

Research Article

Social Transformations of Rural Communities Through Ecotourism: A Systematic Review

Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts (JTHCA)
2017, Vol. 9 (3) pp 54-66
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UITM Press
Submit date: 12th August 2017
Accept date: 22nd November 2017
Publish date: 30th December 2017

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Proposed citation:

Kunjuraman, V. & Hussin, R. (2017). Social Transformations of Rural Communities Through Eco-Tourism: A Systematic Review. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts*, 9(3), 54-66.

Abstract

This review paper observes the gap in the tourism literature, specifically on issues regarding communities' qualities of life through eco(tourism) activities in both developed and developing countries. Based on the previous literature, it was found that the term 'social transformation' is often overlooked in the literature and less focused by tourism researchers. The issue of social transformation in tourism development is crucial to be studied in order to understand the communities' quality of life when engaging in tourism activities and how they manage impacts. In this paper, literature on community participation in tourism activities and the issue of tourism impacts towards communities' qualities of life is also studied. The main contribution of this paper is the discussion on the issue of social transformations of local communities through tourism is scarce and proposes the need to study by having some successful case studies in both developed and developing countries.

Keywords:

Social transformations, local communities, review of literature, eco-tourism

1 Introduction

It is well-known that tourism is often referred to as the world's biggest industry and as a mean for sustainable development which p offers significant economic, socio-cultural and environmental benefits to many local communities (Sharpley, 2002). According to World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2008), tourism accounts for nearly 10 percent or \$5.89 trillion of the World's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This is expected to double by 2018 (Aref, 2011) nearly. Undeniably, tourism has been regarded as a major socio-economic force for many countries in the world and has the potential to upgrade the socio-economic status of the destination communities. Godfrey and Clarke (2000) noted that tourism plays a supplementary role to most coastal communities and provides an opportunity for them to diversify their economic activities. For most coastal communities in developing countries, including Malaysia, fishing is the main source of income and livelihood, and presently tourism has been recognised as a supplementary activity to sustain their livelihood. Thus, integrating tourism as an alternative livelihood activity in coastal fishing communities is one potential solution to alleviate dependency on fisheries (Porter, Orams & Luck, 2015). Thus, tourism has become a source of income generation for many communities seeking a way to enhance their livelihoods (Aref, 2011). More specifically, ecotourism is one of the popular tourism activities in the world where the knowledge of conservation is central. Ecotourism is considered to be a potential strategy to support conservation efforts and at the same time promoting sustainable local development (Ross & Wall, 1999). The people involved in ecotourism related projects are considered an important actor to good service to visitors or ecotourists. The most frequent ecotourism actors are local communities, government officials, tour operators, private ecotourism providers and Non-government organizations (NGOs). Ecotourism often takes place in untouched rural areas and managed by the local people. The local communities play a vital role to protect the natural resources from overconsumption and intended to gain some economic benefits from their participation.

In general, tourism, as well as ecotourism activities, are involved in both the production and consumption phenomena. In this regard, the aspiration of ecotourism providers, especially the local community, should be considered to determine whether they perceive the positive impacts from the ecotourism upon their participation or vice versa. It was observed that tourism has a progressive impact towards local communities' development and this has increased attention among tourism scholars (Uysal, Sirgy, Woo & Kim, 2015). However, studies about ecotourism and its impacts to the communities' quality of life gained limited attention in the literature. Based on this premise, there are several questions that have arisen, first, are communities in rural areas perceive the positive impacts of their participation in ecotourism activities? Does ecotourism brought negative impacts to the local communities and failed its objective? Are local communities in both developed and developing countries have successfully enhanced their quality of life? To address these issues, we reviewed published journal articles which are dealt issues regarding communities' perception or attitudes towards

tourism development or other alternative tourism. There are limited past studies that focused on the communities' perceptions towards ecotourism are limited. Hence, this review is limited to residents' perceptions towards tourism development and included literature on ecotourism.

This review also found two major gaps, first, in the methodological gap where a majority of studies on community or residents' perception towards tourism development have employed quantitative approach, and less attention has been given to qualitative approach. Second, a conceptual gap on the concept of social transformation as tourism, or more specifically, ecotourism related studies did not study well or explore this concept empirically. The primary objectives of this paper are: (1) describing the studies' findings, (2) highlighting the sampling and data collection methods, and (3) identifying the use of social transformation concept in the literature. Finally, we proposed several future research implications both in academia and policy interventions.

