COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM: THE CASE OF THE BUTRINT NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH ALBANIA

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Abstract

The concept of Community Based Tourism (CBT) has been a further development within the sustainable tourism approach. Drawing from the theories and practice of participatory development, it specifically focuses on the impact tourism may have on local communities with the aim of maximizing benefits in terms of jobs, wealth, and support for local culture and industry, and protection of the built and natural environment. Thus the challenge is to put local communities at the center of tourism initiatives and supports in an effort to create win-win solutions concerning the management of tourism destinations. CBT is planned with the goal of preserving local natural and cultural assets, so that both residents and visitors may benefit from the tourism experience.

Dealing with culture and sustainable development should be done within the objective of promoting sustainable development in the region and conserve the Butrint National Park (BNP), by engaging surrounding communities in the development of community-based tourism products and services. The underlying assumption of intervention is that CBT assists in the conservation of BNP’s cultural and natural values by demonstrating the Park’s potential to the local communities in order to generate sustainable economic activities.

Keywords

- Sustainable;
- Ecotourism;
- Community Based Tourism;
- BNP.

Rezumat

Conceptul de turism bazat pe comunitate (CBT) reprezintă o nouă dezvoltare în abordarea turismului durabil. Pornind de la teoriile și practica dezvoltării participative, el se referă în mod specific la impactul pe care turismul îl poate avea asupra comunităților locale, cu scopul de a mări beneficiile în ceea ce privește locurile de muncă, bunăstarea, sprijinul pentru cultura și industria locală, și protecția mediului înconjurător construit și natural. Astfel provocarea este să păstreze comunitatea locală în centru inițiativele turistice și să sprijine efortul de a avea soluții beneficabile de ambele părți în ceea ce privește managementul destinațiilor turistice.

CBT are ca scop păstrarea valorilor locale naturale și culturale astfel încât, atât localnicii cât și vizitatorii să aibă beneficii din experiența turistică. O dezvoltare durabilă culturală ar trebui să fie luată în considerare ca obiectiv al promovării dezvoltării durabile în regiune și conservare a Parcului Național Butrint prin angajarea comunităților în dezvoltarea produselor și serviciilor turismului bazat pe comunitate. Presupunem că acest tip de intervenție a CBT conduce la conservarea valorilor culturale și naturale ale Parcului Național Butrint demonstrând autorităților locale potențialul parcului cu scopul de a genera activități economice durabile.

Cuvinte cheie

- Durabil,
Ecotourism;
Turismul Bazat pe Comunitate;

1. Introduction

Today, travel and tourism are considered the world’s largest industries. By 2010, they are expected to have generated over 328 million jobs across the globe. The gross economic benefits related to these industries are evident and measurable both in terms of revenue and job creation. Social factors and technology are the two main factors that account for the boost in the travel and tourism industries. Growing wealth, cheaper and more efficient transportation, the maturation of the hotel business (e.g., the upgrading and standardization of services), and information technology are some determinants of the increase in demand for tourism.

The traditional forms of mass tourism, which often result in the disruption of local economies, seasonal unemployment, degradation of the natural and decay of the cultural environment, are inherently unsustainable. Though the Travel and Tourism industries have had a particular interest in protecting both the natural and cultural resources, there have been several cases where a negative impact on the environment and people has been found. According to the World Travel and Tourism Organization and the International Hotel and Restaurant Association (1999) some of the most important factors contributing to the impact of tourism are:

- a lack of awareness, on the part of those making decisions about tourism development, of the social, economic and environmental balance to be pursued in achieving sustainable development;
- a lack of commitment by tourism operators and travellers to contribute to the maintenance of the local environment and culture of the host destination;
- PNB.

- a weak institutional framework with inadequate controls unfairly traded tourism, whereby local communities like BNP are unable to share benefits;
- large flows of visitors in remote or sensitive locations can place considerable strains on local resources. Travellers’ expectations of available goods and services can lead to distorted supply of these items or services if imported from outside or local supply chains;
- tourism can change a destination’s cultural make-up and, if poorly developed, can increase crime, prostitution and other social problems.” (World Travel and Tourism Organization and International Hotel and Restaurant Association, 1999).

