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Research paper

## The impact of residents' informedness and involvement on their perceptions of tourism impacts: The case of Bled

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## ABSTRACT

The tourism development debate includes many studies on how residents perceive positive or negative tourism impacts, based on sustainability, as understood by a three-pillar concept. However, so far studies were very limited in addressing certain requirements for sustainable tourism, such as informed stakeholders' participation and cooperation, which represent the subject of this study. The survey that was undertaken follows previous ones in using the established three-pillar sustainability concept in order to define impacts of tourism. Further, it adds to tourism research by surveying informedness and developmental involvement. A two-dimensional informedness–involvement tourism grid was used to segment residents and their perceptions on tourism impacts in each segment are analysed. The model was empirically applied to the Slovenian lake and mountain destination of Bled. The findings showed that more informed and more involved residents had more positive perceptions of tourism than all other groups, whereas those residents who were less informed and less involved had more negative perceptions of tourism. The study contributes by expanding knowledge on resident perceptions of tourism by adding in the aspects of informedness and involvement. The proposed model can be applied to any destination to help manage residents' opinions and consequently their support for tourism development.

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## 1. Introduction

The belief that 'understanding resident perceptions and responses is fundamental to the successful and sustainable development of tourism' (Sharples, 2014, p. 14) is the main reason for the recent expansion of research on resident attitudes to tourism. However, regardless of the numerous papers produced on the topic over the past 30 years, the role of residents in tourism development remains in the interest of academics for many reasons (for a review, see Harrill, 2004; Sharples, 2014). One of the reasons explaining this interest lies in the concept of sustainable tourism development. According to Mihalič (2015), the concept, as recognised by the UNWTO, rests on three theoretical pillars, representing the economic, environmental and socio-cultural impacts of tourism respectively. The concept has been integrated into tourism strategies and policies on all levels: from the destination level to the global level. However, the more recent debate on sustainable development calls for the more successful implementation of sustainability and points out certain sustainability requirements such as customer satisfaction, awareness, participation and cooperation of all stakeholders, political power,

consensus and critical mass (Mihalič, 2015). The sustainability debate recognises the importance of residents as stakeholders in the tourism planning and development process. Indeed, many scholars (Boley, McGehee, Perdue, & Long, 2014; Garrod, Fyall, Leask, & Ried, 2012; Hall, 1994; Harrill, 2004; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Lawton & Weaver, 2015; Murphy, 1985; Simmons, 1994) argue that residents are important destination stakeholders and thus deserve to be empowered to participate in tourism planning and development in order to approve and control the impacts of tourism in their destination. The empowerment of residents is open to a variety of interpretations. It is often difficult to define and evaluate the implementation of empowerment, since it is described by different categories, including: involvement (Ko & Stewart, 2002; Lee, 2013; Murphy, 1985; Nicholas, Thapa, & Ko, 2009), participation (Li, 2006; Simmons, 1994; Tosun, 2006) or the power to influence the decision-making process (Boley et al., 2014; Latkova & Vogt, 2012; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011, 2012; Nunkoo, Ramkissoon, & Gursoy, 2012). These categories often serve as a common denominator for various resident engagement activities, such as participating in tourism activities, support for research of sustainability, being informed and involved in planning, management and decision making. The approach that employs stakeholder theory (Byrd, 2007; Byrd, Bosley, & Dronberger, 2009; Garrod et al., 2012; Nicholas et al., 2009) has proven to be valuable in underpinning the legitimacy and saliency of residents as

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destination stakeholders, but has not completely answered the question of the extent to which residents are informed and consulted, and thus included in tourism development. The growing recognition of this non-adequately answered question has led to several studies that discuss different aspects of resident empowerment through Arnstein's typology of citizenship participation (Garrod et al., 2012; Green & Hunton-Clarke, 2003; Lawton & Weaver, 2015; Tosun, 2006). So far, the results have shown that residents' engagement is mainly considered to be informative in nature and thus lacking in consensus, cooperation or consultancy between residents and tourism managers.

In relation to positive and negative tourism impacts on the destination and host community, social exchange theory informs tourism studies on how residents perceive these impacts and how their perceptions affect their support for or opposition to tourism. In many cases (for example, Andereck, Valentine, Knopf, and Vogt (2005), Ko et al. (2002), McGehee and Andereck (2004), Perdue, Long, and Allen (1990)), it was argued that if residents perceive there to be greater positive tourism impacts than negative ones then they are likely to support tourism development. Those residents who have benefited personally from tourism usually profit in terms of employment and business opportunities: hence their interests in tourism may not be similar to those of other local residents. Indeed, Garrod et al. (2012) have argued that residents represent a heterogeneous group of individuals with multiple interests and they may be allied with more than one stakeholder group, thereby resulting in an overlap of stakeholder interests. Thus, differences among residents in access to information and influence over decision-makers in tourism are determined by alliances with a certain stakeholder group. This prompts yet another important question, which has not been adequately addressed in the literature, relating to how residents evaluate various tourism impacts based on the extent of their informedness and involvement in tourism.

