



## Progress in Tourist Management

## Host perceptions of tourism: A review of the research



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## ABSTRACT

It has long been recognised that it is incumbent on those responsible for the planning of tourism to seek to optimise the well-being of local residents whilst minimising the costs of tourism development.

It is not surprising, therefore, that academic attention has long been paid to the social impacts of tourism in general and to the understanding of host communities' perceptions of tourism and its impacts in particular. Nevertheless, despite the significant volume and increasing scope of the research, the extent to which understanding of residents' perceptions of tourism has been enhanced remains uncertain. Thus, the purpose of this Progress Review is to explore critically the development of the research into residents' perceptions of tourism. Highlighting key themes and trends in the literature, it identifies a number of limitations in the research, including a narrow case study base, a dependence on quantitative methods, a focus on perceptions as opposed to responses, and the exclusion of the tourist from the majority of the research. Consequently, it argues for a multidimensional approach to the research.

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## 1. Introduction

Fundamental to the successful development of tourism is the balanced or harmonious relationship between tourists, the people and places they encounter, and the organisations and businesses that provide tourism services (Zhang, Inbakaran, & Jackson, 2006). In other words, as the 'largest peaceful movement of people' (Lett, 1989: 277) in history both within and across national boundaries, tourism represents one of the world's largest discretionary transfers of wealth, thereby providing a source of income, foreign exchange, government revenues and employment, business and infrastructural development and, hence, wider economic growth and development in destination areas. Consequently, the role of tourism as an agent of economic growth and development has been widely adopted and officially sanctioned (Jenkins, 1991; WTO, 1980).

However, such benefits are not, of course, achieved without cost. The development of tourism incurs varying degrees of impact on destination environments and, in particular, on the local people who act as 'hosts' to tourists (Wall & Mathieson, 2006). Indeed, destination communities face something of a 'development dilemma' (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008); they are, in a sense, required to engage in a trade-off between the benefits they perceive to receive from tourism and the negative social and environmental

consequences of its development. Moreover, as Andriotis and Vaughan (2003: 172) observe, many claim that the 'balance of residents' perceptions of the costs and benefits of tourism is a major factor in tourist satisfaction and is, therefore, vital for the success of the tourism industry'. That is, destination communities' support for tourism, or what Snaith and Haley (1999: 597) refer to as a 'happy host', is considered essential as the success and sustainability of the sector depends upon the goodwill of local residents (Jurowski & Gursoy, 2004; Pérez & Nadal, 2005). Consequently, it is widely suggested that, should local communities perceive the costs of tourism to outweigh the benefits, then they will withdraw their support for tourism, thereby threatening the future success and development of the sector (Lawson, Williams, Young, & Cossens, 1998).

In practice, evidence of such a withdrawal of support for tourism by host communities is limited. In other words, the assertion by many commentators that negative perceptions of tourism on the part of destination communities may be translated into similarly negative (or, as Doxey (1975) famously suggested, antagonistic) behaviour towards tourists or the tourism sector is not widely supported in the literature. Nevertheless, it has long been recognised that, given its ability to 'permeate communities unlike other industries' (Harrill, 2004: 2), it is incumbent on those responsible for the planning of tourism to seek to optimise the well-being of destination communities whilst minimising the costs of tourism development. Hence, it has equally long been suggested that the attitudes and perceptions of local residents should directly inform tourism planning (Ap, 1992), the ideal being what has been termed

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'resident responsive' tourism planning (Vargas-Sánchez, Plaza-Mejía, & Porras-Bueno, 2009).

It is not surprising, therefore, that much academic attention has been paid to the social, economic and environmental impacts of tourism in general and to the understanding of host communities' perceptions of tourism and its impacts in particular. Some of the earliest research dates back to the late 1970s (for example, Pizam, 1978; Rothman, 1978; Thomason, Crompton, & Kamp, 1979), since when a significant volume of work has been published on the subject. Indeed, in preparing this review, a search of just three journals (*Tourism Management*, *Annals of Tourism Research* and *Journal of Travel Research*) based on four key words ('resident', 'perceptions', 'attitudes' and 'tourism') produced a total of 1070 published articles. In all likelihood, this represents only a relatively small proportion of all published/unpublished academic work on residents' attitudes to tourism, yet it reflects its enduring popularity as the focus of research. Moreover, it is not only the volume of work that is of note. Some two decades ago, John Ap, lamenting the restricted and descriptive nature of much of the extant research, called for a more theoretically informed approach: 'Unless researchers launch out of the elementary descriptive stage of the current state of research and into an explanatory stage, where research is developed within some theoretical framework, they may find themselves none the wiser in another ten years time' (Ap, 1990: 615). Since then, and as discussed later in this review, not only has the scope of research expanded greatly, but attempts have indeed been made to base it on rigorous theoretical foundations.

