Building community through socially responsible tourism: a collaborative success in the Dominican Republic

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Abstract

Ecology and ethics: socially responsible developers can create positive socioeconomic and ecological impact in communities where economic development stems from sustainable tourism.

Economy: tourism promotes globalization and rapid change, which creates challenges for communities, especially those in emerging nations. In communities that experience unequal access to education, healthcare, and unequal distribution of wealth; the cycle of poverty is perpetuated.

Education: universities have a responsibility to prepare citizen scholars to live and work in a globalized world through educational experiences that foster social responsibility and civic engagement in addition to content expertise and critical thinking.

This paper outlines the strategies and successes of corporate and university collaboration in an eco-friendly oceanfront resort, second home enclave, airport, and biodiversity research center in Punta Cana, Dominican Republic. In this arena, socially responsible tourism has enhanced community infrastructure and economy, while preserving cultural heritage and ecology. This study demonstrates how socially responsible tourism can increase access to technology, transportation, education and social services. It also addresses the role that universities can have in providing resources for training, education, research and development to foster community participation in socially responsible tourism. Additionally, it models the active university role in ecological stewardship for the development and operation of environmentally friendly tourism venues.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, Dominican Republic, ecology, ethical, community, socially responsible, education.

1   Research question

If supported by a collaborative approach between socially responsible developers and universities, can tourism benefit communities? This paper addresses the balance of ethics, economics and ecology in sustainable tourism.

2   Hypothesis

Site developers who apply a socially responsible approach to tourism bolstered by university research and education capacities can promote sustainable economic development and ecological preservation that benefits communities.

In order to create and manage sustainable tourism that benefits poorer nation states, tourism must include ethical practices. To succeed, private citizens (land holders or not), communities, governments, tourism professionals, educators, corporations, and tourists themselves, must subscribe to ethical standards to create sustained development. If not, the physical environment, culture, community, and the tourist industry itself, may fail.

3   Tourism as a change agent

Tourism has been recognized as a force that needs to be monitored, if not controlled. The non-profit organization, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) has developed the "Global Code of Ethics for Tourism." These guidelines have been adopted to some extent by member countries. This code creates a foundation of ethical standards for tourism.

In response to the surge in global impact, several international agencies including the WTO and United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) have developed guidelines to encourage environmentally, socially and culturally compatible tourism development. In 1999, The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism was adopted by the WTO; however, the Code of Ethics is voluntary.

In 2002, the WTO Committee on Sustainable Development of Tourism, recommended that, "Certification systems for sustainable tourism need to be developed and operated to fit geographical, political, socio-economic and sectoral characteristics of each country, and they need to be adapted to the economic, institutional, social and environmental conditions prevailing in each country." (WTO [1]).

Following a year-long study, which analyzed the impact of tourism on 59 countries, the WTO determined that governments should play a key role in the initiation and development of sustainable tourism. To guarantee success and sustainability, governments must involve key stakeholders including different government authorities (tourism, environment, transportation, finance, education, etc); tourism trade associations and other private groups; academic, education and research institutions; NGOs; consumer associations; and others. The effects of government interaction and control will be further discussed in the historical overview section of this paper. As of June, 30, 2005, the WTO lists 92 member

states, associate members, and permanent observers of nations worldwide (Council [2]).

WTO indicators for success of the tourism implementation included an assessment of the environmental, social and economic impacts of tourism operations. Environmental aspects include preservation of artifacts and of natural habitat for example. Social concerns included the conservation of local/regional culture, heritage and authenticity. This emphasis on culture, and specifically, authenticity, ties in closely with Cowen's observations of homogeneousness. (Cowen, [3]) As tourism increases, the introduction of globally recognized franchises and merchandise impacts local small businesses.

In addition to measuring GNP, economic impact includes local economy, employment, and improvements in technology and infrastructure. For many developing coastal tropical nations, tourism is the major source of employment, foreign exchange earnings, and national government revenue. In 2003, the WTO estimates that tourism receipts accounted for about 25% of total export earnings in the Pacific and over 35% for Caribbean islands (WTO [1]).

However, much of the income generated by tourism leaks back to developed countries (30-50 percent in the Caribbean), mostly to foreign air carriers, hotel owners and suppliers of imported food and beverages (WTO) [1]). Leakage can be reduced with careful planning, education programs, and inventive agricultural initiatives such as those discussed in the Punta Cana Case Study. One of the key elements expanded in the Punta Cana case study is the relationship between globalization and localization in community building through socially responsible, sustainable tourism.

