

Cultural destinations and the role of gender in sustainable tourism development: Focusing on handicraft entrepreneurs

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Abstract

Literature suggests that a strong relationship between tourism and culture can help destinations become more attractive and competitive. Focusing on local stakeholders' perspective of cultural destinations and tourism sustainability, this paper explores specific aspects of this relationship. Interviewing cultural and tourism authorities in a small town, Rethymno in Crete, Greece, indicated that in their sustainable tourism plans they focused more on local residents than on tourists and paid significant attention to the support of traditional arts. Subsequent interviews with local artist-producers involved in traditional arts, questioned various aspects connected to sustainable tourism development, such as what role gender plays. For instance, women were more likely to recognise social gains from their involvement in tourism entrepreneurship, which indicates gendered implications in tourism development. By considering how social gains can be gendered, we can suggest how tourism development programs of cultural destinations can be more sustainable.

Keywords: destinations, culture, gender, sustainable tourism development, stakeholders

Introduction

Cultural destinations seek to refer to the convergence between two of the six place brand dimensions, namely tourism, and culture-heritage (Anholt, 2003). Past literature highlights how creating a strong relationship between tourism and culture can help destinations become more attractive as well as more competitive and it is this relationship that our paper wants to explore (Apostolakis, 2003; Arzeni, 2009).

Winning over a destination's stakeholders is not only a crucial platform for successful place branding but also an indicator of a sustainable approach in tourism development (Zouganeli, Trihas, Antonaki, & Kladou, 2012). Given the need for a more holistic evaluation of tourism success, cultural tourism in small towns was focused upon by undertaking a qualitative study to examine the views of different stakeholder groups, initially interviewing local authorities involved in the cultural and tourism arena of the town and then local artist-producers involved in traditional arts. During the interviews, various aspects connected to sustainable tourism development arose, such as how the participants perceive socio-economic gains and how these may be gendered. The present paper outlines related literature and, after describing Rethymno as a tourism destination proceeds to the presentation of research findings. Then, conclusions are drawn and specific implications suggested.

The town of Rethymno in Crete as a tourism destination

Crete, with a population of approximately 603,000 inhabitants, is the largest Greek island and the fifth largest in the Mediterranean. Rethymno, the third largest city of the island, with a population of around 28,000, is located on the northern coast (see map in Figure 1). The local economy heavily relies on the tourism industry for its prosperity, mainly because a handful of other regional sectors—such as agriculture, commerce, transportation, construction, and services—are strongly related to tourism (Andriotis, 2000). It has been

estimated that approximately 40% of the local population are, directly or indirectly, involved in tourism activities (Anagnostopoulou, Arapis, Bouchy, & Micha, 1996). The island attracts essentially mass tourism, a model of tourism development that is connected to seasonality and raises important issues of land usage, mainly in the urban and coastal zones, affecting their aesthetic and cultural value (Archi-Med, 2001, p. 11). Tourists visiting Rethymno mostly come from North European countries and visit the town during the summer. Despite the recent economic crisis, an increase of 8.02% was recorded in accommodation from 2010 to 2011 (Greek Statistics, 2012).

