

Ecotourism, Protected Areas and Community Development Associated with Two Chinese Parks

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Abstract

The connections between people, parks and tourism have received significant attention in recent years, recognizing the potential for mutually beneficial relationships. Ecotourism has been promoted and widely adopted as a strategy for funding conservation initiatives, while at the same time contributing to the socio-economic development of host communities and providing for quality nature/recreation experiences. Parks are among the most common ecotourism destinations. This study assesses the current status of ecotourism at two protected areas in Hainan, China, where it is being promoted as a strategy for balancing regional economic growth and conservation objectives. Through an evaluation of the existing tourism-park-community relationships, opportunities and constraints are identified. In light of the study findings and the salient literature, planning direction is offered with the intention of enhancing the capacity of ecotourism to generate benefits for both communities and the parks, and thus contribute to the sustainable development of the region more generally.

Introduction

The relationships between tourism, parks and people have received significant attention in recent years, from academics, as well as both government and non-government conservation and development agencies (Cresswell and MacLaren, 2000; Brandon, 1996). A variety of socio-economic reasons are responsible for this interest. Consider the following three trends.

Facing increasing habitat disappearance and biodiversity decline, most nations have made efforts to protect some portion of their remaining natural spaces (Woodley, 1999). However, competition for often scarce resources is making it increasingly difficult for governments to rationalize the allocation of large areas of land for protection. Conservation agencies, especially in developing countries, are also commonly faced with limited budgets (Loon and Polakow, 2001; Norris, 1992). The result has been that protected area systems are under pressure to find innovative

ways to generate funds for conservation (Boyd, 2000), and to demonstrate financial viability in the face of rising opportunity costs.

Secondly, ecotourists are motivated by a desire to observe and learn about tropical forests, birds, mammals, etc., preferably in an undisturbed wilderness setting (Eagles, 1992). Such settings are often to be found in parks. Growing demand for nature-based travel experiences has made parks some of the most popular (eco)tourism destinations (Boyd, 2000; Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). Many international tourists are attracted particularly to the 'natural wealth' of the developing countries (Hummel, 1994).

Thirdly, the protection of biodiversity and provision of public use have long been objectives of national parks (Hvenegaard and Dearden, 1998). However, in recent years, recognizing that park creation can cause abrupt change for resource-based economies (Place, 1991), mandates have also shown increasing support for linking park management and conservation strategies with the needs of surrounding local communities (MacDonald and Aumonier, 1998; Boo, 1990). These considerations are particularly acute in developing countries.

It is not surprising then, that many have noted that opportunities exist for linking ecotourism, parks and communities for mutual benefit, especially in a developing world context. Some have assigned ecotourism great potential, suggesting it has the capacity to provide high quality tourism experiences, while generating funds and support for conservation, and stimulating local socio-economic benefits (Weaver, 1998; Wells, 1997; Nenon and Durst, 1993).

While there is evidence that ecotourism's espoused benefits can be realized (Eagles, McCool and Haynes, 2002; Mitchell and Reid, 2001; Hatton, 1999), there are equally as many cases where ecotourism has fallen short of its proposed objectives (Nepal, 2000; Walpole and Goodwin, 2000; Ross and Wall, 1999b). Indeed, ecotourism's impact has been highly variable. Nevertheless, developing countries continue to turn to ecotourism as a means of generating broad-based benefits. Given this, one must ask if ecotourism is contributing to sustainable development – are its espoused benefits being realized? Ross and Wall (1999) have criticized the lack of practical assessments of ecotourism's status in specific areas. This study is an exploration of the delicate relationships that exist between (eco)tourism, parks and people.

