



Quality and sustainability of tourism development in Copper Canyon, Mexico: Perceptions of community stakeholders and visitors

Manuel Ramón González Herrera^{a,1}, Vinod Sasidharan^{b,*,2}, Julian Alberto Álvarez Hernández^{a,1}, Luis Daniel Azpeitia Herrera^{a,1}

^a School of Tourism and Research Group of Sustainable Tourism Management, Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico

^b School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, San Diego State University, USA



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ABSTRACT

The assessment of tourism development, based on the perspectives and opinions obtained from hosts and visitors could be considered as a basic requirement for the participatory management of destination sustainability. The general objective of this research is to study the contrasted perceptions of tourism development in Copper Canyon Park, according to the opinions of hosts and visitors, with the purpose of evaluating the perceived quality and sustainability of the destination within the context of an implanted territorial tourism development model. In this study, a characterization of the tourism development of Copper Canyon Park was conducted, local public opinion relating to the implanted tourism development model was studied, and perceptions of visitors regarding the destination were analyzed. Utilizing this methodology allowed the identification of compatibilities and incompatibilities, relating to the convergence between the community's perceptions, the visitors' experiences, and the characteristics of the receiving environment.

1. Introduction

The assessment of tourism development, based on the perspectives and opinions obtained from hosts and visitors could be considered as a basic requirement for the participatory management of destination sustainability (Clausen & Gyimóthy, 2016; Grybovyč, 2012). Such assessment is needed to determine sustainable development outcomes when the interests of different parties are juxtaposed within a given space-time dimension of a tourist destination, particularly when the expectations of tourists and local community and characteristics of the destination's natural and/or cultural environment do not coincide (Crosby, 2015; Wang, Zhou, Lee, & King, 2014). Under this conceptualization, the synergies and divergences between social actors could greatly influence the sustainability of the destination. Hence, it is of utmost importance for destination planners to manage the convergence of interests and expectations of stakeholders (Silva, Agapito, & Pinto, 2017) in a manner that yields positive memorable experiences for both visitors and hosts, and creates advantageous destination productivity, sustainability, competitiveness, and profitability outcomes (Crosby, 2015). In order to achieve cooperation between the main stakeholders of the destination, it is essential to address their respective

interests and expectations (Bhat & Gaur, 2012; Byrd, 2007; Peric & Djurkin, 2014), based on which models of sustainable tourism development that provide more opportunities for synergies versus incompatibilities (Crosby, 2015) can be created and promoted.

With relevance to the social dimension of sustainability, it is important to examine the multiple and diverse interactions taking place between hosts and visitors for the purpose of minimizing adverse impacts and managing incompatibilities (González & Palafox, 2014; Yu, Cole, & Chancellor, 2016) at the destination. Accordingly, it is necessary to understand the perceptions of both participants, i.e., hosts and visitors, regarding tourism development within the destination, as well as the vision of local business owners in order to know their points of view as well (Montaño, Núñez, & Pérez, 2016). Past studies have systematically examined the relationship between hosts and guests at tourism destinations, deducing that residents' attitudes towards tourists and tourists' behaviors at a destination are directly influenced by the types of contacts and interactions taking place between the two groups as well as the emotional solidarity and social distance between the groups (Joo et al., 2018; Tasci, 2009; Woosnam, 2012; Yilmaz & Tasci, 2013). Destination models which systematically address and consider the opinions and preferences of local communities and visitors

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: manuel.gonzalez@uacj.mx (M.R.G. Herrera), vsasidha@sdsu.edu (V. Sasidharan), jualvare@uacj.mx (J.A.Á. Hernández), daniel.azpeitia@uacj.mx (L.D.A. Herrera).

¹ Av. Plutarco Elías Calles No. 1210, Fovissste Chamizal, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, CP 32310, México.

² 5500 Campanile Drive, San Diego, CA 92182–4514, USA.

regarding tourism development facilitate establishment of grassroots initiatives for promoting integrated and active community-based participation in planning and decision-making (Guccio, Lisi, Martorana, & Mignosa, 2017; Lekaota, 2015; Pulido-Fernández & Pulido-Fernández, 2017), beginning from the early stages of tourism entrepreneurship in the area.

Based on the prior statements, two questions have been formulated for this study: Are the local community and visitors' perceptions convergent in regard to the sustainability and quality of tourism development at Copper Canyon? What is the utilitarian value of tourism development information provided by the local community and the visitors through their direct responses and online opinions? This research assumes that the concept of quality and sustainability of tourism development, as perceived by different social participants can be studied through a theoretically grounded empirical investigation of their opinions and evaluations made directly or through websites (No & Kim, 2015). In that sense, this study addresses the perceptions of stakeholders toward tourism development in Copper Canyon Adventure Park, located in Chihuahua, Mexico, including the influential localities of Creel, Divisadero, and other small townships and dispersed populations in the region.

