

## **TOURISM AND SOCIAL CHANGE. A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS IN HUATULCO, MEXICO**

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As a social and cultural activity, tourism is a potential source of change. Identifying the benefits and costs as perceived by tourism receiving communities is important for tourism planning and management, particularly for those communities whose economic reliance on tourism is significant. In this vein, this paper presents the results of a research project that aimed to identify local residents' perspectives of the social changes associated with tourism in the Bays of Huatulco – a State Planned Tourism Destination (SPTD) in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Research has revealed that tourism may lead to sociocultural, environmental and economic transformations in host communities (Wall and Mathieson, 2006). Tourism is a factor of change, but the direction of this change is uncertain (Ryan, 2003). This presents unique challenges for tourism management within development initiatives that focus on local and regional growth. Thus, if sustainable tourism development is intended, the perceptions of receiving communities must be considered in the decision making processes, both for integral planning and for the management of tourism (Ap, 1992).

Literatures within the social sciences have concluded that the social negative impacts of tourism may be reflected in increasing crime, illegal prostitution, the use and traffic of drugs, social conflict, and crowding (e.g, Gu and Wong, 2006, Spanou, 2007). However, positive sociocultural impacts of tourism may be present, for example, when community services, leisure recreation, and support for cultural activities are improved (Brunt and Courtney, 1999).

Huatulco is one of the most recent tourism destinations on the Pacific coast of Mexico, widely visited by both domestic and international tourists. Since 1984, the project originally aimed to generate permanent and well paid jobs, encourage investment, and support the agricultural, industrial, and construction sectors (Orozco, 1992).

Although the project was founded on the idea to support regional economic and social development (Orozco, 1992), data have revealed that tourism development and associated population growth and rapid urbanisation in the destination have led to a number of social and environmental problems (Brenner, 2005, Gullette, 2007). According to Brenner (2005), the destination cannot be regarded as a successful case. This is not only because of the social effects in the destination, but also because of the limited considerations given toward local views in the development of planning and management policies within the SPTD (Long, 1990).

The research undertaken in 2009 was exploratory in nature and adopted a qualitative technique. Semi-structured interviews were used. A total of 31 interviews with local people were undertaken in November. The sample size was determined by theoretical saturation criteria (Bryman, 2008). The interview guidelines aimed to identify the changes—in terms of benefits and costs—at both the individual and community levels as perceived by respondents. The instrument gathered data on sociodemographics such as age, job, residency length, and birthplace. Furthermore, interview questions explored how tourism positively and/or negatively affected the life of the informant and that of the whole community. Questions regarding the level of community participation in tourism decision making was central to data collection.

In the case of Huatulco, it was found that tourism has effected local jobs. Tourism has significantly substituted fishing and agriculture in the locality. Tourism has diversified jobs for locals, mainly those related to trade. Also, it was found that the economic benefit of tourism did not substantially go beyond those who worked directly in the tourism sector and that such benefits became more conspicuous in high seasons. Furthermore, the increase of infrastructure and services for the community was observed as a positive effect. For some residents, these positive outcomes were observed in the construction of houses for local people. However, according to previous studies, this condition does not seem applicable to everyone. The availability of housing, and particularly the availability of land for local residents was significantly reduced due to expanding tourism infrastructure and space reserved for future tourism expansion as determined by government officials (Gullette, 2007). And although infrastructure and public services increased in the locality, these positive effects were tempered by the escalating costs of goods and services, as well as increased litter that residents associated with tourism.

According to some informants, small local enterprises were not supported in the way large companies were. For some respondents, the local community was not taken into account, neither by companies nor by government institutions; local people were only informed of the decisions already made in the destination.

In general terms, the study of perceptions by local people in Huatulco toward the consequences of tourism suggests an ambivalent classification of tourism social impacts.