

# COMMODIFYING LOCAL CULTURE FOR RURAL COMMUNITY TOURISM DEVELOPMENT: THEORIZING THE COMMODIFICATION PROCESS

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## **Introduction**

In response to the challenges and uncertainties induced by globalization and other factors, many rural communities in Atlantic Canada and throughout the world have adopted tourism development as an alternative approach in hopes to achieve some sense of sustainability. While some appear to have succeeded, at least in the short term, others have failed. These rural communities rely on their culture and cultural symbols, including artefacts, music, folklore, architecture, heritage and geographic landscapes, as a focal feature for tourism development. In fact, local culture, generally defined as the longstanding traditions, customs and values of a community, has become a dominant attractor for drawing tourists to Atlantic Canada and elsewhere. Many of these small rural communities have a cultural richness and uniqueness that are frequently depicted in various tourism product offerings, marketing publications and media. In short, local culture is increasingly being objectified and commodified to entice tourists to specific destination areas. In tandem to providing new sites of consumption, we are seeing a new wave of demand – cultural tourists – eager to consume a variety of new and novel cultural experiences.

Cultural tourism is arguably the oldest of the new tourism phenomena, and some argue that all travel, indeed, involves a cultural element (McKercher & du Cros, 2002). Cultural and heritage tourism, more specifically, are gaining momentum as approaches for tourism development. These are, generally, understood as type of special interest tourism where heritage or cultural objects, for example, museums, ancient buildings, sites and artefacts, are commodified as items for economic exchange and consumption. Although most small rural communities in Canada do not have monumental ancient sites or magnificent historic structures by global standards, they do, in contrast, hold something which has been enduring and unique - rural culture, a culture that appears to becoming, increasingly, appealing to city dwellers, for instance, and others who have become disenchanted with urban environments, landscapes and modernity.

In this context, rural culture may well be a viable asset and provide a competitive advantage for some rural communities when considering tourism as a strategy for revitalization and sustainability. It is the cultural life of rural people represented through distinct and different living patterns and way of life, and expressed through various symbolic traditions, texts, artefacts and other forms, that provide, for many, a contrast to the mundane and stresses of urban life and environments. Thus, through tourism, the rural regions can offer a variety of new sites of consumption for travelling tourists who are ever seeking new leisure experiences.

However, how this profoundly abstract rural culture, a social construct, becomes materialized into a saleable product for tourism becomes a subject for enquiry. What is the process by which local culture becomes transformed into a commodity for exchange and consumption by tourism? What are the potential consequences to a rural community when it commodifies its local culture as an attractor for tourism? There has been a visible absence of research to address these questions. This absence has placed already fragile rural communities, increasingly pressured and persuaded that tourism development is a

viable option for sustainability, in further jeopardy and risk as they blindly move forward with development.

### **Research Study**

In this presentation, the researcher will discuss the findings and conclusions of recent doctoral research study that investigated the relationships and interconnections among local culture, commodification, community, and tourism in one rural community in Atlantic Canada in its pursuit of local culture-based tourism development. Specifically, it revealed a dynamic commodification of culture process, an important topic that has not been examined in great detail, as it was and is unfolding in the community. This exposition serves to broaden new perspectives when assessing the real potential of local culture-based tourism development for rural community sustainability.

### **Methodology**

The research investigation embraced the epistemological assumptions of the interpretive study. The methodological approach follows hermeneutics thought, and the case study method, using a single case study design, was implemented to investigate a specific contemporary phenomenon of social and structural transformation in Lunenburg, a small community of less than 2,600 in rural Nova Scotia, Canada. For over two hundred years, this research site evolved as a primary production economy but in recent years, due to the collapse of the east coast Atlantic fishery and other factors, repositioned itself as a cultural tourism destination in efforts to retain a viable economy. Moreover, the community received UNESCO Heritage World Site designation in 1995.

Employing a mixed methods approach, data were collected using various techniques including: personal interviews, documents analyses, participant observations, and a survey instrument. Drawing on works of Schein (1987), Ray (2001) and Bourdieu (1987), an integrative theoretical framework was constructed to help explain how local culture, a social construct of community, becomes a commodity for tourism consumption, and to reveal some potential implications associated with the process. To examine this process within the assumptions of community sustainability, a modified version of Flora's (2001) model of community capacity and sustainability was also integrated into the framework.

### **Findings**

Findings from the research revealed a commodification process that can be conceptualized under four main premises: 1) local culture is capitalized as an asset; 2) traditional mechanisms of accumulation, transmission and reproduction of culture give way to new modes; 3) fundamental social and cultural changes take place, and 4) a radical shift in community ideology occurs. Results indicated that local culture, as capital, may be a community's most valuable asset and warranted inclusion into community asset-based models of sustainability. Paradoxically, however, results also indicated that commodification of culture for tourism may impede a community's efforts to achieve sustainability by unbalancing other critical community capital assets. In fact, such tourism development may invoke a metamorphosis of community whereas the 'old' traditional community culture eventually dies and is replaced with the birth of a 'new' culture. Consequently, conventional understandings of community sustainability are

questioned as the author advances a new theory of commodification of culture for tourism development.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Culture, deeply embedded in the history and development of community, is considered the bloodline of any rural community. However, much of this culture is not visible; much is deeply hidden beneath the surface and has remained sacred to the community for centuries. Schein (1987) likens this phenomenon to an iceberg. Thus, many of the impacts of various forces, such as tourism, on local culture and the rural community are not clearly evident; neither are they easily measurable nor explainable.

While culture is implicit in tourism, the sparse research and literature which does exist generally focuses on heritage and cultural tourism development within a larger global context (Boniface, 1998; Featherstone, 1995; Jafari, 1996; McIntosh, Hinch, & Ingram, 2000; Meethan, 2001; Ashworth, 1994). As alluded to earlier, research that explains rural culture, specifically, as an entity within a local scale of tourism development, community capacity building and capital wealth, has been considered far less. Consequently, this research and new theory may have significant implications for rural communities planning or undertaking culture-based tourism as a strategy for economic revitalization and sustainability.

### **Two Solitudes – Academia and Community, Integrating Theory and Practice**

The research previously outlined has been derived from an investigation into the unique life of one rural community. Not only does this research make a valuable contribution to academia, it is intended to benefit other rural communities by providing new information, knowledge and insights that will, hopefully, lead practitioners to more informed, more insightful and better decision-making when developing tourism based on commodification of a community's culture. In this instance, the integration of new academic theory into practical application may make a significant contribution to improving rural community life. Hence, we see a research of reciprocity, one that can have an impact, and one that serves to illustrate the bringing together of "Two Solitudes."

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