2 Critical Analysis of Secondary Data

This review focused on the impacts of alternative forms of tourism in village communities from both developed and developing countries. The impacts identified in this study are classified according to the broad categories as commonly applied by tourism scholars (Mathieson & Wall, 1982). These categories are Economic, Socio-cultural and Environment (physical) domains. The analysis of articles in this paper was limited to papers published in scholarly journals which in line with the proposition by Xiao and Smith (2005). They pointed out that academic journals contain important sources of knowledge and have contributed to the research in respective areas. To find articles which are appropriate to the study objectives, a set of criterion has been employed. First, the article must be focused the impacts of (Eco)tourism development to the local communities in both developed and developing countries. Second, the several keywords are helpful to find relevant articles for this paper such as tourism impacts, residents' attitudes, residents' perception, community support for, community views or perspectives, ecotourism impacts, social change, developed and developing countries and quality of life. Finally, published journals articles are preferred over other sources to ensure the validity and reliability of their contents. Google engine and other databases like science direct and springer link were searched for articles. A majority of the articles found in scholarly journals, such as *Tourism Management*, *Annals of Tourism Research*, *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, *Journal of Travel Research* and other tourism-related journals in the social science field, including tourism. Only full-length articles were selected for review because theoretical ideas and methodological procedures are more likely to be fully described in full-length articles than in research notes, commentaries, responses to published articles, editor's notes and book reviews. As a result, these types of contribution were excluded from the analysis (Nunkoo, Smith, Ramkissoon, 2013). Through this approach, we discovered the

methodological gaps and conceptual gaps in the literature, and consequently, several implications for further research have been proposed. In the meantime, an inductive content analysis was used in this paper. This technique is popular among the tourism researchers and is used to identify the patterns of development or specific concepts and themes (Lu & Nepal, 2009; Nair, Munikrishnan, Rajaratnam & King, 2015). Also, content analysis technique has been applied in previous tourism research attempting to map out the evolution of knowledge in the field of tourism (Xiao & Smith, 2006; Lu & Nepal, 2009; Nunkoo et al. 2013; Nair et al. 2015). In the same manner, this paper used content analysis technique for review the existing tourism literature and aimed to identify several gaps.

3 Literature review

A substantial body of literature has dealt with the issue of the impact of tourism on quality of the local community's life across the world. Local communities are often affected by tourism development regarding economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects as shown in previous literature (Harrill, 2004; Moscardo, 2009; Nunkoo & Smith, 2013; Sharpley, 2014). The impacts of tourism development on local communities' livelihoods have been given serious attention by the tourism researchers since three decades ago until now. This is a vital issue among the local communities in tourism areas as communities received both positive and negative impacts and more research are needed to identify such impacts (Guo, Kim, & Chen, 2014). A majority of previous studies have reported that the local communities acknowledged positive economic impact of tourism development (Pizam, Milman & Jafari, 1991; Allen, Hafer, Long & Perdue, 1993; Ap & Crompton, 1998; Perdue, Long & Kang, 1999; Lee, Kim & Kang, 2003; Mbaiwa, 2005; Lepp, 2006; Wang & Wu, 2006; Leea & Changb, 2008; Marzuki, 2009; Spencer & Nsiah, 2013; Guo, et al. 2014), however a number of studies claimed that local communities are still concerned with the potentially negative socio-cultural and environmental impacts from tourism development within their residences (Perdue, Long & Allen, 1990; Perdue, Long & Kang, 1995; Perdue et al. 1999). Gursoy, Jurowski & Uysal (2002) pointed out that studies related to community or residents' attitudes towards tourism development have been carried out extensively. Why is there much attention paid by tourism researchers regarding this issue? This is because residents' attitudes and perception is the key element in policy making and tourism development plans in order to achieve successful tourism development agendas (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011). Thus, the community approach must be integrated into the planning and development of tourism to gain support from the local communities (Murphy, 1985).

