

2014

BioTechnology

An Indian Journal

FULL PAPER

BTAIJ, 10(14), 2014 [8014-8018]

Empirical research on community-based ecotourism along the silk road economic zone-take shuimogou community as an example

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ABSTRACT

Community-based eco-tourism(CBET) is a new trend of research both at home and abroad, which has been explored deeply in both theory and practice. Only from the point of view of community, and by guiding the community to participate in the eco-tourism process, it had the possibility to deal with the relations between community and tourism development well and obtain new breakthrough in the development of tourism. So that it can reach the goal of the optimization of community economic structure, protecting ecological resources and environment, finally, to preserve traditional culture of community along the Silk Road Economic Zone. A preliminary endeavor was made to solve the practical problems with regard to the community residents' participating in eco-tourism, taking Shui MoGou district as the research sample in this paper.

KEYWORDS

Silk road economic zone; Community participation; Ecotourism; Sustainable development.



INTRODUCTION

Silk Road, is not only a Trade Road that located in ancient Eurasia and Western countries, but also an avenue for cultural exchange^[1]. However, due to the blind, predatory development that is strongly against natural law, the ecological environment has become fully deteriorated^[2] in most parts of this region because of arid and semi-arid climatic conditions, meanwhile, the pace of economic development has been far behind that of the developed coastal areas, as serious imbalance between investment and income is occurring. Tourism has become the world's largest industry and it has a great driving power for the economy of the country, especially for those areas with fragile ecological environment. In Silk Road Economic Zone^[3], it is rich in tourism resources such as cultural and natural landscapes, ancient culture and modern civilization show, which is very attractive for domestic and foreign tourists. Traditional Silk Road tourism development cannot meet the environment development needs, ecotourism represents the inevitable way of the Silk Road tourism development, which is inseparable from community participation and support. Only from the perspective of the community^[4], handling the relationship between the community and the development of eco-tourism, it is possible to get new breakthroughs in economic and ecological tourism development in the Silk Road Economic Zone^[5].

Urumqi, as the bridgehead located in western section of the new Eurasian Continental Bridge^[6], is the most spectacular tourist pearl of the Silk Road, while Shuimogou district is the political, economic and cultural center of Urumqi. This region is rich in tourism resources and has a good momentum of eco-tourism development. The willingness to participate in community tourism development is also high. So this region can be chosen as eco-tourism model along the Silk Road Economic Zone^[7]. The aim of this research is to provide the reference sample for community participation in eco-tourism along the Silk Road, based on the empirical research in Shuimogou district.

EMPIRICAL STUDY OF RESIDENTS PARTICIPATED IN ECO-TOURISM

Research method

In this paper, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods^[8] were adopted to make empirical study. Firstly, we made exploratory study by questionnaire survey methods, analyzed the sample questionnaire, verified the credibility and validity, and then excluded the elements associated with low relevancy. The design thought of questionnaire was converted to statement items from 38 variables, which were produced by residents participation in eco-tourism^[9]. Questionnaire was carried out twice, one was conducted in Shuimogou area in October 2008, while the other one was finished in October 2013. The second respondent was the households in and around Shuimogou tourist attractions. The total of 418 questionnaires were distributed and returned 381 valid questionnaires, and then the effective rate was 91.15%, which met the requirements of questionnaires. Secondly, we used SPSS software for data collation and analysis, found that the observed variables reliability coefficient minimum was 0.743 and maximum was 0.971, to prove that variable was designed suitable and with a more accurate credibility. At last, final conclusions were drawn from official statistics and accessed by local residents discussion.

RESULTS ANALYSIS

Status of participation

(1) Participation stage

Currently, for Shuimogou community residents, the form to participate in eco-tourism was relatively simple, even in a single form of participation in the vicinity of the travel area, which shows a greater gap when compared with the organized one.

(2) Participation effect

Through the survey, we found that the direct and indirect participation in tourism development render different results, to further increase the gap trends between the rich and the poor, and the income of the farmer was very impressive. There were more than 200 rural tourism in Shuimogou area since the first one was built in 2003, including 21 star farmhouse, 76 farmhouse had obtained business license. It has become a successful development model in Xinjiang rural tourism. But the income growth for those who were involved in tourism indirectly was smaller. Although driven by the tourism industry, until the end of 2013, per capita net income of farmers was just close to 7,400 yuan, but the gap was still widening.

(3) Participation attitude

Due to the fast increase of the income for those people who are directly involved in the eco-tourism, and their living standards have been improved obviously, the demonstration effect was obvious, which can attract more residents to participate, which is also verified by the survey that 65.2 percent of residents expressed their willingness to participate in eco-tourism, however, they also stated that they need support and appropriate policies from the government. Since tourism can make good earnings for the local residents, most of them hold positive attitude to tourism, so, they are very friendly to tourists. The population that welcome and very much welcome visitors accounted for 77% of the total numbers, which are beneficial to the community eco-tourism that can be carried out in depth.

Exiting problems

(1) Inadequate participation mechanisms and mainly passive participation.

