

Managing Visitors and Environments: Resident Perspectives on Amenity Values in Mexico

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Successive conferences on the management and monitoring of visitors in protected and recreational areas have provided us with clear frameworks and valuable methodologies for assessing visitor experiences and impacts as well as strategies for addressing their relationships with the resources in question. Indeed a central concern of these conferences has been the centrality of the visitor as the focal point of research, policy, and practice. Drawing heavily on European cases where ecological and economic considerations promote attention to visitor engagement with natural surroundings or local residents it is understandable visitors/users take a key place in any discussion.

In other settings, however, reduced levels of visitation and more limited recreational use create new management challenges. A principal goal may be to attract visitors in ways that contribute to local economic development, thereby promoting patterns of use that attach tangible value to amenities such as landscapes, forests, water, or wildlife. The central issue for professionals, communities, and managers is to find ways to increase and direct visitation in ways that lead local residents to view recreational or amenity use of resources as important contributors to their wellbeing and therefore to assign resources a value making them worthy of protection instead of neglect or degradation.

Research Site

Our research addresses a very different site and circumstances than those found in developed countries with established patterns of recreational use, environmental management, and visitor traffic. As elsewhere in Mexico the Rio Copalita watershed in the southern state of Oaxaca is one where ecotourism and other forms of recreational or amenity use is in its infancy. The mountainous, forested region is home to about 35,000 people, mostly Zapotec Indians, scattered across 1600 square kilometers. Dependent largely on subsistence agriculture and minor commerce the watershed appears to offer visitors from Mexico's urban centers or abroad grand opportunities for ecotourism and enjoyment of local cultural traditions. Yet the current population cannot live in expectation of future potential and may be tempted to neglect good forest practices, hunt wildlife to extinction, or fail to protect the quality of streams and rivers because of the short-term benefits of such behavior. In the interest of clarity we will focus on the municipality of San Pedro El Alto although our findings are broadly representative of the 19 in the watershed.

Methodology

This paper draws from ongoing research in the Copalita watershed. Our central question is "How do local residents understand and make operational their sense of resource value?" Behind this question is a recognition that if residents attach value to resources consistent with the values of conservation and sustainability they will act to protect those resources in ways consistent with prospective visitors, thereby enhancing the attractiveness of San Pedro El Alto for recreational and ecological tourism. If residents view existing resources as commodities to be exploited and exported from the region then they may act in ways that

damage or degrade resources in the eyes of prospective visitors. If pleasant streams become sewers or waste dumps it is unlikely recreational users will appear.

While the overall perspective of resource management may include landscape, forest, water, and wildlife we will concentrate on water, and particularly on water quality. Water quality is readily compromised by careless behavior at the individual level so we want to understand whether attitudes and behaviors will support or discourage visitation to the Copalita watershed. Attitudes and behaviors are being monitored through individual interviews using semi-structured questionnaires, through focus groups drawn from neighbors and organizations, and from informal discussions with possible stakeholders likely to be affected by an increase in visitation. Experience suggests respondents may voice supportive attitudes yet display behaviors that damage water quality, e.g., follow practices for disposing of household or human waste that degrade surface water. So we want to know to what extent do San Pedro El Alto residents share the values of prospective visitors.

Second, we want to understand how institutions and other stakeholders approach protection of amenity values for visitors. The national government has formal policies and plans governing water management but do these reach into remote places like the Copalita watershed? Do outside policies include incentives or support? The government of the state of Oaxaca is an enthusiastic promoter of ecotourism and diffusion of tourism to rural areas to encourage development; does it address practical amenity matters such as water quality? Analyzing stakeholders requires interviews with local government officials and community authorities, review of formal plans and the documentary record, and discussions with environmental activists and tourism promoters.

Findings

Work to date suggests the widespread consensus found in Western Europe or Japan regarding protection of environmental values or the contributions of amenity management to the wellbeing of protected and recreational areas is only beginning to penetrate stakeholder consciousness in places like rural Mexico. In Europe this permits a focus on the visitor while in Mexico attention is divided between the hope for increased visits and the need to attend very directly to the relevant natural resources. What is largely settled in Sweden or Austria is still problematic and contested in Mexico. Furthermore the long tradition of treating the Mexican countryside as a giant reserve of commodities to be exploited for the benefit of outsiders means economic models contemplating the sale of resources to those with the economic capacity and political influence speak loudly. In rural Oaxaca this may mean large mining operations dumping thousands of tons of toxic waste into rivers. Do communities bound together by tradition and culture have the capacity to protect their resources and in the process maintain environments attractive for recreational use? Visitor management requires integral attention to those amenities visitors seek to enjoy.