Studies related to resident' attitudes towards tourism development have been carried out in different geographical locations all around the world and have reported some interesting findings. For instance, Allen et al. (1993) reported that residents perceive the positive effects of recreation on their quality of life, moreover, Perdue, et

al. (1995) revealed that gaming tourism had affected the residents' quality of life even though they initially declined. Using both primary and secondary data sources, Mbaiwa (2005) studied the socio-cultural impacts of tourism development in the Okavango Delta, Botswana. The study indicated that tourism development in the study site has both positive and negative socio-cultural impacts. The positive impacts from tourism development include income generation and job opportunities from community-based tourism projects and safari companies, development of infrastructure and the enhancement of social services such as banking, health, telecommunications and access to electricity. The negative socio-cultural impacts include enclave tourism, racism and the relocation of traditional communities. However, such activities break up of the traditional family structure, increase in crime, prostitution, the adoption of the western safari style of dressing and the use of traditionally unacceptable 'vulgar' language by younger generations. It was also observed that negative socio-cultural impacts from tourism development in the study site overpowered its positive impacts. According to the Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC), the residents' attitudes toward tourism development and its impacts change depend upon the stage of tourism development. In the initial stage of tourism development residents' attitudes toward tourism development is positive but if the tourism development continues, the residents' quality of Life may change from positive to negative (Uysal et al. 2015).

Regarding ecotourism literature, several studies have attempted to study the local communities' perception on ecotourism development and its benefits (Mathieson & Wall, 1982; Weaver, 1998; Belsky, 1999; Jones, 2005; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008; Ahmad, 2014; Afenyo & Amuquandoh, 2014). A study mentioned that through ecotourism, indigenous communities in Brunei Darussalam have enjoyed several benefits such as employment and business opportunities, markets for local products, infrastructure and social amenities and access to the parks and recreational facilities (Ahmad, 2014). On the same vein, Afenyo and Amuquandoh (2014)'s study revealed that ecotourism development in Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary Project, Ghana does bring some benefits to the local communities involved. These benefits include infrastructure development, provided alternative employment opportunities and increased environmental consciousness among community members. Thus, it can be concluded that ecotourism does bring economic, socio-cultural and environmental benefits to the communities involved in it.

3.1 The concept of social transformation and ecotourism development

The concept of transformation was coined by Karl Polanyi through his famous book "The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time" which was published in 1944. Polanyi's book has been recognised as the earliest agreement for economic sociology. Polanyi discussed some of the core problems and questions such as how do societies respond to the era of globalization, and how do they address the risks of market failure, which are rooted from the contemporary macro sociology (Martin, 2016). Based on Polanyi's examination of the contemporary market

phenomena, Martin (2016) urged that “It is probably time to recognize the canonical status of this book and put it on the classical theory syllabus alongside Marx, Weber, and Durkheim” (p. 163). In 19th and 20th centuries, Polanyi has tried to analyse what he called the ‘Great Transformation’ in Europe following the rise of market liberalism. After reviewing his work, we assumed that Polanyi’s work on “The Great Transformation” offers a radical critique of how the market system in 19th and 20th centuries has affected the society since the industrial revolution. Thus, here the drastic changes have happened in society’s way of life and how they overcome such changes. In addition, we also assumed that the industrial revolution in those centuries has the society move from traditional to the modern way of thinking and this is called ‘transformation.’ Many sociological works have been done about changes in society before Polanyi’s work which are identified from Spencer, Durkheim, and Marx.

In the meantime, the concept of transformation has multiple connotations and may differ when putting into contexts. The Cambridge Dictionary (2017) described ‘transformation’ as “a complete change in the appearance or character of something or someone, especially so that thing or person is improved.” Hence, it is understood that transformation is connected to process of move forward into, perhaps, an evolved being (Teran, 2016: 35). On the other hand, it is too ambitious to say that the transformation process does bring positive impacts from any actions, but unfortunately transformation still brings some negative impacts. For instance, the positive transformation in social processes could be identified when the progress of technology and globalization have transformed the traditional societies into more digital societies (Appadurai, 1996, 2000; Scheiner, 2014). However, such transformations also damage the ‘priceless’ surrounding environment by having unlimited mass production, and high use of resources and waste. As consumers are the community themselves, their social relationships can be affected by the excessive use of these resources (Kraut et al. 1998). Moreover, Teran (2016: 35) noted that “transformations are usually contextualized as positive and victorious, and it is regarded s the individual’s process in the tourism and travel scientific field which has not been the exception to this approach.”

Reisinger, (2013) argued that:

“In order to make a change [...], we need to follow a transformation path. We need to transform ourselves-our values, life priorities, lifestyle, and the way we use resources and spend time [...] We must move towards a world in which we learn about the purpose and meaning of our life, a world that gives way to new values of [...] empathy for others, non-violence, human rights and equality.”

