

# Sustainable Tourism Development in Belize: A Comparison of two communities at different stages of development

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## Background

The concept of sustainable tourism attempts to represent an ideal compromise between positive impacts on local people, benefits to both tourists and the industry, while simultaneously respecting the environment. According to the WTO sustainable tourism can be fundamental tool in economic development and the reduction of poverty (López-Guzmán, Sánchez-Cañizares&Pavón, 2011).

Recently Belize has implemented a National Sustainable Tourism Plan that aims to highlight Belize's rich tourism resources while ensuring a sustainable future for tourism. Given that sustainable tourism must benefit local peoples and conserve nature it is important to understand exactly how tourism is impacting local communities. In this study we undertook an analysis of the current state of tourism in the communities of Laguna and Hopkins Village in Belize to identify: how residents perceive tourism and its impacts; the perceived economic, social and cultural effects of tourism on communities' livelihoods and; how this relates to location, governance, and gender.

## Methods

An exploratory case study framework was chosen to address the outlined themes of the research. Use of multiple data sources and of methodological triangulation (qualitative and quantitative methods) increased validity and confidence in research data and results. The multiple case study framework involved literature review, semi-structured interviews and participant observations in both study communities.

## Results

The results of the study demonstrated that the communities of Laguna and Hopkins are at different stages of integration into the tourism industry when considered in light of Butler's destination life cycle model of tourism development (Butler, 1980). Hopkins is exposed to unplanned mass tourism development and foreign investments, whereas Laguna is trying to pursue their own community-based strategy, while setting limits to growth.

Key themes that emerged among Hopkins residents were employment tensions, conflict of interests, resentment towards big resorts, marginalization, and resilience. In Laguna the key emerging themes were the relationship with the Toledo Ecotourism Association (TEA), numbers of tourists, the desire to remain farmers, and the recognition of limits to growth.

## Discussion

Various approaches exist to evaluate and predict performance level of tourism initiatives (Molina-Azorin et al. 2010). In this case these models were simplified and factors affecting performance were divided into two groups: external circumstances and the internal characteristics of the enterprise (See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Factors affecting performance in tourism industry

External factors	Internal factors
Geographical location and environmental characteristics	Skilled labour
Cultural assets	Marketing resources and management
Demand and competitors	Motivations and goals
Supporting industries and stakeholders	Financial opportunities
Economic and political environment	
Tourism infrastructure	
Historically formed cultural aspects and demographics (ethnicity, mentality, religion, gender roles etc.)	
Constraints to sustainable community tourism	

Although developed with tourism enterprise performance in mind, we adapted it to Laguna and Hopkins with a few basic assumptions. The two villages can be seen as two different firms, functioning and developing their tourism initiatives in a set of external and internal conditions and factors within one destination (Belize). Using the models outlined earlier, we defined the factors crucial to the case study that were analyzed in relation to the performance in each community (Table 1). When considered in light of this model the two communities exhibit differences reflective of their state of tourism development.

Both Hopkins and Laguna base their tourism enterprise upon the local culture (Garifuna in Hopkins and Maya in Laguna) and the geographic and environmental characteristics of the communities. The challenges facing the communities however are quite different.

Hopkins Village's greatest challenge is the external origin of tourism in the community and reflects mass tourism development and a difficult relationship with the foreign businesses that drive development. The nature of involvement in tourism for most people in Hopkins is opportunistic and very self-oriented. This negatively affects the ability to shift to sustainable tourism in the future. Overall, Hopkins suffers from a "curse" of most local communities that face foreign development. The situation gets aggravated by the limited knowledge about tourism and reduced livelihood diversification and, therefore, reduced resilience.

In contrast, Laguna's challenges are largely internal issues of growth and direction of development. In Laguna, the tourism industry is based solely on the malfunctioning TEA guesthouses system. It was clear from the interviews that community members are not opposed to the idea of tourism development in the village. However, villagers do not perceive tourism as a potential substitute to all or some of their

other sources of their livelihoods. Most of the interviewees see tourism only as a side activity supplementing their earnings with an amount of cash that is generally spent on school supplies for children. This disposition towards tourism sets substantial limits to its extensive or, more importantly intensive growth in Laguna. Although a dramatic increase in visitation is not desired by the community members, they are still interested tourism as a source of “school money”. Maintaining such a consistent flow of tourists requires regular attention to the tourism enterprise(e.g. village website development, promotion, tourism product development, trail maintenance etc.).This is the classic “chicken and egg” dilemma, where community members either do not have skills, time or money to invest in tourism development, consequently tourism doesn’t suffers, therefore people are forced to concentrate more on other activities, and as a result - even less time or money for tourism. This dilemma is undoubtedly related to the challenge of perception mentioned above, as well to the loyalty to the traditional ways and activities.

## Conclusions

The research revealed that the economic, social and cultural effects of tourism and its importance for local livelihoods varied significantly between Hopkins and Laguna and was dependent on a number of factors – geographical, cultural, social etc. The issues of preserving cultural heritage, problems of marginalization, lack of skills, exclusion and other were all contributed to the sustainability of tourism at these destinations. This underscores the necessity of understanding local circumstances in the success of sustainable tourism development and the need to adapt community development models to tourism development. While culture was viewed as the most significant element in the communities offerings, there relative stages in the tourism product lifecycle significantly impacts their ability to capitalize on these cultural assets and develop a sustainable tourism product.



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