ABSTRACT

This study recognized the conceptual dimensions of community empowerment and sustainable heritage tourism. A preliminary research model was also proposed to explore how empowerment would lead to community involvement and ultimately help achieve sustainable heritage tourism operations.

KEYWORDS: Sustainability, heritage tourism, community empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Heritage tourism is defined as “visits by persons from outside the host community motivated wholly or in part by interest in historical, artistic, scientific, lifestyle or cultural offerings of a community, region, group or institution” (Silberberg, 1995, p. 361). Examples of heritage tourism products include cultural heritage tours, heritage trails, purpose built heritage theme parks, museums, galleries, and cultural/visitor centers (Swarbrooke, 1995, Walle, 1998, and Cros, 2001). It has been recognized as one of the major growth markets in global tourism by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2014).

The literature has documented the constant challenges of dealing with inherited contradictions between conservation and change associated with heritage tourism development. A destination with few strategies for preservation but maximum business goals of developing tourism based on its heritage would inevitably witness a gradual loss of its core relics and cultural identity (Wight, 1994). On the other hand, those which dedicate maximum efforts to conserve its unique cultural vestige instead of exploiting it for tourism would also fail in business terms (Li, 2003). It is thus critical to develop sustainable heritage tourism operations. Rozemeijer (2001, p15) defined sustainable heritage tourism as a four-dimension concept:

1) Economically viable: the long term overall revenue should exceed the costs of entire operation (conservation + tourism);
2) Ecologically and culturally sustainable: cultural heritage and its surrounding environment should not decrease in value over time;
3) Equitable distribution of costs and benefits among all participants in the operations: the host community and local employees, in particular, should not be exploited.
4) Institutional consolidation: a transparent organization should be established that recognizes and represents interests and concerns from all stakeholders, and features consensus building and shared governance.
The following benefits can be anticipated from sustainable heritage tourism operations:

1) Generates long term income sources and employment opportunities to local residents, thus facilitates area development (Rozemeijer, 2001, p13). This is particularly important for remote and underdeveloped host communities. Economic activities from tourism and conservation can contribute to eradication of poverty and overall well-being of the host community (Manyara and Jones, 2007);

2) Provides much needed capital to protect and conserve the often fragile heritage relics.

3) Raises awareness of sustainable life style in using valuable heritage resources in the host community and at large. The economic benefits from capitalizing heritage resources, and the availability of knowledge on conservation, can motivate the community to take more pro-active approaches to plan and manage resources strategically.

Community involvement has always been identified as a central tenet of the concept of sustainable tourism (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999; Joppe, 1996; Miller, 2001). Heritage tourism would not be able to achieve sustainability if local communities did not participate in the development process (Keske & Smutko, 2010; Hubin & Marzuki, 2012). Mann (2000) defines community as “a mutually supportive, geographically specific, social unit such as a village or tribe where people identify themselves as community members and where there is usually some form of communal decision-making”. Anderson (1991) emphasized the inter-personal relationship within a community in influence decision making: members of a community often have something in common and they are actively engaged with one another in a benign fashion, and such sentiments may be used rhetorically to generate some kind of shared identity. In this study, we operationalize host community as the collective of stakeholder groups at a heritage location which have common interests in tourism operations. These stakeholder groups may include local government agencies, residents, area hospitality businesses, local institutions such as research non-profit organizations and universities that are interested in heritage conservation and capitalization.

Numerous authors have explored the concept of community involvement from various perspectives: Salazar (2012) argued that communities must recognize tangible benefits before they can participate actively. Wearing and McDonald (2002) believed that tourism operators and incoming tourists should not be given central priority but be equal partners with destination (host) communities. Murphy (1985) and Smith (2003) emphasized the political nature of tourism operations and pointed out shared control and consensus building as the key approach toward partnership with host community. However, the previous research has been largely fragmented, and has not yet developed an integrated framework on how exactly tourism operators can adequately involve and engage host communities, nor even thoroughly answered the question on why host communities even need to be involved. Our study proposes a research model that features community empowerment as the strategy to involve host community for sustainable heritage tourism operation. We also propose that this research model will benefit the tourism operator as a source of criteria in discussions with potential funders and policymakers. As indicated by the third benefit listed above, actively soliciting and sharing knowledge about heritage and its preservation leads to better informed strategic resource management. The following sections of this paper will present the research model and explain how host communities can be empowered for sustainable heritage tourism. Figure 1 shows the research model.