In this context, it is inferred that in order to completely change or transform into an improved self (a better quality of life and good values and behaviours) an individual must undertake a re-structuring process Mezirow, 1970 as cited in Teran, 2016: 30). This is

because the individual should assume his/herself as the responsible agent to encourage transformation.

Meanwhile, Ross (2010) explained the term transformation as:

“...a dynamic sociocultural and uniquely individual process that (a) begins with a disorienting dilemma and involves choice, healing, and experience(s) of expanding consciousness [...]; (b) initiates a permanent change in identity structures through cognitive, psychological, physiological, affective, or spiritual experiences; and (c) renders a sustained shift in the form of one’s thinking, doing, believing, or sensing [...]”.

Thus, it can be concluded that transformation is a process of going through life in order to enjoy a better quality of life compared to the previous life. Our review indicates that the concept of transformation could be applied in any fields include tourism as long as it fit the context of the study. For instance, the concept of social transformation has been applied to study international migration and provided some interesting findings (Castles, Cubas, Kim, Koleth, Ozkul, & Williamson, 2011). In the same vein, the concept of social transformation is used to study the ecotourism impacts on the local community and to what extent the local communities benefit from ecotourism related projects. In the context of tourism, the transformation concept is still new for further exploration. Although few studies by Reisinger (2013) and Teran (2016) have attempted to use this concept, the outcome of the study was somehow not fully explored and limited to tourist’s perspectives. Studies on ecotourism and community’s perspectives about this concept are neglected area of study based on tourism literature. Thus, more studies on social transformation of the local community (especially the transformation processes go through by the project participants) through ecotourism development are needed in both developed and developed countries to enrich the current body of knowledge as well as a platform for empirically documented in scholarly journals. In the context of Malaysia, none of the past ecotourism studies have used the concept of social transformation from the perspectives of local communities as well as other stakeholders’ groups. Thus, a novel finding could be found if future ecotourism studies consider our suggestions.

4 Findings and Discussion

This section explains this study’s general research findings which are categorised into economic, socio-cultural and environmental aspects, the sampling and data collection methods and identification of gaps in the literature. Overall, some published articles have gone the content analysis, and several methodological and conceptual gaps were identified.

Several recommendations for potential future research directions have been made. By reviewing these articles, we are hoping that this paper will contribute some useful

insights for future tourism researchers to embark on relevant studies based on our suggestions and at the same time, create a platform to enrich the current body of knowledge.

4.1 Findings

Based on the review, four conclusions can be drawn. First, it is acknowledged that tourism and more specifically, ecotourism, does play a significant role in residents' quality of life and their enhancement of livelihoods. The positive and negative impacts of tourism development contribute to the residents' support for future tourism development; the positive dimensions of tourism impacts significantly influence the residents' participation and future tourism sustainability, while the negative dimensions of tourism impacts reduce the residents' quality of life and they are more likely to perceive tourism development as negative. Second, it was observed that not all residents in the community perceive tourism impact similarly. Most of the studies indicate that positive economic, socio-cultural and environmental impacts of tourism influence the residents' to be supportive toward tourism development when they are directly associated with tourism development compared to other residents who are not involved. Furthermore, it is also worth to note that demographic variables, such as family size, length of residency, income and distance from tourist zone influence the residents' acceptance toward tourism development. Third, the residents' quality of life through tourism development may differ depending on the level of tourism development (an early stage of tourism development and later stages of tourism development); some studies reported that tourism is only favorable in the early stage of development. Fourth, the substantial amount of tourism studies mentioned that there are plenty of studies on residents' perception of tourism development in other developed and developing countries but very limited in Malaysia. Therefore, studies related to community's quality of life or social transformation through tourism or more specifically in ecotourism, are needed to compare these previous literature's findings and could extend the current body of knowledge. These key observations revealed that there is still ample opportunity to research to examine the impacts of tourism development on local community which contribute to better quality of life.

