



Examining the extent to which stakeholder collaboration during ecotourism planning processes could be applied within an Egyptian context



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ABSTRACT

In Egypt, as in most developing countries, the relationship between the environment and development remains very unbalanced because of tensions between, and among, all relevant stakeholder groups. These unbalanced relationships are circular and are unlikely to be resolved without more effective collaboration between the relevant stakeholders. The purpose of this paper is to examine the extent to which greater stakeholder collaboration during ecotourism planning processes could be applied in practice. Based on two Egyptian ecotourism case studies our analysis suggests that any stakeholder involvement has tended towards a consultative rather than collaborative approach. Developing any mutual understanding, by listening to stakeholder views and interests, in order to build a consensus between the stakeholder groups was not achieved. Nevertheless, more, effective stakeholder participation during the process could be enabled, and a move towards greater collaboration between and among the stakeholder groups, could be realised if the identified gaps in operationalising stakeholder engagement were mitigated.

1. Introduction

Ecotourism, particularly for developing countries, has been widely advocated as a response to the environmental and cultural degradation associated with mass tourism (Dangi and Jamal, 2016; Yogi, 2010). Its theoretical frame reflects an eco-centric perspective with a philosophical focus for tourism development on nature and local communities (Clayton, 2017; Pipinos and Fokiali, 2009). It is argued that, ecotourism can provide significant positive contributions to the environmental, social, cultural and economic aspects of destinations and local communities, offering long-term solutions which protect and promote local natural and cultural diversity (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1999; Su et al., 2014). Such an approach is consistent with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which aim to alleviate poverty and protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems (UN, 2015).

Although ecotourism captured only around 10% of global tourism in the last decade (ADB, 2010; EBSCO, 2009), it has been projected that this could increase to around 25% of the global tourism market by the beginning of the next decade and account for US\$ 470 billion per year in revenues, according to the International Ecotourism Society (Clayton, 2017; CREST, 2015). This is because, globally, ecotourism is growing three times faster than the tourism industry as a whole (Butarbutar and Soemarno, 2012) with a 10–12% annual growth rate in

the international market (Abdallah, 2012; Marker et al., 2008). Ecotourism as a brand is gaining in popularity, with more than a third of travellers preferring ecotourism and willing to pay for related experiences. The global spend on ecotourism is estimated to grow by 20% per annum over the next two decades, around six times the rate of growth for whole of the tourism industry (Pratt et al., 2011). This growth rate is expected to be sustained in the near future as a result of UN General Assembly Resolution 69/233 on the “promotion of sustainable tourism includ[ing] ecotourism, for poverty eradication and environmental protection” (UNWTO, 2016 p42). Especially as ecotourism can be seen to be more beneficial for the receiving countries and local communities compared with mass tourism. Around 95% of ecotourism expenditure is put back into the local economy (Marker et al., 2008) compared with the only 20% for conventional tourism, the remaining revenue going to international companies and tour agencies (Clayton, 2017; Honey, 2008; McIntyre, 2011).

According to many, including Inskeep (1991); Dowling (1993); El-Barmelgy (2002); Bonilla (2008); Preskill and Jones (2009) and Kenawy and Shaw (2014), a successful planning process should be a necessary pre-requisite for achieving effective sustainable ecotourism development. This is because such plans are usually being developed in highly sensitive regions where there are a wide spectrum of stakeholders who will be affected and influenced by any ecotourism

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development. Currently a lack of co-ordination and integration between those stakeholder groups has led to:

- Continuing degradation of tourism destinations;
- Marginalisation of local people from any of the fair benefits from the tourism development, and then further abuse and degradation of the local natural environment and its assets through informal and unregulated activities, (e.g., selling souvenirs to visitors); and,
- A lack of commitment to the implementation of plans that do not reflect stakeholder interest, meaning that these plans often end up gathering dust on the shelves (Kenawy, 2015).

These outcomes are mutually supportive of one another and are very unlikely to be resolved unless there is more effective collaboration between relevant stakeholders, which may, in turn, avoid the costs associated with resolving long-running conflicts and improve sustainable ecotourism development. The most appropriate starting point for this is focusing on the planning process by ensuring that development plans properly reflect stakeholder interests and deal with their conflict through face-to-face dialogue.

