



Local perception and preferences in nature tourism in Hong Kong



Hoi Yan Chiu ^a, Chung-Shing Chan ^{a,*}, Lawal M. Marafa ^b

^a Department of Geography and Resource Management, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Sha Tin, N.T., Hong Kong

^b Centre for Environmental Policy and Resource Management (CEPRM), Department of Geography and Resource Management, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Sha Tin, N.T., Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores local perception and preferences concerning the development of nature tourism in Hong Kong. The results of a sample of local residents ($n = 376$) confirm a domestic market of relatively older, better educated and higher income residents who generally display a moderate overall interest in nature tourism. From the perspectives of host and user, local residents consider the promotion and expansion of infrastructure to be important for increasing the attractiveness of nature tourism. However, the respondents also take divergent attitudes towards promoting nature tourism to the Mainland visitors, such that three distinctive groups are identified. The conflicting views of local people on nature tourism, and low confidence in the government's ability to handle tourism impact, create a considerable obstacle and unsuitable timing for the development of nature tourism in Hong Kong, unless it is coupled with an ease in tensions and the presence of a long-term nature tourism strategy.

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1. Introduction

Local people feature among the major stakeholders in tourism planning with heterogeneous interests (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999). In this nature-based tourism context, local residents and their communities may play an even more important role as tourism promoters, users and stewards of resources (Tsaour, Lin, & Lin, 2006). Cities are more complex environments for the sharing of nature-based resources between tourists and non-touristic users (largely local residents), and the interactions between stakeholders (Weaver, 2005). For many years, scholars (e.g., Budowski, 1976; Mathieson & Wall, 1982; Pearce, 1988) have already suggested that the interaction between tourists and local residents might result in mutually negative perceptions, which in turn could affect the outcome of tourism products and travel satisfaction.

This condition of annoyance, if not antagonism, is present nowadays in Hong Kong, where many local communities have started to develop a negative attitude towards the rapid development of urban tourism and the increase in numbers of Mainland Chinese tourists. The conflicts between tourists and local residents in Hong Kong are mainly the result of an over-expansion of tourist industry and the overdependence on Mainland markets that create economic and socio-cultural problems

to the locals. There is, therefore, a need to expand the spectrum of Hong Kong tourism products by providing alternative forms of tourism so as to enrich these tourists' travel experience and foster a new travel culture. Researchers over the years have identified the potential of natural environments which are suitable for sustainable tourism development in Hong Kong (e.g., Ng & Li, 2000; Wang, Zhai, & Lingmu, 2006; Chen & Jim, 2012; Cheung & Jim, 2013). However, they have rarely discussed how local residents respond to the development of nature tourism nor have they examined the situation from a local perspective. There is, therefore, a need to consider the perception of the local residents when developing new tourism products due to the influence of mindset on behaviour which consequently affects the outcome of a particular activity.

This paper aims to bridge a research gap of investigating local perception in the current top-down executive-led tourism development (Wan, 2013). The paper presents results from an empirical study which targeted local Hong Kong people to garner their opinions on nature tourism development in Hong Kong. The study examines the development potential of nature tourism in Hong Kong from a local perspective through a study of local preferences and perceptions. Precisely, this study carries three key objectives which include: (1) To understand the local perceptions and preferences in nature tourism resources in Hong Kong, (2) To collect and analyze local suggestions concerning the development of nature tourism, and (3) To identify the characteristics of local residents who tend to support or object nature tourism development in Hong Kong. Based on these objectives, this

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: chy_cgjr@hotmail.com (H.Y. Chiu), ccs_johnson@cuhk.edu.hk (C.-S. Chan), Immarafa@cuhk.edu.hk (L.M. Marafa).

paper develops four research hypotheses to be tested by the empirical study. They are:

H1a. The overall local interest in nature tourism in Hong Kong differs across demographic and socio-economic segments;

H1b. There are identifiable factors of nature tourism elements by local residents;

H2. Local residents prefer certain improvement measures for nature tourism development in Hong Kong; and

H3. Local residents show clusters of divergent perceptions of supporting the promotion of nature tourism to the Mainland market.

This study is particularly important as a decline in tourist arrivals, reports of antisocial behaviour on the part of Mainland travellers, and conflicts between tourists and locals have all led to people questioning the sustainability of tourism in Hong Kong (e.g., Li, Song, Cao, & Wu, 2013; Strutner, 2013; Wan, 2013).

2. Literature review

The emergence of sustainable tourism worldwide in principle, at least, supports the growing demand for more “environmentally friendly” and “ethically correct” consumption (Boström & Klintman, 2008; Connelly, Smith, Benson, & Saunders, 2012). These changes have been observed in theoretical constructs of tourism, especially focusing on the environmental quality and socio-economic sustainability of destinations (Hardy, Beeton, & Pearson, 2008). The nature of tourism is also changing. The emergence of special interest or alternative activities such as nature-based, adventure, ecotourism, and cultural tourism are challenging the dominance of mainstream sun, sand, sea and urban experiences. These alternative tourism forms have broadened the product base, created new destinations, and more importantly provided an opportunity for the sustainability of tourism. Sustainable tourism has a broad array of activities, with the highest recognition being placed as the form of ecotourism and arguably, nature tourism if sustainably managed.