Currently, the general community did not have the decision-making power when participating in eco-tourism development, while all related decisions were made by the governments and experts^[10]. From results of the survey questionnaire, it shows that many residents would like to participate in the eco-tourism development, but they lack participation ways and do not have a clear understanding of their social value for participation in eco-tourism. In addition, many policy makers ignore the rights and vested interests of the residents, and they do not realize that they should let residents actively participate in decision-making and planning.

(2) Uneven benefits.

The survey found that due to the different levels of participation, it leads to greater return on investment (ROI) out, only 17.7 percent of residents believed that they received greater income in the process of eco-tourism, and it was proportional to the level of participation. The attitude of residents that are not involved in the eco-tourism directly were apathy, which was adverse to the construction of eco-tourism.

(3) Lack of service skills.

Residents were poor along the Silk Road Economic Zone and less educated. From the questionnaire survey, there existed some problems in community eco-tourism, such as inadequate service delivery capabilities, lack of standardization in operating skills, incorrect service attitude, language miscommunication, predatory resource utilization, and all of these problems are due to the lack of community training. From the survey, we found that 93.4 percent of residents expressed their willingness to participate in education and training to improve their professional knowledge.

(4) Imperfect management system.

Currently, there were some problems in operating aspects of tourism in Shuimogou district. Due to the lack of unified planning and management, as well as cut-throat competition among individuals and obvious soliciting tout phenomenon, it had affected the entire tourism development to some extent. Some operators increased service prices for their own interests, creating a bad impression to tourists; other people do not pay attention to food hygiene, using lower quality food resources and disposable tableware, indiscriminate discharge of sewage contamination, with damage to the natural environment, just to save operating costs which largely influenced harmony between operators and tourists, man and nature, and was contrary to the nature ecological tourism. All of these bad behaviors damaged the image of the region.

(5) Ineffective ecological protection. As the government and the administration department of scenic spot neglected the rights of community residents, community residents are not enthusiastic about environmental protection on the scenic spot, they are not actively involved in the protection work, resulting in destruction of ecological system in Shuimogou area.

SOLUTIONS FOR EXISTING PROBLEMS

Government should play a leading role

As a strategic pillar industry of the national economy and modern service industry, it must take into account the important role of the community residents in the tourism development process. The Government should establish a set of scientific and reasonable residents participation mechanisms, and let the community become the subject of tourism development^[11], who just served the function of a go-between in the process of the participation in eco-tourism.

(1) Establishing management organization with community participation, which is in charge of specialized leadership. Setting up community tourism development funding center, with staff members coming from the government, resident representatives, representatives of the tourism sector and enterprises. Development Advisory Center is mainly responsible for the management of tourism and community-related matters, such as policies and resolutions related to tourism, tourism planning assessment, so as to provide effective organizational guidance for residents involved in tourism development.

(2) With extensive publicity to raise the residents awareness of participating. Government departments should keep pace with the times, constantly update management concepts and operational level, respect the wishes of residents, strengthen related publicity, so that residents recognize the need for their participation in the process of eco-tourism and significant value, feasibility and effectiveness when they take part in the process, which stimulate their sense of ownership, so that community residents truly become the masters.

(3) with policy guarantee and actively support. Government should explore a wide range of engage ways for residents, making them not only become lurkers, service providers, but also be participants and operators. Offering a variety of preferential policies to actively support and encourage local residents to participate in eco-tourism development.

Improve the profit distribution mechanism to improve residents' awareness of community participation

Distribution of benefits is the foundation and guarantee of the active participation and it is complementary with the participation in tourism development. It is also an important influencing factor for the enthusiasm of residents to participate in eco-tourism. Benefits allocation mainly reflected increasing the employment opportunities for residents to improve the income of them. Besides this, we should ensure priority rights of local residents employment, enhance community ownership of tourism resources, give priority to develop collective economic and share economy, open tourism service facilities to community residents.

We should also improve the compensation for land acquisition to ensure the legitimate interests of the villagers. Finally, employing stock revenue sharing, benefit-sharing approach, to make ticket sales distributed by a certain percentage

between the tourism sector (companies), government departments and villages to protect the reasonable interests of all stakeholders.

As the residents that are indirectly involved in eco-tourism cannot make a profit directly from eco-tourism, however, they have to bear with the costs of tourism development (including environmental and social costs, etc.), so, we should pay more attention to protect their legitimate rights and interests. Their welfare benefits mainly come from dividends, ecological compensation from government and administration departments of scenic spots and we also need to obtain their understanding and support for community participation in the development of eco-tourism so as to promote eco-tourism community better development.

This requires the government to create a harmonious living environment and tourism environment, to accelerate infrastructure construction, to establish a sound social security system, social pension system, and to build community infrastructures, educational infrastructures, as well as public health systems and community health services network, to truly reflect the people's livelihood-oriented concept of governance, and to effectively improve the lives of local residents happiness index. We should also try our best to improve the quality of life, so that every community member can feel a significant impact on the life when attending the process of local community eco-tourism.

We propose that the benefits allocation of the Eco-tourism business tax should be carried out as outlined in the following three parts:

(1) Provident Fund: considered as the accumulation funds to expand reproduction.

