



Putting social impact assessment to the test as a method for implementing responsible tourism practice



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ABSTRACT

The discourse on the social impacts of tourism needs to shift from the current descriptive critique of tourism to considering what can be done in actual practice to embed the management of tourism's social impacts into the existing planning, product development and operational processes of tourism businesses. A pragmatic approach for designing research methodologies, social management systems and initial actions, which is shaped by the real world operational constraints and existing systems used in the tourism industry, is needed. Our pilot study with a small Bulgarian travel company put social impact assessment (SIA) to the test to see if it could provide this desired approach and assist in implementing responsible tourism development practice, especially in small tourism businesses. Our findings showed that our adapted SIA method has value as a practical method for embedding a responsible tourism approach. While there were some challenges, SIA proved to be effective in assisting the staff of our test case tourism business to better understand their social impacts on their local communities and to identify actions to take.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, the social impacts of tourism on host communities have been the subject of great debate among social scientists and an increasing range of tourism stakeholders as part of the worldwide movement towards sustainable development (Cohen, 1972; Crick, 1989; Deery et al., 2012; Wall and Mathieson, 2006). Today, the inherent difficulties of understanding and measuring the social impacts of tourism continue to hinder progress in taking action and responsibility for actively managing these social impacts in practice. Existing approaches to measuring the social impacts of tourism – including empirical research attempting to find scientific and statistically robust answers (Deery et al., 2012), the preoccupation with certification schemes (Font, 2013), and the development of social indicators using a triple bottom line (TBL) approach (Goodwin, 2007) – have all been criticised for not being successful in achieving better management of the social issues created by the tourism industry and for being unsuitable for small businesses (i.e. most tourism enterprises) to implement (Font, 2013; Stoddard et al., 2012; Vanclay, 2004).

Whilst encouraging progress within the tourism sector has been made over the last decade in terms of implementing environmental

management systems (EMS) (Carruthers and Vanclay, 2012, 2007; Dodds and Joppe, 2005), the systematic management of the social impacts of tourism activities lags far behind (Blackstock et al., 2008; Buckley, 2012; Font et al., 2012; Mihalic, 2014; Mowforth and Munt, 2009). The view taken here is that the debate on the social impacts of tourism needs to shift to developing what can be done in practice to embed the management of these social impacts into the existing planning, product development and operational processes of the key tourism stakeholders, such as local government, local communities and private sector tour operators and travel agents. In order to engage these key stakeholders in responsible behaviour change, we argue that what is needed is a pragmatic approach for designing research methodologies, social management systems and initial actions that is shaped by the real world operational constraints and existing systems used by tourism businesses.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the potential of social impact assessment (SIA) to provide a practical method to assist in responsible tourism development and facilitate the pragmatic approach hitherto lacking. We considered this by conducting a trial study in Bulgaria to investigate whether SIA could be effectively embedded into the existing processes and operations of a local travel company (Odyssea-In). Odyssea-In specialises in adventure and cultural tours in rural communities in Bulgaria. Our research also sought to build the capacity of Odyssea-In staff to own and use the SIA process so that they could better understand and demonstrate what they are doing to be a responsible travel company, and more actively manage their social impacts as part

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of their commitment to pioneering responsible tourism practice in Bulgaria.

Our study addressed this need for practical assistance in the tourism industry by 'putting SIA to the test' to see how useful SIA might be in responsible tourism practice, and by identifying any practical adaptations needed to make SIA suitable in this small business context. In theory, the SIA approach with its values, principles and methods (Esteves et al., 2012; Vanclay, 2003; Vanclay et al. 2015) has a lot in common with responsible tourism, but in practice there has been very little attention to investigate how SIA might be useful as part of a management approach that embraces responsible tourism in line with the sustainability objectives of the Cape Town Declaration on Responsible Tourism in Destinations (ICRTD, 2002).

2. Social impacts of tourism

The social impacts of tourism have been much considered in the academic tourism literature (Cohen, 1972; Deery et al., 2012; Leslie, 2012; Rutty et al., 2015; Wall and Mathieson, 2006). As in SIA (Vanclay, 2002), social impacts are typically understood as not being limited to a narrow or restrictive understanding of 'social'. Fox (1977:27) defined the social and cultural impacts of tourism as "the ways in which tourism is contributing to changes in value systems, individual behaviour, family structure and relationships, collective lifestyles, safety levels, moral conduct, creative expressions, traditional ceremonies and community organizations". The interpretation of tourism impacts thus connects with the understanding of social impacts in the SIA field, "all social and cultural consequences to human populations of any public or private actions that alter the ways in which people live, work, play, relate to one another, organise to meet their needs, and generally cope as members of society" (Burdge and Vanclay, 1996:59).

