



Host learning in community-based ecotourism in Nepal: The case of Sirubari and Ghalegaun homestays

Pierre Walter^{a,*}, Kapil Dev Regmi^a, Pushpa Raj Khanal^b

^a University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

^b Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development Kathmandu, Nepal

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Community-based ecotourism
Nepal
Homestays
Host learning
Ecotourism development
Southeast Asia

ABSTRACT

This study investigated host learning in two community-based ecotourism homestay villages in Nepal's mountain trekking region. Homestays are an intense visitor-host contact zone, rich in learning, and important to the success of ecotourism projects. This was an interpretive case study used to interpret and test Billet's (2014) theory of workplace learning, and offer insights into a new area of inquiry in tourism studies. This theoretical lens captured the complex, contextually-based curricular, pedagogical and epistemological practices of host learning in ecotourism homestays. Findings identified a homestay “hosting curriculum” comprising: (a) environmental cleanliness, sanitation and conservation; (b) the valuing of local culture; and (c) homestay management. The study showed the complex dimensions of host learning in a time of cultural, economic and social change occurring in both villages, and how local hosts adapted their beliefs, tourism practices and identities in response to these changes.

1. Introduction

Research and theorising on learning in ecotourism focuses primarily on the learning experiences of visitors. Researchers are interested in understanding visitor perceptions of the ecotourism experience, knowledge gained, attitudinal and behavioural change, and wider, more long-term learning outcomes, mainly in relation to environmental conservation (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2009; Packer & Ballantyne, 2013; Walter, 2013). Studies on community-based forms of ecotourism also examine a wider “curriculum” of informal visitor learning which includes knowledge of local cultures, livelihood and conservation practices (Walter, 2009, 2016a; Walter & Reimer, 2012). A related body of scholarship in the field focuses on the education of ecotourism guides (Christie & Mason, 2003; Walker & Weiler, 2016; Weiler & Walker, 2014; Yamada, 2011). However, to date, less attention has been paid to the learning and education of ecotourism hosts, an especially important role in community-based forms of ecotourism.

In many ways, host learning and education is part of the larger project of building ecotourism capacity for local and Indigenous communities (Nepal, 2004; Scheyvens, 1999; Zeppel, 2006). These are communities which are often located in or nearby some of the world's most remote and pristine natural areas. These biodiversity “hotspots” – in mountainous, rainforest and marine reef areas – are increasingly threatened by more commercial forms of mass and luxury ecotourism,

which may ultimately result in the degradation of natural areas while providing few benefits to local communities (Honey, 2008; Regmi & Walter, 2017; Stronza & Gordillo, 2008). Community-based ecotourism not only allows local residents a stake in the preservation of natural areas, but also functions as a variation of sustainable development to preserve traditional culture and livelihood, and generate income for community members (Honey, 2008; Reimer & Walter, 2013).

However, capacity building for community-based ecotourism is not a simple process of skills training in the management of ecotourism: issues of politics, conflict resolution, cross-cultural interchange, tourist gaze, commodification of culture, equitable division of labour and benefits, and cultural change are often faced by communities involved in ecotourism development (Cater, 2006; Schellhorn, 2010; Stronza, 2001; Tran & Walter, 2014). The presence of numerous strangers in a small community, increased demands for food, shelter, fuel and water resources, waste management issues, and shifts in labour away from farming and subsistence activities may strain community cohesion, identity and livelihood resources. Important questions remain about how local communities enact sustainable forms of ecotourism development, protect their traditional land and sea territories, and control or fend off economic colonialism, sex tourism and other practices offensive to their local and indigenous cultures (Honey, 2008; Kelkar, 2004; Stronza, 2005).

The purpose of this study is to investigate host learning in two

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: pierre.walter@ubc.ca (P. Walter).

community-based ecotourism homestay villages in the mountain trekking regions of Nepal. We focus on homestays since they are an intense contact zone between visitors and hosts and thus a rich learning environment for both. We understand homestays as hybrid spaces where cultures cross, intimate private practices meet public touristic demands, where authenticity is negotiated, community cohesion tested, and new identities shaped (Acharya & Halpenny, 2013; Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyen, & Duangsaeng, 2015; Stronza, 2001; Walter, 2004; Wang, 2007). We see these homestay spaces as tourism workplaces where hosts learn workplace practices, innovate and at times change their identities. As such, we believe these processes are best captured through an adult learning theoretical lens.

In the field of Adult Education, theorising about adult learning in community-based ecotourism is part of a rich vein of scholarship on how adults learn informally and through nonformal education in a variety of out-of-school settings (English, 2005). These include learning in the workplace, community organizations, the environmental movement and numerous community development contexts (Kasworm, Rose, & Ross-Gordon, 2010). In accordance with this literature, we take homestays and local communities to be host workplaces for ecotourism, education to be nonformal, and the learning which occurs in these sites to be mostly informal. Although there are several promising theories of informal adult learning which might be gainfully applied to CBET homestay hosting, including theories of experiential and transformative learning (Walter, 2013, 2016a), we adopt Billett's (2014) theory of workplace learning because it has the ability to more comprehensively capture the nature of both individual and community learning, as well as curriculum, pedagogical and epistemological practices which fall outside the realm of other theories of adult learning (see Regmi & Walter, 2016).