(2) Community Chest^[12]: used for the business skills training, such as tour guide training, service training and farmer resorts management training, operation and maintenance of public participation mechanisms and so on.

(3) Capital stock bonus: paid to shareholders. Allocation approach should reflect the principle of "risk and profit sharing, multi-input multi-get". So, the benefits of the State, the collectives and individuals can be ensured in accordance with their respective shares in the eco-tourism development, just to achieve deeper transformation of community involvement.

Specific distribution of benefits are shown in Figure 1:

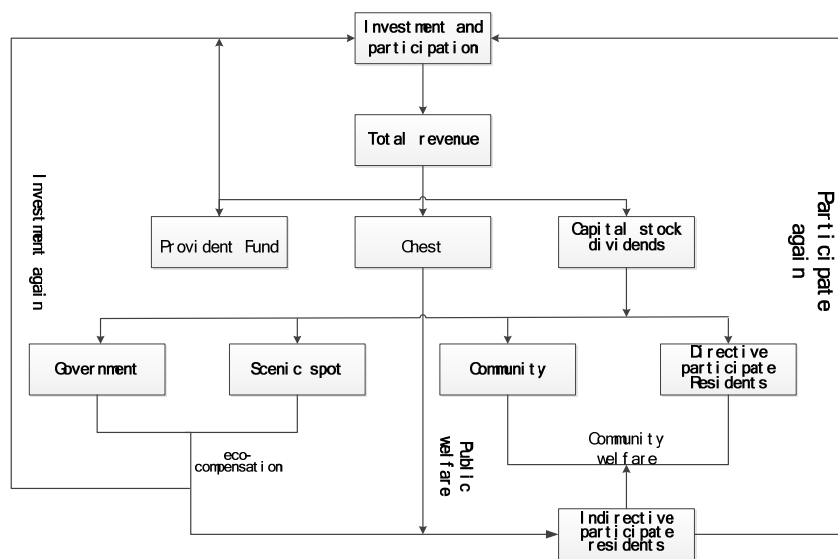


Figure 1 : Distribution of benefits

Improve the management mechanism, strengthen education and training

"State Council on accelerating the development of tourism" is an important strategic decision made by the Party Central Committee and the State Council for economic and social development. It is proposed from the height of the national strategy that "perfect service standards system, to enhance the quality of tourism services". Consumers are demanding high-quality tourism services while tourism standardization is an important means to strengthen the industry and to improve business service levels. Compared to the unique quality tourism resources, the lack of service quality has become a bottleneck affecting the development of tourism along the Silk Road, so the government should put on proficiency training as a long-term, regular, organized and standardized activities.

(1) Perfection of the management mechanism of tourism. To meet with the requirements of eco-tourism development, tourism standardization in the tourism industry should be penetrated through the macro-managements, quality of service, infrastructure equipment requirements, besides this, technology support to tourism industry should be done well.

(2) Paying attention to talent training and service-oriented team construction. We need a modern management quality, higher operating capacity and service level tourism personnel for eco-tourism development. Therefore, training should be paid more attention to the community tourism and travel services personnel.

(3) Training object. The main education and training objects include four aspects: firstly, department heads, to raise their travel ideas and sense of competition. Secondly, business owners, for their close contact with community residents, and

its employment management. Thirdly, for community residents, whose educational level is not high and be lack of service skills awareness, urgent need for system training and guidance is critical. Finally, for young people, the point is, to develop their ecological awareness and the integration of the concept of tourism environment, to avoid conflicts between fragile ecological environment and huge human activities, to form good awareness.

Intelligent management

Management system of community participation in eco-tourism should keep pace with the times. Based on increasingly sophisticated intelligence tourist building platforms, we can develop mobile App program, with all the built-in sites and electronic map navigation for eating area, housing, transportation, shopping, and entertainment. We should construct exclusive tourism administration website or rely on government website in order to take dynamic management to all business establishments in the region. We can also Establish standardized tourism service system, the integrity management system, grading system and relegation system in order to improve the performance of customer complaint handling.

Focus on ecological protection

Most parts of the Silk Road Economic Zone is located in fragile ecological environment under arid and semi-arid climatic conditions. Its cultural heritage, traditional folk culture have great historical and cultural values and need to be protected. Therefore, it is urgent to establish the idea of sustainable development to make local residents as conscious environment protectors and managers.

CONCLUSION

Management mechanism of community participation in eco-tourism needs to fully mobilize the enthusiasm of the government, businesses, communities and residents, and to create a new situation of "joint operations" which is closely with relevant stakeholders. This is the key choice to achieve sustainable development of the Silk Road. Only from the perspective of community and guiding the community to participate in the eco-tourism process, it had the possibility to deal with the relationship well between the community and tourism development so as to obtain new breakthrough in the development of tourism. Consequently, it can achieve the optimization of community economic structure, protecting ecological resources and environment and preserving traditional culture of community along the Silk Road Economic Zone.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This review was carried out under the support of National Natural Science Foundation of China (71150001).

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