

An Empirical Assessment of Stakeholder Understanding of Sustainable Tourism in Alpine Protected Areas

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Abstract: Sustainable tourism has been widely viewed as an effective way of addressing the socio-economic and environmental issues associated with protected areas, particularly alpine protected areas which are popular destinations, providing opportunities for adventure tourism with close-to-nature experiences. Nevertheless, the impact of tourism is controversial and its sustainability is not always evident both in terms of socio-economic development and nature conservation. This paper assesses the level of understanding of multiple stakeholders about sustainable tourism in the Central Karakoram National Park (CKNP), located in Pakistan's peripheral province of Gilgit-Baltistan, where nature tourism is considered to be the most promising activity to overcome livelihood and conservation problems. Data were collected from four stakeholder groups using a previously structured survey instrument about their level of understanding of sustainable tourism while semi-structured interviews were conducted about the barriers to achieving sustainable tourism. The findings disclosed that although stakeholders had a moderately high level of understanding of sustainable tourism, the main obstacles and challenges that underpinned sustainable tourism development in CKNP were acute fragmentation between public and private entities, absence of a participatory governance structure, and a lack of tourism management plan for CKNP's potential future as a destination for sustainable tourism. Implications are discussed for building a more integrated policy approach to sustainable tourism development in protected areas.

Key words: Sustainable tourism, participatory governance, protected areas, tourism planning, integrated management

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Introduction

High alpine protected areas, especially in developing countries, are characterised by vulnerable and fragile environments and are home to underprivileged indigenous communities which have a deep-rooted social, economic and environmental connection with the protected area. Communities that reside within or around these protected areas encounter problems such as involuntary displacement and restricted rights of access to resources for their livelihood. (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2011).

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In addition, crop raiding and loss of livestock by predators in and around protected areas is a problem faced by communities frequently (Fungo, 2011; Sharma, 1990; Studsrod & Wegge, 1995). This marginalisation and deprivation of the local communities has in many instances led to their disenfranchisement and their lack of support for protected area conservation (Brockington & Igoe, 2006; Ghimire, 1994; Sharma, 1990). Moreover, as popular destinations, these alpine protected areas face significant challenges associated with the environmental and socio-cultural costs of unplanned development of conventional mass tourism (Sirakaya-Turk, Jamal & Choi, 2001).

Many studies assert that the relationships between livelihood and conservation, tourism and livelihood enhancement, and conservation and tourism are dynamic and complex (Adams *et al.*, 2004; Croes & Vanegas, 2008; Ollenburg & Buckley, 2007; Nyaupane & Thapa, 2004), and there is no single framework to examine the complex relationships among these concerns (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2011). As a result of these complex socio-ecological inter-relationships underpinning protected areas, Nunkoo & Gursoy (2012) state that sustainable development of tourism in such economies needs to be closely linked to local community involvement and their livelihoods. How these key stakeholders view and understand sustainable tourism can reveal their level of willingness to support sustainable tourism policies or active participation in a sustainable tourism project (Sirakaya-Turk, Ekinici & Kaya, 2008).

The main purpose of this study is to investigate how various stakeholder groups in a protected area which is also a tourism destination interpret sustainable tourism and how this understanding can provide information to protected area planners and policy makers to make informed decisions on implementing sustainable tourism for biodiversity conservation and livelihood improvement. This research, carried out in the Central Karakoram National Park (CKNP) in Pakistan, assesses and compares the level of understanding about sustainable tourism of four stakeholder groups: local communities, protected area authorities, tourism enterprises, and tourists. Barriers to implementation of sustainable tourism in the protected area destination are also presented.

Literature Review

In protected areas, multiple actors with differing interests such as tourists, tourism enterprises, local communities, and protected area authorities are organised at different scales and create a complex assemblage with a diversity of practices in tourism (Darbellay & Stock, 2012). Therefore, research places a strong emphasis on stakeholders as the key drivers that can steer the process of sustainable tourism. The vital importance of stakeholders and stakeholder management within sustainable tourism policy development, therefore, has been well recognised (Timur & Getz, 2009). Considering the significance of stakeholders, some of the underpinning aspects identified in research to achieve sustainable tourism objectives are a bottom-up approach, capacity-building, empowerment, strong leadership, a sense of ownership among all stakeholders, and building strong partnerships (MacLeod & Todnem, 2007; Elich *et al.*, 2002; Bell & Morse, 2004).

