



عظیمی

علوم محیطی سال چهارم، شماره سوم، بهار ۱۳۸۶
ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES Vol.4, No.3, Spring 2007

9-20

Broadening the Environment: a Social Impacts Study of Tourism in Esfahan

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Abstract

The cultural heritage is accepted as forming an element in the environment and, as such, it is important to evaluate the effects of various activities, including tourism, on it. The purpose of this paper is to examine and identify the general trend of attitudes among residents of an historic city and World Heritage Site towards tourism development. A fundamental assumption underling this paper is that "environmental" impacts should be regarded not only as those affecting ecosystem function, for example, or even the aesthetic values of a land-or city- scape but also the social fabric of the locality. As such, this paper provides the first social impact research on such an historic city in Iran by measuring the host community's attitudes towards tourism development. The primary goal here is to establish a theoretical and empirical study for the city of Esfahan, enabling future comparative analyses of host attitudes. A sample was chosen from among local residents and regression analysis was applied in order to discover if there are any underlying dimensions concerning their attitudes towards tourism development, and whether socio-economic and demographic characteristics can be useful predictors of these attitudes.

Keywords: environment impacts, tourism development, cultural heritage, historic cities, host perceptions, social impacts.

توسعه محیط زیست: مطالعه تأثیرات اجتماعی گردشگری در اصفهان

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چکیده

امروزه میراث فرهنگی بعنوان یک عامل محیط زیست پذیرفته شده است بطوریکه ارزیابی تأثیرات فعالیت‌های مختلف بر آن از جمله گردشگری اهمیت زیادی دارد. هدف این مقاله بررسی و مشخص نمودن روند کلی رفتار ساکنان یک شهر تاریخی که میراث فرهنگی جهانی است نسبت با توسعه گردشگری می‌باشد. فرض اصلی این است که تأثیرات محیط زیستی تنها نباید به تأثیرات اکوسیستمی خلاصه شود بلکه باید آنرا بر لایه‌های اجتماعی محلی هم مورد توجه قرار داد. از این منظر، این مقاله اولین تحقیق بر تأثیرات اجتماعی یک شهر تاریخی در ایران با اندازه‌گیری رفتار جامعه مهمان‌پذیر در رابطه با توسعه گردشگری را نشان می‌دهد. اولین هدف در اینجا ایجاد چارچوب مطالعه‌ای نظری و عملی برای شهر اصفهان می‌باشد. تا در آینده با آن بتوان تجزیه و تحلیل مقایسه‌ای از رفتار اجتماعی بدست آوریم. یک نمونه از میان مردم محلی انتخاب گردید، و تجزیه و تحلیل رگرسیونی بکار برده شد تا کاوش بعمل آید. که چه اندازه‌ای این رفتارها در رابطه با توسعه گردشگری وجود دارد و آیا خصوصیات اقتصادی- اجتماعی و جمعیتی می‌تواند یک شاخص مفیدی برای ارزیابی این رفتارها باشد.

کلیدواژه‌ها: تأثیرات محیط زیست، توسعه گردشگری، میراث فرهنگی، تجربه مهمان‌پذیر، تأثیرات اجتماعی.

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Introduction

The cultural heritage has been accepted by international bodies such as UNESCO, as forming part of the environment of cities, countries and regions and any impacts on the fabric of these elements can be seen more broadly as impacts on the environment.

Iran has a long-term plan to develop of its tourism industry, especially cultural tourism in view of the depth and richness of its cultural and historic sites and cities. As we know, any expansion in tourism is seen from the point of view of governments and economists as a positive for the economy of the country as whole, and for tourism destination regions in particular. However, as it will be seen from the review of literature in this field, we will find that any tourism development which consequently provides some economic benefits to tourism destinations also brings with it some social impacts on the residents of the tourism area in question. As far as I seen in this field, these impacts have not fully studied in Iran and, in particular, in the city of Esfahan which was and is historically a major destination for both domestic and foreign tourists. Therefore, this study aims to take into consideration the social impacts as well as the economic benefits of tourism in Esfahan.

