Rural Residents’ Perceptions Toward Tourism Development: a Study from Iran

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the identification and explanation of rural residents’ perceptions toward the impacts of tourism development and their grouping with respect to these attitudes. Data from 262 households are used in the empirical analysis. Because of emerging stages of tourism development in the study area, most residents expressed a quite strong support for tourism development, although some social and environmental concern was expressed. The results revealed that respondents most value economic objectives, but the community was not homogeneous in its views. Education, gender, age, income, employment and a high degree of community attachment were found to be the major factors affecting the attitudes of residents. Findings of this study indicate that local people value the tourism in ways consistent with the social exchange theory. Copyright © 2012 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Received 05 July 2011; Revised 19 June 2012; Accepted 20 June 2012

KEY WORDS residents’ perceptions; rural tourism; tourism attitudes; social exchange theory; Golestan province

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the largest and fastest growing industries today with the potential to support local communities in developing economic diversity (Long et al., 1990; Allen et al., 1993; McGhee and Andreck, 2004). However, tourism has the potential to create both positive and negative impacts. To address tourism’sappropriateness, it is necessary to determine the profile of residents’ perception.

Local communities traditionally may perceive tourism in a positive manner because of its potential for job creation, investment attraction, income generation, improved welfare and enhanced rural infrastructure and services, as has been found in many host area (Saveriades, 2000; Mitchell and Reid, 2001; Andriotis, 2002). Otherwise, the people of host communities may perceive tourism in a negative manner because of the socio-cultural and environmental costs, as has also been found in many host areas (Liu et al., 1987; Perdue et al., 1990; Chen, 2000). More likely, people will be aware of the positive and negative implications of tourism and will depict their judgment based on the relative weightings they consider to the benefits and the costs. Some scholars (Lankford and Howard, 1994; Allen et al., 1988; Ritchie, 1988) have suggested that this balance of residents’ perceptions of the costs and benefits of tourism is a major factor in visitor satisfaction and is, therefore, vital for the success of the tourism industry. Thus, awareness of residents’ perceptions of tourism development and its impacts can help planners and policy-makers to identify real concerns and issues for appropriate policies and action to take place, optimizing the benefits and minimizing the problems.

Recently, many researchers argue that integrating local people is the most effective means of tourism development. They suggest that effective tourism planning requires resident involvement to mitigate the negative impacts and to clarify the benefits associated with the tourism industry (Sewell and Coppock, 1977; Rohe and Gates, 1985; Wates, 2000; Chambers, 2002). Consequently, several studies have been conducted to investigate residents’ perceptions toward tourism development worldwide (Liu and Var, 1986; Long et al., 1990; Perdue et al., 1990; Ap, 1992; Getz, 1994; Lankford, 1994; Lankford and Howard, 1994; McCool and Martin, 1994; Akis et al., 1996; Hernandez et al., 1996; Juvorski et al., 1997; Chen, 2000; Gursoy et al., 2002; McGhee and Andreck, 2004; Andreck et al., 2005). A common finding following from these studies is that involving host community opinions and beliefs is inevitable part of any effort toward sustainable tourism development.

The province of Golestan in east coast of Caspian Sea is a natural-based tourism destination where the diverse forest, rural landscape, natural protected area, local handicrafts and living cultural traditions attract large numbers of tourists (Jamali, 2001). As a result, tourism is one of the main economic activity of the province. Recently, tourism in rural area of province of Golestan, is at an emergent level of development. This paper targeted in the village of Zyarat as main destination of rural tourists in the province of Golestan. Zyarat, due to its really gorgeous natural attraction always is host of many tourists all year round (HFIR, 2010).

However, in spite of the above importance of tourism to the study area, little is known about the local community’s perceptions toward tourism development.

Moreover, no research has been conducted to investigate the local residents’ feelings or perceptions toward tourists and the impact of tourism as a whole. In addition, rural residents in study area have not been considered in the tourism development process, and the most of rural inhabitants believe that they are not involved in the decision making that affects their lives (HFIR, 2010). Because rural livelihood in study area depends on quality and quantity of tourists, understanding the perceptions regarding aspects of tourism and how they vary may be critical to managing tourism activity and sustaining rural livelihood.

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