PROPOSED RESEARCH MODEL

Community Involvement
Community involvement is not a new concept in sustainable tourism. Actually, Loulanski & Loulanski (2011) recognized community as the primary factor to the multidimensional framework of sustainability. We will approach its relationship with sustainable heritage tourism operations through examining the unique challenges facing heritage tourism.

The biggest challenge facing sustainable heritage tourism is to balance preservation efforts with economic development. Tourists often do not only come to see the core heritage site, but also appreciate the opportunities to interact with local people and to experience the culture that makes such heritage unique. Ironically, heritage tourism often face a paradox that the efforts to maintain cultural authenticity, the very reason to attract tourists, can quickly give in to commercialization movements that are incentivized by economic benefits from the influx of external visitors. If the host community is sufficiently involved in the strategic planning process, stakeholder groups can develop a broader vision regarding how their individual activities fit into the big picture, and how they can coordinate with each other to reduce internal competition and conflicts. In the project of Al-Azhar Park in Cairo, Aga Khan Development Network maintained continuous communication with the local residents. Based on their inputs, the revitalization program not only rehabilitated the Darb-Al-Ahmar neighborhood physically by improving sanitation and restoring historical monuments to meet modern tourism standards, but also provide social-economic services to the impoverished craftsman residents. Examples include training workshops to re-introduce long lost crafts and skills (such as arabesque wood carving techniques), and micro-finance to over 400 craftsmen, allowing them to maintain shops onsite for tourist visitations. Through re-creating the past which might be lost forever otherwise, and preserving and sustaining the intangible cultural heritage, community involvement in this case was proven to benefit all parties from local government and tourism operators to visiting tourists and hosting community residents.

**Figure 1. Research Model**

Community Involvement
- Confident
- Inclusive
- Organized
- Co-operative
- Influential

Sustainable Heritage Tourism Operations
- Economically viable
- Ecologically & cultural sustainable
- Equitable distribution of costs and benefits
- Institutional consolidation

Although many tourists claim that they want “authentic cultural experience”, not every one of them values the accurate presentation of the heritage, particularly at under-developed locations. It is thus a challenge to balance the true cultural authenticity and tourists’ perceived image of that heritage. In a case study documenting the Ping Shan Cultural Heritage Trail, a Hong Kong
Tourism Board (HKTB)-designated heritage tourism attraction, Cheung (1999) found that the site was credited for an excellent level of spontaneity and authenticity of the local lifestyle, but was abandoned and devoid of tourist facilities and commercial activities. On the other hand, Singapore’s renovated Chinatown was booming and bustling with tourists and other commercial activities, but had been criticized for lack of spontaneity and authenticity in representing the real Chinatown spirit (Henderson, 2000). The two cases demonstrated that local communities should have been involved into the tourism planning and operations, they need to realize the impact of influx of tourists, and be prepared with making compromises between maintaining cultural authenticity and gentrifying historical residents.

The third challenge relates to the issue of knowledge/skill preparedness. The long term preservation and further development of the heritage tour sites requires advanced scholarly research by highly specialized professionals such as palaeobiologists, folklorists, or archeologists. Knowledge on these fronts can not only help sustain the core heritage, but also stimulate curiosity from visitors and significantly enrich their overall visiting experience. Although tourism operators do not necessarily have to keep a permanent research staff in house, it is in their best interest to maintain a close relationship with the research communities (i.e. local universities, research institutions) by supporting and promoting this type of research. Additionally, heritage tourism companies often need to simplify the specialized research results and make them less intimidating/more accessible to the general public. Properly disseminating such knowledge and staging a unified image of the heritage culture can be a daunting task, since tourists will also have external contact experience with local communities (e.g. residents, street peddlers, and independent craftsmen) that are beyond direct control of tourism companies. Sometimes, visitors may feel the quality of these contacts outweighs that of formal channels with the main tourism operators for their overall perception of the heritage site. It is thus obvious that involving all stakeholder groups of host communities can be the make or break point for sustainable heritage tourism operations.

