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Community-based tourism: Moving from rhetoric to practice

This article provides a synopsis of the author's previous research on community-based tourism in the Peruvian Andes in two communities: Taquile Island and Chiquian. Various publications are summarized, with a focus on their key connective ingredient - community integration in tourism. In this formula, three critical parameters are highlighted: (1) community awareness, (2) community unity, and (3) power or control relationships (local and external). It is argued that to move beyond participatory rhetoric to meaningful practice, tourism planners must take communities seriously. Key recommendations include supporting tourism champions, incorporating alternative forms of knowledge and maximizing local input whenever feasible.

Keywords: community integration, local participation, Peru, sustainable tourism

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All too often, communities are treated as just one more component in tourism planning and management, and requisite lip service paid to local participation. A typical comment is “communities need to be involved in tourism.” But how are we to ‘involve’ communities? Does this suggest a few seasonal, low paying jobs or something more meaningful? Why should they be involved at all? How can we move from rhetoric to practice in community-based tourism?

Research on community integration in tourism

To address this deficiency, the author’s tourism work has examined rural community involvement in tourism planning, development, and ownership in Latin America. The research described below is largely based on a comparative study of two Andean communities in Peru: Taquile Island (on Lake Titicaca near Puno), and Chiquian (near the Cordillera Huayhuash of the Huaráz region) (Mitchell, 1998). The key concept developed, tested, and refined was ‘community integration’ in tourism, typified by at least some of the following characteristics: (1) inclusive and transparent decision-making process; (2) high number of participating citizens; (3) high degree of meaningful local participation; (4) equitable and efficient process; and (5) high local ownership and management in the community-based tourism sector (adapted from Mitchell, 1998). While it is unlikely that all of these conditions could simultaneously exist, at minimum, they are useful measures of a community’s attempts for integration.

In the case of Taquile Island, Mitchell and Reid (2001) propose a framework for community integration in tourism planning and management, placing greatest emphasis on decision-making power structures and processes, local control or ownership, and the type and distribution of employment. In theory, a tourism integration process for a given community is linked in a dynamic integration triangle to three critical parameters: (1) community awareness, (2) community unity, and (3) power or control relationships (local and external). It was found that a high level of community integration on Taquile Island leads to greater socio-economic benefits for most residents, including women and children. Especially in ethnic communities with traditional cultures, residents must be active participants and beneficiaries of tourism, not simply cultural curiosities put on display by outside agents (see also Mitchell, 2000).

By comparing Taquile Island and Chiquian, Mitchell and Eagles (2001) reveal how community integration in tourism planning and management may enhance (or not) enhance local socioeconomic benefits. It was found that greater tourism integration may decrease potential impacts, since the community would conceivably have direct control in setting the terms and conditions for tourism development. However, integration elements of tourism awareness-raising and equitable sharing of benefits may be congenitally easier to achieve in more traditional communities. This research also demonstrates that influential local (and often non-local) interest groups or individuals might circumvent overall community needs or wishes. Likewise, facilitating input in public decision-making by marginalized community members such as women may be difficult to attain, yet critical, for equitable sharing of power and other benefits.

Pathways and pitfalls of tourism sustainability in a comparative study form the basis of Mitchell (2001). The role and accessibility of knowledge in community-based tourism are emphasized. Questions examined include how knowledge of tourism potential is disseminated, which forms of knowledge are considered, who the principal advocates and their motives are, and to what extent do (or could) local residents collaborate with tourism policy makers, managers, and industry players. Above all, is the public equitably engaged to identify desirable futures and acceptable pathways for sustainable tourism? Although a participatory framework

should encourage greater local control of tourism management and ownership, both internal and external forces to the community can also negatively affect such control. Complex factors such as community stability and globalization may cause tension even while opportunities for revenue generation are increasingly made available. Increased individualism and materialism may erode community harmony and weaken local control. Finally, Mitchell (2001) shows the importance of encouraging community integration at the onset of tourism development, perhaps by the support of facilitators or local tourism champions. This may avoid an unpopular redistribution of wealth afterward if a long implementation delay is anticipated.

Recommendations for sustainable community tourism

Hopefully, this brief synopsis will encourage others to conduct more research on community-based tourism. Some suggestions to evaluate or implement sustainable tourism projects from a community-based perspective are outlined here:

- *Determine degree of cohesion and support for tourism among community residents and industry players.* Potential adversaries may become the most enthusiastic advocates of a given sustainable tourism project if their support is obtained at an early stage. The support of local tourism champions or facilitators is often key. Political leaders, entrepreneurs, and other power holders within and outside the community are perhaps the pivotal link in the integration process. These may be able to assist in the dissemination of opportunities and drawbacks to implementing a sustainable tourism program. However, care must be taken so that the process does not become circumvented to the advantage of those with significant decision-making control or influence.
- *Encourage and incorporate indigenous and ad hoc forms of knowledge.* This should be done in conjunction with scientific or mainstream strategic information gathering. Ongoing and flexible training of local guides (in developing nations, ideally proficient in at least one foreign language such as English) and administrators is a must.
- *Maximize local input whenever possible from start to finish.* Create a sustainable tourism strategy with appropriate visions, goals, objectives, targets, activities, and a marketing plan in a democratic manner. Community residents should be involved in all tourism development stages, but particularly early in the process, and broad-based participation encouraged whenever possible.

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