Building Community Capacity for Indigenous Sustainable Tourism Development

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Introduction

Tourism development is increasingly being viewed as a catalyst for economic development among many indigenous communities throughout the world. Many indigenous communities also recognize that tourism development can stimulate change in social, cultural and environmental dimensions as well. Research related to native tourism development tends to emphasize issues related to: sustainable planning and control of resources (Zeppel, 1998), indigenous tourism and its link to parks and protected areas (Altman, 1989), frameworks for indigenous tourism development (Smith, 1996; Sofield & Birtles, 1996), and the social-political context of native tourism development strategies in northern contexts (Notzke, 1999). Common elements in these studies include the understanding that native tourism development is a complex process and its success to a large degree depends on hospitality-based skill development, access and control of traditional resources and community support. Noticeably absent from these studies, however, is the understanding that for any type of development to be successful and effect positive change in the economic, social and cultural dimensions, a native community must develop the capacity to undertake these development initiatives.

The purpose of this paper is to articulate the relationship between developing sustainable tourism and building community capacity. This relationship is conceptualised by the Sustainable Tourism Capacity Building Model (Figure 1). The concepts of community wellness and learning are emphasized as key building blocks of community capacity and will be discussed in greater detail in the paper. The development of the model was inspired by Bell (2000) who discussed the role of recreation and capacity building in aboriginal communities in the Northwest Territories, Nunavut and the Yukon Territory. In addition, 6 years of community-based research by the author in aboriginal communities in northern Alberta, and northwestern British Columbia have assisted in the development of the perspectives articulated in this paper.

Sustainable Tourism Capacity Building Model

The premise of the Sustainable Tourism Capacity Building Model (STCBM) (Figure 1) is that for sustainable tourism development to be successful, critical elements must first be addressed that allow for the growth of community capacity. Inherent in the STCBM is that community wellness and learning, largely influenced by an association with a traditional land base, must be engaged and directed toward community healing and the ongoing development of learning skills and strategies that will allow indigenous communities to take advantage of new opportunities.

The issue of community healing is rarely confronted openly in the academic literature related to indigenous tourism and the purpose of this paper is not to suggest that all tourism research in indigenous communities address this topic directly. To be effective researchers, however, it is necessary to be aware of these issues in order to understand a particular projects fit with broader community issues. It may also provide a glimpse of the potential success of a tourism project. The following sections provide a cursory overview of the issues addressed in the Sustainable Tourism Capacity Building Model.
The Land

Maintaining a close association with the land is an important element for many native people. The land provides both physical and spiritual sustenance. This relationship is often expressed through the articulation of traditional knowledge. To effect successful community development that enhances and builds on the capacity of the people, tourism researchers must consider extending the breadth of their research and consider developing research opportunities that connect both themselves and their collaborators to traditional knowledge. This can be a complex and sensitive process as bridging traditional knowledge and western-based knowledge has proven difficult (Cruikshank, 1998). Despite this complexity, however, many First Nation communities are insisting on development strategies and research processes that incorporate the values derived from a relationship with the land (Stevenson, 1997).

Community-Wellness and Learning

Community development emerges from a process that positively impacts community wellness and learning (Warry, 1998). These are core principles of community development and must not be excluded during the development process. Traditional community development focuses upon a needs-based approach (McKnight, 1993). Tourism development plans often perpetuate this approach and further instil the concept of "learned helplessness" (Warry, 1998) thereby doing little to contribute to the broader goals of community development. An assets-based perspective (McKnight, 1993) recognizes and builds upon the strengths of a community and its individuals and couples this knowledge with the skills required to undertake specific projects. As native communities seek sustainable tourism as a viable method of economic diversification, aspects of the planning process must include mechanisms that allow assets to be matched with appropriate skill development.

Community Capacity

An outcome of community capacity includes the ability to effectively govern and manage internal and external community affairs. It is an empowered position derived from processes linked to re-connecting to and valuing traditional culture and learning (Bell, 2000). Community capacity is derived through the development of collective individual capacity (Warry, 1998). Tourism development, therefore, must seek to address community and individual
needs simultaneously. It is from this foundation that effective community development related to sustainable tourism can transpire.

**Community Development**

Successful community development is an incremental process. Community development is founded through diverse parallel paths converging toward a single end: a self-actualised community that has the capacity to build on its strengths and control its destiny. Although these ends may appear out of reach for academics engaged in tourism research in indigenous communities, it is these ends that must be addressed in the research process in order to effect sustainable tourism.

**Conclusion**

The Sustainable Tourism Capacity Building Model signifies key issues that must parallel the tourism development process. It denotes the importance of placing tourism development within broader community goals and aspirations. Central to this model is the understanding that communities must have the capacity to develop tourism and that this capacity must be developed in conjunction with tourism initiatives. Tourism development can, therefore, contribute to a diverse collection of community needs. Tourism researchers must become cognizant of these broader needs and engage in discourse with community members in order to design research that meets these ends.

**References**


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