



# Can community-based tourism contribute to sustainable development? Evidence from residents' perceptions of the sustainability

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, the research gaps in sustainable tourism development were addressed by examining residents' perceptions of the sustainability of community-based tourism based on tourism area life cycle theory. The survey questionnaire was distributed to the residents of six Taiwanese communities, and it was designed to determine the residents' perceptions of the economic, socio-cultural, environmental, and life satisfaction sustainability of tourism. In total, 849 usable questionnaires were collected. The analytical results further elucidated the sustainability of nature-based tourism and suggested that the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental sustainability varied significantly in the consolidation, development, and involvement stages of community-based tourism development. The four dimensions of sustainability were evaluated according to the pre- and post-development perceptions of tourism sustainability, and significantly different results were obtained. The study concludes that the residents' perceptions differed across the developmental stages; thus, managers should consider the development opportunities and adopt appropriate strategies across different development stages.

## 1. Introduction

Tourism is considered an effective method of reducing poverty in some traditional communities (Croes, 2014) because tourism provides different jobs than traditional livelihoods (World Tourism Organization, 2002) as well as opportunities to sell local products (Lee, 2013; Lepp, 2007). Community-based tourism (CBT) has been widely identified for its ability to improve local economies, and it has been introduced in many countries (e.g., Dodds, Ali, & Galaski, 2018; Lee, 2009b, 2013; Lepp, 2007). Consequently, traditional communities, such as rural communities (e.g., Wang, Cater, & Low, 2016), fishing communities (e.g., Thompson, Johnson, & Hanes, 2016), small islands (e.g., Teh & Cabanban, 2007), and aboriginal communities (e.g., Reggers, Grabowski, Wearing, Chatterton, & Schweinsberg, 2016), could develop CBT to improve their economic status.

The development of CBT increases the number of facilities, roads, parks, and recreational and cultural attractions, which benefits residents' quality of life and respects their culture (Brunt & Courtney, 1999). In exotic communities, tourism offers opportunities for residents to appreciate and respect the local culture of the socio-ecosystem, thereby increasing the sustainability of the socio-ecosystem (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2011). In aboriginal communities, residents have revived

local traditions and culture and exhibited their culture to tourists (Lee, Jan, & Yang, 2013; Wearing, Wearing, & McDonald, 2010). In addition, abundant natural resources, unique terrains, beautiful scenery, and unique flora and fauna species increase the environmental awareness of residents, leading to greater environmental protection in an attempt to provide high-quality recreation experiences (Lee, 2011; Lee et al., 2013; Lee, Jan, Tseng, & Lin, 2018; Lepp, 2007). Therefore, CBT plays an important role in poverty alleviation because it contributes to community development, thereby supporting community sustainability.

However, tourism may lead to negative impacts, such as an increase in the cost of living (Lee & Back, 2006), an unequal distribution of tourism revenue (Alam & Paramati, 2016), low-skilled and low-paying employment (Davidson & Sahli, 2015), natural and cultural resource degradation (Bowers, 2016), crime and crowded living areas (Ap, 1992; Lee & Back, 2006), and a low degree of empowerment (Hatipoglu, Alvarez, & Ertuna, 2016).

These negative impacts may damage local residents as well as the economy, culture, and environment, such that subsequent sustainable CBT may be obstructed. For sustainable CBT, reducing negative impacts on the environment and society is thus warranted.

Residents' perceptions are crucial for supporting the sustainable development of CBT (Lee, 2013; Nicholas, Thapa, & Ko, 2009). Based

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on the social exchange theory (SET; Ap, 1992), residents may support CBT according to their positive or negative perceptions (Lee, 2013). Moreover, during CBT development, residents are the critical stakeholders who may affect tourism planning, development, and support based on their perceptions of the impacts of tourism (Lundberg, 2015). Based on the perception of tourism impacts, resident attitudes toward tourism development may change from positive to negative (Lee, 2013; Woo, Uysal, & Sirgy, 2018); specifically, residents' perceptions of CBT may change over time according to the level of tourism development (Butler, 1980; Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009; Hunt & Stronza, 2014; Lundberg, 2015). Thus, assessing the heterogeneous perceptions of residents at different levels of tourism development is warranted.

Although scholars have examined the perceptions of residents at different development levels (Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009; Hunt & Stronza, 2014; Lundberg, 2015), monitoring changes in perceptions (i.e., pre- and post-CBT development) may lead to insight into sustainable tourism development (Li, Hsu, & Lawton, 2015). Unfortunately, no studies have assessed sustainable tourism development by examining residents' perceptions of the sustainability of CBT based on tourism area life cycle theory. The perceptions of CBT's pre- and post-development will allow for the assessment of changes by CBT from residents' point of views. If the post-development changes are greater than the pre-development changes, would indicate that the residents feel that CBT has benefited their living in terms of the economy, socio-cultural factors, environment, and well-being. From residents' perspective, understanding the changes by CBT will help us to assess the sustainability of CBT. Thus, determining whether CBT will lead to better or worse living conditions for residents is warranted.