The general objective of this research was to study the contrasted perceptions of tourism development in Copper Canyon Park, according to the opinions of hosts and visitors, with the purpose of evaluating the perceived quality and sustainability of the destination within the context of an implanted territorial tourism development model. For the purpose of this research, Copper Canyon is assumed as a tourist public space that enables social transformation, where the information and knowledge from visitors and hosts can be used for destination planning and decision-making and for the improvement of the experiences and satisfaction of both groups with regard to the quality and sustainability of tourism development in the region. It is necessary to develop tourism strategies that allow the confluence of interests and expectations in Copper Canyon Park and stimulate the development of memorable experiences and the progressive recognition of the destination as a sustainable mountain resort of high international attractiveness. In this study, a characterization of tourism development of Copper Canyon Park was conducted; public opinion relating to the implanted tourism development model was studied; and perceptions of visitors regarding the destination were analyzed. Utilizing this methodology allowed the identification of compatibilities and incompatibilities, based on the levels of convergence between the community's perceptions, the visitors and the receiving environment.

From a practical perspective, this study sheds light on the significance of considering the perceptions of various local stakeholders regarding tourism development in order to ensure a participatory planning process and support long-term destination sustainability. Theoretically, the paper serves to augment existing knowledge by conceptualizing a new model for understanding visitors' and hosts' perceptions regarding tourism development within the framework of a territorial tourism plan. The main contribution of this research is the in-depth analysis of Copper Canyon Park as a public space primarily for tourist use, and an important setting for stimulating social transformation. This study approached the examination of public perceptions regarding tourism development in a holistic manner, as it incorporated the opinions of settlers in different locations of the destination, as well as the perspectives corresponding to the visitors. Consequently, this study also highlights the high potential offered by information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a platform to foment the design of increasingly relevant tools that favor sustainable tourism development and management (Ali & Frew, 2014; Berné, García-González, García-Uceda, & Múgica, 2015; Soteriades, 2012), assuming that the pursuit of sustainability is only possible through the participation of all stakeholders involved in the tourism system (Waligo, Clarke, & Hawkins, 2015; Zmysłony, 2014). Additionally, the methodological procedure used could be implemented in other tourism contexts with similar issues.

Owing to the geographical location of this region and restricted access to communities, this study considered only the most vulnerable and important territories impacted by tourism development in the area. By including specific communities, it is intended that the findings will provide relevant information and recommendations to the local government and shall demonstrate that local communities need to be mobilized and empowered for the implementation of sustainable tourism and local communities' and visitor's perceptions need to be considered as a part of the tourism planning and decision-making process. The analysis of the integrated perceptions of the destination incorporating the totality of all local communities and canyons impacted by tourism development is declared as a future task to be conducted in coordination with the local and regional government and other related institutions.

The principal challenges that this study had to overcome included the lack of organized/official tourism information about the region as well the non-existence of official plans related to the development of tourism in the region. At present, no central tourism information database is available for the region and there is a lack of presence of an official Destination Management Organization for Copper Canyon. Additionally, the lack of interest among some stakeholders in participating in tourism planning demonstrates insufficiencies in participatory planning for sustainable tourism development in the region. Findings from this investigation will be utilized to plan future studies, with enlarged geographical scope, for analyzing the integrated perception of the destination, incorporating all local communities and stakeholders, including those that were not included in the present research, and to provide specific local-level results for guiding sustainable tourism development initiatives in the region.

2. Literature review

2.1. Conceptual model of perceptions regarding territorial tourism development

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are oriented towards the comprehension of existing contradictions between the local community's and visitors' perceptions in terms of quality and sustainability of tourism development at a destination. Therefore, a paradigm of tourism development is presented to establish the relationships among the conceptual variables addressed in the study (Fig. 1); this model explains the role of the principal transdisciplinary concepts involved in the social transformations taking place at the destination. The literature review includes various concepts which subsequently are reintroduced in the methodological procedure. In the conceptual model shown in Fig. 1, the relationships between various indicators of tourism development perceptions relating to quality and sustainability have been established. Corresponding to these variables, three concepts that shed light on the relationship between the indicators are presented: 1) Perceptions of the local stakeholders in relation to the development of tourism: quality and sustainability of tourism development; 2) Stakeholder engagement in the development of tourism at the local destination: visitors' and hosts' motives and interests, experiences, expectations, satisfaction levels and future intentions; and 3) Mechanisms to incorporate the perceptions of local stakeholders within strategies for the development of tourism: management tools and information for participatory planning and decision-making in the implementation of sustainable tourism development.

In recent years, several studies have attempted to provide a better understanding of the operationalization of concepts relating to quality and sustainability of tourism development (Cabrini, 2014) by "emphasizing sustainable tourism as a strong paradigm and vision for alternative development" (Perona & Molina, 2016, p. 527). Within this context, community tourism emerges as a sustainable option for economic and social development, coupled with balanced distribution of the benefits in the local space (Hamilton & Alexander, 2013; Perona &

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