The findings of research by Hung, Turk & Ingram (2011) suggest that the extent to which community members participate in the tourism development process depends on motivation, opportunity, and ability to participate. Research also shows that stakeholders' participation in the tourism development process depends not only on social, political and economic considerations but also on their individual characteristics such as personal interest, knowledge,

confidence, awareness, resources, education, and time (Cole, 2006; Hung *et al.*, 2011; Mitchell & Reid, 2001).

Choguill (1996) asserts that the extent to which a community participates in collaborative activities greatly depends on the government's attitudes toward the community and support from non-governmental organisations. Dodds (2012) states that sustainable tourism is the responsibility of all stakeholders and there is a need to understand their role in sustainable tourism practices. Numerous studies assert that positive attitudes to tourism are usually accompanied by a higher level of support for tourism development (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010; Vargas-Sanchez *et al.*, 2009). Kask *et al.* (2011) are of the view that sustainable tourism development represents the tension between economic gain, environmental stewardship, and community relationships. Castellani & Sala (2010) emphasise the importance of consulting and involving local stakeholders in development strategies to ensure that priorities of different stakeholders are taken into account.

Although the importance of diverse stakeholder groups in planning and management of tourism is underscored in the tourism literature, empirical studies have mostly concentrated on understanding the residents' attitudes toward tourism for successful tourism development (Andriotis & Vaughan, 2003; Choi & Sirakaya, 2005; Nunkoo & Gursoy, 2012; Yu *et al.*, 2011). There is limited research that assesses how multiple stakeholders view and understand sustainable tourism and its policy and management implications on the development of a sustainable tourism management system in protected areas.

This research presumes that sustainable tourism cannot be successfully implemented without the involvement of all the actors affected by tourism. Therefore, it examines multiple stakeholders' understanding and responsiveness towards tourism, which comprise the first step towards making their involvement possible in sustainable tourism. In light of the key findings of the research, this paper identifies the key challenges to implement and reinforce the role of sustainable tourism.

Central Karakoram National Park (CKNP)

CKNP is located in Gilgit-Baltistan. Covering more than 10,000 sq. km, plus a further 7,500 sq km buffer zone, it is Pakistan's largest national park (WWF-Pakistan, 2007). Like other alpine protected areas, CKNP is characterised by indigenous populations, remote location and a fragile resource base. However, it is endowed with a pristine environment, a unique ecosystem and cultural features that naturally differentiate it from other tourism destinations. CKNP is an appropriate study area as it is an ecologically fragile destination exemplifying the problem of resource-dependent communities in a peripheral environment. In CKNP, tourism has decreased due to terrorism concerns in recent years (Ali, 2010). The protected area authorities, the tourism enterprises, the local communities, and the international and national NGOs (interviews with the stakeholders) classify tourism as the most promising activity to reverse the current negative trends of resource exploitation, low economic growth and insecure image of the destination.

Methodology

This study examined and compared the understanding of four stakeholder groups – local communities, protected area authorities, tourism enterprises, and tourists – about sustainable

tourism in CKNP. To do this effectively, the research applied a mixed method approach. A questionnaire survey was undertaken to obtain quantitative data, while document analysis and interviews with representatives of the four groups were conducted to obtain qualitative data.

For the quantitative analysis, the sustainable tourism attitude scale (SUS-TAS) developed by Choi & Sirakaya (2005) to assess residents' attitudes toward sustainable tourism was revised according to the requirements and understanding of the respondents in the study area. Since initial development of the scale, SUS-TAS has been widely used and validated by tourism researchers (Yu, Chancellor & Cole, 2011; Sirakaya-Turk *et al.*, 2008; Prayag, Dookhony-Ramphul & Maryeven, 2010). The original SUS-TAS containing 44 items (Choi & Sirakaya, 2005; Sirakaya-Turk *et al.*, 2008) was modified and its number of items was reduced to 21 to suit the purpose of this research. A five point Likert scale was used for responses to each item of 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. The revised scale was used to measure the understanding of multiple stakeholders about sustainable tourism in CKNP. The content validity of SUS-TAS was established during translations of the scale items from English to Urdu. The experts involved in scale translations and the data collectors reported that the scale items were suitable for measuring stakeholders' understanding of sustainable tourism. The revised scale was discussed with colleagues and pilot-tested with a group of individuals belonging to the tourism sector.

Considering factors such as the heterogeneity of the sample population, difficult terrain of the research site, insufficient population data and time constraints, convenience and purposive sampling techniques were used to collect the data (Neuman, 2006). Purposive sampling was used to select the tourism enterprises and protected area authority stakeholders (Yasarata, Altinay, Burns & Okumus, 2010). The local communities and tourists were selected through convenience sampling. The CKNP Directorate and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) staff assisted in selecting the eight valleys out of the total of 18 located in the buffer zone of the park and with entry points to the park, for surveying the local communities. On average, 20-24 members from each valley, with an approximate population of 2500, were conveniently selected and included in the survey.