In this study, we aimed to understand what ecotourism hosts learned in homestay hosting, how they learned it, and with what consequences. How, for example, do hosts and their communities learn to manage increased ecotourism demand and impact on their environmental resources, reject or embrace hybrid cultures, respond to the contradictory tourism forces of commodification of culture and demands for “authenticity”, manage shifts in livelihood away from traditional agriculture, herding and hunting, maintain social cohesion and equity in the community? What agency do they exert in their homestay transactions with eco-tourists, how do they learn to “turn back the tourist gaze” (Stronza, 2001; Zhu, 2012)? We frame our analysis in terms of three defining characteristics of community-based ecotourism as a project of sustainable community development; namely, that it should: (a) promote environmental conservation, (b) provide new sources of livelihood, and (c) value or revive local cultures and lifeways for ecotourism hosts and communities (Honey, 2008; Reimer & Walter, 2013; Zeppel, 2006). As such, our main research questions are:

1. What do ecotourism homestay hosts learn about environmental conservation, the value of local culture, and new forms of ecotourism-related livelihood?
2. How do they learn this “curriculum”?
3. What are the outcomes of their learning for themselves and the community?

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

In literature focusing on adult learning in ecotourism settings, several empirical and theoretical studies have examined ecotourism curriculum areas and informal learning processes. In research on adult learning in a community-based ecotourism project on Kao Yao Noi Island in southern Thailand, Walter (2009) theorised that local environmental, cultural and livelihood knowledge was critical to the success of community-based ecotourism projects. Further, while the study did not focus specifically on host learning or homestays, four curricular areas of ecotourism hosting were identified: ecotourism

management, environmental conservation, cross-cultural exchange and political activism. In the main, this “ecotourism curriculum” was taught to hosts through nonformal education offered by a local community development organisation, and learned in “ecotourism practice” by hosts “through trial and error with hundreds of visitors over the course of years” (p. 527). However, Walter (2009) also found that the success of the ecotourism project meant that hosts were experiencing “homestay fatigue” in repeatedly welcoming strangers into their homes. Thus, villagers learned to commercialise their hosting and became less “authentic” ecotourist accommodations in the process (p. 525):

...in some respects, the very success of the ecotourism project in attracting tourists to Koh Yao Noi threatens its fundamental roots in authentic local learning, environmental education and cultural exchange. For homestay families, this has meant a kind of professionalization of hosting and interpretation services, providing a set experience of cultural learning (southern Thai-Malay cooking, wearing headscarves, living in a local home) and environmental community tourism (visits to beaches, reefs, aquaculture cages, rubber plantations, handicraft co-operatives, the family jewellery or batik store) within a fixed range of possibilities, with generalized itineraries (tours) and (priced) tourist activities.

Hosts in Kao Yao Noi also worried that the community-based ecotourism “carrying capacity” of their island home would soon be exceeded, as non-project homestay groups expanded, commercialised and ignored basic ecotourism project principles of environmental conservation, cultural preservation and community development. And in fact, by 2017, this had largely occurred, as luxury and backpacker tourism from the beach resorts and mass tourism enclave of nearby Phuket Island had overflowed onto Kao Yao Noi Island (author's personal observation). Yet even with this largely uncontrolled tourism development, Kao Yao Noi hosts maintained that the homestay hosting and the political skills they had learned in the ecotourism project had at least allowed them to capture a portion of the benefits of tourism development. This came mainly in negotiating for local jobs in new conventional tourism accommodations developed on the island. Thus, the outcomes of host learning for ecotourism for community livelihood were fairly positive, but were complex, and mostly uncontrollable and unpredictable in the long-term. By contrast, efforts to preserve natural environment and local cultural forms were less successful on Kao Yao Noi. That is, the richness of local environmental and cultural knowledge as a development resource for community-based ecotourism was partly negated by unchecked commercial tourism development by outsiders to the island.

In a second comparative study of the Koh Yao Noi project and a community-based ecotourism project in Chambok Village, Cambodia, Walter and Reimer (2012) drew similar conclusions about the importance of local environmental, cultural and livelihood knowledge in the visitor ecotourism curriculum. However, in the case of the Chambok project, the village was fairly isolated in a mountainous region of southwest Cambodian rainforest, with no nearby mass tourism enclave like Phuket, Thailand from which commercial tourism might spread. Moreover, ecotourism homestay visitors were mostly local urban middle class Cambodians, who were interested in experiencing nature and rural life, not luxury resorts or mass tourism. As a result, unlike Kao Yao Noi, the Chambok community-based ecotourism project was largely successful at environmental and cultural preservation, and generating a livelihood for local villagers. However, this may well change in the near future: the tourism and transport infrastructure in the region is developing rapidly, and ecotourism development is a key pillar of the Cambodian's government's development strategy in the region (Walter & Sen, 2018). Thus, Chambok homestay hosts, like their Kao Yao Noi counterparts, may be required to professionalise their accommodations and learn new hosting skills and knowledge to do so.

A number of studies of CBET have been undertaken in Nepal, especially in exploring the impact of ecotourism on marginalised

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7422599>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7422599>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)