‘Stepping on the heads of our Gods’: Community Action and Learning in Response to Tourism Development in Manali, India

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ABSTRACT

The Himalayan region of India is experiencing rapid development in tourism, agriculture, highway construction and hydroelectric dam construction. This research considered the role of the public both within and outside of development decision-making processes in these high mountain environments using the proposed Himalayan Ski Village (HSV) in Manali as a case study. The qualitative data revealed that there has been an extensive array of public participation activity related to the HSV project over approximately 10 years. Very little of this activity has evolved, however, through the formal decision-making process. Rather, most participation activities, such as general house meetings, objection letters, public rallies, court cases against the proposed project, and a religious congregation were instigated by the public to protest the proposed development. The findings also show that involvement in the participatory activities undertaken by the public and project proponent fostered instrumental and communicative learning outcomes.

Keywords: Community-Based Tourism Development, Himalayan Ski Village (HSV), India, Learning, Public Involvement

INTRODUCTION

For many developing countries, tourism is one of the main sources of foreign exchange income and it creates a wide range of tourism-related employment opportunities (WTO, 2012). In these countries, tourism has continued to emerge as one of the main drivers of economic growth and societal change, particularly in remote mountain communities. While tourism has been widely acknowledged for its contribution to economic development, the industry also brings associated adverse environmental and social impacts, which are not as benign as...
had been predicted (Berno & Bricker, 2001; Genelitti & Dawa, 2009). In the face of rapid tourism development, the notion of sustainable tourism development has emerged to describe development that strives to contribute to the sustainability of the environment, society, and overall socio-economic development of a tourist destination (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005; McCool, 1996; Neto, 2003).

Community participation is central to the notion of sustainable tourism development (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005; Liu, 2003; Timothy, 1999). In this regard, participation should be viewed from two perspectives: involving the public in tourism planning and development decision-making processes, and/or involving the local community in tourism benefit sharing (Timothy, 1999; Tosun, 2000). The literature indicates benefits and justification for involving the public in tourism decision making and planning, such as building trust and understanding at the local level, creating transparency and accountability, minimizing the potential negative impacts on the society and environment, ensuring benefit sharing, and increasing efficiency and acceptability of tourism policies and proposals, etc. (Kapoor, 2001; Kent et al., 2011; Sinclair & Diduck, 2009; Timothy, 1999). In addition, some research recognizes the potential for broad-based individual and collective sustainability related learning outcomes of public participation programs (e.g., Fitzpatrick & Sinclair, 2003; Sinclair et al., 2008; Sinclair & Diduck, 2009; Webler et al., 1995).

In India, tourism is the largest service industry and contributes extensively to the country’s economy by generating income and employment (Kaur & Sharma, 2012). According to the World Tourism and Travel Council (WTTC), in 2011 India’s tourism sector made a total contribution of about 6.4% to the Gross Domestic Product and accounted for 7.8% of total employment. These statistics also indicate that India has experienced a steady growth in both international and domestic tourist arrivals. The number of domestic tourists within India, however, is very high compared to foreign tourists’ numbers. The total number of domestic tourists recorded in 2011 was 850.86 million whereas foreign tourist arrivals were estimated at 6.92 million for the same period (Government of India, 2011).

This research took place in and around Manali in Himachal Pradesh, a northern mountainous state of India. Mountain regions, including the Himalayan region of India, have become a prominent global tourist destination because of their natural scenic landscape, and cultural and ecological diversity (Gardner et al., 2002; Kent et al., 2011; Price et al., 1997). The tourism potential of these mountain areas has attracted various investors, including foreign corporations, who have invested in large-scale development projects such as ski resorts and luxury hotels. The Himalayan Ski Village project - proposed for Manali and with the intention of attracting a new generation of Indian and foreign ski enthusiasts - is not a typical example of such commercial tourism ventures in the Indian Himalayan context in that it is large scale as opposed to the smaller-scale, Indian-owned developments in the region. Such large-scale developments are often presented as ‘local friendly’ (Gopinath, 2008) or ‘eco-friendly’ initiatives (EQUATIONS, 2008; Singh, 2008), but sometimes the reality is different. In India and elsewhere, such developments can actually end up threatening the economic and environmental viability of the places where they occur (Singh, 2008).

The purpose of this paper is twofold. The first is to establish the activities undertaken by the local community, proponent and government in the case of the proposed HSV project that provided the community with a voice in the decision-making process. The second purpose is to convey the individual learning outcomes of participants gained through their involvement.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Past studies on public participation have revealed that there is a very limited scope for such community involvement in decision-making related to large-scale development projects in
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