Contextualizing the complexities of managing alternative tourism at the community-level: A case study of a nordic eco-village

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HIGHLIGHTS

- The contradictory goals of sustainable tourism make it difficult to practically apply alternative tourism strategies.
- Sólheimar eco-village is used as an ethnographic case study to assess managerial difficulties in alternative tourism.
- A lack of human resources dedicated to the alternative experience of guests impedes sustainable tourism development.
- Knowledge over conflict resolution, critical reflection and cultural communication is crucial to alternative tourism.
- Alternative tourism is conceptualized as a forum for discussion between host and guest.

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ABSTRACT

To shed light on the complexities of fostering sustainability through alternative tourism, we explore the managerial contradictions and difficulties that arise as alternative tourism is developed in the name of sustainability at Sólheimar eco-village in Iceland. Following a focused ethnographic approach, we establish that those behind the management of volunteers, students and other guests regularly struggle to coordinate these respective groups in a manner that balances economic objectives with those relating to the environment and social equity. This is because limited human resources and strategic knowledge exist to fulfill all the host community's goals through alternative tourism. The findings reveal the need to conceptualize alternative tourism as a forum for discussion between host and guest over the complexities of generating sustainable development. This highlights the need for knowledge transmission over matters such as conflict resolution, critical reflection and cultural communication associated with the tourist experience at the community.

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1. Introduction

The term alternative tourism is usually used to describe tourism that is characterized by small-scale and locally owned and controlled operations, offering experiences related to, for instance, educational tours, volunteer travel, farm-stays, and ecotourism (Oriade & Evans, 2011; Weaver, 2006). Many observers consider that alternative tourism has the potential to bring about sustainable development to communities due to its participatory, localized and sensitive character (Scheyvens, 2002a, 2012). The reality is, however, that conflicting interests and contradictory goals plague the development of alternative forms of tourism (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012; Deville, Wearing, & McDonald, 2016; Mostafanezhad, 2016; Weaver, 2013, 2007). Moreover, the complex conception of sustainability in tourism scholarship, not to mention its normative future-driven orientation, renders the application of sustainable norms difficult for local stakeholders (Ruhanen, 2008; Sharpley, 2009; Xiao, 2006). Lane (2009) believes this relates to the weak understanding of what fundamentally drives markets in tourism. Inevitably, the compromises firms and other stakeholders must make in their pursuit of sustainability materialize in their managerial practices where they need to decide how they want to, for instance, develop human resources, invest in capital, adopt new technologies and offer a competitive product (Smith, 1997). Ultimately, community stakeholders involved in alternative tourism must ensure they have a strategy for hosting and interacting with tourists as they seek to benefit from their presence (Salazar, 2012).

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In this article, we explore the managerial contradictions and difficulties arising in local contexts where alternative tourism development is promoted for sustainability's sake. For our case study, we focus on an alternative space, in this case the Icelandic eco-village Sólheimar, which like other such destinations hosts guests, including volunteers who provide free labour and with whom the locals share best-practices (Dawson, 2006). Despite the eco-village's mission to promote social integration (in this case of persons with mental handicaps) and eco-living practices, it is obvious that, on a daily basis, various practical organizational issues crop up that challenge the settlement's overall mission in terms of moving toward sustainable development. Thus, the main question we have chosen to ask is: what managerial challenges does this community face in its attempts to reconcile its mission of social equity generation and environmental education with that of its overall economic goals through alternative tourism?

We begin with a literature review on alternative tourism highlighting research that has identified complexities and contradiction in its sustainability and management. The methodology details the focused ethnographic approach that was used to study Sólheimar. The ensuing section gives background information on the case study before presenting the findings. These findings are divided into two categories: 1) reconciling comfort with contribution and; 2) managing productivity and creativity. The increased number of guests and volunteers put pressure on local human resources, revealing a need to foster a form of alternative tourism management that enables tourists to contribute to more than just the community's economic goals. We propose that for alternative tourism to become a tool for community development, there needs to be investment in knowledge transmission over practical matters such as conflict resolution during the tourist experience, and critical reflection and cultural communication between host and guest over local matters. Alternative tourism is thus conceptualized as a forum for discussion between host and guest over the complexities of generating sustainable development. Finally, we suggest further research in the field of alternative tourism and encourage the use of ethnomethodologies in tourism management research.

