining the success and sustainability of an ecotourism venture, the distribution of economic benefits from ecotourism is just as important as the actual amount of benefits a community may receive (Wilkinson & Pratiwi, 1995).

Economic empowerment or disempowerment can also refer to the local community's access to productive resources in an area now targeted by ecotourism. For example, the establishment of protected areas typically reduces access to hunting and agricultural lands. In addition, protection of wildlife species such as elephants may result in destruction of crops and injuries to livestock and people. Lindberg et al., when studying several ecotourism initiatives in Belize, found that of those households which reported direct damage to fish, livestock or crops by protected area wildlife, less than one-third received direct economic benefits from ecotourism (Lindberg et al., 1996). In terms of the equitable distribution of benefits, this is of concern. It should also be of concern to conservationists given that local people will only continue to support conservation of protected areas if this assists with their own development (Sindiga, 1995).

3.2. Psychological empowerment

A local community which is optimistic about the future, has faith in the abilities of its residents, is relatively self-reliant and demonstrates pride in traditions and culture can be said to be psychologically powerful. In many small-scale, unindustrialised societies, preservation of tradition is extremely important in terms of maintaining a group's sense of self-esteem and well being (Mansperger, 1995). Ecotourism which is sensitive to cultural norms and builds respect for local traditions can, therefore, be empowering for local people. On the other hand, ecotourism which interferes with customs by, for example, interfering with the integral relationship between a group of people and their land, may have devastating effects. Mansperger describes how groups of Yagua Indians of the Peruvian and Colombian Amazon have been relocated by tour operators into regions more accessible to tourists. The Yagua have consequently become dependent on money raised from cultural performances and their obligations to the tour operators mean they have insufficient time to raise crops, hunt and fish, and no land on which to engage in slash-and-burn agriculture. The Yagua are now plagued by various forms of ill-health, and apathy and depression are common place (Mansperger, 1995). These feelings, along with disil-

lusionment and confusion, often indicate psychological disempowerment of a community.

It is in order to avoid such negative effects that some Aboriginal communities in Australia have chosen to shun direct involvement with tourists, instead preferring to earn an income from tourists indirectly by making craft goods or sharing the entry fees to environmentally distinctive areas (Altman & Finlayson, 1993).

3.3. Social empowerment

Social empowerment refers to a situation in which a community's sense of cohesion and integrity has been confirmed or strengthened by an activity such as ecotourism. Strong community groups, including youth groups, church groups and women's groups, may be signs of an empowered community. Social empowerment is perhaps most clearly a result of ecotourism when profits from the tourism activity are used to fund social development projects, such as water supply systems or health clinics, in the local area.

On the other hand, social disempowerment may occur if tourist activity results in crime, begging, perceptions of crowding, displacement from traditional lands, loss of authenticity or prostitution (Mansperger, 1993). Ecotourism is not, by nature, immune from these problems. Inequities in distribution of the benefits of ecotourism, described under 'economic empowerment' above, can also lead to social disempowerment through feelings of ill-will and jealousy which they may foster. For example, one village chief in Yap, Federated States of Micronesia, kept all of the entrance fees to his village for himself. This led some community members to feel that 'Money is making people stingy and therefore harming community spirit' (Sofield & Birtles, 1996, p. 90). In a proposed ecotourism development in Lauvi Lagoon, Solomon Islands, a local 'big man' tried to initiate the ecotourism development with minimal consultation with others in the community, thus resulting in considerable dissension (Rudkin & Hall, 1996). To assume that communities will share unproblematically in the production and benefits of the ecotourism product may be excessively romantic (Taylor, 1995). Clearly in all communities there are inequalities which may be exacerbated by the introduction of a somewhat lucrative industry to which all will not have access.

3.4. Political empowerment

If a community is to be politically empowered by ecotourism, their voices and their concerns should guide the development of any ecotourism project from the feasibility stage through to its implementation. Diverse interest groups within a community, including women and youths, should also have representation on community and broader decision-making bodies. Akama

argues that for local communities to be able to exert some control over ecotourism activities, however, power will need to be decentralised from the national level to the community level (Akama, 1996). This could include involving grassroots organisations, local church groups, and indigenous institutions in decision-making processes and on representative bodies such as national parks boards or regional tourism associations.

4. Conclusion

The empowerment framework, designed for analysis of the impacts of ecotourism ventures on local communities, attempts to emphasise the importance of local communities having some control over, and sharing in the benefits of, ecotourism initiatives in their area. The rationale behind the framework is that ecotourism should promote both conservation and development at the local level. The framework could be applied in both western and developing country contexts but, because it takes as its central concern the concept of empowerment, it is perhaps particularly pertinent when examining the extent to which indigenous people, or other disadvantaged groups, are benefiting from ecotourism.

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