



# The role of social capital in encouraging residents' pro-environmental behaviors in community-based ecotourism



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## H I G H L I G H T S

- Integrates concepts of social capital with community-based ecotourism research.
- A reciprocal relationship exists between community members as beneficiaries and the nature of ecotourism.
- Economic benefits have a direct impact on residents' pro-environmental behaviors.
- Cognitive social capital, rather than structural social capital, has partial-mediation effects.
- High levels of social capital encourages residents' pro-environmental behaviors.

## A R T I C L E I N F O

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## A B S T R A C T

This study integrated the theoretical perspective of social capital into community-based ecotourism (CBET). Two destinations were selected to test the conceptual model to see whether social capital improves cooperation between community residents and the coordination of CBET development, and whether its role is persuasive and encourages residents' pro-environmental behaviors. The sample consisted of 420 residents living in two typical ecotourism destinations in China. Findings from a two-stage structural equation model analysis show that economic benefits have a direct impact on residents' pro-environmental behaviors; and the cognitive, rather than structural social capital has a partially mediating effects on this relationship. These findings indicate that a high level of social capital, particularly the cognitive variant, is instrumental in encouraging residents' pro-environmental behaviors.

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## 1. Introduction

Empirically, research on social capital and community-based ecotourism (CBET) has attracted moderate, although somewhat limited, attention in the ecotourism research. Compared with mass tourism, CBET has been promoted to residents as a community activities because of its economic benefits; these could, in turn, serve as a powerful support for their pro-environmental behaviors (Bovarnick & Gupta, 2003; Lindberg, Enriquez, & Sproule, 1996; Ross & Wall, 1999; Wunder, 2000), and can potentially be

reconciled with local environmental protection (Campbell, 2002; Kiss, 2004). Optimistic proponents of CBET strongly encourage a long-term view, believing that residents will actively engage with the principles of biodiversity conservation and related ecotourism attractions in order to sustain economic benefits. However, a number of authors draw the rather different conclusion that the economic benefits of ecotourism do not necessarily lead to residents supporting conservation or taking relevant action (Kiss, 2004). The increased income from ecotourism alone is often not enough for conservation (Stronza & Gordillo, 2008) or can even foster more rapid resource extraction (Barrett, Brandon, Gibson, & Gjertsen, 2001; Ferraro, 2001). A comprehensive analysis demonstrates that in addition to the various types of economic benefits (such as those drawn from employment, business operations, and investment in CBET), the social advantages of CBET development would also encourage local residents to act in a pro-environmental

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manner (Jones, 2005; Pretty & Smith, 2003; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008). Specifically, stronger relationships of trust, common rules, shared norms, reciprocity between neighbors, and endorsement of environmental behaviors within a community, or what Putnam calls “social capital” (Putnam, 1993, p. 36), would be instrumental factors for pro-environmental behaviors (Jones, 2005; Pretty & Smith, 2003; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008).

Specifically in response to the lack of agreement on these issues, a few attempts have been made to empirically determine how the various dimensions of social capital function in generating local residents’ pro-environmental behaviors from the perspective of CBET. Thus, further empirical investigation is needed to examine the role of social capital in the relationship between economic benefits and conservation (Jones, 2005; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008).

The purposes of this study are therefore to: 1) integrate the theoretical perspectives of social capital into the CBET research; 2) examine whether community residents, who are the key carriers of the benefits and responsibilities of ecotourism, will undertake reciprocal actions; and, 3) investigate the role of social capital in encouraging residents’ pro-environmental behaviors.

The results can potentially extend our current theoretical knowledge of the relationships between ecotourism development, economic benefits, social capital, community participation, and residents’ pro-environmental behaviors. Such a stronger understanding could also offer a new pathway for involving more residents in environmental protection and ecotourism development that could ultimately facilitate local natural resource management and achieve sustainable ecotourism.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Social capital

The concept of social capital has attracted considerable research attention across multiple disciplines over the last few decades. The foundation established by Bourdieu in 1986 was given a theoretical framework by Coleman (1988, 1990), and widely popularized by Putnam (1993, 1995). Unlike physical, financial, and human capital, social capital is relatively abstract, and is always defined in terms of the degree of connectedness and the quality and quantity of social relations within a given population (Ecclestone & Field, 2003; Harpham, Grant, & Thomas, 2002; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti, 1993). According to Putnam et al. (1993), social capital refers to the “features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated action” (p.167). Generally, this concept serves to describe how people in a specific group interact with each other (Brunie, 2009; Harpham et al., 2002; Jones, 2005), as well as how such interactions bring benefits for both individuals and the collective (Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Brunie, 2009; Jones, 2005).