The fourth challenge is the issue of employee maintenance and development. Traditionally, tourism companies do not operationally differentiate heritage tourism from other types of tourism (such as vacation/leisure travel). Local residents are hired primarily because of their vocational skills in guest accommodation, which are highly disposable. These local employees may find their jobs being low-paying and lack of upward career advancement opportunity. On the other hand, tourism companies are plagued with low morale and high employee turnover. Kattara, Weheba, & El-Said (2008) argued that “low-skilled contact staff may not be able to cope with emotional situations when the entire image of the service firm is at stake. Because emotions are intangible, difficult to control and instantaneous, they have both short-term and long-term effects on customer perceptions.” If local employees are strategically positioned as part of the cultural landscape or representatives of that heritage that tourists are drawn to experience, these employees becomes more valuable assets to the company, and thus would be more likely to receive higher pay and brighter career development trajectory. Host communities need to be involved more than being treated as simply the source of low cost labor, but to include them as the ambassadors to their heritage culture. Staff turnover in tourism companies has been cited as a significant source of disruption to the continuity of operations, and of degraded service quality (Walmsley, 2004). Retaining and developing employees for longer periods of time will allow the tourism operator to craft and present a consistent service experience, differentiating their brand as advocates for sustainable and unique cultural value.

It is not unusual for many external tourism companies to take the “us” vs. “them” mentality when working with host communities. The fifth challenge is the common tendency for these operators to treat the host community as a homogenous bloc (Salazar, 2012). In reality, organic
“consensus” within any community is rare (Salazar, 2012). When trying to compromise conflicting interests among stakeholder groups or to decide who takes control over the changing economic landscape and living conditions, community differences can become further widened. It is thus important to recognize that the host community is diverse. Institutional mechanisms must be developed to include all stakeholder groups in tourism planning and to engage them in continuous communication, rather than depend on traditional central/top-down planning structure. Such level of involvement can facilitate horse-trading and consensus-building during conflicts, and ultimately achieve sustainable operations.

Without community involvement, it is also much too easy for commercial and government stakeholders to obscure the long-term business interests of the tourism operator. As noted by Roberts and Tribe, “given the various interests among and between the stakeholders, and their perceived need to ‘stake out territory’ and ‘protect certain interests’, sustainability indicator processes and selection can become driven by those with the highest stakes and by those with the most power.” Credible sustainability standards from the local community are essential to provide support for tourism operator interests in negotiations with financially and politically powerful stakeholders: “In the course of negotiations, arguments will be more meaningful and solutions, more acceptable, if they do not appear to be arbitrary.” (Alfredson & Cungu, 2008) Community members are the source of the heritage product being offered to customers; to neglect them as a resource when forming business operations strategy is unsustainable. The tourism operator has the responsibility and the opportunity to build up local community members, as a source of credible standards when determining the long-term viability of its business model.

Based on the arguments above, we thus formulated the first proposition below:

**Proposition 1** Higher level of host community involvement improves the level of sustainability in heritage tourism operations.

**Community Empowerment**

After discussing the critical role community involvement plays in sustainable heritage tourism operations, the next natural question to address is how we can actively involve host communities.

Community empowerment is a term describing a participative and developmental approach to local decision making, “through which marginalized or oppressed community members and groups acquire valued resources and basic rights, and achieve greater control over their lives and environment” (Maton, 2008). It has been gaining traction among the sociology and public management researchers since 1997 when the UK’s labor government favored community empowerment as a key policy (Adamson & Bromiley, 2013). It needs to be noted that community empowerment is a distinctive concept from community involvement and community engagement, since community members can involve/engage very actively in an initiative, but still fail to exercise control over the process and consequently influence the results. Community empowerment, on the other hand, is more action driven, about “changing power structures to remove the barriers that prevent people from participation” (CDX, 2013), and is thus believed to bring about community involvement.