Overall, 320 respondents aged between 18 and 65 were given the SUS-TAS questionnaire. Of these, 290 respondents completed the questionnaire. The number of each of the four stakeholder groups was as follows: 155 local communities (53%), 62 tourists (21%), 32 protected area authorities (11%) and 41 tourism enterprises (15%). The sample consisted of 250 (86.3%) male respondents and 40 (13.8%) female respondents with a mean age of 34.5 years.

For the qualitative analysis, interviews were conducted with 30 respondents (5 protected area authorities, 10 local communities, 6 tourism enterprises, 4 NGOs and 5 tourists) to obtain a more detailed perspective regarding the meaning these stakeholders attached to sustainable tourism and key issues related to the development and implementation of sustainable tourism. Data were collected by conducting face-to-face, in-depth interviews using open-ended questions. Interviews usually took 40-90 minutes. The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and analysed. The in-depth responses from stakeholders facilitated in triangulating the results of the quantitative analysis.

Results

Descriptive statistics were used to examine the respondents' perceptions of SUS-TAS items. Table 1 contains the mean values obtained for each item for the entire sample. Because the

Table 1. Frequency distribution and mean responses of SUS-TAS (n=290)

#	Statement	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total %	M	SD
1	<i>There should be unlimited tourists in the Park</i>	20.7	24.4	24.8	15.9	14.1	45.1	3.22	1.325
2	<i>The tourists have the right to use the recreational resources in any way they want</i>	19.0	31.0	24.4	14.4	11.0	50.0	3.32	1.250
3	Proper tourism development requires that wildlife and natural habitats be protected at all times	9.7	10.3	19.3	26.3	33.1	59.4	3.65	1.306
4	The park's environment must be protected now and for the future	6.6	8.6	19.7	21.7	43.4	65.1	3.87	1.246
5	Tourism must be developed in harmony with the natural and cultural environment	9.0	7.5	21.0	27.2	35.2	62.4	3.72	1.268
6	I believe tourism development needs well-coordinated planning	6.2	8.2	18.6	31.7	35.1	66.8	3.82	1.180
7	Tourism development plans for the park should be continuously improved	10.0	7.2	21.0	25.5	36.2	61.4	3.71	1.297
8	I believe tourism in the park should be a strong economic contributor to the community	5.2	9.2	22.2	29.6	33.4	63.0	3.77	1.158
9	Tourism in the park should bring new income to the community	5.9	8.6	21.7	31.2	32.1	63.2	3.75	1.166
10	I think tourism businesses in the park should hire at least one-half of their employees from within my community	7.9	10.7	25.8	29.0	26.6	55.6	3.55	1.214
11	Community residents should receive a fair share of benefits from tourism in the park	6.6	8.6	26.5	33.4	24.8	58.2	3.61	1.141
12	The tourism businesses in the park should obtain at least one-half of their goods and services from within my community	5.9	11.4	28.5	33.7	20.3	54.0	3.51	1.114
13	Tourism businesses must contribute to community improvement funds	6.2	6.9	25.4	40.2	19.7	59.9	3.62	1.072
14	Tourism should create new markets for local products	4.1	8.1	24.3	33.2	28.6	61.8	3.75	1.080

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15	Tourism businesses must monitor visitor satisfaction	4.5	8.1	25.0	38.7	22.0	60.7	3.65	1.055
16	Tourism businesses must ensure good quality tourism experiences for visitors	3.8	10.9	24.9	33.6	26.2	59.8	3.67	1.096
17	Full participation in tourism decision making by everyone in the community is a must for successful tourism development	6.2	9.7	26.2	34.9	22.8	57.7	3.58	1.122
18	Community residents should be given more opportunities to invest in tourism	4.8	9.3	27.2	36.0	22.4	58.4	3.62	1.079
19	I think residents must be encouraged to assume leadership roles in tourism committees	5.5	8.2	27.2	33.0	25.8	58.8	3.66	1.112
20	Tourism development in the park must promote positive environmental ethics among all parties with a stake in tourism	5.9	4.1	27.5	27.2	35.1	62.3	3.82	1.133
21	Park's recreational resources are overused by tourists	14.1	15.9	24.8	24.4	20.7	45.1	3.22	1.325
Total mean % score							59.18		

