

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

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TRANSFORMATIONS IN UNCERTAIN TIMES: FUTURE
PERFECT IN TOURISM, HOSPITALITY AND EVENTS

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#CAUTHE2021



TRANSFORMATIONS IN UNCERTAIN TIMES: FUTURE PERFECT IN TOURISM, HOSPITALITY AND EVENTS

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Examining Host-Tourist Relationships In Research-Related Tourism

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Abstract

The study examines the perceptions of an indigenous host community in the context of research-related tourism (RRT) in Fiji. A qualitative methodology including interviews and participant observation was adopted for data collection and analysis. The main findings highlight that RRT possesses socio-economic and environmental benefits for the host community, notably increased income, improved infrastructure, perceived livelihood improvement, and the acquisition of knowledge. Negative impacts of RRT were identified regarding to issues of benefit sharing, reciprocity and transparency.

Keywords: research tourism, host perceptions, host-guest relations, South Pacific, host gaze

[WP]

Introduction

Research entails studying natural, socioeconomic or cultural phenomena, for example, through ethnographic fieldwork, sampling of flora and fauna, and visits of ongoing research projects. This usually requires the researcher to travel to a specific research site within or across national boundaries. Indeed, researchers, academics, students and consultants are increasingly on the move. This may include domestic and cross-border travel to conferences, or to conduct study programmes, fieldwork and other research-related or knowledge-driven activities. Research tourism has been broadly defined as “professional travel of useful discoveries” and located within the alternative tourism paradigm, demonstrating strong linkages to educational, scientific, and volunteer travel (Benson, 2005, p. 133). RRT is thus presented as a broad mix of research-related activities such as fieldwork, conferences, professional internships, scientific meetings and academic staff exchanges (Holden, 2015).

Whilst existing studies show that such research-oriented travel can positively influence the tourism development in a destination (Slocum et al., 2015), the perceptions of the host (researched) community has received little attention within the scope of RRT. This study thus explores the impacts of research-related tourism on the local community and how ‘the researched’ perceive different types of research-related tourists, such as students, volunteers, and researchers.

Conceptualisation and data collection

Concepts

The conceptual framework draws on existing research of host-guest relations, host perceptions, and the ‘host gaze’. In the context of tourism to economically less developed countries, tourists are often characterised as being ‘advanced’, ‘superior’, ‘dominant’, ‘intruding’ and ‘exploiting the locals’, who in turn are characterised as primitive, pristine, exotic, authentic and inferior in comparison to the tourist and their culture (Dolezal, 2015; MacCannell, 1992). Therefore, such encounters often contribute to tourism’s negative insinuations, and include the consumption of exotic culture, commodification, commercialisation, loss of human bonds, and other tangible and intangible forms of exploitation.

Such negative environmental, social and cultural costs may be offset by the perception of economic gains from tourism activities (Dyer et al 2007; Harrill, 2004). Studies further highlight a

strong and positive relationship between community members' perception of tourism development and community participation (Nzama, 2008). Positive impacts of tourism such as improvement in the quality of life, better social amenities, creation of opportunities, societal peace and exposure of the community to different worldview and perspectives are a result of the productive interaction between the community and tourists (Eshliki & Kaboudi, 2012). When the host-guest interaction is perceived as rewarding (benefits outweighing costs), there is an increased motivation to interact (Triandis, 1977). This assessment depends on the cultural similarities and dissimilarities between the hosts and visitors. Furthermore, the perceived value and significance of resources, based on cultural beliefs and norms, such as money, information, feelings, goods and services, influence the nature of (or the level of) interaction (Reisinger & Dimanche, 2010).

In overturning John Urry's (2002) seminal concept of the tourist gaze, Maoz (2006) put forth another aspect for analysing the host-guest encounter, thereby introducing the conceptual relevance of the 'local gaze'. The 'local gaze', also known as 'host gaze', as a concept, is made up of stereotypes and images about the tourist and tourism dimensions (Trupp, 2014) and is also based on previous encounters and experiences with tourists (Chan, 2006).

Methods

This research was based on the local indigenous community of Votua lying on the coral coast of Viti Levu in Fiji, a site location where RRT is practiced on a regular basis. Votua sees a mix of local and international research tourists, namely university students, academics and scientists, volunteers, organisations and consultants. The present research employed a qualitative approach, including 20 semi-structured interviews with community members, five focus groups, three *talanoa*¹ sessions and different types of observation over a period of three weeks, conducted by one of the authors. The introduction to the village started with the welcoming ceremony and the presentation of a *sevu sevu* (a large root of 'Yaqona' - piper methysticum and known in Polynesia as 'kava') to the village chief as a sign of respect to the title and seeking permission to enter the village. Followed by the formal induction into the village, a tour of the village helped in understanding the spatial and socioeconomic structure of the village and households. Mornings were spent observing the daily routine of the villager, both on the weekend and week days, followed by observation of specific work related to ongoing or previous research. Participation in everyday activities also took place during the frequent visits to farms, where the researcher was involved in the process of picking vegetable for the host family. Places covered under previous research were also visited and the use of the resources by the community members, procured and developed through the previous research projects was also observed. Thematic analysis was utilised to develop themes.

Findings

Perceived Benefits

The community members' perceptions were based on the monetary and material benefits received through RRT. Income was generated through research tourists' stay in the village and services provided for them, e.g. accommodation, food, guides, translation, facilitating access to information, and entertainment. Furthermore, some community members were employed under these projects for a short duration.

