

The Developmental Advantages and Disadvantages of Small Tourism Towns from the Perspective of Stakeholders

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Abstract: The rapid development of small tourism towns around big cities in recent years has increased the county-level economy, boosted the development of rural industries, and promoted farmer's employment, making outstanding contributions to the improvement of rural environment. But a re-examination of the advancement of small tourism towns from the perspective of stakeholders, it is found that the tourism development of small tourism towns is not a "non-smoke" industry, especially its negative impacts on some stakeholders. For example, it damages ecological environment, converts rustic civil style to business civil style and limits other industrial developments. This article analyzed the advantages and disadvantages of small tourism towns by taking Tangyu Town—a small tourism town in Mei county of Shaanxi province as an example.

Keywords: Stakeholders; Tourism; Small Towns

1. Introduction

Tangyu Town, located in Mei county, Shaanxi Province, has taken the lead in developing hot springs and forest tourism since the late 1980s by relying on the rich hot spring resources of Taibai Mountain—the highest peak in the Qinling Mountains, and the Tangyu estuary. It became a pioneer for the development of mountain scenic spots in Shaanxi province. Now, it has evolved into a national 5A-level tourist attraction focusing on ecotourism, and is the only national-level tourist resort in the province. Mei county has also become the first in Shaanxi and the 70th in China in the top 100 counties and cities in the comprehensive competitiveness of county-level tourism because of Tangyu. However, there are both advantages and disadvantages by reviewing the tourism development of Tangyu town from the perspective of stakeholders even though it improved local economy, employment and environment.

2. Stakeholders in the development of small tourism towns

Stakeholder Theory could be traced to 19 century and was first used by Stanford Research Institute in 1963. Freeman, an American economist, defined stakeholder as a any "group or individual who can affect, or is affected by the achievement of a firm's objectives"^[1]. Given the practical situation of the tourism development in Tangyu town, stakeholders in the tourism development in Tangyu town were divided into five groups, i.e., local residents, tourists, tourism enterprises, government agencies, environmental protection organizations and religious groups.

2.1 Local residents

Local residents are the masters of the tourist destinations. They are important human resources capital as well as the builders of local tourist landscapes. And local people's way of life is also a part of local tourism culture.

2.1.1 The benefits from tourism development:

Increased employment opportunities and incomes. For instance, local residents in Tangyu town participated in infrastructure construction during the local infrastructure construction period, and in tourism-related industries (hospitality industry and retail) during the boom of tourism, higher incomes were granted.

Gradually unlocked mindset. Through contact with tourists, local residents gradually became more business-minded and open-minded.

Improved living conditions. Before promoting the tourism industry in Tangyu town, Tangyu town was the poorest town in Mei county for many mountainous land and inconvenient transportation. There is a saying that goes “don’t get your daughters married to the Tangyu estuary’s people”. But the infrastructure has been greatly upgraded since developing tourism.

2.1.2 The drawbacks from tourism development:

Impacted traditional cultures. Before the tourism development, local Tangyu folks were simple, hospitable and believed in Buddhism, Daoism or other local religions. But after that, money-oriented and profit-seeking opinions spread.

Increased cost of living. Previously, the local economy was dominated by small-scale farming economy. But since the tourism development, residents have been forced to join tourism-related industries, increasing their dependence on the outside world and rising living costs.

Strained man-land relationship. Due to the tourism development, residents in the town area gathered in Tangyu estuary in accordance to the government's plan. New and old residents, tourism enterprises and tourists all crowded in Tangyu estuary, which made the relationship between man and land in Tangyu estuary gradually tense.

Surged risk of economic fluctuations. The development of tourism is sensitive to the social and economic development. Tourism is easily affected by factors such as the economic environment, government policies, especially the pandemic outbreak, which has had a greater impact on the local tourism industry.

Widened gap between the rich and poor. The profits brought by tourism development are mainly shared by tourism enterprises and some residents. If some residents didn’t play a part in the tourism industry due to their own reasons, nor could they engage in other industries, the gap between them and the wealthy groups will be further widened.

