Understanding tourists' choices in a developing tourist community

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Introduction

Recently tourism has gained currency as both a poverty reduction strategy and a means to promote the conservation of biodiversity for lower income nations. Poverty reduction is a central concern for Uganda with a GNI of US$500 (2010) and 35 % living below the poverty level. Concurrently, Uganda's population (34.5M) is growing rapidly with a 3.1% annual population growth rate and has been estimated to reach 150M by 2050 at current growth rates, placing unprecedented pressure on the country's natural resources. Uganda is a country rich in natural and cultural resources with opportunities for sustainable tourism, providing local impetus to support the conservation of wildlife and natural areas. In order to capitalize upon this potential, Ugandans must derive benefits from tourism. Although critiques of ecotourism in Africa caution on its natural and cultural limits (Laudati, 2010), community conceived alternative tourism development strategies can lead to rural development and avoid dependency (Lepp 2008). Developing local capacity to research, plan and manage natural resources is essential to sustainable development of tourism products and realizing profits (Ashley, Roe, & Goodwin, 2001). In 2006, the University of Manitoba and Makerere University began a 6-year project aimed at enhancing rural livelihoods in support of biodiversity conservation through sustainable community based tourism (see Campbell, MacKay, & Dranzoa, 2011). A key subcomponent of the project was the development of locally initiated tourism activities in project partner communities bordering protected areas. The first of the communities to be engaged in community tourism, Ruhija, organized itself in to several community groups under one umbrella community group, the Ruhija Community Tourism Association (RCTA). The success of initiatives such as these depends, in part, upon understanding visitor's images of the destination and using this information to enhance their experience and promote repeat visits.

Context

Ruhija (pop. 1200) is located in the Virunga Mountains of southwestern Uganda on the border of Bwindi Impenetrable Forest National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The Park and larger ecosystem that includes the Albertine Rift, Parc des Volcans in DRC and Virunga National Park in Rwanda are recognized as a global biodiversity hotspot and is home to the endangered mountain gorilla (*gorilla beringei beringei*). Gorilla tracking forms the backbone of Uganda's primate based tourism offerings and accounts for 70% of all Park revenues. While gorilla tourism has been taking place in Uganda since 1994, gorilla tracking only became available in the Ruhija district with the habituation of the Bitakura group in 2008. This spurred the UM-Makerere team to assist the community in the development of the Ruhija Gorilla Friends Resort Camp. Majority ownership of the camp (80%) is composed of small investors while the remaining 20% is owned by the larger community through the umbrella organization RCTA.

Method

In order to determine tourists' perspectives on the community tourism offerings, 55 semi-structured interviews were conducted with tourists who stayed in Ruhija between August 19 and September 18, 2011. Interviews were conducted in English and took approximately one half hour to complete. Only 10 tourists declined to participate. Another 28 were unable due to time constraints. The 10 individuals who declined to participate indicated that they were not comfortable answering the questions in English.

The interview guide development and procedure followed Patton (2002) and included questions related to destination image, leisure specialization, and activities undertaken on the trip and specifically at the site. A thematic content analysis utilizing open and structured coding provides the basis for the findings. Firstly, the interview audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Question responses were analyzed individually and then considered across questions for recurring and unique themes.

For this paper we are considering the responses to questions that focused upon the tourist's image of the destination along with pre and post trip decisions with respect to the destination.

Results

When asked to share their impressions of Ruhija, respondents expressed thoughts ranging from the descriptions of the people "open lovely people", the community "isolated, poor, alive", the landscape "beautiful-gorgeous" "wild dramatic", infrastructure "awful awful roads" and the environment "impenetrable green". Most often respondents talked of the gorillas, the lush beautiful landscape and the friendly people.

Respondents were also asked to describe what pictures they would share that described Ruhija and two themes dominated – not surprisingly gorillas and cascading mountains. In addition respondents identified the village as focus of their shared photos. In response to the question "why did you choose Ruhija?' responses can be characterized by the response "we didn't" as most respondents were in Ruhija due to availability of gorilla permits and the plans of their tour groups. When asked if they would return to Ruhija respondents were fairly evenly split between those who would and those who would not return. Those who would not

return responded so "not because we were disappointed but there are so many other places to see" reflecting something of the life list mentality. Those who would return cited their desire to pursue other activities with a particular focus on birding.

Conclusion

For decades destination image has been supported as a primary factor in deciding where to travel (Hunt, 1975; MacKay & Couldwell, 2004; Tasci & Gartner, 2007). As the summary impression of a place comprised of cognitive and affective evaluations, image is an essential ingredient of tourism. The dominance of gorilla tracking as the destination choice driver was reinforced by the image and impressions while at the location. This image verification (Okoroafo, 1989) was illustrated by the choice of likely photographs to share. The preliminary results suggest post visit image would not be particularly influential on repeat visitation in this context of a developing tourist community in rural Uganda. The current focus on gorilla tourism ignores a significant opportunity to engage repeat visitors and lengthen visits in the form of birders and those interested in pursuing other activities in the community. Additionally, tour operators should be informed of other activities available in the so that they can include these in their offerings. While the tourism initiative is currently successful, long-term viability will require product diversification.

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