Study Objectives

This study sought to assess the current status of ecotourism at two protected area destinations where it is being promoted as a sustainable regional development strategy. The existing tourism-park-community relationships are evaluated at

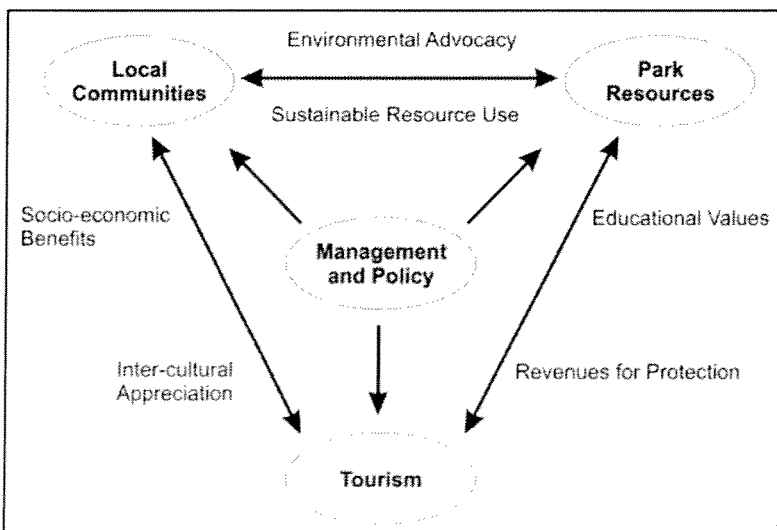
Jianfengling and Diaoluoshan National Forest Parks (JNFP and DNFP), in Hainan Province, China. Hainan, although endowed with a wealth of natural resources, is one of China's most economically backward provinces. Ecotourism has been identified as an important provincial strategy for balancing economic growth and conservation. The study is intended to enhance the capacity of ecotourism to generate benefits for both the local communities and parks, and thus contribute to the sustainable development of the region more generally.

Methodology

In order to be able to comment on the tourism-park-community relationships, input from the various stakeholders at each site – park managers, community residents, hotel managers and tourists – was required. Interviews, observations and secondary sources were employed to gather information on park management and facilities, community perceptions of the park and tourism, and levels of tourism spending. Triangulation was used wherever possible to confirm findings and limit personal and methodological biases.

An evaluative framework developed by Ross and Wall (1999a) was adopted to help guide each case study evaluation (Figure 1). The framework conceptualizes ecotourism in terms of synergistic links, and uses a variety of indicators to determine if existing relationships are operating in a manner that allows each to make positive contributions to the other.

Figure 1. A Framework for Conceptualizing and Evaluating Ecotourism (Source: Ross and Wall, 1999).



Results

Ecotourism, strictly defined, and as assessed under the adopted framework, does not currently exist at either park. The case studies revealed that most community members have a good understanding of why the parks were created and that forest protection is important because of its influence on climate, ecology and water resources. The majority of respondents in each case think that the parks are a good thing overall, and would welcome more tourism. In each community, there is the perception among some, that the park has had a positive influence on the local economy. However, it is also noteworthy that in each case at least one-quarter of residents surveyed indicated that the park has had no and/or only negative effects (mainly in terms of lost jobs and land) on their lives. In reality, community socio-economic benefits have been very limited. Similarly, (eco)tourism has not generated revenues for conservation at either park. Nevertheless, the overwhelming pattern in interview responses was optimism, with most officials and residents seeming confident that tourism growth will generate benefits for their community. A limited number of residents qualified their optimism with concerns over environmental damage or community safety. The few who were more pessimistic generally held the belief that only government officials will benefit from future tourism growth.

The case studies have also identified a number of important factors – weaknesses in the tourism-park-community relationships – that stand to limit ecotourism's ability to generate benefits. Few tourists currently stop in either community en route to the park, and there are relatively few spending opportunities, for either tourists or locals, suggesting a significant potential for economic leakage. Community residents are not actively involved in park planning processes at either location. Relatively little is known about the tourists that visit JNFP and DNFP, and in both cases it was evident that staff have little expertise in park or tourism management. Sound planning and management strategies may help to overcome some of these issues and, when coupled with fairly widespread community support and recent funding increases, suggest that there is significant potential at both destinations for ecotourism to develop in a manner that will provide benefits on a broad scale.