Many writers looking at the relationship between cultural heritage and tourism have viewed it as one inevitably involving conflict, including conflicts of interest between visitors and the host community. (Boniface 1998; Jansen-Verbeke 1998) However, this is not necessarily the case and tourism in stable, mature destinations that have historically received both domestic and foreign visitors – as Esfahan has since the 18th century – where tourism is regarded as playing an important role in the social, cultural and economic fabric of the local community (Perdue, Long and Allen 1990). The assertion that increased visitor numbers will automatically lead to adverse impacts may well be true of rural or natural environments. However, it is not necessarily true of urban areas that are traditional tourism destinations and, in the case of cultural tourism cities, they may actually welcome the

increase in visitors to museums and monuments that rely on visitor fees for their up-keep (McKercher *et al.* 2005)

Identifying and Measuring Social Impacts

The literature has paid great important to tourism impacts, because this industry has both negative and positive economic benefit impacts on the tourism destination area. Tourism with its great economic benefits has seen as a tool of development (Gee, Choy and Makens 1989; Theuns 2002) and many associated economic benefits can be measured objectively and serve as support for further development (Cohen 1972). Moreover the significance of culture as a motivator for travel should not be underestimated and World Heritage Sites (of which Esfahan is one), for example, account for between 15% to 20% of tourist visits (Musitelli 2002). Hence, the importance of a cultural tourism destination such as Esfahan to the local and even national economy is unquestioned. However, the social impacts of tourism appear to have been addressed less fully and much of the literature in this field is not very new.

During last three decades, researchers mainly in North American and Europe have examined many different aspects related to residents' perceptions of tourism development. Pizam (1978) suggested that a heavy concentration of visitors has resulted in negative attitudes in the host destination. The study by Rothman (1978) highlighted a negative perception towards increased noise, litter, traffic, crime, overcrowding and tourism-induced price increases, although other research findings have also noted some positive aspects and attitudes. These included improvements in local infrastructure (Belisle and Hoy 1980), increased employment opportunities (Milman and Pizam 1988; Rothman 1978), and increased recreational opportunities (Davis, Allen and Cosenza 1988).

Other significant findings include the personal and demographic factors that are known to influence attitudes and perception, such as distance of residence

from the central tourism zone (Belisle and Hoy 1980), the influence of one's length of residence in the community (Liu and Var 1986) and age as in the case of Bastias, Perez and Var's (1996) study in Darwin, Australia. Since the mid-1990s, much the literature has given a stronger emphasis to the sustainability – economic, social, cultural and ecological – of tourism development (Pearce 1995; Rastogi 2003), an issue for which the host community's attitudes are of relevance.

The great number of studies so far carried out cover only small, rural, or resort-type communities. This has been the focus in the United States (Davis *et al.* 1988; Liu and Var 1986; Milman and Pizam 1988; Perdue, Long and Allen 1990; Pizam 1978; Rothman 1978; Thomason, Crompton and Kamp 1979), in continental Europe (Var, Kendall and Tarakcioglu 1985) and in the United Kingdom (Brougham and Butler 1981; Sheldon and Var 1984). Research into perceptions in larger urban areas has generally been ignored, with the exception of a study by Haley, Snaith and Miller (2005) that looks at the social impacts of tourism in the historic city of Bath in the UK that, like Esfahan, is a World Heritage Site.

The dominant theory to emerge to shape understanding has been social exchange theory, which concentrates on the extent to which residents receive something for the imposition the industry places upon them. Recent work on this subject in Ghana (Sirakaya, Teye and Sonmez 2002) shows that it is not simply the existence of an exchange that is important, but its nature and value that influences attitudes and perception. Hence, traditional social exchange theory would hold that if people are employed in tourism then they would be expected to hold a positive attitude towards the industry as a whole. Craik (1995) gives a useful breakdown of the potential positive and negative impacts of tourism on the local community that will, of course, affect the attitudes of local residents. These include, on the positive side, enhanced services and amenities, increased employment opportunities and even the maintenance of the local community itself. On the debit side, they

include greater pressure on existing services, conflicts over the use of and access to sites, a raised cost of living and undermining local traditions and ways of life. Clearly, the degree to which residents' perceptions are positive will depend upon the degree to which the perceived benefits outweigh the negative consequences of tourism development. Bassevain (1993) gives Mdina on Malta as an extreme example of where the development of an historic town has had devastating consequences for local residents, where 200 local residents face an influx of 750,000 visitors annually.

