
The role of community in tourism studies

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Australia, Community, Tourism

Abstract

An autobiographical discussion of using "community" as a framework to locate the impacts of tourism on a coastal town in Queensland.

Introduction

This paper traces changes in my thinking about the study of tourism in the last few years. I am writing as an academic, writing a masters thesis on the impact of tourism in the town where I live in North Queensland. The paper is unashamedly autobiographical as it seems to me that my own struggle with the research problem speaks to wider issues.

Why study tourism?

The sociology of tourism is an underdeveloped discipline (Urry, 1995). The study of tourism has been attacked for being apolitical and an apologist for an industry capable of inflicting environmental and social impacts on a global scale (Hall and Jenkins, 1995). Other theorists have retaliated, arguing that the social science critiques of tourism are overly emotive and lacking in empirical fact (Nash, 1996). The conclusion I have drawn from this debate is the need to remain critically and ethically engaged with tourism's positive and negative impacts. As Craik (1991) put it, empirical research can argue the point more forcefully than rhetoric.

How to study tourism?

I decided to use the concept of community as the tool to approach impacts of tourism and a community study as my methodology (see Dempsey, 1990; Poiner, 1990; Lynn, 1997). Although a deeply problematic term, community is still widely used by practitioners, governments, NGOs and the general public (Lynn, 1997). It suggests a group of heterogeneous people who share the locality – the tourism destination. By looking at the power relations within the community – it is possible to begin to dissect who benefits and who loses from tourism development (i.e. is it true, as Dogan (1989) says, that a tourism elite replaces the agrarian elite, rather than allowing the economic benefits of tourism to "trickle down"?). It also prevents the host community being depicted as passive victims of tourism, by showing how people variously resist, embrace or/and encourage further development.

Where to study tourism?

Having decided that I wished to gather empirical information on tourism's impacts, I began to look at where and how to do this. At first I was interested in studying an Asian country, such as Indonesia, as I was particularly interested in issues of dependency and self-determinism (after de Kadt, 1979). However, it was while I was thinking of these issues in terms of another country that I realized the same issues were facing the community I lived in.

Sociology, like charity, begins at home

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense to study my own community. Interpreting participant observation is always difficult, even more so when one must dissect another language, religion and culture. Ethnography in my own town has given me the chance to reinterpret a culture I am already familiar with. Despite the hazards involved in "insider" research (King, 1997), I have found it much easier to be reflexive in this setting. I realized any negative impacts of my research would be more easily avoided as I already had some sense of the power dynamics in my town. The local council and tourism body have given their blessing and support to the project. (The likelihood of the same reaction to a critical analysis of tourism in Indonesia seems unlikely.) The residents are anxious to get their voices heard and look on my project as a mouthpiece for their concerns. Thus the research process has become more a reciprocal exchange of information than the more traditional relationship between the "developed" world academic and the exotic "other".

Action research

As suggested earlier, I believe in action research. I am firmly committed to an ethical tourism industry and a thorough investigation of the impacts of tourism to support the move towards sustainability. Using a locality-based study helps demonstrate the horizontal and vertical power relations in a tourism destination, and between periphery and the metropolis (Craik, 1991; Wilkinson, 1995). I felt it is most likely to be effective in a democratic arena. My research is just a tiny cog in

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the wheel of tourism development in my area – I do not pretend to have all the answers or that my work will significantly alter the status quo. However, by exposing the power relations and how the status quo works, I hope to move the debate forward. I have the freedom to criticize, even if I am ignored!

Conclusion

I am not arguing against studying tourism in “developing countries”. By trading experiences and strategies, we can support indigenous movements for sustainable tourism without patronizing. I am suggesting that we should use our own societies as “guinea pigs” while working on tourism reform. I am arguing for empirical research on a micro scale to complement the macro level theory. My society can afford to address issues of sustainability – it is a matter of political will, not a lack of resources. There are many less barriers to a sustainable tourism industry in my community than in others. However, the barriers are definitely there and need to be exposed. But if we can not achieve an ethical tourism industry in our own society, I do not see how we expect others to succeed where we have failed.

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