4   Case study – Punta Cana, Dominican Republic

Although the Dominican Republic (DR) was a member of the Organization of American States (OAS), the United Nations (UN), and other international bodies for decades, it remained a poorer underdeveloped country with an unstable government. The Dominican Republic, a small island nation of approximately 48,442 square kilometers, is located on the eastern half of the island of Hispaniola (La Isla Española), which it shares with Haiti. The 388-kilometer border between the two nations is more than a political line; it also demarcates differences in culture, race and economics. In the past, Haitians invaded the Dominicans, and now Dominicans, in spite of some integration, remain mistrustful of their closest neighbor. Neither nation enjoyed a stable government.

As late as 1965, the DR was embroiled in civil war over differences between democratic and authoritarian factions. US intervention helped stop the war, but also left some Anti-American sentiment. As of 2005, the DR continues to be stable with a government that supports a blend of democracy, human rights, and strong leadership powers. Unlike Haiti, stable governance provided the safety required for tourism to become a viable industry in the DR.

Tourism increased significantly in the DR, beginning in the 1970s. The DR government actively created a long term commitment to tourism development

and passed Tourist Incentive Law (Law 153) in 1971, which created certain "tourist poles" to promote tourism (Haggerty [4]). "Tourist poles" are identified as specific sites that, if developed, have the propensity to attract tourists due to geographical or cultural features.

Mexico's Pan American Highway plan (PAH) literally created a map to the future of Mexico's tourism industry. In 1967, the Mexican Central bank team began a study with a mere $2 million. The final product created a master plan for implementing a socio-economic roadmap for the future of tourism using new computer technology leased from the US. The study identified five key sites to become tourist areas or poles (Library of Congress [5]). All five would be beach resorts directed by state officials. The five poles or planned resort were: Cancun- in the astern coast on the Yucatan peninsula; Ixtapa - near Acapulco in the state of Guerrero; Las Cabos - in Western Baja California; Loreto - in Western Baja California; and Bahias de Hautulco in the poor southern state of Oaxaca. In some cases, such as Cancun, communities were estranged by tourism venues.

The DR and other nations used the Mexican government's approach, and identified specific tourist resort poles for development (Clancy [6]). The nine areas include: Northwest Samana Peninsula; Nagua and Cabrera; The Amber Coast; Nagua and Cabrera; The Northwest, including Montecristi, Dajabon, Santiago Rodriguez and Valverde; Compostela; Constanza and Jarabacoa in central DR; The Amber Coast (Puerto Plata and Sosua); The South (Barahona, Bahoruca, Independencia and Pedernales); MacaoBavaro; San Cristobal, Palenque, Peravia, and Azua de Compostela; and Santo Domingo -La Romana.

Like Mexico, the DR government institutionalized tourism growth by blending it into the national financial system. Investors received a ten-year tax break and an exemption from tariffs on imports not available locally. At the same time, the government carefully sought to prevent "leakage," by providing tariff incentives for investors to use local resources when available. Law 153 is an example of sustainable tourism being introduced at the infancy stages of development. Hence, government created mechanisms to localize profit through globalism.

Law 153 also established a special arm of the central bank to co-finance new investments in tourism. Later, the DR tourism development director was appointed to the president's cabinet as a visible sign of governmental commitment to tourism and support of the local community.

By 1984, (the same year the Balearic Islands of Spain set for renovation purposes to rectify 30 years of uncontrolled tourism growth and development.) tourism had surpassed agriculture as the leading industry in the DR (Islands [7]). The DR was rapidly moving from Stage One Growth into the Take Off Stage, as the Dominican economy became more diverse and no longer dependent upon sugarcane crops.

In 1975, 278,000 tourists visited the DR. Hotel rooms stayed occupied, and by 1985, visitors increased to 792,000 (Haggerty [4]). By 1989, the DR had more hotel rooms (18,000) than any other Caribbean nation. Foreign-exchange earnings from tourism increased over 80 percent from US$100 million in 1980 to US$570 million by 1987 (Haggerty [4]).

The Dominicans learned quickly that tourism could damage the environment. Current infrastructure could not support the rapid growth. The lack of water, electricity, and educated workers, the slow construction of buildings and roads, and shortages of materials impacted tourists and communities. The Dominican government watched as vacationers left their island due to lack of clean water, unsuitable accommodations; or conversely, did not arrive due to inadequate roads and air transportation. Unlike Mexico and Spain, could the Dominican Republic reap the economic rewards of tourism without destroying social and ecological structure?

