



Stakeholders' views on reducing financial support in government-led ecotourism areas



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ABSTRACT

Government-led ecotourism, which is common in developing countries, produces several tangible outputs, such as the certification of international institutes for high-quality ecological landscaping, as well as increased tourism and associated socio-economic benefits. Nonetheless, the overall structure of government-led ecotourism can be weakened by changes in a government's policy. This study analyses the reasons behind the reduction of governmental support for ecotourism in the South Korean island of Jeung-do. In order to study stakeholders' views, Q methodology was used. The results showed that existing managerial staff and local officials, both being hostile to external interference, focused on gradual independence from governmental support. Furthermore, only new managerial staff desired the rapid growth dependent on government and external capital. These results illustrate that the more experience managers have with managing ecotourism activity itself, the less supportive they are of external support and rapid economic growth (at the expense of the environment). For this reason, in order to ensure long-term environmental conservation and economic sustainability, government policy changes should not lead to the replacement of existing personnel or dependence on governmental support.

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1. Introduction

Developing countries use ecotourism as a strategy to conserve ecological resources and vitalize local economies (Che, 2006; Cheung and Fok, 2014; Liu et al., 2013). The government helps to maximize the profits of local residents by providing human and financial support for ecotourism in various ways, including marketing, the provision of information, education, and cooperation (Bhuiyan et al., 2011). However, when governmental support is reduced, the structure of ecotourism can be weakened considerably. Economically, reduced governmental support is devastating to ecotourism because facilities cannot be maintained appropriately in terms of the environment (Hall, 2007), and it can bring about conflict due to the corresponding decrease in the numbers of operational personnel from a sociocultural perspective (Coria and Calfucura, 2012; Stronza and Gordillo, 2008). Analysing the effects of reduced governmental support on ecotourism areas is vital for the sustainable operation of government-led ecotourism initiatives.

Nevertheless, government-led ecotourism studies emphasize only the transition of power to others through the participation of local residents (Yuan et al., 2008) or local tourism organizations (Beaumont and Dredge, 2010). There is insufficient research on how operating rights are transferred from government to others, especially when such transfers are very rapid and large-scale and when governmental support is reduced. In order to provide alternatives to governmental support reduction, an in-depth analysis of the changes and interests of the ecotourism locations that are experiencing these difficulties is needed (Su et al., 2014).

This study uses Q methodology to analyse the perspectives of stakeholders on environmental, social, and economic issues to assess the reduction of governmental support for ecotourism initiatives. Q methodology is a powerful approach to objectively illustrate these interests by exploring ecotourism issues through the combination of qualitative and quantitative analyses. It uses a Q factor analysis (quantitative approach) (Watts and Stenner, 2005) and applies qualitative methods to analyse the micro-interests of local stakeholders with respect to the identified ecotourism issues (Hunter, 2013; Rodríguez-Piñeros et al., 2012; Rodríguez-Piñeros and Mayett-Moreno, 2015). As Q methodology is not affected by

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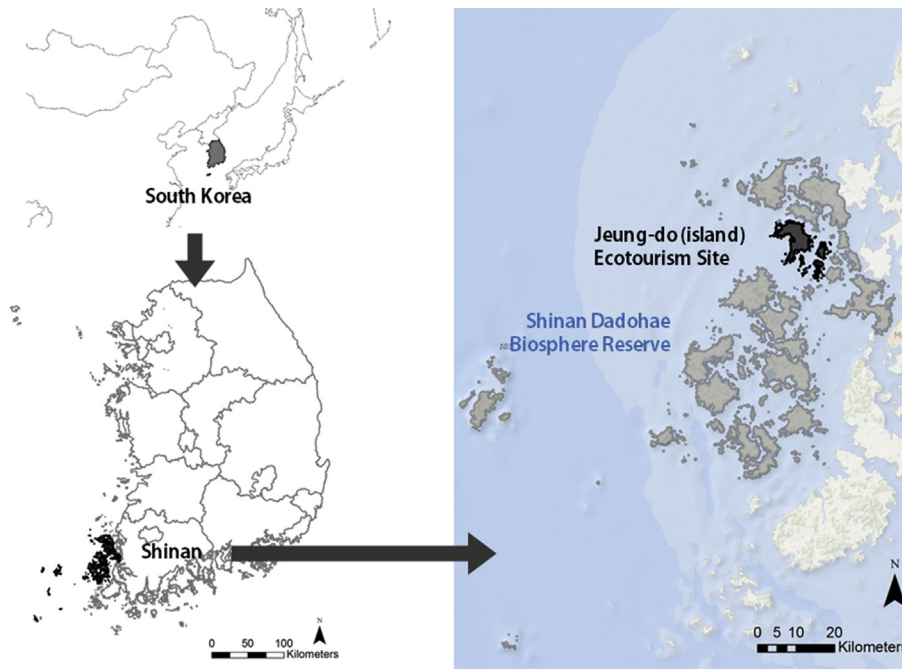