2. Alternative tourism: tourism for sustainable development?

Alternative tourism has gained increasing popularity in discourses of sustainable development because of its purported sensitive approach to host communities' needs (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008; Scheyvens, 2002a; Singh, 2002; Weaver, 2006). Alternative tourism experiences usually include educational tours, volunteer travel, farm-stays, ecotourism, and other tourism types characterized by small-scale and locally owned and controlled operations (Oriade & Evans, 2011; Weaver, 2006). Some observers even argue that, rather than reflecting modern consumer culture, these approaches encourage close exchanges between host and guest centered on profound cultural encounters (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2008; MacIntosh & Zahra, 2007; Zahra & McGehee, 2013). Scholars praise these tourism forms, not only for their limited adverse environmental and socio-cultural impacts, but also because they aim to provide greater participatory opportunities for small entrepreneurs, residents and various local stakeholders, while spreading the wealth to local stakeholders (Scheyvens, 2012, 2002a; Singh, 2002). This participation is considered crucial to ensure the specific needs of communities members are met through tourism (Saarinen, 2006; Sebele, 2010; Tosun & Timothy, 2003).

Alternative tourism can thus be considered a form of sustainable tourism, where its smaller-scale and more sensitive operations can be used effectively to generate local bottom-up development (Moscardo, 2008). However, a primary challenge associated with alternative tourism as a path to sustainable tourism is that sustainability is a multi-dimensional concept, meaning its operationalization can mean different things to different players. Other than the age-old question about "what should be sustained and developed" the problem exists that, for many stakeholders, sustainability becomes hard to grasp due to its future-oriented nature (Dryzek, 1997; Redclift, 1987; Rist, 2002). Particularly those players with fairly short time perspectives (e.g., business owners and developers) are likelier to emphasize immediate economic priorities to ensure their sustainability through tourism, rather than to oversee to environmental and social equity goals (Lane, 2009; Liu, 2003; Prideaux, 2015; Sharpley, 2009). The persons with a longer-term comprehensive vision of sustainability are usually those whose motives are not driven by economic ambitions (e.g., environmental groups or social activists).

Weaver (2009, 2007) speaks of "veneer environmentalism" whereby most stakeholders are unwilling to shift their practices, which focus overwhelmingly on short-term gain generation. To these players, the sustainability discourse's utility has much to do with a public relations' perspective. Endeavors associated with alternative forms of tourism have been criticized for supporting their own reproduction through economic gain. There are numerous forms of tourism, initially meant to be sensitive and small-scale such as eco-tourism and backpacking, which have intensified through the past decades becoming increasingly standardized and not so diversified from the mass tourism they were meant to replace (Cohen, 1972; Scheyvens, 2002b; Wheeller, 1997). Accordingly, Guttentag (2009), Mostafanezhad (2014) and Palacios (2010) have argued, for instance, that many volunteer organizations are more likely to seek their own reproduction as capitalist enterprises through alternative tourism.

There is always the real risk, in cases where alternative tourism is promoted, that economic growth may divert local actors' interests away from their original objectives (Coghlan & Noakes, 2012; Weaver, 2013). It is inevitable that any enterprise, even those purported to be aimed at alternative tourism, through their sheer necessity to survive, might appear to be profit-oriented, while in reality they are working strategically to stay afloat. Coghlan and Noakes (2012), writing on NGOs involved in volunteer tourism, explain that alternative stakeholder groups are usually forced to compromise between: "'money' and 'mission', and that the ensuing tradeoffs are characterized by degrees, not absolutes" (p.128). Inevitably, local actors have to provide a variety of activities, experiences and comforts to their paying customers. The goals of households, businesses and organizations that strive to subsist from alternative tourism often become contradictory since, on the one hand, they seek to pursue their idealistic mission while, on the other hand, they have to recognize the daily realities that are shaped by the global capitalist system (Deville et al., 2016; Mostafanezhad, 2016). For instance, Mostafanezhad (2016) describes that despite their harsh critique against the agro-industrial complex, some farm hosts shopped at large economy warehouses to afford feeding their volunteers as the food they grow is expensive. This trade-off goes against the principles of organic farmers, but is deemed crucial to support the promotion of affordable organic food in the long-run. The issue becomes more problematic when guests come to believe that their hosts are compromising the very principles they purportedly stand for and might not be as altruistic as advertised (Mostafanezhad, 2016).

This dilemma that alternative tourism stakeholders face is crucial to consider in order to promote sustainable tourism at the community-level. While Wheeller (2012, 2005) outlines the necessity for tourism scholars to consider the challenges of sustainability within a wider context of power by considering economic and political systems, he also acknowledges the importance of