Social capital can be disaggregated into two dimensions: cognitive and structural (Bain & Hicks, 1998; Harpham et al., 2002; Jones, 2005; Krishna & Shrader, 2000). The cognitive dimension includes values, attitudes, norms, and beliefs (Jones, 2005; Krishna & Shrader, 2000), as well as perceptions of support, reciprocity, sharing, and trust among members of a specific population (Harpham et al., 2002; Jones, 2005, 2010). Previous definitions of structural social capital address the composition, practices, and scope of local-level institutions, both formal and informal, that help to facilitate mutually beneficial collective action (Krishna & Shrader, 2000), or the extent and intensity of associational links or activity within a population (Harpham et al., 2002; Jones, 2005). In other words, cognitive social capital relates to what people feel while

structural social capital relates to what they do (Harpham et al., 2002; Jones, 2005).

The work done by Pretty in collaboration with Ward (2001) proposes that social capital has the potential to lower the transactional costs of working together and increase the confidence of individuals to invest in collective actions. Accordingly, it can facilitate cooperation and coordination, which in turn can improve positive outcomes for individuals and collectives. Such a role for social capital has been empirically examined in a variety of domains such as operations management (see for example Fischer & Pollock, 2004; Krause, Handfield, & Tyler, 2007; Lawson, Tyler, & Cousins, 2006; Moran, 2005), human resource management (see for example Dess & Shaw, 2001; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001), public health behaviors (see for example Brune & Bossert, 2009; Harpham et al., 2002; Mitchell & Bossert, 2007), economic development (see for example Knack & Keeffe, 1997; Krishna, 2001; Narayan & Pritchett, 1997; Portes & Sensenbrenner, 1993; Szreter, 2000; Warren, 2001; Woolcock, 1998), and environmental sustainability (see for example Jones, 2010; Ostrom, 1990; Pretty & Smith, 2003; Pretty & Ward, 2001).

Social capital has the ability to improve cooperation between community residents and the coordination of the development process of CBET. In order to guarantee mutual benefits for the environment and residents, it has particular importance for the local-level collective management of common resources, such as the environment (Jones, 2005, 2010; Lehtonen, 2004). According to Jones (2010), both cognitive and structural social capital are positively connected to the environmental activation of a community. In her study, residents who tended to trust others in the community were more willing to participate in the resolution of environmental problems. The same outcome has been observed in the context of community participation in local social networks. Similar results can be found in the research of Krishna and Uphoff (1999), Jones (2005, 2010), Pretty and Ward (2001), and Pretty and Smith (2003). For example, Pretty and Smith (2003) demonstrate that relationships of trust, reciprocity and exchange, common rules, norms and sanctions, and connectedness in communities are all necessary for shaping individual action to achieve positive biodiversity outcomes.

### 2.2. The role of social capital in CBET

With the objective of taking the world forward into what it sees as the legislative framework required to address the environmental repercussions of production and consumption, the *International Ecotourism Society* (2000) defines the concept of ecotourism according to five key components: protection of ecological diversity; maintenance of residents’ welfare; encouragement of environmentally friendly behavior among residents, tourists, and tourism operators; reduced utilization of irreproducible resources; and community participation. These highlight the importance of networks of community participation, and have become the key reference point for environmental management systems.

Compared to ecotourism, CBET takes the social dimension a step further, placing emphasis on social ties, improved effectiveness of community participation, and social integration of environmental protection within local communities (see for example Campbell, 2002; Kiss, 2004). As the key bearers of the responsibilities of CBET, residents will potentially benefit from a social structure that does more to facilitate the management of local natural resources and achieves sustainable ecotourism by enhancing their civic engagement in environmental protection and ecotourism development.

Despite the important role of social capital in the management of common resources such as the environment, little research has been done to test its role in generating local residents’ pro-

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