Numerous initiatives have been designed to promote relevant stakeholder involvement and bridge the fragmentation gaps between institutions in Egypt, but they have not been successful in achieving their objectives. However, the performance and inputs from all stakeholders during the planning process could be enhanced and move towards greater collaborative if the challenges to stakeholder engagement could be mitigated. This paper seeks to examine the extent to which a more collaborative planning approach could be applied during initiatives designed to achieve more sustainable ecotourism development in Egypt. The paper can be divided into two parts. The first one develops an idealised conceptual framework for successful collaborative planning based upon an analytical review of the relevant literature. Two ecotourism planning process case studies are then evaluated, in the second part, to identify the potential for stakeholder collaboration in Egyptian ecotourism planning.

2. Developing an idealised conceptual framework

The development of the conceptual framework combines an understanding of the requirements for successful ecotourism development with the potential of a collaborative planning approach to address these requirements.

2.1. The key fundamentals of ecotourism and the requirements for its development

Although there are numerous definitions of ecotourism in the literature, most writers use terms such as: nature- and local culture-based, ecologically sustainable; concerned with natural and biodiversity conservation; and involving eco-tourists and local residents in education (Chiutsi et al., 2011; Himoonde, 2007) and advocate that ecotourism must bring positive benefit to local communities (Buchsbaum, 2004). Hence, three main pillars for ecotourism success can be identified (see Fig. 1):

- Promoting conservation of the natural and cultural resources;
- Profitable for local communities: through providing local people with social and economic benefits such as creating jobs, providing income opportunities and improved local infrastructure (Debnath, 2011).
- Participation – particularly of affected local communities – but also including other relevant stakeholder groups more generally, all of which should be involved in running the ecotourism activities (see Fig. 2) (Mader, 2010; TDA, RSSTI, PA and USAID, 2003). Indeed, stakeholder involvement and collaboration within the ecotourism development process is not only desirable, but necessary for true

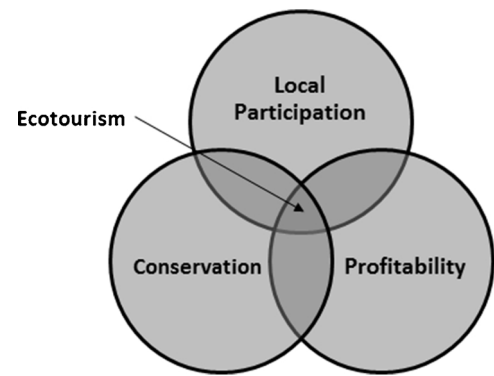


Fig. 1. The pillars for ecotourism success according to the most definitions.

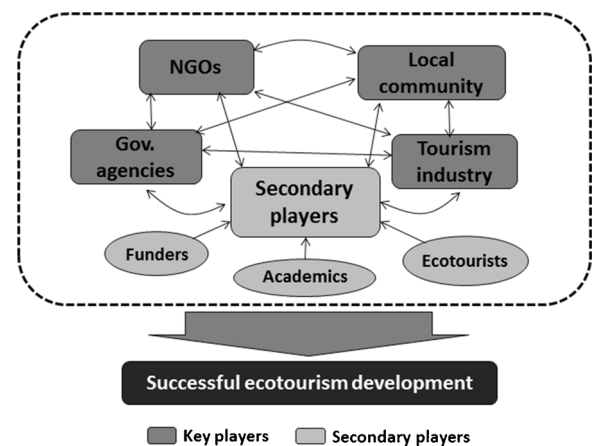


Fig. 2. Wide spectrum of stakeholder groups in the Ecotourism system.

ecotourism to occur (Su et al., 2014).

Any discussion in the ecotourism literature emphasises that in order to achieve positive outcomes, a number of the fundamental requirements must be included in the planning process:

- Ecotourism cannot be developed as an isolated activity, because it is so interdependent upon other development projects. It should instead be seen as being integrated with other development sectors, and these interactions should be considered in the planning process to prevent conflict between outcomes of different planning processes (Buchsbaum, 2004).
- Fragmentation should be addressed by building strong inter-connectivity between the government authorities (Debnath, 2011);
- Building multi-stakeholder participation during the whole planning process helps to develop a sense of shared ownership (Buchsbaum, 2004);
- Raising awareness and training about the ecotourism principles, development requirements and guidelines are necessary and on-going processes for all stakeholders (Debnath, 2011).

Consequently, in order to embrace all these requirements, ecotourism development needs to move from a traditional static planning approach towards more dynamic collaboration between relevant stakeholders and the planning domain. This is because no single actor has all the knowledge and information required to address all the complex issues associated with ecotourism development (Kenawy and Shaw, 2014). Furthermore, a collaborative planning approach should provide a flexible approach which evolves over time (De Boe et al., 1999). Such an approach is appropriate for coordinating the planning of ecotourism development because it can address the interdependencies between the

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