To fill these research gaps, this study, which is based on Butler's (1980) tourism area life cycle (TALC) theory, will examine (1) residents' perceptions of sustainability in terms of the economy, socio-cultural factors, environment, and well-being at different CBT development stages, and (2) different perceptions between pre- and post-development analyses at different CBT development stages. These approaches may broaden the understanding of a sustainable CBT model, as well as help us to determine the development opportunities and appropriate implementation strategies across different CBT development stages.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Residents' perceptions of sustainability

Residents' perceptions of tourism impacts are an important issue that has garnered considerable attention in the tourism literature (Almeida-García, Peláez-Fernández, Balbuena-Vázquez, & Cortés-Macias, 2016; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012). Based on SET (Ap, 1992), residents support tourism development because they perceive that the benefits will be much higher than the costs (Lee, 2013). Therefore, more positive resident perceptions of tourism will foster greater support for the development of CBT.

Residents' perceptions can be influenced by demographic factors (e.g., age, gender, education, and years of residence; Huh & Vogt, 2008; Vargas-Sánchez, Plaza-Mejía, & Porras-Bueno, 2009), community attachment (Lee, 2013), tourism planning (Choi & Murray, 2010), environmental sustainability (Choi & Murray, 2010), the state of the local economy (Gursoy, Jurowski, & Uysal, 2002), and the stage of tourism development (Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009; Hunt & Stronza, 2014; Long, Perdue, & Allen, 1990; Lundberg, 2015).

Previous scholars have explored sustainability indicators for measuring the sustainable development of CBT (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006; Lee & Hsieh, 2016). Ross and Wall (1999a, b) provided a framework that included the interactions among tourism, biodiversity, and local residents. Based on their findings, Lee and Hsieh (2016) developed 141 indicators from several stakeholders' points of views (e.g., visitors, residents, for-profit organizations, government entities, non-profit organizations, and the environment). As mentioned above, residents seem to

be the most important stakeholders in CBT development because they interact with tourists directly and provide unforgettable experiences for tourists; thus, residents with positive perceptions will become major stakeholders in tourism planning and management (Davis, Allen, & Cosenza, 1988; Lee & Hsieh, 2016).

To assess residents' perceptions, studies have focused on the perceived economic and socio-cultural impacts (Gursoy et al., 2002). Moreover, scholars have also assessed the perceptions of environmental impacts as a tool for measuring residents' perceptions of sustainable tourism (Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009; Lee, 2013; Lee & Hsieh, 2016; Lundberg, 2015; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012; Vargas-Sánchez et al., 2009). Choi and Sirakaya (2006) also proposed six dimensions for measuring the sustainability of CBT: political, social, ecological, economic, technological, and cultural indicators.

Scholars have introduced life satisfaction as an indicator to measure residents' perceptions of CBT (Long et al., 1990). For example, Kim, Uysal, and Sirgy (2013) proposed the perception of the residents' well-being under tourism, which may influence the direction of tourism policy and planning. Several scholars have also used well-being as an indicator to examine residents' perceptions for supporting tourism development (Kim et al., 2013; Vargas-Sánchez et al., 2009). Additionally, Woo, Kim, and Uysal (2015) indicated that residents' perceptions of community life satisfaction is a crucial indicator for supporting sustainable tourism development. Thus, this study includes residents' perceptions regarding the impacts of tourism on the sustainability of the economy, socio-cultural factors, environment, and life satisfaction as effective predictors of support for further CBT development.

### 2.2. Life cycle of a CBT area

Tourism development changes over time (Butler, 1980). To depict the evolution of tourism, Butler (1980) proposed the concept of TALC, which is based on the product life cycle concept, i.e., the S-curve, in which the y axis represents the numbers of tourists and the x axis represents the development time. This S-curve represents the evolution of tourism development, such as the exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation, and decline/rejuvenation stages. The S-curve pattern may differ based on the various characteristics of a destination (Butler, 1980). According to Butler (1980) definition, as the tourism increases and tourists visit regularly, local residents begin to provide facilities and services in the involvement stage. In the development stage, local cultural and natural resources are well-developed, and more sophisticated facilities and services are provided by outsiders. The number of residents is nearly equal to the number of tourists in this stage (Butler, 1980). Butler (1980) indicated that the number of tourists exceeds the number of residents, but the rate of increase in tourist declines during the consolidation stage. Because a large number of tourists visit, residents start to become annoyed by tourists' appropriated behavior and grow discontent with tourism activities (Butler, 1980). Since the perspectives of stakeholders are different across different stages (Ngo, Lohmann, & Hales, 2018), destination managers may identify the stage of tourism development to plan for and manage destination resources to increase the attractiveness of communities (Lundberg, 2015). In addition, because residents are key stakeholders in terms of developing tourism, residents' perceptions are an important determinant of whether the development will be successful or not (Long et al., 1990). Diedrich and García-Buades (2009) have used residents' perceptions as an indicator by depicting positive and negative perceptions using the TALC model, and they found that resident support of tourism development is the primary difference between positive and negative perceptions and that this support was highest during the development stage. Thus, the TALC model helps destination managers to develop sustainability strategies and make decisions on the basis of historical paths and future development trends (Kruczek, Kruczek, & Szromek, 2018; Rodríguez, Parra-López, & Yanes-Estévez, 2008).

Several studies have observed the relationship between resident

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