Discussion: Planning Implications

Ecotourism development is in its infancy at both sites, and cannot be expected to be operating without flaws. The comments offered here draw on the salient ecotourism literature, and are intended to provide planning direction that will help decision-makers find a path of development that promotes synergistic relationships.

Relationships Between the Local Communities and Parks

Park establishment can alter the local economic base and often results in reduced access to resources for local people (Lindberg, *et al.*, 1996). This has been the case at both JNFP and DNFP. Where residents face pressures due to resource use restrictions, compensation should be provided (Sherman and Dixon, 1991). This is especially important recognizing that many of the threats protected areas face arise from the needs of local communities to use resources for survival (Norris, 1992). Dependence on natural resources is high in both the Jianfengling and Diaoluoshan regions, and illegal resource harvesting has occurred at both parks as a result. Some residents have lost jobs or land, and noted that it is now harder to make a living. Although some compensation has apparently been provided to residents in the form of new homes, seeds and lump sum payments, interviews revealed differing interpretations of what has been provided and whether or not it was adequate. Park officials are also hoping that compensation will come in the form of increased employment opportunities from the development of ecotourism. For now, such opportunities have yet to materialize, and other strategies are needed. Earmarking a portion of park budgets/revenues to go toward community development projects and providing alternative resource supplies for agriculture, plantations, etc., outside of the parks would be two potentially valuable strategies. The creation of a multi-use buffer zone at JNFP is a positive step in this direction.

Although each park has made an effort to educate community members about the reasons behind park establishment and the importance of protecting the forest, residents have not had the opportunity to participate actively in planning processes. This problem is not unique to JNFP and DNFP. Communities adjacent to parks have frequently been overlooked (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). This is significant, recognizing that the generation of benefits and positive attitudes toward tourism is to a large degree dependent on local people's ability to participate effectively in decision-making (Lindberg *et al.*, 1996). Failure to involve local people can lead to poorly integrated conservation-development projects that damage the resources and reduce tourism's potential to generate benefits (Cresswell and MacLaren, 2000). At DNFP and JNFP opportunities to participate could be provided using public forums and/or committees comprised of local residents to allow residents to voice their concerns. If community members have a vested interest in such processes they are more likely to become advocates for the park and support the development of ecotourism. Although participation can be a time consuming and difficult process, the risks associated with not providing such opportunities would seem to outweigh any potential costs.

Relationships Between the Local Communities and Tourism

There have been relatively few socio-economic benefits to date at either site. Some perceive improvements in water resources, climate, roads, incomes and the local economy. This is important recognizing that attitudes toward tourism are largely based on perceived costs and benefits (Lindberg *et al.*, 1996). Although road improvements were observed, climate and water resource effects are difficult to

confirm and, in reality, tourism-related employment and income have been limited. Aside from work in the hotels, travel companies, or as a guide, and occasional small shop sales to tourists (water, fruit, snacks, etc.), employment and income from tourism have yet to materialize on a significant scale at either site. Should ecotourism grow and employment opportunities expand, it will be important that local residents have the requisite skills to be able to fill positions. Management will want to consider developing training programs for local people before importing workers who may already possess the necessary skills, but will add to the loss of economic benefits from the local community (Sherman and Dixon, 1991). In the future, earmarking a portion of park budgets/revenues for small loans for local people wishing to start a tourism venture may also help generate and retain community benefits (Lindberg, 1991).

Given the prospect for future foreign investment at both parks, managers will want to ensure that they retain some control over the development of the industry. Foreign investment increases the potential for economic leakage and can, somewhat paradoxically, limit opportunities for locals to get involved in tourism if outside investment outpaces local capacities to accumulate capital or acquire training (Place, 1991). Local control will allow the flexibility to impose conditions on projects that will maximize community benefits (Loon and Palakow, 2001). The use of locally produced goods and services, and the employment of community members whenever possible are absolutely critical to generating and retaining socio-economic benefits in the community.

