



USING RESILIENCE CONCEPTS TO INVESTIGATE THE IMPACTS OF PROTECTED AREA TOURISM ON COMMUNITIES

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Abstract: Protected area tourism is a growing trend worldwide. It has an enormous potential to impact on local communities. Traditional assessment methods tend to focus on current conditions using sustainability indicators that are often poorly chosen resulting in the misidentification and misinterpretation of impacts. Research in systems thinking and resilience suggest that future conditions may be different, more extreme and rapidly changing than previously experienced, requiring very different approaches to assessment. New methods acknowledging uncertainty and change are required. Here we present a novel approach to investigating the impacts of protected area tourism on communities by framing them as a social-ecological system and adopting resilience assessment principles. **Keywords:** community, impacts, protected area tourism, resilience, thresholds, uncertainty. © 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION

The power of nature and natural settings in attracting tourists is widely recognized, with protected areas offering a significant attraction to tourists (Pedersen, 2002; Reinius & Fredman, 2007). Increasingly, tourism is one of the most common uses of protected areas (Walpole & Goodwin, 2001). Protected areas are defined as areas of “land and/or sea especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and managed through legal or other effective means” (IUCN, 1994, p. 7). Very often, protected areas and tourism are intertwined and their respective impacts on local communities are difficult to separate. The sustainability of protected areas is accepted as dependent on

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due attendance to their social, economic and cultural context (Fortin & Gagnon, 1999; McCleave, Booth, & Espiner, 2004).

However, conflicts between protected areas and communities can adversely affect this sustainability. Plummer and Fennell (2009) propose that multi-stakeholder conflict, complexity and uncertainty are issues that remain unresolved and persistent. When problems persist and are not resolved by current interventions they may be classed as “messy” or “wicked” (Allen & Gould, 1986; Rittel & Webber, 1973) and require a new paradigm to understand them. Before exploring a new paradigm or way of thinking about and investigating the relationships (and associated impacts) between protected areas, tourism and local communities, it is useful if not essential to review current methods using a “whole system” perspective.

This whole system perspective is being actively pursued in current research on tourism as a complex adaptive system (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2005; Lacitignola, Petrosillo, Cataldi, & Zurlini, 2007). Such systems, where the social components are explicitly acknowledged (as is the case with tourism), are known as social-ecological systems (SES) (Allison & Hobbs, 2006; Gunderson & Holling, 2002; Schianetz & Kavanagh, 2008; Walker & Salt, 2006). Many interacting variables are characteristic of SES, with the systems behaving according to three principles: order is emergent as opposed to predetermined; the system’s history is irreversible; and the system’s future is unpredictable (Waldrop, 1992).

Systems thinking is required to bridge the social and biophysical sciences (Allison & Hobbs, 2004) to help understand, for example, how to link social and ecological systems for sustainability (Berkes & Folke, 1998). Fennell (2004) and Dredge (2006) highlight that issues associated with tourism and protected areas are inherently complex, multi-scaled (local, regional, national and global) and involve horizontal as well as vertical linkages. For example, communities, whether local or further afield, are an integral part of the protected area tourism system. Management of sustainable tourism relating to protected areas should anticipate system dynamism and transformative changes (Plummer & Fennell, 2009).

Components of a Protected Area Tourism System

Protected area tourism systems are generally comprised of three key components: a given protected area, tourism operations and associated communities. Protected areas themselves take several forms. According to official IUCN designation, there are six types of protected areas: strict nature reserves or wilderness areas; national parks; natural monuments; habitat or species management areas; protected land or seascapes; and managed resource protection areas (IUCN, 1994). The primary management objectives of these protected areas differ considerably (Eagles, McCool, & Haynes, 2002).

The management authority for a given protected area varies according to the differing management objectives (Eagles, 2009).

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