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**Community participation in sustainable tourism - A case study of two indigenous communities**

Community participation has been widely advocated as a critical element for sustainable tourism development. This article is based on a study conducted at two indigenous communities in the east of Taiwan. The findings provide an example of understanding the priority concerns of communities and their perceptions toward developing small-scale tourism at the communities and a nearby nature reserve. Mechanisms to facilitate local participation are suggested.

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## **Introduction**

Protected areas around the world are becoming popular tourist destinations along with the rapid growth of nature-based tourism or ecotourism (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). Managers are facing more challenge to maintain ecological quality within protected areas when more human activities are introduced. It is argued that, without local support, conserving natural resources in protected areas will not be easily achieved (McNeely, 1995; Stoll-Kleemann & O'riordan, 2002; Wells & Brandon, 1992). As a result, involving local communities in protected area tourism is suggested as a solution to improve conservation management. It is hoped that by sharing tourism benefits, communities will be willing to share the responsibility of conserving the natural resources (Brandon, 1996).

Although the idea of integrated conservation and development has been embraced by conservationists and protected area managers since the 1982 World Congress on National Parks (Wells & Brandon, 1993), the implementation rarely resulted in success (Nepal, 1997). As Nepal indicated, two of the reasons for the poor outcomes were due to the failure to address local needs and build partnership between residents and tourism-related agencies. The purpose of the study is to explore the local concerns about and perceptions of developing tourism at two indigenous communities and a nature reserve in conjunction with the communities.

## **The communities**

Tourism has been widely promoted as an alternative for local economy in response to declining demands in agriculture in rural areas. Chialan and Zhengxing are two communities that have been experiencing the economic consequences of the weak agricultural economy. Both communities border the largest nature reserve in Taiwan, Tawushan Nature Reserve. About 80 percent of the residents belong to the indigenous group of Paiwan. Tawushan is the traditional territory of the Paiwan who were removed from the mountainous area by the government for better management in the 1950s. The right to access Tawushan by the Paiwan was further limited after this area was set aside as a nature reserve in 1988.

In addition to the purposes of education and research, human activities are forbidden within the nature reserve system. However, the unique and abundant natural resources keeps attracting illegal and inappropriate activities, such as logging, poaching, and tourist activities to Tawushan (Council of Agriculture, 1999). The local government proposed to initiate small-scale tourism development to involve local residents in guiding/serving tourist activities and assist the nature reserve to reduce improper natural resource exploitation and recreational activities. Although the proposal has been discussed for years, no consensus has yet been reached. The study was conducted in 1999 with the assistance of an informant from the local area. Fourteen interviewees were selected, including the traditional Paiwan tribe leaders and representatives of the other ethnic groups. Three issues of most concern are introduced in the following.

## **Local concerns of community development and protected area tourism**

The need to stimulate local economy was an issue identified by all the interviewees. Sluggish local economy, lack of skill/knowledge/capital, and low living standards were reasons for this concern. Tourism as a desirable supplement for local economy was indicated by most

interviewees despite that perceived negative impacts of the current tourist activities were generally expressed. Tourism was expected to benefit the locals by bringing in economic opportunities, improving living standards, promoting agricultural products, and facilitating cultural preservation. The fear of losing control to outsiders was commonly revealed among the interviewees. However, only one interviewee held negative attitude toward tourism because of this reason. Meanwhile, most interviewees recognized the importance of running tourism by residents to prevent the unwanted consequences by losing control to outsiders. The need for assistance from the local government to facilitate this process was also expressed. Evaluation of positive and negative tourism impacts lead to the neutral attitude by two interviewees. Overall, the interviewees exhibited a positive tourism attitude.

Land issues, including the needs of transforming current land use and acquiring more lands to respond to population growth and future development, was the second concern of the interviewees. Although local residents have the right to use the lands, the ownership of community land belongs to the government. The need to alleviate the land pressure had been communicated to the public sector. Nonetheless, no response was received.

Another issue, the right to access the traditional territory, was recognized by half of the interviewees. Most of them supported natural resource conservation; however, they also indicated that respect for local opinions and cultural traditions should also be equally emphasized. The wish to regain the ownership of the traditional territory and practice small-scale hunting, gathering, and agricultural activities within the nature reserve were revealed, especially by the Paiwan residents. Conflicts between community members and the nature reserve were implied from this expression.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Although local participation in sustainable tourism development has been widely advocated, motivating community members is never an easy task. From the study it is found that resident behaviors to participate in sustainable tourism were hampered even when positive attitudes were expressed. The interviewees generally demonstrated supportive attitude toward tourism and conservation, and were aware of the importance of local participation. However, the researcher was informed that local participation in relevant meetings organized by the local government was not active. A conversation with the official of local government revealed distrust existed between the residents and government. The distrust might be a consequence of long-term ignorance of local needs and lack of communication. Despite this fact, residents still expressed the need of government assistance to build the capacity for future development. Conflict between the need of using and conserving the resources of the nature reserve was another possible factor contributing the distrust and reluctance to enact supportive behaviors.

To bridge the gap among the residents, local government and the nature reserve manager, community issues need to be addressed, which will then serve as an incentive for local participation. Mutual respect, communication, and transparent policies are mechanisms to reduce distrust and conflicts. The earlier the trust is built, the easier the communication can be processed. A neutral group or NGO might be helpful in facilitating this process.

Chialan and Zhengxing demonstrate the characteristics of “tourism-hungry communities” (Smith & Krannich, 1998). They are seeking economic alternatives and maintain optimism about tourism. Under this condition, introducing small-scale tourism does not guarantee that the needs of the local and nature reserve are both met. The balance between conservation and local

development is a tricky one. Will small-scale tourism be able to satisfy the local needs and, therefore, serve as an incentive for local support of conservation? While local concerns need not to be ignored, the conservation mission of protected areas should not be sacrificed either. Continual communication to build partnerships, to define the vision and identify the possible outcomes of protected area tourism will be necessary before tourist activities are introduced. In addition, planning and monitoring techniques, such as zoning, carrying capacity, limits of acceptable change, visitor impact management, and environmental/social impact assessment should be applied to keep tourism development at the right track.

The study not only provides an understanding of local perceptions and concerns about community development and protected area tourism, but also stimulation of local discussion about the relevant issues. It might be argued that field research should minimize any disturbance on its populations. Nonetheless, for communities looking for changes, stimulation of more thoughts and discussion may facilitate the identification of problems to be faced in the future. Preventive measures can, therefore, be applied to reduce the unwanted outcomes.

A weakness for the study and perhaps other community-related research is that good relationships between researchers and community members are seldom built due to the time constraint. Residents of many indigenous communities frequently hold skeptical attitude toward outsiders no matter government officials, researchers, businessmen, or new comers. The current study did not invest enough time to completely break residents' skepticism. Meanwhile, the informant of the study was not considered as neutral in terms of some community issues by the locals, which in turn affected residents' trust on the researcher. It is suggested that studies which need to elicit opinions from communities should build good relationship with and gain the trust from residents to prevent confused results.

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