The use of different methodologies in examining host perception has resulted in a fragmented rather than coherent view of the subject. Sampling methodologies used in the studies and sample sizes vary considerably. Descriptions provided of the sampling plans have generally been limited, and the information provided does not allow readers to make judgments about the appropriateness and adequacy of the sampling plan. This apparent lack of attention to sampling methodology calls into question the validity of the reported findings. The weakest aspect of the data characteristics of the early research is that few studies (Sethna and Richmond 1978) report any tests of the reliability and validity of the measures used in the survey instrument. Babbie (1986) highlighted the importance of reliable and valid measures to sound investigation, and more explicit consideration by researchers regarding this matter is needed in the future.

The statistical techniques that have been used to analyse perception data also varies considerably from study to study, and thus makes comparisons among them difficult. A welcome exception, Teye, Sonmez and Sirakaya (2002) employ the same methodology in two destinations to enable cross-comparison of differing histories of tourism development. The multivariate techniques most commonly used have been regression analysis, analysis of variance, and factor analysis (Perdue, Long and Allen 1990). A survey of the techniques generally employed provides

us with valuable information about their spread and diversity and may possibly lead to developing alternative techniques in the future. Although not all studies have attempted to justify the techniques used, Belisle and Hoy (1980), Brougham and Butler (1981), Sheldon and Ver (1984), Liu and Var (1986), Teye, Sonmez and Sirakaya (2002) have all provided a clear and adequate explanation. The fragmented character of this set of findings has been exacerbated by researchers from a variety of disciplines examining perception. These include anthropology (Farrell 1977; smith 1977), economics (Archer 1973; Liu 1979; peters 1969); geography (Butler 1974; Keogh 1989; Murphy 1981), and sociology (Cohen 1978; de Kadt 1979; Turner and Ash 1979). Consequently, the development of conceptual frameworks has not shown much real progress.

Importance of Understanding Local Attitudes

Knowledge and understanding about the local community's attitudes towards the consequences and impacts of tourism is an important factor that needs to be considered in planning. It should be mentioned here that irrespective of how tourism is introduced and developed in a community, local residents are important stakeholders who can affect the success or failure of the local industry. They may contribute to the well-being of the community through their participation (in varying degrees) in the planning, development, and operation of attractions and by extending their hospitality in exchange for the benefits to be gained from tourism. On the other hand, residents can also be instrumental in discouraging the industry by opposing it or exhibiting hostile behaviour towards tourism advocates and/or tourists (Crompton and Ap 1994). In developing and attracting tourism to a community the goal is to achieve outcomes that provide the best balance between benefits and costs for all parties, particularly residents, tourists and the industry. The totality of these attitudes deserves investigation and documentation along with the associated resident profile characteristics, in order

more fully to understand this essential component of the supply side of the tourism product.

Study Methods and Empirical Results

A quantitative methodological approach chosen for this research and so a questionnaire was handed to a random sample of Esfahan's residents. It is widely recognized in the literature that the main advantage of a quantitative approach is that it can measure the reactions of a great number of people to a limited set of questions, which facilitates comparison and statistical aggregation of the data (Bell 1992; Preece 1994; Robson 1993; Veal 1993). Postal surveys have been said to be more appropriate because of their relatively quick and low-cost way for collecting information for a city of the size of Esfahan. However, because of lack of availability of the necessary information about residents, an insufficient infrastructure as well as cultural attitudes towards that kind of method of data collection, this was not deemed appropriate in this case. A further positive aspect to this direct sampling method is the presence of an interviewer to prevent any misinterpretation of the questions in the questionnaire.

The survey instrument used in this study comprised a subset of items originally developed for use in rural American communities in Colorado that have subsequently undergone slight adjustments before being applied to historic cities. The survey instrument consisted of two sections that were retained in the historic cities instrument. The first included 24 questions and required respondents to rate their level of agreement with each on a five-point scale, from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Each of these items related to general aspects of tourism development, sharing an interest in a particular issue and thus enabling the creation of sub-scales. An additional questionnaire item related to whether or not residents were positive about tourism when they spoke to each other about its presence in the city. The second section looked for socioeconomic and demographic information in order to: verify, as far as possible, the

similarity of the surveys; to identify the number of times residents were entering the city (for shopping, recreation and work); and to calculate the average length of their visits. In addition, respondents were asked to report whether or not they had a family history of residence in the area.