Fig. 1. Location of Jeung-do (Island) ecotourism site, Shinan.

the number of people surveyed, it can be used to assess ecotourism areas with small populations Brown, 1996 (Lee and Son, 2016). Accordingly, the micro-interests of local citizens can be understood by excluding the researcher's subjectivity compared to qualitative research that is conducted in an interview form.

This study analyses the interests of the Jeung-do (Island) ecotourism initiative (South Korea), which faces the challenge of a reduction in governmental support, although it has grown as a government-led ecotourism location. Jeung-do, which is made up of more than 1000 islands, has long been recognized for its ecological superiority and beautiful tidal mudflats, which until recently could be reached only by boat. Shinan, which includes Jeung-do, drew much attention when it was categorized as a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Biosphere Reserve in 2008 (Kim, 2015; Lee et al., 2010; Park et al., 2013). The Jeung-do Bridge was constructed on 3 March 2010 to connect the island to the Korean mainland. As a result, Jeung-do developed rapidly, drawing more than 800,000 tourists after 2012. Nonetheless, monetary support was suddenly reduced due to the financial situation at the time and the shift in the government's prioritization of ecotourism over other industries. As a result, the existing managerial staff and the local government experienced significant hardships. For instance, financial hardships and the replacement of existing labour force caused widespread mistrust, which was reflected in inappropriate environmental monitoring and management, the gradual cessation of council and program operations, and complaints about profits and their distribution. By analysing the Jeung-do ecotourism area, the current study discusses alternatives for government-led ecotourism initiatives facing a reduction in governmental support.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study area

For an in-depth investigation of government-led ecotourism, this study selected an ecotourism area that has experienced

hardships as a result of policy changes. It targeted the Jeung-do ecotourism area in Shinan, for which personnel and financial support have been reduced significantly due to the current economic situation and the promotion of other industries (see Fig. 1).

With the introduction of the Western concept of ecotourism in the East (Lee et al., 2012), Asian countries actively accepted ecotourism as a strategy of sustainable development (Weaver, 2002). Moreover, the Korean government hosted an international ecotourism forum in Seoul in 2002 to mark the UN year of ecotourism and clearly stated their intention to promote ecotourism in environmental legislation. Through this effort, it legally designated new ecotourism sites and wholeheartedly provided financial support for these areas. The Jeung-do area was selected as a biosphere reserve and subsequently designated as an ecotourism area. The Korean Ministry of Culture and Tourism also established a comprehensive development plan for a 'tidal flat ecological exhibition', and the local government invited a large travel accommodation company called the 'El Dorado Resort', thereby transforming the area into a professional ecotourism location. Moreover, in making the existing Taepyeong salt pond facilities a tourist attraction, the demand for local salt increased and significant profits were made. Additionally, the residents and the environmental NGO established the local organization for ecotourism in 2010. They monitor the environmental resources in Jeung-do, using funding obtained from the government and local companies. They also support education for residents and provide tour programs for tourists.

However, as support was reduced due to economic depression, friction arose between the members of the local organization for ecotourism. The government's policy change resulted in the removal of economic subsidies and a corresponding decrease in management personnel, negatively affecting several management activities. For example, it became difficult to monitor and regulate chemical use in shrimp farms, and to cope with the damage to the tourism infrastructure. The education of residents, which had been provided until then, became difficult. Finally, due to the anxiety that governmental support could be lost, the outflow of human

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