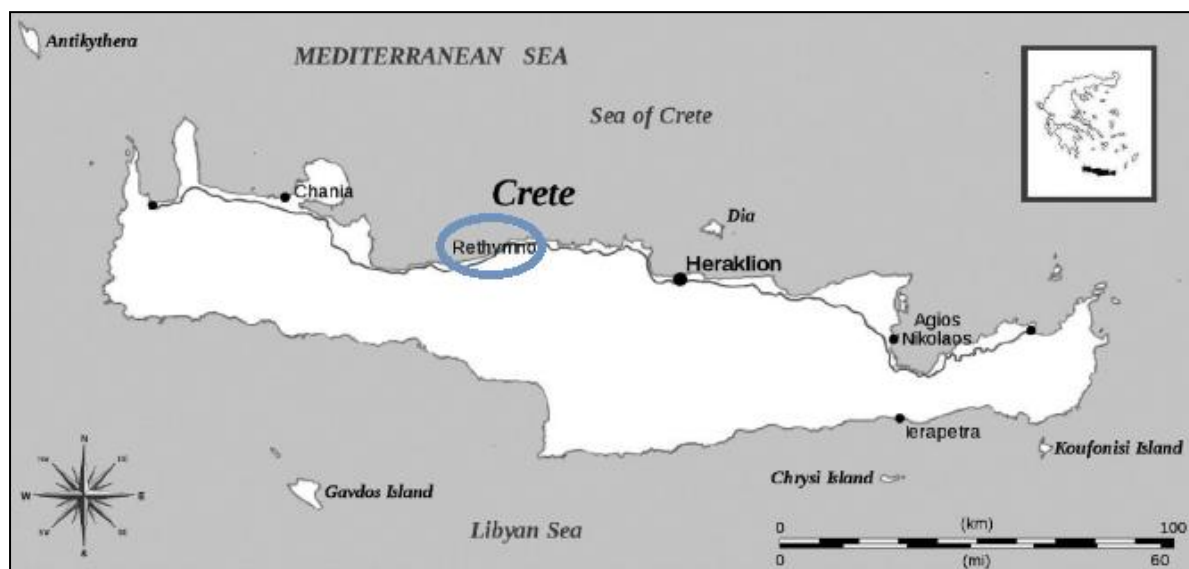


Figure 1 Map of Crete

Theoretical Background

Understanding the social and economic gains of stakeholders from tourism development, is an important consideration when planning for sustainable tourism development, as stakeholders such as local tourism entrepreneurs are very much part of the “tourism product” (Deery, Jago & Fredline 2012) In fact, Buhalis (2000) argues that marketing of destinations should balance the strategic objectives of stakeholders with the sustainability of local resources, which is where culture plays a significant role. Given the need to differentiate

destination products and develop partnerships between local stakeholders, a number of sustainability issues arise once again. National and European policies for sustainable tourism development have focused on including women in particular and have consequently succeeded in increasing the number of female entrepreneurs in Greece (Iakovidou, Koutsou & Partalidou 2009). Regarding the economic gains for local tourism entrepreneurs, the general trend has been for favourable perceptions of tourism to be held by people working within tourism as indicated in work by Andriotis (2005) and others.

The subject of social gains from tourism has been covered in less depth, with past literature (Brougham & Butler 1981) focusing mainly on descriptive analyses rather than trying to explain the nature of these social gains. More recently, social exchange theory has been used by many researchers to look at individuals' social gains and impacts from tourism development, evaluating their participants' quality of life (Tovar & Lockwood 2008) or looking at how much their participants support tourism development (Huh & Vogt 2008). However, there has been limited literature addressing a deeper understanding of social gains by assessing how these may be gendered.

Despite gender being often used simply as a synonym for women, recent developments in gender and development literature emphasise the importance of analysing gender more critically in order for development efforts to be more effective (Chant 2006; Ferguson 2010). By looking at how what constitutes feminine and masculine is "repositioned through tourism work" (p. 88) in specific contexts enables us to evaluate the social change brought on by tourism (Tucker 2007). In this paper, we use gender as an analytical category so we can capture a fuller picture of how stakeholders are affected by tourism development in terms of social gains, as gender questions a wide range of social constructs including cultural, religious, social and economic influences on a person. Furthermore, using feminism as a theoretical perspective allows us to use the "powerful tool of gender" to analyse the social constructions of taken for granted human interactions and hence view tourism development through a more nuanced lens (Barker & Kuiper 2003).

Methodology

Qualitative approaches allow researchers to better comprehend cultural issues and social sciences (Ferguson, 2000; Bornhorst et al., 2010). This paper uses qualitative methods to analyse stakeholders' perceptions of social gains, thus responding to the recent call for the use of qualitative methods to analyse the issues facing tourism stakeholders (Deery, Jago & Fredline 2012). Semi structured interviews were conducted with local cultural and tourism officials, allowing adjustments whenever necessary (Marzano and Scott, 2009). Given the dominant role of the public sector for destination marketing and branding strategies, the target group involved cultural and tourism experts who worked for the municipality.

These experts possessed knowledge on the town's cultural products, their influence on the city image, their appeal to target markets and the respective strategies followed in order to communicate between the town and its respective products. The second part of our research was conducted by interviewing entrepreneurs involved in culture. Tourism handicraft micro-entrepreneurs were selected, due to their involvement with traditional local products which are sold as souvenirs to tourists. By using interviews, we managed to gain a more holistic and nuanced view of how the second stakeholder group (i.e. entrepreneurs) perceive tourism development and consequently how they experience being part of their town's cultural attractions. Using feminist theory to guide the questions, these participants were asked what social and economic gains they had from working in tourism and were encouraged to expand on the importance of these gains to them.