The survey was conducted over a three-month period during both high and low tourism seasons. The data breakdown of the sample shows that around 55 percent of those interviewed were born in the city, around 60 percent were male and the rest were female. Tables 1 to 4 give the results of the empirical tests. Analysis has been carried out to see whether socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, economic reliance and positive and negative perceptions are useful predictors for local residents' attitudes towards tourism development issues. In order to achieve this, these predictors have been used as independent variables in five hierarchical regression equations as used by Madrigal (1993) to test the relative contribution of each variable. Tables 1-4 also show the results of these equations. The independent variable has been specifically selected to consider the aforementioned questions as to good predictors of local community support for the tourism industry and for attempts to increase tourist numbers or make the city a more major tourism destination (equations 1,2 and 3). Equation 4 shows whether the variable predicts community opposition to the tourism industry and, in such circumstances, the government and local authority should respond to this. Equation 5 shows whether the variables are good predictors of the involvement of local people .

Tourism & Impacts in Historic Cities – Study Findings

As was initially stated, the purpose of this research is to examine resident's attitudes toward tourism development in the historic city of Esfahan. As a consequence, the research aims to establish a study of the analyses of host community attitudes in the city. The subsequent analysis of the results enabled us to

answer the two hypotheses and provides a sound foundation for recommendations regarding a practical way forward for Esfahan as well as making theoretical contributions more broadly for future social impact assessment studies.

The paper's first contribution is to the discussion raised by previous studies suggesting that a two-factor structure existed, which indicated both positive and negative dimensions (Kim 1992; Madrigal 1993; Perdue *et al.* 1990; Snaith and Haley 1994). Results from this study confirm these observations with a two-factor structure being apparent from the sample. This enables the rejection of the first null hypothesis and establishes consistency in the use of this research approach with previous studies.

Second, the group of variables associated with economic reliance proved consistently predictive of a general support for tourism development. There has, however, been some criticism of this approach (Ap and Crompton 1998) which is supported by the discovery of another four potential dimensions: overcrowding and congestiopressure on services, taxation and community attitude. While this new approach is welcomed, the continual development of new survey instruments carries with it an important implication. Certainly, if we can increase our understanding of the underlying dimensions to this question it will be important step forward. On the other hand, if we wish to be able to trace the changing nature of host attitudes, and compare them alongside developments in tourism and its planning within any particular destination, some degree of continuity must exist to act as a baseline for reference. It is suggested that there is a place for several different approaches that either possess the potential for comparative analysis or seek to derive more specific support from the consistent research finding that those who perceive that they may, or actually do, benefit economically are more supportive of further tourism development (Perdue *et al.* 1990).

It was found that, as income levels fell, the residents were more likely to support increased

Table 1- Mean Scores for the Tourism Impact Statements

| | Tourism Impact Statements | Mean Scores |
|--|---|---------------------------|
| Positive | More tourism improves the economy | 3.91 |
| | The benefits of tourism outweigh its negative impacts | 3.51 |
| | Tourism should play vital role in the future | 3.53 |
| | Tourism provides good jobs for residents | 3.49 |
| | The city should not try to attract more tourists | 2.94 |
| | Tourism improves the appearance of the city | 2.99 |
| | Tourism increases recreational opportunities | 2.94 |
| | The city should become more of a tourist destination | 2.86 |
| | Tourism development increases the quality of life | 2.61 |
| | When I talk to fellow residents I am positive | 3.31 |
| | I would support a local tax levy for tourism | 2.27 |
| | I can personally influence tourism decisions | 2.06 |
| | Mean For the scale | 3.21 |
| | Negative | Tourism increases traffic |
| Tourism leads to more litter | | 3.80 |
| Tourism development increases council tax | | 3.16 |
| Tourism unfairly increases property prices | | 3.09 |
| Tourism businesses are too influential politically | | 3.25 |
| Tourism increases the amount of crime | | 3.14 |
| Tourism negatively affects the environment | | 3.20 |
| Tourism reduces quality of outdoor recreation | | 2.86 |
| Local government should control tourism | | 3.68 |
| Local government should restrict tourism | | 3.05 |
| Tourists should pay more for attractions | | 3.49 |
| Mean for the scale | 3.36 | |
| Overall | Mean for all items | 3.33 |

^a1== strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree; ^b Reverse coded item; ^c Not included in scale.

