LOCAL INHABITANTS’ FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE BY MEANS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF ECOTOURISM

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Abstract

During the last years of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, the size of world ecotourism showed a positive tendency. The figures display that in the 1990s ecotourism has grown by 20%-34% per year (Mastny 2001:37). Today ecotourism has reached the global level and is growing at 10%-12% per annum in the international market (Mintel Report, 2004). When the ecological situation took a turn for the worse, people began to appreciate their health and the "health" of nature. Polluted cities and tourist centers do not attract travelers, which makes a tourist product unutilized here. This is why society changed its opinion and the nature of tourism also changing. Experience shows that ecotourism is a kind of activity which does not need great investment and highly developed infrastructure. The major resource for this type of tourism is a unique nature, peculiar to a certain region. The increasing growth in demand for ecotourism, however, requires a corresponding re-arrangement of service. Consequently, ecotourism facilitates the creation of new workplaces, the improvement of inhabitants’ living standards, and can even lead a country to relative prosperity. Such advantages are certainly in local government’s interest, especially in developing countries, which do not have a great number of sources of income, because of economic, political, social, and other problems. This report will be dedicated to the determination of means which ecotourism can bring to the local economic situation, through correct government policy. The consequences of the measures which should be taken, and the problems the government and the population can face, will also be discussed

**Motivation: culture or profit?**

To reach a stable financial situation through the development of ecotourism, the government itself should take measures to promote an increase in interest to this problem among the different parts of society.

Nowadays not every state has many resources which can provide sufficient income to the national economy, especially in the so-called ‘countries of the south’, which are still developing. South America and Africa and other poor areas have unique nature ecotourism, which can provide a real chance to improve the financial situation of these regions.

In order to reach a relatively stable financial situation, not only economic measures should be taken. Only a serious complex of social, political, and economic reforms can lead to level of development, at which ecotourism can be a profitable sphere of the economy.

First of all, to make the region attractive to ecotourists, certain changes in the mindsets of inhabitants should occur. The main one is the preservation of the native nature by the inhabitants themselves. Through the right methods of social reforms, including information, prevention (social advertisement, propaganda, education) and punishment (fines, etc.) the government can stimulate and motivate people to reach a common aim. “The most important social factor is to make sure that the local populations have a crucial level of awareness of the prospective benefits and costs of tourism to contribute effectively in the planning process” (Diamantis, 2004).

Not only the local population should follow ecological ethics, however, “These unique environments represent different uses to different people. Locals use their environment delicately to maintain a balance and future for their culture. Foreigners see a unique environment as an untapped source waiting to be developed or harvested for its resources…. By simply expecting to live at the same standards as they do in their home country, tourists use the resources on the local island much more frivolously. These negative consequences to the environment can be eliminated through proper education of both native and foreign people with respect to tourism” (Belanger, 2006). This means that the government should make information accessible to tourists,
including information concerning the preservation of nature and the consequences of violation of the rules.

It is not enough to influence men’s consciences and minds by moral methods only. There are other measures that should be taken. If the country has never been involved in the sphere of service and tourism, it is obvious that it needs a new professional community. It is especially important for developing countries, which have very high unemployment. A new chain of consequences now follows: new workplaces create more possibilities for local inhabitants to earn money. Being one of the leading spheres of an economy, tourism demands more and more educated employees, which means that education in the region will become more available and there is a real possibility that the level of education will be raised. As a result, people are motivated financially and have a natural interest in earning their living and working hard, which also makes the sphere of ecotourism attractive to travelers and prosperous for the national economy. In 1996, the Aboriginal Tourism Team Canada issued their goal to “represent Aboriginal people as world leaders in tourism in harmony with our culture” (Hashimoto, Telfer, 2004). For the most part they have been successful. They have a high reverence for the environment, and this translates directly to their treatment of tourism. The Aboriginals work themselves to control the tourism industry, and not through a foreign party. This allows them to have a full share of the revenue generated, and they can divide the profits equally (Belanger, 2006).

Where to get support

“The level of profitability will depend to some extent on how well the ecotourism business venture is managed and on the nature of the development” (Tisdell, 2003). One of the main aspects of the success of ecotourism is to call for investment, which can help to make this sphere attractive and prosperous. If the national economy cannot itself afford to finance this sector, it should consider allowing foreign investments. This will bring money to the developing country, build ecotourism infrastructure and encourage stability in the community (by creating new job opportunities).

In order to attract foreign business to the region, there should be full disclosure concerning the potential which the wild nature of the region has. Advertisement and participation in different professional exhibitions or workshops should show the uniqueness and possibility of
financial rewards if this resource is used correctly. Such marketing should reach the government’s objective: to take care of giving full information and illustrating the potential of recourse, of which the country is proud.

Undoubtedly, such measures should be taken in order to get certain grants or financing from organizations, supporting the development of ecotourism and warning about the conservation of world wild nature. UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization), UNEP (United Nations Environment Programs), UNESCO, TIES (The International Ecotourism Society) and many other local and world organizations could be approached for help.

The local community and foreign investors need to be motivated financially; they need to possess true and accurate figures showing the benefits.

The government’s aim is to support the potential projects with suitable policies, including a flexible system of taxes, and creating special economic free zones. These and other measures of economic and political reforms can help significantly in attracting foreign investment and promoting the prosperity of local ecotourism.

**The investment benefit**

Making the region a perspective site of ecotourism, invested money can change the lifestyle of local inhabitants and afterwards the country itself, in social, political and economic fields.