4.1 Airport access accelerates DR tourism

In 1984, a public-private collaboration permanently changed tourism in the DR. Grupo PUNTACANA (GPC) and Club Med opened one of the first privately owned commercial airports in the world on the island, making the DR accessible to mass tourism. GRUPO PUNTACANA founders include US labor lawyer Ted Kheel, and DR entrepreneur Frank Rainieri, and partners Oscar de la Renta and Julio Iglesias.

Three years later, in 1987, with over 1 million visitors, the DR became the fifth largest earner of tourism dollars in the Caribbean, behind the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and the United States Virgin Islands (Black [8]).

The former dominance of agriculture is being displaced by mass tourism in the Caribbean, which accounts for between 25 and 35 per cent of the total economy of the region. Tourism is the major foreign exchange earner in the region, accounting for one-quarter of foreign exchange earnings, and one-fifth of all jobs (ranging from direct dependence on tourism, such as working in hotels and on the beaches, to indirect involvement such as banking and farming (UNEP [9]).

Two different types of tourism are now visible in Punta Cana. Mass tourism created overdeveloped hotel areas in some areas of the island. All inclusive resorts and cruise ship ports are examples of mass tourism. These venues are not integrated into the local structure. Sustainable tourism is also present, in the form of eco-friendly resorts, which follow standards promoted by the Caribbean Alliance for Sustainable Tourism. This case study addresses the latter of the two types: specifically, one example of sustainable tourism in Punta Cana.

4.2 Grupo PUNTACANA: resort and research

Grupo PUNTACANA (GPC), developer of PUNTACANA Resort & Club, is a Dominican/American partnership. GPC has integrated a biodiversity and multicultural research center with an upscale beach front resort replete with Pete Dye Golf Course, private homes, and condominiums. GPC has made unique collaborations with the DR government, local educators, community members, international universities and researchers to create a dual purpose enterprise. Tourists appreciate the eco-friendly, upscale retreat; while students, teachers, and researchers thrive in the living biodiversity and education labs. In addition to the airport, GPC addressed infrastructure and built the road that connects Punta Cana

to Higuey (where many of the resort workers live) developed an independent power grid; and built a waste- and water-treatment plant. To support the expanding community, GPC also built a town church, outdoor shopping area, and school (Marshall [10]).

4.2.1 Education

The Ann & Ted Kheel Polytechnic School, founded in 2004 as a tribute to Theodore W. Kheel, cofounder of GPC, and his late wife Mrs. Ann S. Kheel, is located a few miles from the resort. It serves students from the towns of the Verón, Bávaro, Cortecito and Cabeza de Toro. GPC initially invested US$785,000 and supplied computers as well as physics, chemistry and biology labs. In 2006, the school was expanded to include a library, additional classrooms, and workshops (Marshall [10]).

The Biodiversity Center of the PUNTACANA Ecological Foundation hosts professors, researchers and students from more than ten universities including: Virginia Tech, which has established a permanent center on site. By integrating ecological research into hotel operations, GPC has become a model for sustainable, ecological, community enhancing tourism development (Virginia Tech [11]).

4.2.2 Ecology

Even the architecture of the PUNTACANA Resort and Club minimizes impact on the environment; the buildings are barely visible from the beach. The developers designed the resort so that no roofline is taller than the palm trees (Virginia Tech [11]).

The PUNTACANA Ecological Foundation (PCEF) is a nonprofit foundation established in 1994 by the PUNTACANA Resort and Club "to protect and restore the natural resources of the Punta Cana region and contribute to the sustainable development of the country. The Foundation is endowed with a 1,500 acre ecological park and reserve, filled with an array of local flora and fauna, experimental gardens, and a petting zoo. The PCEF works directly with the PUNTACANA Resort and Club to influence and contribute to the rational use of natural resources and respect for nature as a model for the sustainable development of destinations." (PUNTACANA [12]).

The PCEF tends to the ecological balance of nature with a diverse array of projects. Biodiversity research has resulted in new crops and farming methods. Produce from its organic gardens is served in PUNTACANA Resort restaurants and is also sold to area residents. The golf course uses a hybrid grass developed by researchers requires minimal fertilizer and pesticide and can be irrigated with seawater. Grey water from the hotel is also used to irrigate crops

In January 2008 the PCEF launched "Lombricompost," This eco friendly process converts solid waste into high quality organic soil. Punta Cana Resort is the first tourist site to use this low impact environmental conservation technique. According to PUNTACANA Group environmental director Jake Kheel, in its first stage, the project will process from 200 to 500 pounds of organic waste monthly (PUNTACANA [13]). The resort is also using imported honey bees to pollinate crops and create organic honey for consumption.