The perceived improvement of QOL through research-related tourism was a direct result of the research projects which enhanced the existing social infrastructure by providing, for example, clean drinking water, better sanitation and reduced pollution. Supplementing income positively

¹Talanoa – face to face conversation, both formal or informal

affects the material, community, health and safety, and well-being domains of QOL (Kim, 2002). Moreover, perceived personal benefits from tourism propitiates the effect of the economic aspect of QOL (Movono & Dahles, 2017; Woo, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2018). A recent study on QOL in Fiji however finds that local community members did not perceive benefits from tourism as equal exchange for the time, resources and assets used by the community members (Matatolu, 2018). This difference was based on the prioritised QOL elements for the study which include faith, family and farming, where tourism is seen to negatively affect these variables.

Another positive example concerns the results of the Wai-Votua research project – conducted by The University of the South Pacific (USP), National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research (NIWA) and NZ Aid – which led to improved water supply, waste water management, marine biodiversity and reduced disease outbreaks. The success of such projects under local participation enhanced pride in the community and had a positive impact on people's perception of QOL. The participation of local community members in these projects further strengthen co-operation and community relations and thus social capital which is based on trust, reciprocity and solidarity (Kay, 2006).

However there are observable differences in wealth of community members. Those members who have better housing and more economic security are not the ones who participate in RRT, but those who worked abroad or in senior positions with government services.

Perceptions towards Different Types of Researchers

Interviewed community members favoured researchers who could provide funding, materials and experiential knowledge. Participant Soso (Male, NGO worker) while speaking on researcher requirement for the village suggested:

For the solutions we need money and the village does not have the money. So, who so ever can provide materials and money and help us, we would prefer them. But we need more experience and knowledge, we have the manpower in the village.

This viewpoint indicates a preference for organisations and senior staff (professors and scientists) as they were seen to be more experienced, possessed access to funds and could offer better benefits. Whilst this was a rather unanimous stand, some interviewees preferred students due to the fact that they came in large numbers and thus were a better choice economically for the village. However, no member of the community who was part of this research suggested volunteers as their preferred choice for researchers. This can be inferred as host participants' focus on the material and economic gains from RRT. On inquiry regarding their choice of researchers, Vaca, a female participant who worked as a babysitter in the nearby resorts stated:

I think Organisations, as they most bring help to us. Help in term of whatever we have to do, better information, the village needs more resources and funds, and we need Organisations that can provide with more such things.

Whilst other research tourists (RTs) provide some economic gains, volunteers do not benefit the community either monetarily or materially. As ingrained in the host gaze, there is a strong expectation that tourists – including research tourists – contribute to the village economically. Such contributions however hardly derive from volunteer tourists in the village.

Problems of RRT

Members of the community highlighted issues related to researchers' lack of reciprocity, transparency and participation. Interviewed community member opined that researchers used community knowledge and resources and then never revisited or communicated again. Moreover, findings from their research were not normally shared with community members. As highlighted by Levi Strauss (1969), reciprocity is the norm for all human relationships. Such reciprocal relations are also highlighted in Pacific methodologies (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). In the Fijian context,

reciprocity indicates recognition and honour. Therefore, time, energy and knowledge given by the community must be reciprocated (Nainoca, 2011). If the researcher fails to reciprocate, he or she will not be respected.

Issues related to transparency related to both handling of the research and funds within the community and unequal benefit sharing deriving from research projects. Some of the interviewed community members were unaware of the contributions by RTs. There was no information regarding RTs' purpose, background, and no discussion on the kind of benefits or funds they were contributing to the community. Participant Marika (Male, Farmer), voiced the issue related to the lack of transparency within the village and stated:

To me as I'm just here I don't actually know what they bring to the village. I'm there to welcome, I don't have an idea what they get [provide] to the village

Furthermore, the concept of equitable sharing of income generated through RRT is not clearly defined. When facilities are utilised by RTs, the traditional rules allow the chief to decide the work allotment. In terms of providing accommodation and food, only households with additional space, cleanliness, and better conditions for toilets and bathrooms are preferred. This excludes other households from benefits-sharing.

The issue of transparency with NGOs is related to fund management and unequal benefit sharing. As pointed out by one of the elder participant from the community, Bale (Male, Retired government worker):

Most of the research that have been done are on the marine conservation and reef regeneration...and some of them earn millions of dollars for that research but we don't get anything out of it. Just \$500 (FJD) per month from the rent for the research on the qoliqoli other than that nothing. They make themselves rich but they don't pass the benefit.

The interviewed members of the community felt that these organisations use the name of the village to secure funding but they do not clearly state the amount that would be used on the community. They use the resources but there is no substantial benefit that the community derives out of it (Adan, 2015; Tortajada, 2016).

Conclusion

From a community perspective, the main interest in participating in RRT is connected to money and material benefits such as employment and improvement of QOL. These findings highlight that RRT is similar to other forms of tourism, where local community motivations are based on key factors such as creation of job opportunities, revenues and QoL (Meimand, et al., 2017), yet there are differences how the local community members perceive the various types of research-related tourists.

The conventional host-guest relationship is often perceived as materialistic and short-term (Fennell, 2006). Whilst this notion of a primarily economic interest in the host-guest relationship also prevails in research-related tourism, it nevertheless involves elements which are characteristic of Pacific values, such as generosity, long-term relationships and reciprocity (Berno, 1995). Furthermore in the case of host-RTs relationship, the reciprocity varies based on the classification of RTs. In RRT, the community's reciprocal expectations from students and volunteer RTs is different from those of academics, scientists and organisations.

The challenges and issues with RRT are related to its functioning. In the absence of a guiding set of rules, there is a lack of transparency resulting in a feeling of distrust within the community. These issues point towards no single point of contact for RTs, and in most cases, the community being unaware of the reason for RTs' presence, especially if they are visiting individually. With no formal arrangement, this often results in unequal participation and benefit sharing.

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