

## Connecting Tourism Development and Ecological Restoration Synergies with Bordering Processes at the U.S.-Mexico Border

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# **Connecting Tourism Development and Ecological Restoration Synergies with Bordering Processes at the U.S.-Mexico Border**

## **Abstract**

This study investigates the relationship between tourism development, ecological restoration, and border making processes at the U.S.-Mexico border. By employing a multiple case study design, this paper highlights stakeholder views towards ongoing tourism development and ecological restoration efforts in the region as well as opportunities for stakeholder collaboration. The findings reveal diverse attitudes towards these ongoing efforts, unlikely partnerships between stakeholder groups previously thought to have incompatible goals, and abundant challenges as well as opportunities for cross-border collaborations. As data continues to be collected, the findings will be discussed in the context of 'bordering' processes to illuminate how these efforts contribute to border 'softening' and/or 'hardening'.

## **Introduction**

Border scholarship has historically provided a descriptive and non-theoretical view of international borders by describing them as static results of political decisions over time (Newman, 2006a; Newman 2006b; Newman & Paasi, 1998). More recently, however, much of the academic literature discussing international border topics has vastly expanded on this non-theoretical outlook and has broadened our understanding of the many different types of borders that exist and the process by which these borders are created and change over time (Gao et al., 2019; Martinez, 1994, Newman, 2006b). This process of creating, softening, and hardening borders is known to researchers respectively as 'bordering', 'debordering', and 'rebordering' (Herzog & Sohn, 2017), and represents a continual process that can be influenced by many social and political factors (Deleixhe et al., 2019). This nuanced understanding of borders highlights the importance for scholars to examine the impact that different factors have on borderlands and the bordering, debordering, and rebordering processes. In this study, the factors under investigation are tourism development and ecological restoration.

The current lack of understanding of how tourism development and ecological restoration are intertwined in the bordering process provides the rationale for this study. The purpose of this study is to decipher how both tourism development and ecological restoration operate as agents of bordering by using the Sky Island region of the U.S.-Mexico border as a case study. Further, the objective of this study is to illuminate the relationship between tourism development, ecological restoration, and bordering by examining stakeholders' perspectives.

## **Literature Review**

Over the past several decades, a number of models and frameworks have conceptualized the tourism development process as well as the community responses to this phenomenon. The most widely cited of these models, according to Hall (2006), is Butler's (1980) Tourist Area Life Cycle (TALC) model, which posits that tourist areas pass through a number of stages as tourism develops: exploration, involvement, development, and consolidation, at which point three alternative trajectories of stagnation, decline, or rejuvenation unfold. In addition, researchers have shown that

resident attitudes tie into this tourism development life cycle (Hunt & Stronza, 2014) and that local enthusiasm drastically declines when critical boundaries of social and environmental tolerance are reached (Dodds & Butler, 2019; Pechlaner et al., 2020). Moreover, Doxey (1975) demonstrated this attitude decline in the Irritation Irridex by postulating that local residents' attitudes begin in a stage of euphoria as tourism development initiates, after which sentiments digress into stages of apathy, irritation, and antagonism as the destination develops into a more popular tourist area.

Tourism development in a cross-border context highlights unique challenges and opportunities for stakeholders. Among the challenges for developing tourism in border regions are a lack of proper skills and financial capital among local communities and tourism entrepreneurs (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017), as border regions are located geographically and economically on the periphery of their respective nations (Timothy, 2001). In addition, tourism stakeholders in border regions hold unequal power, which complicates equitable distribution of tourism benefits as the more powerful stakeholders try to shape tourism systems in their favor (Stoffelen et al., 2017). While these cross-border obstacles can hinder regional tourism development in borderlands, even former conflicted borders have been able to provide tourism development opportunities, such as the Iron Curtain Cycling Trail now found along the Germany-Czech Republic border (Stoffelen & Vanneste, 2017). According to Prokkola (2010), favorable supranational policies and local involvement leads to higher border permeability, which in turn invites more tourism investment and opportunities for sustainable tourism development and binational cooperation.