However, tourism can also contribute to economically, ecologically and socially sustainable development because it:

- has less impact on nature and the environment than most other industries;
- is based on enjoyment and appreciation of local culture, built heritage, and natural environment, as such that the industry has a direct and powerful motivation to protect these assets;
- can play a positive part in increasing consumer commitment to sustainable development principles through its unparalleled consumer distribution channels;
- provides an economic incentive to conserve natural environments and habitats which might otherwise be allocated to more environmentally damaging land uses, thereby, helping to maintain bio-diversity.

In addition new patterns of tourists and tourism have arisen. The logic of sustainability imposes several limits to all aspects of massive tourism. Interpreted very broadly, more cautious and
environment-friendly, forms of tourism have been suggested as a way out of such problems. A broad definition of alternative tourism would refer to forms of tourism consistent with natural, social and community values thus allowing both hosts and guests to enjoy positive and worthwhile interaction and shared experiences. As such, according to De Kadt (1990), the key issues that must be dealt with, are: a) environmental, b) the scale of development, c) the question of «who benefits», d) cultural sustainability.

2. The concept of community based tourism

The concept of Community Based Tourism (CBT) has been a further development within the sustainable tourism approach. Drawing from the theories and practice of participatory development it specifically focuses on the impact tourism may have on local communities with the aim of maximizing benefits in terms of jobs, wealth, and support for local culture and industry, and protection of the built and natural environment. The challenge thus is to put local communities at the heart of tourism initiatives in an effort to create win-win solutions concerning the management of tourism destinations.

CBT is planned with the goal of preserving local natural and cultural assets, so that both residents and visitors may benefit from the tourism experience. CBT focuses on the long term well being of the community, and includes those who are affected by the project as partners in the development process, in markets conducive to sustainable development.

Communities often regard environmentally protected land or historical sites as limitations. The conflict arises from the fact that such areas must be conserved thus resulting in the application of limitative laws/measures, which at the first glance may seem as detrimental for the surrounding populations. CBT seems to solve this conflict by making sure that while the cultural heritage and environmental blessings of these areas are protected, local inhabitants profit from them.

CBT initiatives are designed and operated to provide economic benefits (what BNP needs) to the community, rather than having large corporations reap the benefits through all-inclusive resorts. Differently from these latter, CBT creates incentive for tourists to spend both time and money in the community rather than in resort and large hotels.

The most important feature of CBT is its social sustainability, (what BNP needs). Activities are developed and operated mostly by local community members, with their full consent and support. Another very important feature of CBT is its respect for local culture, and traditions, as well as its concern for natural heritage, especially since the environment tends to be one of the primary attractions.

3. The case of Butrint National Park, Albania

The Butrint National Park (BNP), Albania’s best preserved natural park and archaeological site has experienced a very interesting application of the CBT model and is a good illustrator of how capacity building focused on participatory approaches can become a key ingredient to its success. Situated at the south of Albania, this protected area covers 29 km². Besides the natural and diverse landscape, it also includes ruins which date from the late Bronze Age (12th century BC), through the Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Venetian and Turkish periods, up to the 18th -19th centuries AD. Archaeologists have always been drawn to this area, and the park itself has been open to visitors
since the 1970’s. Only in 1992 was it considered a World Heritage Site, later to be expanded in 1999. Finally, in March 2000, the Albanian government proclaimed it a National Park.

Extraordinarily the landscape of the Park is intact. This area is home to 33 animal species of Global Conservation Concern, 14 of which are globally endangered species. Nearly 70% of the country’s amphibian and reptile species, and the largest number of bird species ever recorded on an Albanian site, as well as a great diversity of mammals, endemic and subendemic plants of National Conservation Concern, are found in this area. The land between the Cuka Channel and the Greek border, which includes the Butrint National Park and the Stilo Peninsula, has been designated a Wetland of International Importance under the Ramsar Convention, since 2003. With more than 45,000 visitors each year, the Butrint National Park has been recognized to have great potential to become a catalyst for sustainable tourism and new income generation in the southern part of the country.

