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Assessing the Impacts of Nature-Based Tourism: Host and Guest Perspectives

Introduction

Nature-based tourism is one of the most popular forms and fastest growing sectors of the tourism industry. Tourism could potentially be a boon as well as a burden to nature-based tourism destinations (Newsome, Moore, and Dowling 2012). The impacts of tourism largely depend on the type of tourism development, but there is no single recipe to managing tourism. This is because tourism destinations are unique and there are so many factors in the tourism system that play an important role in shaping a destination. However, there are some attributes that are common to destinations. First, both positive and negative impacts concurrently originate with tourism development (Poudel, Nyaupane, and Budruk 2014). The impacts can be organized into social, economic, and ecological domains (Stoddard, Pollard, and Evans 2012). Sustainable development of tourism requires maximization of positive impacts and minimization of negative impacts.

Second, there are several stakeholders involved in managing tourism designations, which can be broadly categorized as hosts (e.g., tourism entrepreneurs and residents) and guests (i.e., tourists) (Byrd 2007). The stakeholders have their own preferences for tourism development. It is crucial to understand and analyze the interests, needs, and priorities of stakeholder for sustainable tourism development (Byrd, Bosley, and Dronberger 2009). Literature shows that stakeholder theory has been extensively used to study the perspectives and perceptions of stakeholders in tourism research in the last three decades (Currie, Seaton, and Wesley 2009; d'Angella and Go 2009). Tourism stakeholders have different levels of exposure or experience with the destination. To illustrate, tourists usually stay for a few days, whereas residents spend years resulting different level of knowledge and understanding of the destination elements. Third, social exchange theory has been extensively used to understand residents' perceptions towards tourism development. Based on the social exchange theory, how positive and negative impacts are perceived by local residents can be understood by analyzing the exchange of resources (material, social or psychological) between individuals and groups. However, empirical studies show that social exchange theory has limited utility in tourism, as benefits is a valid predictor of attitude, but negative impacts (costs) of tourism do not seem to help predict attitude (Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, and Vogt 2005; Ward and Berno, 2011). Another drawback of the social exchange theory is that it does not take into account of memory in the process of attitude formation. According to the place memory theory (Chawla 1986), people's memories affect their perceptions and attitudes. This suggests that the place memory theory can help to unfold host and guest perceptions in tourism contexts.

The purpose of this research was to assess the impacts of nature-based tourism at the destination level and compare the perceptions of hosts and guests regarding tourism impacts. This research contributes to the tourism literature by examining why hosts and guests perceive tourism impacts differently using the stakeholder and place memory theories. The paper also provides practical implications for managing tourism at nature-based tourism destinations.

Methods

This research was conducted in Chitwan National Park, Nepal, the most visited national park in

Nepal and also a world heritage site. The park is popular for various nature-based tourism pursuits, including elephant safari, bird watching, wildlife viewing, jungle walk, and canoeing. The respondents were international tourists and local residents. The survey method was used to collect data and the questionnaires were self-administered by the respondents. The questionnaires were designed in Nepali for local residents and English for tourists. We collected a total of 430 surveys (response rate 86%), which included 220 residents and 210 tourists. The percentage of males in the resident and tourist data were 71% and 49%, respectively. Tourists (mean age = 32.08 years) were slightly older than the residents (mean age = 34.62 years). Average annual income of the resident and tourist samples were US\$ 2349.00 and US\$ 44029.30, respectively. Tourists were better educated than the residents—71% tourists and 13% residents had an associate or higher degree.

Tourism impacts were measured using positive social, negative social, positive economic, negative economic, positive ecological, and negative ecological impact scales. The scale items were selected from a review of extant literature on impacts of tourism in the social, economic, and ecological environments of tourist destinations (e.g., [Andereck, et al. 2005](#); [Byrd et al. 2009](#); [Choi and Sirakaya 2005](#)). In addition, we consulted local level tourism stakeholders, including park managers, tourism entrepreneurs, tourists, and local people to make sure that the scale items were relevant for the study context. All scale items were measured on a 5-point Likert scale that range from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The exploratory factor analysis was conducted to examine the dimensions and Cronbach's alpha (α) was computed to examine the reliability of the scales. We retained 7 items in positive social ($\alpha = .73$), 12 items in negative social ($\alpha = .88$), 17 items in positive ecological ($\alpha = .85$), 8 items in negative ecological ($\alpha = .81$), 6 items in positive ecological ($\alpha = .73$), and 8 items in negative ecological ($\alpha = .81$) impact scales.

Results

We used independent-samples t-test to examine whether the perceptions of stakeholders vary. In our analysis, six aforementioned tourism impacts scales were dependent variables and tourists and residents were comparison groups. Results show that the perceptions of tourists and residents differ on all impacts scales; that is, the test was significant for positive social impact scale, $t(428) = 3.93, p < .001$, negative social impact scale, $t(428) = 5.02, p < .001$, positive economic impact scale, $t(428) = 3.15, p = .002$, negative economic impact scale, $t(428) = 9.36, p < .001$, positive ecological impact scale, $t(428) = 6.46, p < .001$, and negative ecological impact scale, $t(428) = 9.74, p < .001$. A comparison of means showed that compared to tourists, residents scored significantly higher on positive social, economic, and ecological impact scales, and significantly lower on negative social, economic, and ecological impact scales (Table 1). This means residents perceived higher positive impacts and lower negative impacts than tourists.

Table 1. Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) for Residents and Tourists on Tourism Impact Scales

Tourism impact scale	Residents		Tourists	
	M	SD	M	SD
Positive social	4.02	.48	3.84	.48
Negative social	2.44	.70	2.77	.68

Positive economic	4.02	.49	3.88	.38
Negative economic	3.21	.67	3.72	.42
Positive ecological	3.99	.62	3.64	.48
Negative ecological	2.50	.67	3.06	.66

Discussion and Conclusions

The results indicate that residents were more supportive towards the current form of tourism development in Chitwan National Park than tourists. The results support the notion of stakeholder theory that tourism stakeholders perceive the impacts of tourism in different way (Byrd 2007). Therefore, from a practical point view, it is imperative to include all relevant stakeholders while planning and managing tourism destinations. The reason why residents perceived tourism more favorably than tourists can be explained by the place memory theory (Chawla 1986). By reviewing biographical memories of places, Chawla (1986) identified that people's perceptions of places can be explained by a range relationships: from an idealization of a place to the omission of a place. Local residents' perceptions are more likely to be influenced by their conscious memories from a wide range multiple reference points, whereas international tourists' perceptions are formed by a narrow range or a single reference point. Therefore, the perceived outcomes were dependent on reference points, which supports the prospect theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979). Reference points are defined as any stimuli "which other stimuli are seen in relation to" (Rosch 1975, p. 533). For local residents, reference points might be the economic, social and ecological benefits and costs they perceived from the park previously. Tourist reference points, on the other hand, may be their previous visit to the park, if they visited in the past, or other destinations they visited, and heard or read about. Therefore, local residents' perceptions are based on the long term and conscious memories and experiences, whereas tourists' perceptions are short-term and superficial. Local perceived tourism a principal source of revenue to carryout forest and wildlife conservation programs. Similarly, tourism is seen as an economic engine that helped increase income, provided employment opportunities, and contributed to community development projects.

This research concludes that it is necessary to measure and manage both positive impacts and negative impacts for sustainable destination development. In addition, from a demand perspective, tourism destinations are often developed based on how guests perceive the destination. However, this study shows a great discrepancy between local residents and tourists. The findings can be useful for tourism researchers, and destination planners and managers to understand the differences between stakeholders, particularly the hosts and guests.

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