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The Socio-cultural Impacts of Tourism

Introduction

When discussing the socio-cultural impacts of tourism there is a need to first understand the terms *society* and *culture*. The concept of society is studied, in particular, within the subject of *sociology*. Sociology is largely concerned with the study of society and focuses on people in groups and the interaction of those in groups, their attitudes and their behaviour. *Culture* is a similar concept to society and is about how people interact as observed through social interaction, social relations and material artefacts. According to Burns and Holden (1995), when discussing culture within the context of tourism, it consists of behavioural patterns, knowledge and values which have been acquired and transmitted through generations. Burns and Holden (1995:113) provide more detail when they indicate that “culture includes knowledge, belief, art, moral law, custom and any other capabilities and habits of people as members of society”

Key perspectives

The focus in this chapter is on the study of the impacts of tourism on people in groups. The specific groups are those who are residents of tourism areas (such people are usually referred to as *hosts*), but also the tourists themselves. Socio-cultural impacts are concerned, in addition, with impacts on the culture of the local residents, (or host population) and also with any effects on the culture of the visitors themselves. The study of socio-cultural impacts also involves ways in which culture can be used to promote tourism, and this frequently involves reference to how aspects of culture are packaged (or commodified) to ‘sell’ to tourists. The resulting effects this has on the culture itself are also topics investigated.

There are a significant number of cultural factors that can act as tourism attractions. Of particular importance, according to Ritchie and Zins, (1978) are:

- Handicrafts
- Traditions
- Gastronomy

- Art and music
- History of the area/including visual reminders
- Types of work engaged in by residents
- Architecture
- Language
- Religion (including visible manifestations)
- Education systems
- Dress
- Leisure activities.

The nature of the impacts

Before proceeding with a discussion of specific socio-cultural impacts, it is worth considering once again the influences on the impacts of tourism which were presented in Chapter 6. All the factors discussed there are important in relation to socio-cultural impacts, however, of particular importance are the following:

- Who is involved
- What activities are engaged in
- Where tourism is taking place.

The scale of tourism can also be an important factor in terms of socio-cultural impacts, and the length of time tourism has been an activity in a particular location may significantly affect the nature of this type of impact.

However, in addition, the nature of both the visitors and the host population can be very influential in relation to the nature and extent of these types of impacts. For example, the culture of visitors and hosts may be very similar, or very different. Visitors may come from, for example, a wealthy European country and the local population be poor residents of a Pacific island. These two groups may or may not speak the same language. They may, or may not, have the same religion, share the same beliefs, enjoy the same food or like the same music. Whether there are similarities or differences, the interaction of the two groups will be a major issue in affecting the types of impact. Nevertheless, as Burns and Holden (1995) argued, if there is a large contrast and major differences between the culture of the receiving society, or host population, and the origin culture of the tourists, then it is likely that socio-cultural impacts will be greatest. Page (2003) concurs with the point about impacts being particularly significant when cultural differences are great. Drawing on the work of Douglas and Douglas (1996), Page (2003) states that the interaction between the two groups is dependent on the following:

- The nature and extent of social, cultural and economic differences between tourists and hosts
- The ratio of visitors to residents
- The distribution and visibility of tourist developments
- The speed and intensity of development
- The extent of foreign and local employment