Community empowerment generally involves a twin approach to empower: 1) “to give confidence, skills, and power to communities in order to shape and influence what public bodies do for or with them”; and 2) establish a “process whereby public bodies reach out to
communities to create empowerment opportunities” (CLG, 2007, p 12). Community empowerment can occur in different aspects (Speer and Hughey 1995, Sofield 2003, Manton 2008), including psychological (e.g., development of pride, self-esteem, the feeling of freedom of choice), economic (e.g., financial resources, control of subsistence resources), social (e.g., women rights, education, improvement of local organizations, increased social capital), and political (e.g., participation in decisions, development of leadership, increased local governance over natural resources). Community Development Exchange, a national organization based in UK to promote citizen involvement defines community empowerment in five dimensions (CDX, 2013):

1) Confident: to make information understandable and accessible to community members, in order for them to gain proper skills, knowledge and confidence to participate in the discussions about what planning, budgeting, and operating the initiatives actually entail. Once community members establish a belief that they can make a difference, they are more likely to get involved.

2) Inclusive: to recognize differences, promote equality of opportunity and good relationships between all stakeholder groups within a community. Identify and encourage all community members to participate in the conversation. When people can gain a cross-section of views, experience and expertise, through learning more about each other, then they are more likely to work well together.

3) Organized: to develop an organizational structure that is open, democratic and accountable so that community members can formulate commonly accepted processes for discussion and decision making. Once people understand how the decisions will be made, what the results are going to look like, and what it will take to move through the process, they are more likely to establish collective responsibility for the initiative.

4) Cooperative: to instill a strategy that identifies commonalities across stakeholder groups and builds positive relationship so that people can establish partnerships, and work to each other’s strengths.

5) Influential: to take a bottom up approach, encourage and equip community members to take part and influence decisions and activities, so that they see the benefits of their involvement in the change that takes place and feel collectively responsible for the initiative.

In their research on collaboration and cooperation, Jamal and Getz (1995) identified power imbalance as a significant barrier to successful community involvement. In tourism operations, few communities can naturally have equal access to the political and economic resources necessary for meaningful involvement, which is particularly challenging for community groups at underdeveloped destinations, such as indigenous minorities who are often socially disadvantaged (Snyder and Sullivan, 2011). It is thus critical to make efforts toward empowering host communities. Power not only gives those communities members, who are often marginalized or oppressed, the ability to control valuable resources and to secure returns from having tourism in their community (Brennan and Allen, 2001), but more importantly, allows them greater political self-determination and willingness to be involved in sustainable tourism operations.

Thus, building on Proposition 1, it is not enough to periodically ask the local community for their input; they must be given the tools, knowledge, and time necessary to exert meaningful influence. As cited by Park and Yoon (2011), “Educating stakeholder groups should be a top priority because one of the major failures in implementing indicators at the local level has been a lack of awareness and participation among stakeholders.” One essential training topic for both tourism operators and local community members and employees would be integrative
Negotiation. Integrative negotiation is defined as a style of negotiation that reconciles divergent interests into shared solutions, rather than generating winning and losing interests (Zerres, et al., 2013). It has been demonstrated that training can be effective in improving integrative negotiation skills (Zerres et al, 2013). Empowered with these skills, local community members can more effectively gather and share key criteria for the preservation of their personal and cultural interests.

Based on the arguments above, we thus formulated the second proposition below:

**Proposition 2**  
Empowering the host community improves the community’s level of involvement in sustainable heritage tourism operations.

LIMITATIONS

It should be noted that, in addition to the service and strategy benefits it brings, host community empowerment may also introduce operational complexity. Street and Meister (2004) state that small businesses often thrive on a flat, informal organizational structure, and that the introduction of centralized, complex, and formal processes can undermine the benefits of operational flexibility. In order to enforce community involvement in strategy decisions, a tourism operator must have structures in place to guarantee fairness and transparency in decision making. Furthermore, the operator must be able to convey to the host community its core business vision, mission, and competencies, to help shape truly viable solutions. Further research is needed to determine the operational systems, roles, and skills needed to support a continuous, authentic, accountable relationship with the host community.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the significant role tourism companies can play in facilitating host communities to achieve sustainability. Due to the perishable, fragile, and non-replaceable nature of cultural heritage, the stakes could not be higher for both tourism companies and host communities. As an external party which has tremendous resources and power to reshape the future of the heritage destination, tourism companies should capitalize their advantageous position by taking the lead to carefully design the strategy and process of involving host community members. The two propositions above can serve as a starting point to motivate and guide them toward community empowerment. Future studies can follow this research stream by empirically testing the proposed research model and exploring the specific practices within the five dimension framework for empowering host community members.

MAJOR REFERENCES