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression of Two Items on Resident Attitude

| Blocks of independent Variables | Regression 1 | | | | Regression 2 | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|---------|---------|--------------|----------------|---------|---------|
| | Beta | R ^{2a} | T value | P value | Beta | R ² | T value | P value |
| Residents Characteristics | | | | | | | | |
| Income | -.02 | | -.34 | | -.00 | | -.03 | |
| Length | .02 | | .37 | | .06 | | .82 | |
| Distance of residence From tourism | .05 | | 1.2 | | .08 | | 1.6 | |
| Born in City | .03 | | .60 | | -.01 | | -.09 | |
| Home ownership | -.06 | | -1.3 | | -.08 | | -1.7 | |
| Age | -.06 | | -1.2 | | .09 | | 1.5 | |
| Gender | .03 | | .63 | | .02 | | .36 | |
| Year round residence | .07 | -.01 | 1.8 | | .07 | .01 | 1.2 | |
| Economic Reliance | | | | | | | | |
| Importance of tourism | .05 | .07 | 1.2 | .000 | -.01 | | -.25 | |
| To occupation | .03 | .56 | .78 | .000 | .03 | .03 | .54 | .003 |
| Employed in the Tourism in industry | | | | | | | | |
| Positive Opinion | .65 | .6 | 12.7 | .000 | .48 | .43 | 9.3 | .000 |
| Negative Opinion | -.18 | | -3.8 | | -.33 | .48 | -5.6 | .000 |

^a Adjusted R square

Table 3- Hierarchical Regression of Two Items on Resident Attitude

| Blocks of independent Variables | Regression 3 | | | | Regression 4 | | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------|------------------|---------|---------|--------------|----------------|---------|---------|
| | Beta | R ² a | T value | P value | Beta | R ² | T value | P value |
| Residents Characteristics | | | | | | | | |
| Income | -.01 | | .18 | | .02 | | -.36 | |
| Length | .08 | | 1.7 | | .03 | | .53 | |
| Distance of residence | .00 | | .02 | | -.13 | | -2.7 | |
| From tourism | | | | | | | | |
| Born in City | -.08 | | -1.6 | | .04 | | .71 | |
| Home ownership | .01 | | .153 | | -.08 | | 1.7 | |
| Age | .08 | | 1.9 | | .05 | | .93 | |
| Gender | .06 | | 1.6 | | .01 | | .13 | |
| Year round residence | .01 | -.02 | .25 | | -.07 | .02 | -1.1 | |
| Economic Reliance | | | | | | | | |
| Importance of tourism | .05 | | 1.2 | | -.03 | | -.64 | |
| To occupation | | | | | | | | |
| Employed in the | -.01 | .08 | -.37 | .000 | -.02 | .06 | -.39 | .002 |
| Tourism in industry | | | | | | | | |
| Positive Opinion | .79 | .66 | 16.9 | .000 | -.32 | .34 | 5.5 | .000 |
| Negative Opinion | -.03 | .64 | -.67 | .487 | .4 | .45 | 6.8 | .000 |

Table 4. Hierarchical Regression of Two Items on Resident Attitude

| Blocks of independent Variables | Regression 5 | | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------|------------------|---------|---------|
| | Beta | R ² a | T value | P value |
| Residents Characteristics | | | | |
| Income | -.1 | | -1.4 | |
| Length | -.1 | | -1.2 | |
| Distance of residence | .19 | | 3.01 | |
| From tourism | | | | |
| Born in City | .1 | | 1.6 | |
| Home ownership | .05 | | .62 | |
| Age | -.14 | | -1.8 | |
| Gender | -.02 | | .36 | |
| Year round residence | .02 | .04 | .24 | .017 |
| Economic Reliance | | | | |
| Importance of tourism | .08 | | 1.2 | |
| To occupation | | | | |
| Employed in the | -.07 | .05 | -.89 | .126 |
| Tourism in industry | | | | |
| Positive Opinion | .21 | .08 | 2.9 | .002 |
| Negative Opinion | .01 | .09 | .16 | .875 |