Several projects are dealing with culture and sustainable development with the objective of promoting sustainable development in the region and conserve the Butrint National Park, by engaging surrounding communities in the development of community-based tourism products and services. The underlying assumption of intervention was that CBT assists in the conservation of BNP’s cultural and natural values by demonstrating the Park’s potential to the local communities in order to generate sustainable economic activities.

The intervention second my opinion must be:

• To develop community-based tourism and related products (e.g., crafts, specialty agricultural products with Butrint branding) in and around the Park in a way that (i) minimizes the impact on natural and cultural resources with the aim of maximizing benefits for local communities; (ii) unifies the local communities and interest groups behind the conservation of the Park; (iii) provides information and educational experiences that highlight the Park’s values.

• To build the capacity of Park staff to: (i) conduct community outreach and generate goodwill within communities through multiple avenues and programs; (ii) assist communities in developing community based tourism and related products that support the goals and values of the Park; (iii) undertake conflict resolution when necessary.

• To build the capacity of local communities to develop, manage and market their community based tourism businesses. This included: (i) training and technical assistance to the Park Management and to community members; (ii) support to local communities in accessing funding, micro-credit and other forms of support from public and private entities, both nationally and internationally.

CBT in BNP in Albania have to adopt a participatory approach. This entails the inclusion of different dimensions such as:

a) animation: the process of assisting people to develop their own capacities, to examine and explain issues they can do to bring about change;

b) structuring: the development of solidarity and of some form of structure among rural people;

c) facilitation: assisting people to undertake specific actions designed to strengthen their participation such as acquiring particular technical skills, gaining access to available resources or translating their ideas into feasible projects;
d) intermediary: serving as a go-between and helping the establishment of contacts with existing services or actors;
e) withdrawal: encouraging local people (possibly through the development of local agents) to undertake and manage the projects in which they are involved.

4. Community - based tourism activities

Communication played an important role in the project. Various awareness raising activities are carried out in view of engaging local villagers, students, local authorities, local press and radio in CBT activities. These activities raised inhabitants’ interest and knowledge about the Park, sustainable tourism and the sustainable utilization of the environment. It also will provide necessary information to the local population about the BNP and the opportunities it could provide, as well as attempted to change the negative perception of many villagers towards CBT.

Whereas the above activities helped create of an enabling environment for community based tourism, technical assistance provided on CBT was definitively the backbone of the intervention. Consequently, the objective will be on:

(i) identifying products usually crafted by women and techniques used e.g., hand-sewing, embroiding, knitting needles, crochet;
(ii) showing high-quality products and models from neighboring countries;
(iii) discussing issues relating to quality, materials and prices;
(iv) identifying characteristics of products which will attract different kinds of tourists e.g., small and practical objects, easy to travel with, cheap, good quality, and strong links to the Albanian tradition and Butrint image which could be sold as “souvenirs of the Butrint National Park”;
(v) discussing the need to link the product and the BNP, i.e. by using the Butrint Byzantine mosaics figures (flowers and birds) as decorations for the handcraft products;
(vi) examining the need for raw materials;
(vii) establishing of working groups as the best way to organize the work.

Finally, it is necessary a study on local products, especially local agricultural products. The analysis showed that such products can not be traded due to conservation needs and compliance to health standards. Therefore, only the sale of honey, spices and medicinal herbs, which can be easily conserved, is encouraged. Or for example, the other CBT activity identified are to direct assistance to local fishermen in order to establish a boat tour service within the BNP.