2.1. Defining and differentiating nature tourism and ecotourism

The term “nature tourism” tends to be used interchangeably with “nature-based tourism” (Luzar, Diagne, & Gan, 1995; Nyaupane, Morais, & Graefe, 2004). The emergence of nature tourism aims to provide sustainable economic development in rural areas (Place, 1991). As defined by Lucas (1984, p. 82), nature tourism is “*the enjoyment of natural areas and the observation of nature that has low impact environmentally, is labor intensive and contribute socially and economically to the nation (destination)*”, while Valentine (1992, p. 108) defined it as tourism that is ‘*primarily concerned with the direct enjoyment of some relatively undisturbed phenomenon of nature*’.

Initially, ecotourism was a concept defined for a new form of nature travel that placed greater emphasis on nature experience, learning and emerging environmentalism (Ceballos-Lascurian, 1993). Many definitions of ecotourism have clearly established a connection with nature tourism with specific core principles (e.g., Laarman & Durst, 1987; Allcock, Jones, Lane, & Grant, 1993; Scace, 1993; Fennell, 2008) though the latter term has been gradually replaced. Nature tourism has to contain at least three distinctive characteristics for it to be recognized as ecotourism: (i) minimization of adverse economic, social and environmental impacts on the destination, (ii) provision of positive influence on the environmental conservation, and (iii) improvements in local communities and their livelihoods (Wearing & Neil, 2009).

However, given the growing manifestation of natural areas and resources that have a high proximity of urban areas, the development of ecotourism or nature tourism is not confined to a particular

geographical setting but consists more of the attainment of the principles it is based on. This idea is even more applicable to an emerging large pool of soft (urban) ecotourists (Weaver, 2005). Whereas the “core” principles of ecotourism (namely, learning, sustainability, ethics and local benefits) are satisfied, the tourism development should have accomplished the holistic ends of sustainable tourism (Fennell, 2008). In highly urbanized areas like cities, there are potential areas or resources that show opportunities for developing a sustainable form of nature tourism, but some of the “prescribed” players (e.g., local communities or indigenous people) may be absent. Citizens or local residents can represent the role of local community and their perceptions and attitudes towards certain new forms of (nature) tourism development should be taken into consideration.

This study in Hong Kong therefore does not utilize ecotourism as the form of tourism in question. In this study, “nature tourism” is used and defined as, “leisure travels beyond ordinary visit to conventional tourism spots, but to the countryside of the place with natural or cultural value that experiences and activities are nature-oriented with minimal impacts”. In this connection, ecotourism in cities is the sub-set of nature tourism in that its success depends on the learning outcome (Orams, 2001; Huybers & Bennett, 2003).

From definitions of nature and ecotourism as aforementioned, it is noted that nature tourism is always being treated as being synonymous with ecotourism due to similar principles, fuzzy and overlapping concepts (Boo, 1991; Western & Lindberg, 1993; Luzar et al., 1995; Wheeler, 2003). With subtle but important differences in the intrinsic meaning, however, the interchangeable usage among the terms is debatable and more importantly, the associated sustainability in each new form of tourism is adjustable (Mowforth & Munt, 2003). Overall, these new forms of tourism are nature-oriented, which are also the platform of this study. The natural areas and resources are used to distinguish it from mass tourism attractions to give flexible choices for tourists (Mowforth & Munt, 2003).

As seen from definitions of nature tourism and ecotourism, the nature-based and educational dimensions in the two forms of tourism collide in certain degree. For their nature-based dimension, an issue emerges with the degree of “naturalness” or more precisely, the ambits of “undisturbed nature area” (Blamey, 2001). According to Sherman and Dixon (1991), nature tourism occurred in remote places with a fairly high visit cost. When looking at empirical studies, destinations of both nature tourism and ecotourism are always in association with remote places with considerable floral resources or wildlife with indubitable high natural and ecological value, such as nature tourism in Safari, Africa (Sherman & Dixon, 1991), ecotourism in Yellowstone ecosystem in the United States (Whelan, 1991), and marine ecotourism in Kaikoura, New Zealand (Orams, 2002). Nevertheless, as observed by Orams (2001), nature tourism may not be sustainable but indeed could adversely affect destinations and results in severe negative environmental degradation. Clearly, ecotourism follows stricter, prescribed criteria and intrinsic components with a higher level of sustainability in which not all activities associated with the nature are regarded as ecotourism (Orams, 2001).

With respect to the plethora of definitions without concrete consensus in ecotourism, the “naturally educative experience” is one of the most important aspects across definitions (Butler, 1993; Wight, 1994; Blamey, 2001; Bjork, 2000; Weaver, 2006; Fennell, 2008). In the educational dimension, nature tourism directly highlights the purpose of having leisure enjoyment in natural areas, whilst ecotourism is usually being seen as the sub-set of nature tourism with an education component (Laarman & Durst, 1987; Allcock et al., 1993; Goodwin, 1996; Buckley, 2004; Fennell, 2008). Nature tourism could be seen as any form of tourism that utilizes natural resources for enjoyment (Goodwin, 1996). It does not necessarily need to be compatible with the environment (Ziffer, 1989; Fennell, 2008). Conversely, ecotourism, with more stringent variables, is identified as low impact, contributive to conservation and economy of the locals and educative (Ziffer, 1989;

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