SD = Strongly disagree; D= Disagree; A/D= Neither agree nor disagree; A = Agree; SA= Strongly agree. *Note:* Items 1 and 2, appearing in *italics*, have been reverse coded and high mean value indicates high acceptance.

coding for items 1 and 2 was reversed, a high mean value indicated high acceptance of the item. The results in Table 1 show that mean scores for all of the items were above 3.0 indicating that, except for items 1 and 2, the respondents had a moderately high level of understanding about sustainable tourism. Table 1 also shows the response frequency distribution for the data set in terms of percentage of respondents selecting each response, and their total percentage agreement with each item. The responses varied from 45.1% (item 1) to 66.8% (item 6), with a mean score of 59.18%. Overall, the respondents exhibited good understanding of sustainable tourism.

The two items that yielded the strongest responses were item 4 “The park’s environment must be protected now and for the future” and item 6 “I believe tourism development needs well-coordinated planning”. More than 65% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with these statements, producing mean scores of 3.87 and 3.82 (out of 5) respectively.

The respondents exhibited the smallest percentage agreement for item 1 “There should be unlimited tourists in the park” (reverse coded) and item 21 “Park’s recreational resources are overused by tourists”. The scores for both these statement were (45.1%). Unlike previous studies where respondents exhibited a high level of concern for increased tourist activity (Ko & Stewart, 2002; Smith & Krannich, 1998; Yu *et al.*, 2011), it seems the respondents in the present research had a low level of understanding about the social and resource use implications of unlimited tourism development.

The above finding is consistent with previous research findings in which the results did not support that perceived social costs had significantly negative effects on resident quality of life or possible negative environmental impacts of tourism on natural resources (Kuvan & Akan, 2012; Yu *et al.*, 2011). As Yu *et al.* (2011) observe, this finding could be because of CKNP being in the early development stages of tourism development, the number of tourists is limited. As there are imperceptible social costs in the initial tourism development stage, there seems to be a higher tolerance level toward social costs related to tourism. In the case of this study, the limited number of tourists may have resulted in residents' perceiving tourism with hardly any social costs that could impact the park's quality and the quality of their life.

Item 8 "I believe tourism in the park should be a strong economic contributor to the community" (63.0% with a mean rating of 3.77) and item 9 "Tourism in the park should bring new income to the community" (63.2% with a mean rating of 3.75), exhibited a high percentage of agreement among the respondents.

The qualitative analysis results revealed that all the stakeholders were highly interested in putting in place and participating in sustainable tourism development as they believed that tourism could help generate higher incomes and improve the livelihoods and quality of life. As one of the community members remarked,

"Sustainable tourism promotes livelihood opportunities for the local population."

The qualitative results also revealed that despite a strong understanding about sustainable tourism, the stakeholders felt constrained in actualising the goals of sustainable tourism, which is summarised well in these statements from the local communities.

"Tourism can help in the improvement of social and economic indicators.....the best way forward is through a process of inclusion and sharing....we never know what is being planned for a certain area. We are always unaware of what happens at the top and what the ground realities are. Officials always try to impose things from above. They don't understand what the community wants."

The above statements suggest that lack of leadership, and top down governance stalled the process of stakeholders' involvement in tourism development. Additionally, political interests and instability impede the growth of tourism. As is apparent from these remarks made by a tourism enterprise owner and protected area authorities' staff:

"I met a foreign tourist couple. They said your embassy told us not to visit Pakistan. We have come here on the recommendations of our friends who visited Gilgit-Baltistan last year."

"As direct impact of 9/11, we have seen closing of businesses, hotels and tourist operators..... Because of negative travel advisory and media, people are afraid to come here..... The number of trekking parties after 9/11 has come down to 110 from 300..... Because of security threats in Pakistan, our image is tarnished abroad..."

The interview results showed that the contribution of protected area authorities and international NGOs in encouraging and facilitating coordination, cooperation and reciprocity among the stakeholder groups was very modest. As one of the NGO members remarked,

"Unfortunately, all the projects working in Gilgit-Baltistan have negligible integration and understanding between them..... At present the system is somewhat

disintegrated..... Different departments and NGOs work independently within CKNP without any coordinated system.”

The above remarks indicate how government policies and lack of common vision and coordination among the government departments has significantly impacted upon the development of tourism as the key economic sector for Gilgit-Baltistan.

The qualitative analysis also revealed gaps in policy and legislation. Some of the government policy documents were not in place as suggested by this remark from a protected area authority staff:

“Private investors don’t invest here, because there is no investment policy. Currently we don’t have any destination management policy; we don’t have any tourism policy for Gilgit-Baltistan.”