There is a large body of literature which blames the tourism industry (including tour operators and travel agents) for the negative social and cultural impacts on host communities, including issues such as cultural change, increased crime, an increase in begging and gambling, local people being pushed out by rising prices and sometimes forcibly evicted, in-migration of outsiders, increased sex industry activity and visibility, the devaluing of local language and culture, and an inequitable distribution of the profits from tourism (Deery et al., 2012; Easterling, 2004; Wall and Mathieson, 2006). Tourism is also credited with positive consequences, such as: the broadening of international peace and understanding; reinforcing the preservation of heritage and culture; reducing religious, racial and language barriers; and enhancing the appreciation of one's own culture (Wall and Mathieson, 2006).

Commencing from the classic works of Erik Cohen (1972, 1974, 1979) and Valene Smith's (1978, 1989), *Hosts and Guests*, a distinct anthropology of tourism has emerged. Whilst other scholars typically recognised some benefits of tourism, anthropologists tended to raise concern that tourism damaged culture, which was evident in the key concepts of this anthropology of tourism discourse, such as: 'acculturation', where the borrowing of some elements of other cultures takes place as a result of the contact between different societies (Burns, 1999; Nunez, 1989); 'Doxey's irridex' (or index of irritation) relating to the nature of the relationship between tourists and their host communities (Doxey, 1976); the 'commodification of culture', in which the cultural meaning of cultural activities and artefacts is lost because of changes in their production needed to suit tourist consumers (Greenwood, 1989); and the 'invasion of private backspaces' by tourists in search of 'authenticity' (MacCannell, 1973).

Much recent literature (e.g. Archer et al., 2005; Burns and Novelli, 2008; Deery et al., 2012; Skinner and Theodossopoulos, 2011; Singh, 2012; Van Beek and Schmidt, 2012; Wall and Mathieson, 2006) is increasingly moving away from the tendency to categorise the impacts of tourism exclusively into either the advocacy platform (the good) or the controversy platform (the bad) (Jafari, 2001). There is a noticeable shift towards a more balanced

perspective that recognises that the consequences of tourism have become increasingly complex (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). It is accepted, for example, that the commercialization of culture might revive interest in traditional art forms as well as having the potential to modify them substantially. There is also increasing awareness that the complexity of tourism may make impact impossible to measure. "Many of the impacts of tourism are manifested in subtle and often unexpected ways ... primary impacts give rise to secondary and tertiary impacts and generate a myriad of successive repercussions which it is usually impracticable to trace and monitor" (Wall and Mathieson, 2006:6).

Deery et al. (2012:65), who are critical of the literature on the social impacts of tourism, considered that there was a "dominance of a quantitative paradigm which has not facilitated a deep understanding of the impacts of tourism". They also considered that: "The research undertaken to date has tended to provide lists of impacts without a clear understanding of how perceptions of these impacts were formed and, more importantly, how such perceptions could be changed if necessary" (Deery et al., 2012:65). While there is "reasonable agreement as to the nature of the impacts and the variables which influence residents' perceptions, recent quantitative research does not provide an in-depth insight into the reasons for residents' perceptions and the subsequent consequences of such perceptions" (Deery et al., 2012:2). In other words, there is a focus on examining the symptoms of the problem rather than its' inherent causes. This compounds the related problem that there is limited academic research on what can be done by tourism stakeholders to responsibly manage these social impacts in practice and to address their related sustainability challenges. Similarly, the practical guidance documents available in the grey literature on how to implement sustainability, whilst an improvement on what is offered through academia, is also limited in terms of making specific recommendations for tourism businesses to identify and implement social impact management systems and associated measures.

However, regardless of what the literature has to say, there are increasing external social pressures on tourism (and other) businesses to go beyond the strict requirements of the law or the market place to manage their impacts (Buckley and de Vasconcellos Pegas, 2013). Depending on the country of operations, these pressures include to: "minimise social impacts associated with differences in wealth and culture; provide employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for local residents; train staff and customers in cultural sensitivity; contribute directly to local community health and education; encourage philanthropy in cases where rich tourists visit poor communities; and negotiate and uphold fair leases and contracts with community landowners" (Buckley and de Vasconcellos Pegas, 2013: 522).

3. Responsible tourism

Building on the Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainable development (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) and the inclusion of tourism in the sustainable development agenda arising from the World Conference on Environment and Development (or Earth Summit) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) in 1993 defined sustainable tourism development very generally as "meeting the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunity for the future" (cited by Sharpley, 2000). Sustainable tourism has now been redefined as "tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities" (UNEP and UNWTO, 2005:11).

Many argue that the meanings of 'sustainable development' and 'sustainable tourism' remain vague or fuzzy and consequently difficult to operationalize (Berno and Bricker, 2001; Mihalic, 2014; Miller and Twining-Ward, 2005; Sharpley and Telfer, 2015; Wall and Mathieson, 2006; Weaver, 2006). Whilst recognising that the imprecision of these

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