

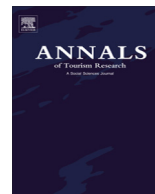


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Annals of Tourism Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/atoures



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Responsibility in tourism: A discursive analysis

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 14 March 2014

Revised 20 September 2014

Accepted 23 October 2014

Coordinating Editor: R. Sharpley

Keywords:

Responsibility

Discourse analysis

Power

Nature

Thelon River

Arctic

ABSTRACT

This paper illuminates how norms associated with certain discourses of responsibility in tourism operate and to what effect. Drawing on discursive and postcolonial perspectives, we analyze meanings and practices of responsibility represented in qualitative and visual texts derived from 28 tourists of the Thelon River in Arctic Canada. Findings reveal that responsibility is primarily constructed around an ethic of leaving no trace, which is contingent upon nature as peripheral and anachronistic space, deference to scientific and experiential knowledge, and cycles of representation. This limits tourists' potential to more fully identify with the Thelon as Aboriginal homeland. The paper exemplifies the power of responsibility to normalize particular versions of truth, dismiss the presence of others, and reinforce social privilege and disenfranchisement.

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Introduction

The power of tourism to produce ecological, cultural, economic, and political effects has given rise to several modes of practice and thought designed to ensure tourism's positive potentialities outweigh anything hurtful. 'Responsible tourism' has received much recent attention as one of these promising and/or alternative possibilities. While studies have approached responsible tourism as a product consumed by an ethically oriented market segment (Goodwin & Francis, 2003; Weeden, 2013), the term tends to denote a process of planning, policy, and development that prioritizes community-level involvement, sustainable resource management, equitable distribution of benefits, and minimal neg-

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ative impacts to local contexts (Goodwin, 2011; Husbands & Harrison, 1996; Reid, 2003). According to Leslie (2012), such processes aim to generate tourism experiences underpinned by a holistic moral concern for individual, community, and broader social and environmental well-being. This is reflected in the mantra of the International Centre for Responsible Tourism: “making better places for people to live in, and better places to visit” (ICRT, 2014); and inscribed in the 2002 Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism in Destinations (Frey & George, 2010). Indeed, the currency of responsible tourism extends globally. It is applicable to a range of tourism-related actors—tourists, managers, guides, industry associations, politicians, governments, NGOs, host communities (Bramwell, Lane, McCabe, Mosedale, & Scarles, 2008)—involved in contexts as diverse as park tourism in Finland (Puhakka, 2011), slum tourism in Egypt (Mekawy, 2012), and pack animal supported mountain tourism in Morocco (Cousquer & Allison, 2012). It is likewise relevant in contexts of Arctic tourism where research and development priorities have included understanding visitor and Indigenous community perspectives (Notzke, 1999; Stewart, Dawson, & Draper, 2011), developing codes of conduct for operators and visitors (Mason, 1994, 1996), and assessing the implications of rapid environmental change (Dawson et al., 2011).

Visions and practices of responsible tourism are not without their critics. Wheeler (1991), one of the earliest, noted that responsible tourism is adopted more often as a marketing ploy than an ethical planning mechanism. Others have politicized responsibility in tourism by associating it with the expansion of neoliberalism (Duffy, 2008) or power differentials reminiscent of colonialist regimes (Sin, 2010). From Fennell's (2008) perspective, responsible tourism has largely failed to achieve the outcomes desired by its proponents due to a lack of philosophical engagement with the meaning of responsibility. He argues that responsible tourism has become a ubiquitous term, but with ambivalent outcomes attributable to “a lack of sufficient ontology in structuring a way forward” (p. 4). Calling upon Derrida, Fennell contends “in the case of RT [responsible tourism], a failure to have knowledge of what responsibility means is itself a lack of responsibility” (p. 4). In effect, enhanced philosophical grounding and reflection is deemed necessary for tourism to *be* or *become* responsible.

This paper seeks to augment such critical and meditative appraisals by turning attention to what ‘responsibility’ in tourism *does* or *can do*. This approach treats language—in this case the rhetoric of responsibility—not as a reflection of reality, but as constitutive of it (Hollinshead, 2007). In other words, how we talk about and communicate responsibility in tourism has real-world effects, some that can be extraordinarily positive or productive, and others that can perpetuate socially dominant or ecologically destructive ideologies. Influential to this analytical position is the critical perspective of discourse, which, for the purposes herein, is understood as the “specific series of representations and practices through which meanings are produced, identities constituted, social relations established, and political and ethical outcomes made more or less possible” (Campbell, 2009, p. 166). This perspective, which we elaborate upon below, is adopted not to undermine the relevance of responsible tourism to issues of social justice and sustainability that span global and local scales, but to draw attention to how power relations permeate, and are constituted through, the meanings and practices of responsibility in a particular tourism setting. It helps to illustrate how even good intentions discipline us to ignore certain truths, are never without their silences or modes of othering, and are always ripe for critical dialogue and debate.

Drawing upon these insights, the purpose of this paper is to report on research that illuminates how touristic norms associated with certain discourses of responsibility operate and to what effect. More specifically, this study adopts a postcolonial lens and engages qualitative and visual texts derived from canoe tourists of the Thelon River in Arctic Canada to address a series of interrelated research questions. First, in an effort to explore various discourses at work, we ask: What construction(s) of truth in relation to responsibility are privileged in the meanings and practices of Thelon canoe tourists? To what extent are there inconsistencies within these? Second, to unpack how certain visions of responsibility are legitimized among canoe tourists, we ask: How are the meanings and practices of responsibility produced, favoured, and accepted as knowledge? And finally, recognizing that alternative discourses overlap with, interrupt, or contest dominant discourses, we ask: What voices are silenced by touristic discourses of responsibility within the context of the Thelon? What are the mechanisms that enable these exclusions?

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