Backing from various organizations or direct sponsorship of exterior assets creates a new infrastructure in the region. Tourism infrastructure, including hotels, restaurants, transport networks and other service institutions, creates a high number of job opportunities. “This creates business growth and provides additional income for often economically unstable areas. Also, an outlet to new markets for local products is created, in that locals are able to sell their goods directly to the consumer without having to use an intermediary” (Belanger, 2006).

Ecotourism, implying the features of so-called ‘wild’ travelling, unlike other types of tourism, does not need a great modern infrastructure which can break the main rule of ecotourism, which is to keep a balance in nature. A busy infrastructure will not attract tourists
who are looking for untouched nature. Therefore this type of tourism does not require a vast amount of investment.

External investors, in the form of world-famous chains of hotels or restaurants, bring their standards of service, which the potential employees should follow, for the purpose of raising the level of service.

It must be admitted that a certain part of the income, which is gained by these companies, does not stay at the site of investment, but goes abroad, to the headquarters of the company. In the ideal situation, “a large part of the revenue gained will stay within the region” (Diamantis, 2004). This is possible only in developed countries in stable economic situation conditions, where local business can afford to finance corresponding projects. In developing countries, the first stage for them is accumulation of income, which afterwards will be used to bolster the economy, both by the government and local private enterprise. At this stage, investment will help to enrich the local community and add to the budget. “When the locals are the hotel owners, the restaurant workers, and the tour guides, it is only proper business that they get to keep the money that they make and not have to share it with foreign powers” (Belanger, 2006).

The investment balance

Ecotourism requires the conservation of the balance of nature, where tourism infrastructure will not harm the environment. Investments attracted and other ways of getting financial support need to be strictly regulated. If uncontrolled, powerful business enterprises will spread around the region with the aim of getting more income, but, at the same time, not obeying the rules and principles of ecosystem.

Consequently, the government’s forces have a double aim – to attract the investments and simultaneously to control their amount and scale, in order to protect the main source of ecotourism. Some of the measures should include creating certain zones under the government’s protection (national parks), and special laws concerning the environmental protection of the country and its special zones, which will also regulate business activity in the region.

Without such government planning, under the pressure of developing mass tourism, the site can lose its image as a centre of ecotourism with tourists, or can adapt the features of the
‘normal’ tourist destination, with too much advanced infrastructure. This destination will probably generate more income and therefore more financial independence in the region, but, will come into conflict with local community members, who care about their traditions, culture, and native nature ecology.

One of the best examples of a combination of inputs and preserving nature was shown in Ambergris Caye, Belize, where the local government managed to keep this balance. “The local government has implemented a plan for more sustainable growth of the industry to limit the continued expansion. Every hotel that is to be built can have a maximum of 60 beds, and the total growth per year is 120 beds. This limits the input of foreign developers because many do not see a 60-bed operation as being a worthwhile investment of time and money. Also, in order to maintain the important tradition in the region of having an unpaved center of town, the plan forces the construction of further paved roads along the edge of town” (Moreno, p. 217-244).

Financial independence

When the region achieves all the above-mentioned aspects required for developing ecotourism (motivated inhabitants, attracted investments, corresponding policy), finally follows a real possibility to speak about the economic benefits, which comes from the measures undertaken.

In developing countries there has always been a problem of unemployment, which has stopped the stable growth of living standards, economic expansion and financial well-being of the population itself. Having a chance to create a new infrastructure for this type of tourism will impact positively on the local community. New workplaces, and new jobs will be in demand, undoubtedly. Foreign corporations, with their standards, create a normal competition among potential employees searching for the best well-paid vacancies. Therefore one of the main consequences of developing ecotourism is the possibility for the inhabitants to earn their own living, and becoming financially independent.

Besides the unique and wild nature, the growth of the level of service will attract more tourists, searching for some degree of comfort and new ways of spending their free time in the region. The growing number of tourists results in a growing amount of income: “If the wildlife site is a state protected area, its income may come from the following sources: (a) entry fees,
camping fees, and other charges levied on visitors and (b) the allocation of government revenues, (c) sales of services and products at the site, (d) donations by visitors and (e) sales of concessions to others to provide products or services at the site, e.g. accommodation, food and tours” (Tisdell, 2003).

In spite of the fact that infrastructure needs inputs, ecotourism is not the kind of economic sphere which requires heavy investment, because in practice it does not require well-developed infrastructure. It just needs the careful protection of national parks and other special zones, essential means of transport and accommodation, which should not include modern luxury hotels with their various services, which distract from the natural, pristine surroundings.

Therefore, requiring a relatively small amount of input, but having the prospect of a flourishing profit, ecotourism can mean financial independence, not only to the local inhabitants, but, as a consequence, to the whole country, making it the main source of income for the national economy.

Only the government can bring all these changes to a country. Taking the right measures, including the motivation of the community, attracting investment, keeping the balance between the amounts of inputs and preserving nature through an appropriate policy and system of laws, can really help in supporting the economic situation of a developing country, or even lead to a relatively stable financial independence.

Conclusion

Ecotourism can be defined as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people”¹. Changes in consumers’ motivation should follow certain alterations in government’s directions concerning the organization of ecotourism and its infrastructure. Having a major resource - protected areas of wild and unique nature - will lead to the appearance of a certain number of ecotourists in the region. The government’s complex of measures, described in the report, in creating a corresponding atmosphere of service, including new inputs and workplaces, can provide both new tourists and

¹http://www.ecotourism.org/site/c.orLQKXPClMf/b.4835251/k.FF11/Our_Mission__The_International_Ecotourism_Society.htm
money. Conserving nature and the environment through a system of ecological laws and other strictly controlled rules, the local government promotes the welfare of its inhabitants and the financial independence of the country itself.

References