4.2.3 Ethics

As an exemplar of socially responsible tourism, the GPC provides projects and programs that support community through, education, health and welfare, education, and cultural identity:

- GPC established a school for equitable access for local children
- University students teach English and literacy to over 120 school children in schools supported by the Ann and Ted Kheel Foundation.
- GPC teaches local fishermen why protecting the local coral reefs is important
- GPC has urged lawmakers to create no-fishing zones to sustain reefs
- GPC teaches farmers new agriculture techniques-the crops, including new variations of herbs organic vegetable and fruit which are then served in the hotel restaurants
- GPC waters crops with water recycled from the resort
- GPC irrigates its golf course with grey water to reduce waste (Virginia Tech [11]).

4.2.4 Economy

These examples of sustainable tourism as an integrated part of local culture, community and political structure, demonstrate how tourism can serve multiple purposes. GPC is a prime example of the positive impact of shared knowledge and vision through education and ethical standards.

While it is highly unlikely that most of the DR resorts will be as intrinsically involved in sustainable tourism and economic development, tourists are driving more efforts to create eco-tourism venues on the island.

According to the February 1999 report of the World Travel and Tourism Council, the Caribbean is the most economically dependent on tourism of the 13 world regions identified by the Council. For example, in 1999, on a global basis, the WTTC estimated that the combined effects of travel and tourism account for 11.7 percent of world Gross Domestic Product (GDP): [but] for the Caribbean, this figure is 20.6 percent, and for some islands, such as Anguilla, it is over 65 percent (UNEP99 [13]).

The Dominican Republic has surpassed all other Caribbean countries in the number of tourist arrivals in 2007, according to the most recent figures from the Caribbean Tourism Organization. From January through October of 2007, more than 3 million travelers, (not including those who arrived by cruise ships) visited the DR. This number far exceeds other Caribbean destinations. The number of hotel rooms increased from 1,600 in 1977 to 59,000 in 2004. As result, tourist expenditures increased from US$55.4 billion in 1977 to US$3,127 billion in 2004 (Christie [14]).

In 2006, Tourism generates 35% of foreign exchange and accounts for 50,000 direct employments and 30,000 indirect employments in the DR. In the tourism employee sector, 97% of the employees are Dominican and 30% are female (Christie [14]). Although tourism has created a new economy and new employee base for the nation, it has not been as beneficial to small business. Because 75%

of all hotels are all inclusive, small and medium enterprises, including restaurants and cultural centers have had a tendency to fail. Hence, tourism provides jobs within large resorts, but has not created opportunities for small businesses, which are often hard to reach from resorts due to poor roads. In contrast, PUNTACANA Resort and Club, as a sustainable tourism venture, has integrated the resort into the socioeconomic environment.

Dominican newspapers and WTO reports alike suggest that tourism venues must be more diverse and that heritage sites and local places of interest be more accessible. Cowen's warning of homogeneity is apparent in the all-inclusive resorts that dominate the DR; tourists are asking for better access to authentic culture and diverse communities (Dominican [15]).

5   Summary

Socially responsible tourism, if supported by socially responsible site developers and educators, as well as a participatory community, has the potential to create the following direct and indirect benefits to stakeholders. At Punta Cana Resort, socially responsible development has created collaborations that build socio-economic stability while preserving community and an ecological balance in a fragile ecosystem.

In sum, in this single case study, the following direct results are noted:

- Ecology: University researchers developed and put into practice new methods of farming, conservation, and recycling.
- Ethics: Communities now have improved healthcare, education, and housing. Infrastructure supports both the community and resort.
- Economy: Global economic development through tourism has created localized profits and economic opportunity. Leakage has been diminished through the use of local resources and the development of new processes to enhance production.
- Education: The PCEF supports enhanced learning opportunities for community, tourists, and scholars. Teaching and learning extend beyond the classroom.

Socially responsible site developers can collaborate with universities and community leaders to create sustainable development that promotes cultural enrichment and educational opportunities to visitors and residents. The GPC model can serve as an exemplar for universities with study abroad programs and centers and collaborative tourism site developers.

This case study merits additional research. Beyond this abbreviated case study, dissertation research includes qualitative and quantitative analysis of implementation, best practices, and challenges for sustainable tourism in coastal resort sites in the Dominican Republic, Spain, and Mexico. In more detailed analysis, I compare and contrast development methods and models in other ecologically sensitive areas that are fundamentally dependent upon tourism for sustainability.

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