Although the lack of benefits can be attributed, in part, to the relatively low levels of visitation at each park, it is also due to the location of tourism activity (at the park hotels, which lie some distance from the communities) and the absence of spending opportunities for tourists in the communities/towns. The capacity of ecotourism to generate benefits in the future will, to a significant degree, depend upon the ability of managers to encourage tourists to spend larger sums of money, in the desired locations (i.e., in both the parks and the communities). Providing tourists with opportunities to spend money locally, through the development of tourism facilities and services in appropriate locations – interpretative media, food concessions, souvenirs, etc. – can help in this respect and also encourage tourists to return in the future (Lindberg, 1991).

Spending opportunities are not only important for tourists, but also for local people. In small, rural economies like those at JNFP and DNFP, aside from food and basic supplies there are few goods or services available. This results in local people travelling to larger centres to purchase major appliances, electronics and other 'big ticket' items. If (eco)tourism grows, much of the money that will be spent on accommodations, food, etc., will ultimately leave the community in the absence of locally available goods and services. Although tourists' direct expenditures are important, it is also important that a portion of those expenditures be kept in the community through local secondary (indirect) and tertiary (induced) spending.

Relationships Between Tourism and the Parks

Protected area use fees, especially in developing countries are often nominal (Wall, 1994) or missing altogether (Lindberg, 1991). At JNFP and DNFP no use fees have ever been charged, and park operated hotels and travel companies have generated little, if any profit. As a result, (eco)tourism has yet to raise funds for management or conservation activities. Although levels of visitation have been relatively low, even a small fee could have raised substantial funds. It is quite possible that tourists would be willing to pay more than the 50 RMB (\$9.60 CDN) or 20 RMB (\$3.85 CDN) that managers at DNFP and JNFP respectively are considering implementing in 2002. Nature-oriented tourists have also been shown to be willing to make donations towards conservation programs (Hvenegaard *et al.*, 1998). A survey of park tourists, asking what they would be willing to pay to enter the park could help to determine appropriate use fees and donation mechanisms. The same survey could be designed to collect information on tourist demographics, spending patterns and satisfaction levels – critical management information that is missing at each park.

Higher use fees than those currently being considered could potentially be charged if high quality experiences were provided at the parks. Each offers spectacular tropical scenery, but accommodations are basic and educational opportunities few. Although ecotourists may be content with such accommodations they do demand high quality experiences (Eagles, 1992). Neither JNFP nor DNFP currently offer such an experience given the lack of educational opportunities. On a positive note, both parks have provided some training for a small number of Chinese-speaking guides, and a new visitors centre has recently opened at JNFP. With recent funding increases it may also be possible to begin to develop and implement nature interpretation plans.

Many of the tourism-park-community relationship weaknesses identified in this thesis have been aggravated, if not caused, by funding shortages and limited, or inappropriate, staff education. Careful planning and management are required if ecotourism is to develop successfully (Boo, 1991). This in turn, requires a properly trained, interdisciplinary staff (Boyd, 2000) and the presence of sufficient funds. Each park is scheduled to receive substantial funding increases from the government over the next ten years, suggesting the potential for enhanced management effectiveness. One official at DNFP also indicated that they are trying to establish a special university training program to prepare students to fill key management positions. The effectiveness with which funding increases, training initiatives and management strategies can be used to strengthen the tourism-park-community relationships will be critical to the successful development of ecotourism at both sites and, more generally, to the sustainable development of Hainan.

Implications for Parks in the Developed World

Although the scope of this paper does not permit a detailed exploration of the study's implications for protected areas in the developed world, the findings argu-

ably have much broader application than for Hainan, China alone. Park managers in Canada face similarly sensitive tourism-park-community issues when dealing with First Nations groups and small, resource-based communities. The connections between parks and their potential for (eco)tourism have also received increasing attention in recent years, as parks in Canada are under pressure to generate revenues and justify their existence. Finally, park management is, to a large extent, about balance – between resource use, enjoyment (recreation) and conservation. In this sense, the approach used in this study of evaluating protected area sites in terms of the relationships between resources and people has broad applicability. Evaluations can afford protected area managers everywhere, the opportunity to identify weaknesses and, in response, develop or refine planning and management strategies that strive to nurture synergistic people-park relationships.

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