tourism, and those with the lower incomes were more likely to accept their city becoming more of a destination. This is further reinforced by the finding that those employed in the industry were more supportive of further tourism development. Hence, the industry may be seen as a source of low income employment, which has important implications for developing its image. It would appear from the data that at present those who receive economic support from the industry are grateful for that support, in accord with conventional social exchange theory. However, should wages in tourism begin to fall relative to those enjoyed by the rest of the city, then it would be reasonable to expect even those economically reliant on it to become resentful of the industry. To the concept of social exchange might usefully be added the work of Adam's equity theory (1963) which argues that the level of satisfaction displayed depends on the extent to which people feel they are being treated fairly. Hence, social exchange theory relies not just on the existence of an exchange, but also on the relative perceived fairness of that exchange.

Much of the early literature debated the potential for using socioeconomic and demographic variables as indicators of differing attitudes and perceptions of tourism (Pizam 1978; Rothman 1978) and this debate has continued, with a great deal of disagreement, throughout the past 20 years. The reason for this may well lie in the limited nature of attempts by research groups to define the destination types, employ the same methodology and develop models broad enough to contain all of the potential contributing variables. As a result of these weaknesses, researchers can rarely state with confidence whether or not specific socioeconomic and demographic variables are significant indicators of distinct attitudes.

The findings of this survey of Esfahan enable us to reject the second null hypothesis, suggesting that some of the variables may indeed provide a good basis for a general understanding of which people are more susceptible to perceiving certain impacts of tourism positively. Further studies of Esfahan, or more widely

in other historic cities in Iran and elsewhere, must ask whether socioeconomic and demographic characteristics act as useful predictors of residents' attitudes. For practitioners, such as town planners, understanding the effects of these socioeconomic and demographic variables would be most useful, since they could then anticipate the likely reactions of the host population to future planned actions.

As a fourth contribution, it was found in Esfahan that those living closer to the central tourism zone were more supportive of restrictions on tourism activities and visitor numbers. This study also has found that those people who were born in the city appeared more likely to notice the negative impacts of tourism. In contrast, the shorter their lengths of residence in the city, the more positively residents viewed the impacts of tourism. Thus, those who have recently moved to the city may be at an earlier stage in their exposure to the significant tourist numbers Esfahan receives and thus maintain a more positive view of the industry than those who have been exposed to it for longer. Equally, those more long-standing residents will have a memory of the city before the pressure of tourism and visitor numbers had become as great as it now is.

Finally, residents' perceived level of influence on the decision-making process did not influence any of the results in the earlier stages of the research and, again, the adjustment was weak in the sample. Either, the respondents misunderstood the question asked or there was no association between their attitudes towards of tourism and their ability to be involved in the planning process. Whatever the version for this finding, it was a concern of Keogh (1990) and remains an interesting area for research development, since it may offer an insight into the motivations and ability of individuals to involve themselves in local issues and the planning of their communities.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine the attitudes of local residents towards economically-inspired tourism development in the historic city of Esfahan. As stated

above, this is the first study to consider specifically the social impacts of tourism development in Iran in an historic city with such a large population size. This study has been shown to support our prediction that those residents who gain economic benefits are more supportive of this industry than others and they support further development. It has been found that, as the level of employment fell, residents were more likely to increase their support for the development of this industry and related businesses. Those with lower incomes will more easily accept to see their city becoming a more major destination for the flow of tourism and this finding is in the line with social exchange theory. It has also been seen that, if wages in the tourism industry begin to fall relative to wages in the rest of the city's economic activities, then we will see even those currently benefiting from this industry will develop a resentment towards tourism. Further studies of Esfahan or, more widely, of other historic cities in Iran and elsewhere must ask whether socioeconomic and demographic characteristics can act as useful predictors of the likely attitudes of local residents to any tourism development.

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