Discussion

The results of the quantitative analysis point to the fact that despite the different nature of the stakeholder groups involved, there was a large consensus for sustainable tourism. These results show that the respondents highly valued the environmental dimension of sustainable tourism and exhibited a strong level of understanding of the importance of coordinated planning to reach sustainable tourism goals.

According to the quantitative results, the stakeholders did not attach any social costs to tourism. This generally low understanding about the role and influence of tourism on their quality of life was because the stakeholders had not experienced any negative social consequences due to low key tourism. Instead, the qualitative analysis revealed that they felt that the number of tourists visiting Gilgit-Baltistan was too low as tourist numbers have declined over the years following the 9/11 incident. Increased number of tourists, in their perceptions, would not only bring economic advantages but would enhance the awareness of and revitalise Gilgit-Baltistan culture. The findings coincide with the concept of tourism life-cycle (Butler, 1980) when in the early stages of tourism development, the residents’ quality of life is enhanced through tourism and their reaction to tourism development and tourists tends to be receptive and friendly (Yu *et al.*, 2011).

All the stakeholders strongly agreed that tourism in the park should be a strong economic contributor to the community. One possible reason for this strong agreement could be that the perceived economic benefits from tourism have significant importance for the respondents who anticipate financial benefits and therefore their reaction to tourism development and tourists tends to be receptive and friendly.

When quantitative results were triangulated with the qualitative analysis, it was observed that the high understanding of sustainable tourism among the protected area authorities and the local communities was associated with their interest in developing a sustainable tourism management system that would improve their quality of life and the quality of the protected area environment. However, it was observed that the absence of tourism planning, development and policy formulation and a complex hierarchical governance structure with poorly defined roles were the top challenges facing management initiatives in CKNP. Moreover, lack of coordination, among the stakeholder groups and an inequitable power structure among stakeholders were other barriers to the process of implementing sustainable tourism. In addition to the above challenges, the region was constrained by terrorism, and a decreasing number of

international and domestic tourists due to government policies discouraging tourism. Attracting international tourists would require a secure image.

The dissatisfaction of the tourism enterprises and the local communities with the current governance and management system indicated a general lack of communication and formal interaction at organisational levels among the stakeholder groups. The stakeholders, including the government representatives, showed concern over bureaucratic governance and the length of time taken to make decisions. For instance the three CKNP protected area management plans which were developed are still paper plans as none has yet to be approved.

It was observed that the protected area authorities have learnt lessons from their experience in the top down and exclusionist approach to management and governance in Khunjerab National Park, which is adjacent to CKNP, and therefore were planning more inclusive management strategies with support from the international and local NGOs for a participatory management model. However, the lack of strong leadership, multiple layers of top down governance and lack of vision was impeding the process of sustainable tourism development for the park.

Conclusion

This study applied the SUS-TAS scale to assess the level of understanding of multiple stakeholders about sustainable tourism and its implications on sustainable tourism development in protected areas. The findings indicate that although the stakeholders exhibited moderately high understanding of sustainable tourism, there were serious challenges related to political will, the level of stakeholders' support and their participation. Governance issues influenced the ability of tourism destination stakeholders to realise sustainable tourism development objectives and to reach successful sustainable tourism development outcomes.

It was further inferred that the absence of a well formulated collaborative strategic planning and decision making process hindered the process of consensus building for sustainable tourism development among these groups. The results suggest that the goal of sustainable tourism will be difficult to achieve without a bottom up participatory governance structure.

It was therefore inferred that just the understanding of the importance of sustainable tourism is not enough for sustainable tourism development to be successful. It is essential that stakeholders are involved and incorporated in the development of its policy, planning and management. Indeed, greater integration through a participatory governance process is essential so that the stakeholders effectively internalise the concept of sustainable tourism.

To conclude, at least five major policy directions can be offered based on the findings. These include: (i) a participatory governance structure; (ii) collaboration between protected area authorities and other stakeholder groups based on participatory decision making and participatory strategic planning for adaptive management; (iii) integrated social, economic and environmental assessment and monitoring; (iv) strong communication and information sharing networks for knowledge management; and (v) opportunities and avenues for capacity building and education.

Findings indicate that stakeholders' understanding and support for sustainable tourism is simply not enough to start the process of sustainable tourism rolling. In fact, the understanding of sustainable tourism is influenced by more complex factors such as the enabling environment and opportunity for actually engaging in sustainable tourism development.

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