Given both its increasing volume and also its trajectory, it is now timely to review to the development of this research. Thus, the broad purpose of this paper is to consider whether progress has been made in our understanding of host communities' perceptions of and responses to tourism development, or whether we do, in fact, remain 'none the wiser'. More specifically, it seeks to address a number of important questions, not least the extent to which, as some suggest, the research can be generalised into a universal model or understanding of residents' perceptions (Draper, Woosnam, & Norman, 2011; Vargas-Sánchez, Porras-Bueno, & Plaza-Mejía, 2011) and, hence, inform a generally applicable framework to support the planning and management of tourism. Or does the research, perhaps, remain an eclectic collection of studies relevant only to the context of each study? In doing so, the paper traces the evolution of research, highlighting key themes and methodologies and exploring future directions and challenges. The first task, however, is to review briefly the concept of tourist–host interaction, for this is the context in which the study of residents' perceptions is, or should be, located.

## 2. Background: tourist–host interaction

Although variously defined, tourism has long been conceptualised as 'the quintessence of relationships which result from travel and sojourn by outsiders' (Hunziker & Krapf, 1942: 21, cited in Dann & Parrinello, 2009: 15). That is, tourism is essentially a social phenomenon defined by the consequences of the movement of people to and their temporary stay at places away from their normal residence; it is about people 'interacting with other places and other people, undergoing experiences that may influence their own or the host community's attitudes, expectations, opinions and, ultimately, lifestyles' (Sharpley, 2008: 1–2). Thus, fundamental to tourism are so-called 'host–guest' relations (Smith, 1977), the nature of which may determine, on the one hand, the extent to which tourists have a successful or fulfilling experience (Reisinger & Turner, 2002) and, on the other hand, the degree of impact, positive or otherwise, experienced by host communities or residents in the destination area and, hence, their perceptions of tourism and

tourists. Consequently, although some studies explore residents' perceptions of proposed, rather than existing, tourism developments (Keogh, 1990; Mason & Cheyne, 2000; Nepal, 2008), it is logical to suggest that, in order to identify and explain local communities' perception of and responses to tourism and tourists, the research should be located within a conceptual framework of host–guest relations. However, as this paper will reveal, this is rarely the case; as Woosnam (2012: 315) observes, 'The present residents' attitudes literature does not consider how residents' feelings towards tourists (on an individual level) may potentially influence their attitudes about tourism'. In other words, although the terms 'tourism,' and 'tourists' are often used inter-changeably within the literature, most studies are concerned with residents' attitudes towards what may be referred to as tourism development, and the benefits/disbenefits that arise from it. Conversely, attitudes towards tourists, which may be rather different from those related to tourism development, are rarely addressed.

Of course, the contexts within which such relations occur vary almost infinitely, from the stage, scale and type of tourism development or the expectations/behaviour of tourists to the structure and characteristics of the destination society (Pearce, 1994). Indeed, as will be discussed shortly, much of the research is concerned with identifying these variables that may determine differing resident perceptions of tourism. Nevertheless, early studies of tourist–host relations attempted to model the structures and settings of encounters between tourists and local people as a basis for predicting their (a)symmetry. Sutton (1967), for example, identified five characteristics seen as common to most encounters. He claimed that contact is transitory, both parties seek instant satisfaction, encounters tend to be new or unusual experiences for tourists but 'business as usual' for local people, cultural distinctions exist between the two parties and, overall, encounters tend to be unbalanced. Similarly, a later UNESCO paper found that 'the encounter between tourist and host is characterized by its transitory nature, constraints in terms of time and space, and relationships that are both unequal and lacking in spontaneity' (UNESCO, 1976: 82). Implicitly, both papers focus on encounters between tourists and local people in what might be referred to as organised tourist spaces. In other words, the encounters occur not only at specific sites within resort areas (in hotels/restaurants, in shops/markets, on the beach, and so on) but also between tourists and people engaged formally or informally in the tourism sector. Thus, both Sutton and UNESCO are concerned primarily with encounters which occur in the first of three principal settings described by de Kadt (1979: 50), namely, 'where the tourist is purchasing some good or service from the host'. In addition, encounters may occur, according to de Kadt, where 'the tourist and host find themselves side by side' and where 'the two parties come face to face with the object of exchanging information or ideas'.

A number of points immediately demand attention. Firstly, the form and nature of relations between local people and tourists evidently varies significantly, from structured, commercial exchange-based encounters to spontaneous, serendipitous meetings or even relations that involve no contact or communication at all (that is, limited to the sharing of space). Such distinctions have long been recognised. Krippendorf (1987), for example, accepting that destination residents do not form an homogeneous group, proposed four types of resident within a primarily business context: those in direct businesses with continuous contact with tourists; those in irregular contact in unrelated businesses; those in regular contact but only partially deriving their income from tourism; and those with no contact with tourists. Similarly, it is possible to conceptualise tourist–host encounters as lying on a continuum, though based more generally on the nature of contact and subsequent influences on host perceptions rather than the business-specific context proposed by Krippendorf (see Fig. 1).

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