4.2 Methodological Gaps

It was found that studies on the residents' attitudes or perception toward tourism development are dominated by quantitative research, and few studies have used the qualitative research methods. Hence, this study assumes that tourism scholars prefer to use quantitative research methods in studies related to residents' perception toward tourism development because the findings are statistically reliable and valid. However, this does not mean that qualitative research methods are not suitable for studies related to residents' perception. Each approach has their strengths and weaknesses, and tourism scholars have their preferences to choose the approaches which are best to explain the phenomena being studied. Based on the review, it was observed that many studies applied quantitative research approach and less attention

has been given to qualitative research approach. Several authors have also welcomed the fact that the qualitative research methods are relevant for tourism studies (Walle, 1997; Riley & Love, 2000; Jamal & Hollinshead, 2001) as there are still a limited number of published studies that adopted the qualitative research methods (Nunkoo et al. 2013). In this regard, the present study could be considered as a wakeup call to address this issue, and more studies should adopt the qualitative research methods for examining residents' attitudes toward tourism development. This study is also crucial to bridge the gap in the literature particularly towards social transformation phenomenon in ecotourism development.

4.3 Conceptual Gaps

Based on the review, it was found that many ecotourism studies have neglected the concept of social transformation. This concept is deemed as relevant to apply in community ecotourism studies and is linked to the concept of quality of life. In this light, the impact of the output of the ecotourism activities in the community is quality of life which could also be advocated as social transformation. These two concepts must be explained together when studying the impacts of ecotourism on the local community in ecotourism destinations. The social transformations on the community could include the economy, socio-cultural and environment domains at a macro level. A majority of the literature just explained the impacts of tourism and ecotourism development on host communities without emphasizing the concept of social transformation. Thus, this is the time for tourism scholars to explore this concept by putting it as the main concept in ecotourism related studies in both developed and developing countries. In doing so, we hope that the concept of social transformation could expand the current body of knowledge, especially in ecotourism literature from a micro level perspective. The present study also indicates that the concept of social transformation could be a novel concept in ecotourism literature and future studies are needed to assess it in different contexts or locations.

5 Conclusion and Future Research Suggestions

In this section of the paper, we would like to emphasize two key points. First, the gaps in the literature specifically the methodological and conceptual gaps. Second, we would like to suggest few future research directions based on our observations from the review of the literature. It is clear that tourism, as well as ecotourism literatures, recognize that the local communities in tourist destinations are gaining benefits or being involved in social transformation process in economic, socio-cultural and environment domains. Such benefits encourage the host communities to support tourism development with more enthusiasm. The benefits gained by the communities allow them to enjoy a better quality of life if they continuously engage in tourism activities. On the other hand, despite the plethora of studies that have examined the positive benefits of tourism development, there are reports that claimed, tourism still brought negative impacts to local communities if such tourism activities are not properly

managed. Thus, careful further examinations are needed to curb these negative impacts, and relevant authorities should play their roles.

As mentioned earlier, some studies related to residents' attitudes and perceptions have been conducted by tourism researchers all around the world, and several gaps have been observed from the previous literature. First, many studies have utilized the quantitative methods, especially survey, to evaluate the residents' perceptions toward tourism development. The qualitative research methods such as in-depth interviews and observation to study residents' perceptions toward tourism development and there is a limited attention to social transformation. As mentioned by Bryman (2004), the qualitative approach is suitable for research as it includes an inquiry process of understanding an ecotourism matters which is framed with words, subjective issues and the detailed perceptions of informants in a natural setting or context could be presented naturally and since the issue of social transformations is a subjective matter, qualitative research methods are deemed appropriate. The case study research strategy is also suitable for ecotourism-related research where the researcher could obtain a thick description of the phenomena based on the communities' point of view (Yin, 2003). Thus, we suggest that qualitative research methods be considered by future researchers for studies related to the social transformation of local communities involved in ecotourism in different geographical settings.

The review also revealed that the utilization of the concept of social transformation in ecotourism research is very limited. We also noted that the concept of social transformation in ecotourism research is relevant and could be an alternative concept for other existing concepts like quality of life or social change. Also, the identification of social transformation as a study's concept could help extend and strengthen the current literature. Thus, more empirical studies are needed to apply this concept in both developed and developing countries. In doing so, this concept would have some merits for the empirical documentation in tourism academia.

Future research on the social transformation of local communities through ecotourism should be conducted in Malaysia, particularly in Sabah as it is famous for ecotourism activities. In the future, if more research on social transformations of local communities through ecotourism is done in Malaysia, the authors believe that with more knowledge on the impact of ecotourism, particularly in developing countries, a more comprehensive theory of ecotourism could be formulated, especially in the context of Malaysia. Moreover, the findings from the future research might have practical implications for local authorities in designing and planning future ecotourism development in Malaysia. Consequently, the sustainability of the ecotourism, as well as community participation, could be managed systematically.

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