2.2 Tourists

Tourists are the principal part of tourism activities and the logical starting point for the existence and extension of the tourism economic industrial chain. Tourism is essentially a special way of life based on the satisfaction of pleasure needs and temporary on-site aesthetic experience in different places^[ii]. Therefore, the core interest appeal of tourists is to obtain a pleasant travel experience. For tourists, they care about the quality of the tourism resources, the infrastructure and the services that the scenic spots can provide. Along with the economic returns and the open-mindedness they brought to Tangyu town, they also brought many negative impacts. For example, damages in Tangyu’s ecological environment due to the uncivilized behaviors of some tourists; adverse effects on folk custom caused by bad thoughts and behaviors of some tourists and higher local price level.

2.3 Tourism enterprises

Tourism enterprises are principal part of tourism development, mainly including infrastructure developers, tourism and catering enterprises, tourism and entertainment enterprises. The core interest appeal of tourism enterprises is to pursue maximization of the economic benefit. Irregular practices of some tourism enterprises will impair the benefits of other stakeholders-local residents and tourists in the process of enterprises’ development.

2.4 Government agencies

The systematization of developing tourism resources and the comprehensiveness of tourism products determined that government agencies need to be the interest coordinator in developing tourism. But in many cases, government agencies have to impair the interest of one party for the interest of the other.

2.5 Environmental protection organizations and religious groups

Environmental protection organizations as non-profit organizations regard the preservation of ecological environment in tourism areas as top priority. And religious groups existed as faith groups keep the conservation of religious places, the normal proceedings of religious activities and the succession of religious cultures in mind. The development of tourism, especially the infrastructure construction, has brought a certain impact on the local ecological environment, as well as on the original religious sites and religious activities. On the one hand, the steady stream of tourists has brought economic income for religious groups to carry out religious activities and further spread their religious beliefs through tourists. On the other hand, the growth of tourists has destroyed the quiet environment, and some religious people believe that it has affected their practice.

3. Game relationships among stakeholders

3.1 Governmental agencies and local residents

From the place infamous for “don’t get your daughters married to the Tangyu estuary’s people” to the small and rich tourism town well known province-wide, in the eyes of outsiders, Tangyu town has benefited profoundly from the tourism development and Tangyu residents should be thankful to the government, but the game between them as two stakeholders never stopped. The government leads the development of tourism according to the local tourism resources, and its investment and support for other industries will inevitably be insufficient, leading to the dissatisfaction of other groups.

3.2 Tourism enterprises and local residents

The contradiction between tourism enterprises and local residents is mainly concentrated in two aspects. For one thing, the local residents participating in tourism compete with large tourism enterprises in business operation. For the other thing, some local residents believe that tourism resources are their own assets but most of the money is earned by tourism enterprises.

3.3 The internal conflicts within local residents

The first conflict is the competition among tourism practitioners. The second is the conflict between these newly relocated residents and the old residents, which mainly was caused by man-land contradiction and the fight for rites brought forward by population aggregation. The third is the conflict between tourism practitioners and other industries. Residents who weren’t involved in tourism thought that the development of government-led industry has forced other industries to clear way for it.

4. Conclusion

As John Bodley put it, “everybody is the victim of progress”^[iii]. We all have to pay for economic development. Although this kind of expression seems extreme, after all, developing the economy and ensuring people's wellbeing is what the people are most concerned about, it also reminds us to seek advantages and avoid disadvantages as much as possible in development.

4.1 Tourism is not a smokeless industry

Generally speaking, tourism is a non-smoke industry, that is, a non-polluting and non-destructive industry, which does not consume natural and cultural resources. Industry insiders and local governments often deploy this argument when emphasizing the economic benefits of tourism, thus artificially promoting high efficiency and underestimating the level of resource consumption^[iv]. But the truth is that tourism is an economic industry with a cultural nature. Natural resources and cultural resources mainly act as indirect practical value and non-practical value. Taking Tangyu town as an example, although the development of tourism is not aimed at destroying the environment and plundering natural resources. Large-scale infrastructure construction in the process of development, such as building mountain roads, cableways, power facilities, and communication base stations, will inevitably have an adverse impact on the local ecological environment.

4.2 The tourism need sustainable development

There is no need to say much about the many benefits of developing tourism, but from the existing data and the history of the development of small tourism towns, tourism areas need to develop new landscape and continuously maintain the tourism facilities so as to keep the tourism prosperous, which requires large amounts of capital investments. Currently, most of the funds for the development of small tourism towns mainly rely on the financial aids coordinated by the government. Once the investment is reduced and the publicity is decreased, the small tourism town will soon be replaced by scenic spots of the same nature, and then various problems of the dying tourism area will follow.

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