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Impacts of tourism

Introduction

A key aspect of sustainable tourism is limiting its negative impacts and maximising its positive impacts, with an good understanding of where those impacts occur within the tourism systems, how they occur and if possible what leverage points can be applied. An impact is considered to be the change in a given state over time, resulting from an external stimulus. It is important to distinguish internal and external stimuli: a change in state from internal drivers, e.g. the maturing of an ecosystem and the successional changes in species (e.g. from grasses to trees) as a result, would not be considered an impact, under that definition.

As a reminder the UNTWO's definition of sustainable tourism focuses largely on maintaining the status quo: "maintain ecological processes and conserve natural heritage and biodiversity; respect the authenticity, traditional values and cultural heritage of host communities and contribute to cross-cultural understanding; and, ensure viable businesses, and distribute economic benefits to all stakeholders equitably" (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005).

This definition can serve as a general guideline and most tourism activities that you can think of can be designed to work towards or against these. However, it is helpful to understand impacts in more detail to know what to look for and what to avoid or alternatively enhance. It is easiest to do this by examining economic, social and environmental impacts as separate categories from each other. The caveat here, is that the boundaries between categories are generally fuzzier in any given tourism context, and as covered in Chapter 2, they are all interlinked through various types of feedback mechanisms. As we become better at understanding tourism impacts, we will start to see relationships between social, environmental and economic impacts (c.f. the examples given in Chapter 2).

For example, increased tourism development might generate more waste, use more natural resources, and impact negatively on biodiversity, at the same time as generate more jobs and a higher standard of living. When these negative environmental impacts and positive economic impacts are weighed up against each other, what is the likely outcome on social, e.g. wellbeing, outcomes? Those are the types of questions that impacts studies of tourism seek to answer, and that sustainability initiatives will seek to address.

This chapter will therefore outline each different category of impact, highlighting both negative impacts and positive impacts, then move on to an example where one researcher has incorporated all these different impacts into a model, where the relationships between these can be assessed both in terms of their strength and their direction with a more realistic, holistic system. In addition, in taking a systems approach, it also becomes clear that it is difficult to separate the impacts of tourism from other activities and events that occur within destinations and tourism-generating regions. This chapter will open with this point so that a realistic understanding of impacts can be developed.

Key words and concepts

- Fuzzy boundaries
- Multiplier effect
- Leakage
- Linkage
- Cultural commodification
- Authenticity
- Cultural appropriation
- Front and backstage
- Emotional labour
- Irridex model
- Demonstration effect
- Culture shock
- Interpretation

5.1 Issues of with identifying tourism impacts

Because of the systems nature of tourism, feedback loops and delays, and its somewhat fuzzy boundaries, as well as the scale issues discussed in Chapter 3, our ability to understand tourism impacts and attribute impacts them to specific actions can be a challenge. Even more so, as the study of impacts only has a 40 year history or so (the equivalent of the professional lifetime of one researcher), and is even more recent in tourism research. Furthermore, tourism impact research tends to focus on destinations, and at very localised levels, e.g. an attraction, and often in very similar environments, e.g. recreation ecology as a sub-discipline devoted entirely to the scientific study of environmental impacts arising from recreational activities in protected natural areas, has been developing since the 1960s.

Another issue of understanding tourism impacts is that they cannot easily be distinguished from impacts of other activities (this is what is meant by fuzzy boundaries). With the exception of tourism development undertaken as part of a growth strategy, tourism itself is often one element of a suite of development initiatives. This means that infrastructures such as roads and airports may be constructed for the purpose of transporting cargo as well as facilitating tourism. As another example, are changes in gender roles or fashion tastes related to a so-called demonstration effect of outsiders visiting a community and their behaviours and possessions leaving a marked effect on local culture, or can these