According to the above gaps in the literature, this paper seeks to examine residents' perceptions of tourism and how they are shaped through residents' informedness and involvement in tourism development. Following the identification of four resident groups based on their levels of informedness and involvement, group differences in perceptions will be demonstrated within the framework of the three sustainability pillars (i.e. referring to economic, environmental and socio-cultural tourism impacts). In the next section, we set out the theoretical contexts concerning the role of residents in tourism development and the importance of their segmentation. This is followed by a presentation of the conceptual model and hypotheses, methodology and empirical results from a survey of local residents in the Slovenian destination of Bled. The latter are discussed in the concluding part of the paper.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The role of residents in sustainable tourism development

A popular definition of sustainable tourism development (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005, pp. 11-12) postulates that it should take 'full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities.' Moreover, sustainable tourism development requires 'the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders' (Edgell, DelMastro Allen, Smith, & Swanson, 2008, p. 195) and constant monitoring of tourism impacts in the community to ensure the building of a consensus for development and the possibility of introducing preventive or corrective measures (Edgell et al., 2008). According to Gunn

(1994), sustainable tourism development cannot be successful without the support of residents. This is supported by several studies (Ioannides, 1995; Robson & Robson, 1996), which have demonstrated that if residents are included in discussions about tourism development, if their opinions are taken into account, and if they are involved in the planning process, sustainable tourism development is achievable. However, in order for residents to play an active role, they need to have substantial knowledge and understanding of the issues (Byrd, 2007). This can happen through informing and education, so that the decision-making process is based on the information provided and, therefore, represents an objective utilisation of collective wisdom (Byrd, 2007).

Thus, it is inevitable to say that the debate on sustainable tourism development has contributed to recognising local residents as important destination stakeholders. In outlining the debate, Mihalič (2015) noted that to make tourism sustainable (what we know as tourism being based on the three pillars of sustainability, i.e. economic, socio-cultural and environmental) it is imperative to meet the following three requirements: (1) to maintain a high level of visitor satisfaction; (2) to base tourism on awareness of sustainability and ethics, supported by environmental education and the informedness of all stakeholders; and (3) to ensure strong leadership, informed stakeholders' participation, a consensus, cooperation and a critical mass for realising sustainable tourism. Hence, residents are placed at the very centre of sustainable development, since both the indirect and direct support of residents' participation is the foundation for implementing the sustainability paradigm (Butcher, 1997; Hunter, 1997; Jamieson & Jamal, 1997).

However, Byrd (2007) noted that every community also includes individuals who do not want to be involved in any decision-making process. However, their interests also need to be represented since their lives are directly impacted by the presence of tourism in the community. Therefore, in order to ensure equal representation of *all voices* within a community, different forms of resident participation have to be ensured (Byrd, 2007).

### 2.2. Residents' participation: the perspective of informedness and involvement in tourism development planning

A few studies have examined different aspects of resident empowerment through Arnstein's typology of citizen participation (Garrod et al., 2012; Green et al., 2003; Lawton & Weaver, 2015; Tosun, 2006). Arnstein (1969) typology distinguishes three categories: *Non-participation*, *Degrees of Tokenism*, and *Degrees of Citizenship Power*, which are ascribed to different levels of citizen participation. Moving up through Arnstein's ladder means that, both individually and collectively, partners experience greater empowerment in the planning situation (McCool, 2009). The first category acknowledges manipulation and therapy as a form of citizen participation. Manipulation is considered to be an illusionary form of participation, where most frequently residents would be placed on 'rubberstamp advisory committees or advisory boards' (Arnstein, 1969, p. 218) for the purpose of being co-opted to grant their support for tourism development. Similarly, therapy refers to the masqueraded engagement of residents within an extensive group activity, with the sole purpose of being granted support for tourism development rather than addressing the issues of the community. Most often, these two levels enable tourism managers and planners to explain their independent decisions to the stakeholders and thus be given their support. This translates to a formal, top-down communication from managers to residents, which Tosun (2006) categorises as coercive participation. According to Lawton and Weaver (2015), this kind of participation is mainly rejected in tourism studies since 'it conflicts with basic social sustainability principles' (p. 662).

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