The promotion of a tourism service must consist on:

a) a brochure in both Albanian and English to be distributed to tourists at the entrance of the Butrint archaeological site, in the village of Ksamili and in the town of Saranda, in particular in restaurants and bars, to taxi drivers and to local tour operators;
b) leaflets distributed to tourists at the entrance of the Butrint Park, by the ranger in charge of selling park tickets;
c) organizing a boat tour for 8 journalists form Saranda, Delvina and Gjirocaster and 2 tourist agents from Saranda. The service became less reliable due to the poor motivation of fishermen and the long timetable foreseen; fishermen proved unwilling to be present at the departure point during all the foreseen work hours.

Another finding are Bed and Breakfast (B&B) in the villages around the Park. After having successfully tested the boat tour and the handcraft activity,
thereby gaining credibility, it is necessary to explore other CBT activities and services to include the most ambitious goal of prolonging the average tourist visiting time and increase the potential for revenues generation in the region. In order to support the B&B and create other attractions and income-generating opportunities for the broader community, a number of ecotourism activities such as trekking, bird watching, party with traditional music and dances, dinners in families and traditional food must be identified and tested with the first groups of visitors. The B&B offer and pilot experiences were broadly communicated with the Tourism Office of Saranda, the local tourism agencies, the local population (via the local mass media) as well as with interested parties internationally, targeting mostly through specialized travel groups (via email).

5. Main challenges and lessons learned

One of the biggest challenges has been the redefinition of the Park’s role and building of a new image as an opportunity. The Park was mostly perceived as a limitation to the local population and little effort is put into adequately informing people about the rational and the potential benefits arising from its protection. The Park suffers the absence of a comprehensive communication strategy and a specific attention to local tourism development. Therefore it is important to put a significant amount of energy and often worked as a mediator towards the reversing of this image. Moreover, specific problems must be encountered in the implementation of specific CBT activities. With regards to the handicraft activities, the main problems is the low level of participation of local women due to their engagement in production for middlemen for sale in Greece, and the perception among local women, at the offset of the project, that handicraft is a hobby rather than an opportunity for income generation. The main problem encountered with the B&B activity is the lack of experience of the hosting families. Some could not differentiate between hospitality to relatives and tourism (e.g., problems of privacy).

At the same time, a number of lessons must be learned. In particular, the focus on communication and sensitization activities must prove to be a key to the project success. Accompanying stakeholders in every step of the technical assistance with proper communication activities is a critical ingredient in showing people the critical linkages between tourism, conservation and poverty reduction. I consider that these linkages are critical to generate a common understanding about the whole activity, prevent conflict and pave the ground for sustainable CBT. A lot of attention must be concentrated into marketing, especially at the offset of such activities. Indeed, the mix of communications and technical assistance has to succeed in changing the attitude and perception of local stakeholders towards the Park, which is now seen by many an opportunity and not only a limitation. In fact, most villagers now see the Park and its related tourism as a key potential for increasing their well-being.

In the future the qualitative results will refer to:
- the demonstration of the potential of CBT initiatives to the local community; the interest shown by and involvement of the poorest people;
- the increase of the tourism offer in the Park’s area especially through the preparation, testing and positive evaluation of the eco-tourism package;
- the creation of new economic activities and income sources and the non-negligible earnings of the people involved in such initiatives;
• the attraction of supplementary funds to support the CBT;
• the creation of a positive attitude towards local development and the engagement in new economic opportunities that emerged in the area;
• the strengthened link between the people and the territory, the increase in self-esteem and pride of the local people, along with awareness raising on issues like environmental protection and waste management; the consideration of the Park as an opportunity and not only as a limitation by the local community.

The CBT approach indeed strengthened the link between the local communities and the territory, generates cultural pride and makes people more attentive to its potentials and more sensitive to its protection. Moreover, the experience gained through the development of small-scale sustainable-tourism related businesses can increase community capacity, energy and resources in addressing other local problems with a view to sustainable development. Finally, as a long term perspective, the economic earnings generated by the small businesses associated with community based tourism are more likely to remain in local communities than those generated by large scale/capital intensive tourism.

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