Ecological restoration is the practice of restoring ecological processes that have been disturbed, damaged, or destroyed (Clewell & Aronson, 2013; Suding et al., 2015). Many scientists see ecological restoration as a necessary measure to reverse the devastating impact humans have had on natural landscapes and the earth's climate (Harris et al., 2006). Further, ecological restoration can also have economic impacts on a region as non-extractive industries, such as tourism, can replace mining, ranching, or lumber industries (Zhang et al., 2011). When ecological restoration efforts are applied across larger landscapes, such efforts have the potential to lead to the creation of new protected areas (PAs), including national parks, whose designation naturally attracts tourism (Butler, 2000) and can have the positive impact of reducing stress on existing facilities inside PAs induced by high visitor volumes (Liliehalm & Romney, 2000). A study of the intersection between tourism and ecological restoration is needed as few studies have addressed these topics in conjunction (see Anderson et al., 2019; Clark & Nyaupane, 2020; Hall, 2019; Pellis, 2019), and most of these studies have focused on only a small subfield of ecological restoration known as rewilding, which mostly focuses on restoring wildlife in ecosystems where they have been extirpated (Anderson et al., 2019). Continued research on this aspect of ecological restoration is important as certain wildlife species, such as wolves, have been treated unkindly by western folklore, making attempts to restore them in certain places around the globe highly controversial (Butler, 2000).

## **Methodology**

This research uses the Sky Island border region found across southeast Arizona, southwest New Mexico, northwest Chihuahua, and north east Sonora as a case study for understanding the linkages between tourism development, ecological restoration, and bordering processes. To further understand these linkages, this study aims to understand stakeholder perspectives, resource governance structures, and shared appreciation for common natural and cultural heritage. This

highly ecologically rich borderland region derives its name from the scattered mountain ranges that rise above the desert and has a unique cultural and natural landscape (López-Hoffman & Quijada-Mascareñas, 2012; Piekielek, 2009). However, the region is described by many as one that is imperiled, where border patrol activities that attempt to control illegal border crossings and drug and human trafficking are militarized to the point that diverse ecosystems and communities are divided and damaged in the process (Meierotto, 2014). This scenario presents as many opportunities as it does challenges for creating ties between these two countries that transcend the steel-framed barrier that divides them. Data for this study is being collected using a multi-method approach, including in-depth interviews, photo elicitation interviews, personal observations, secondary data analysis, and focus group discussions. Participants from key stakeholder groups are being recruited through purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling methods (Bernard et al., 2017). Within the study area, these key stakeholder groups include ranchers, conservation nonprofits, federal and state agencies, local residents, and tourism and hospitality businesses.

## **Results**

The initial results of this research reveal abundant examples of cross-border collaborations to restore ecosystems by conservation nonprofits, private landholders, nature-based tourism providers, and state agencies. Key players within each stakeholder group are either working on various restoration and conservation initiatives or are directly benefitting from such initiatives, and tourists have crossed borders to engage in these restoration efforts. Further, various local businesses and festivals have been built around specific natural attractions in the study area that have been protected or restored by private ranchers, conservation agencies, and nonprofits. New tourism ventures on the U.S. side of the border include a recently established 140-mile bikepacking route that passes through private ranches and a conservation nonprofit's property which previously restricted property access to researchers but has found sustainable tourism to be compatible with their conservation goals. However, some stakeholders are still cautious with how tourism will impact the environment or traditional agricultural livelihoods. Moreover, the border barrier, strict immigration laws, and safety concerns about drug cartels significantly limit cross-border forms of tourism.

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

Although the data collection and analysis of this project are ongoing, the initial results reveal copious opportunities and challenges for cooperation and collaboration for tourism development and ecological restoration between key stakeholders in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. Among the opportunities for collaboration are findings which reinforce Zhang et al.'s (2011) claim that ecological restoration can facilitate economic shifts from extractive industries towards non-extractive ones, such as sustainable tourism. In this light, tourism and ecological restoration can be viewed as agents of debordering as they lead to more cross-border synergies (Herzog & Sohn, 2017), but some stakeholders have their reservations about tourism impacts. Conversely, the heavy militarization along the U.S.-Mexico border and safety concerns about drug cartels significantly limit cross-border tourism activities, suggesting that tourism on its own does little to impact bordering processes in this region. In summary, this research helps fill a void of understanding regarding the relationship between tourism development and ecological restoration (Hall, 2019) by examining how these two forces interact in a cross-border context.

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