Analysis and findings

Cultural and tourism stakeholders agree that the presence of international tourists benefit the city not only economically but culturally as well. According to the interviews conducted with this first stakeholder group, demand and consumption create new job opportunities, improve

infrastructure and boost creativity. Local stakeholders also agree that respect towards local history and culture expressed by foreign tourists may increase a similar feeling of respect in local residents. Furthermore, local authorities argue that tourism in Rethymno is mostly appreciated because of its overall benefit to the local society. In fact, stakeholders believe that any negative impacts that tourism has on local culture and society is because mass tourism is the main form of tourism.

The economic crisis and respective social changes have made local authorities reconsider their tourism approach, wanting to focus on attracting tourists who are interested in Rethymno's local history and culture. Hence local authorities now appear keener to invest in local culture, for example by funding museums to organise events which provide learning experiences to residents. This has a dual result. First, inhabitants learn more about their local culture and second, local people are actively involved in the cultural field as entrepreneurs and educators.

Furthermore, in order for the destination to be communicated as a cultural one, authorities realise that its attributes need to be promoted and positioned in such a way that they respond to tourists' desires and expectations. The destination's image and the products it offers need to be in line with what has been promised and what is desired and expected by tourists. Therefore, investments in cultural activities which can attract tourist interest while also benefiting locals economically, culturally and socially are a main priority.

Proceeding to the second group of stakeholders, the handicraft tourism entrepreneurs, the majority of participants were positive about the economic gains from tourism, yet their responses regarding social gains varied. For many of the female participants, working in tourism brought social recognition as they now considered themselves productive members of society. An issue the women worried about was their inability to achieve a family/work balance during the summer months when they worked very long hours. An influence of the strength of religious beliefs was also detected since women who adhered less to religious beliefs regarding the 'correct' woman, complained more about the double burden of

housework and tourism work upon them and as a result negotiated household task better, often getting their husband to help them.

Discussion and implementation

Cultural assets become tourist assets as soon as they start attracting tourists to the destination or create the motivation to extend one's stay (McKercher et al., 2004). In order for tourists to appreciate specific cultural assets, they should be attractive outside the local community, while their uniqueness must also be emphasized (McKercher & Du Cros, 2003). Moreover, cultural tourist assets effectively tell a story, are accessible, qualitative, and offer a sense of authenticity and experience (McKercher et al. 2004). Local stakeholders in Rethymno value cultural tourism and emphasise its economic gains for local residents, especially those directly involved in cultural tourism such as handicraft tourism entrepreneurs. However, further research reveals significant considerations ignored by the authorities such as the role gender plays in translating social gains.

These differences in perception of gains from tourism development may be explained by the socio-cultural ideologies underpinning gendered division of labour. Starting from the sense of empowerment and increase in self-confidence the female entrepreneurs felt, this was also observed by Baughn et.al.(2006) who linked it to the level of a country's general support for entrepreneurship and its amount of gender equality. In the small town of Rethymno in Northern Crete, tourism work is highly gendered with the majority of women working in 'feminised' positions such as hotel-maids, cleaners and cooks, where as men occupy positions such as managers, drivers and administrators (Leontidou 1994). Hence for a woman, being an entrepreneur in this small town is effectively doing an occupation normally done by men and thus socially accepted as a productive activity, which may explain why our female participants classed being a productive member of society as a social gain from tourism development. As men are already imbued in masculine discourses which situate

them as being productive, this possibly explains why our male participants did not mention social acceptance as being one of their social gains.

The notion that women's primary responsibility is their family is still very prevalent in most of Greece. Religion reinforces the version of how a 'correct' woman should act and it promotes the idea that a woman's primary responsibility is towards her family and she can achieve this by doing all the housework, attending church and by being responsible for the family's spiritual well-being (Lazaridis 2009). Therefore, on the subject of combining family life with working in tourism, female participants with strong attachments to the church were the most likely to naturalise pressures on them to do all the housework as well as work in tourism, a task they achieved by working exhaustingly long hours, without complaining about it.

The male participants on the other hand identified social gains from working in tourism mainly as being social interactions such as making new friends and discussing ideas with colleagues.

The differences in perceptions of social gains for the female and male entrepreneurs in our study indicate the role socially constructed gender roles play in sustainable development efforts. As the gendered pressures on entrepreneurs will vary depending on context, it is important to consider gender dynamics that are embedded in supposedly "gender neutral" tourism development processes in order for development efforts to be more effective, (Ferguson 2011, p. 236). Consequently, when considering managing a destination's cultural tourism, we must investigate how the stakeholder's realities are gendered in order to create development programs that are beneficial both to cultural tourism entrepreneurs and to local authorities.

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