

Dispersed Visitation in Mexico's Mountains: Challenges to Sustainable Management

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Introduction

References to “managing and monitoring visitors” generally bring to mind the grand concentrations of visitors thronging Angkor Wat, the Coliseum of Rome, or Teotihuacan, locations that by their fame and accessibility draw large numbers from around the world. Management becomes in effect synonymous with crowd control, carrying capacity, and dealing with periodic surges in visitation related to seasonal vacation periods or other circumstances influencing visitor flow. Rarely do we think of low or sporadic flows or tourism as presenting their own challenges, particularly when institutional support and management processes themselves confront serious constraints. In this paper we examine challenges to sustainable management under conditions of emerging but minimal, intermittent visitor traffic in mountain sites where historically such visitation has been non-existent.

Methodology

Unlike concentrated, focused visitor traffic to beach resorts or the World Heritage Sites of Monte Alban and Mitla, mountain tourism in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca is dispersed over a wide area of rugged terrain having the greatest cultural and ecological diversity of any state in the country. Over the past twenty years visitors motivated by the desire to explore such diversity have filtered into the mountains individually or in small groups, influencing communities to consider “bottom-up” strategies for promoting and consolidating visitor traffic. Across this period the authors have worked with communities and organizations to assist planning, organization, and operation of local-level support systems. Between us we have more than seventy years of experience in community resource management and we draw from this experience to discuss two models emerging through both trial-and-error and imitation/adaptation. In a sense we use composite organizational ethnography based on the last twenty years of direct experience with multiple communities as they struggle with the need to create management models enabling them to respond to a critical question: how may they shape management models enabling them to address modest and somewhat unpredictable demand patterns in the face of serious resource scarcity? Thus the paper draws on participant-observation across twenty years to explain the emergence of two community-level approaches to visitor management.

Note the difference in scale and complexity between mass tourism and dispersed tourism settings. The annual volume of tourism in a typical mountain community may be the equivalent of one day of off-season tourism in a major site such as Monte Alban. Consequently management and monitoring consists not of administrative offices with written records and databases but individual memories, scraps of paper

in a drawer, and significant events such as the opening of a museum or construction of a road. Under such conditions the formalities of method give way to the realities of teasing out useful information from community “noise” of ten or fifteen years ago.

As we moved through our organizational analysis we focused on four areas: planning, resource allocation, conflict resolution, and decision-making.

Results

Two management models emerged from our analysis. The *community collaboration model* builds on longstanding traditions of uncompensated service to the community via participation on committees delivering or overseeing the provision of water, education, road maintenance, or other critical needs. Some communities have local museums and the pattern is to assign responsibility for visitor management to the museum committee on the assumption it is most likely to have interaction with visitors. The *community commercialization model* sees visitor management as part of a package of services to be sold to outsiders to generate income, much as communities might sell crops or firewood. This model also sees community control over visitors as a central concern so access is determined through a community body, not private vendors. Both models emerge from pre-existing institutional arrangements rather than by imposition from senior levels of government or other external actors.

Community commercialization is most likely to emerge where communities already have public organizational structures managing commercial transactions with outsiders. For example the Pueblos Mancomunados in the northern mountains of Oaxaca has a history of selling forest products through a community-owned enterprise. As it became evident visitors sought access to the forest for recreational purposes the communities banded together to form Expediciones Sierra Norte, selling access, recreation services, and lodging, keeping profits in community hands. The neighboring village of Santa Ana del Valle, with a community museum centered on its long weaving tradition, assigned much visitor management to its museum committee as the critical point of contact. Visitor management was seen as a service to the community, not as a direct source of income. Committee members are expected to collaborate in attending to visitors because it is their duty as community members.

Based on experience in more than twenty communities the paper addresses the dynamics of community action with respect to visitor management. One critical finding is that neither community collaboration based on traditions of community service nor community commercialization, based on the commodification of non-extractable resources, has proven to be sustainable under current circumstances. The challenge to alter those circumstances or to find a new model continues.