

Sustainable Cultural and Religious Tourism in Namibia: Issues and Challenges

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Biographies

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Abstract

The tourism sector has become an important pillar for governments and development agencies searching for socio-economic development. Recent national tourism policies in Namibia have increasingly aimed at promoting cultural heritage tourism, signifying its potential to aid with poverty reduction targets and community revitalization. While tourism development has contributed to the country's economic growth, for cultural heritage, the thrust of the tourism industry is to make the most of the country's natural and cultural resources. Thus, in order to preserve the cultural heritage assets in Namibia, a clear framework need to be developed that take into consideration on every issue and challenge, so that the decision making process is reliable to optimize the value of cultural heritage tourism sector in the country. This study involves a retrospective review of policies and frameworks in relation to cultural heritage tourism initiatives in Namibia. The findings could provide an enabling framework which may be useful in future research aimed at cultural heritage tourism.

Introduction

Tourism is often called one of the world's fastest growing industries and there is no indication that its growth or spread to new places is likely to end in the near future (Saarinen, 2011). In Southern Africa, the tourism industry is a growing and important element in the regional economies. Many Southern African countries presently see the promotion of tourism as a good strategy that can be used to attract foreign capital and investors through showing local indigenous cultures (Saarinen & Niskala, 2009). In Namibia, tourism is an important and growing activity in the national economy and regional development process (Saarinen, 2011). The tourism sector has become an important pillar for governments and development agencies searching for socio-economic development. Recent national tourism policies in Namibia have increasingly aimed at promoting cultural heritage tourism, signifying its potential to aid with poverty reduction targets and community revitalization. Cultural heritage tourism has emerged as a potential form of alternative tourism. The significance and economic potential of cultural heritage tourism have been widely recognized, and they form part of planning and development approaches of numerous development agendas (Goodwin, 2008). As an approach, cultural heritage tourism aims to redress the past unequal power relations that guide and control benefits from utilization of natural and/or cultural resources (Saarinen, 2016). In Namibia, the incipient tourism fundamentally refers to the idea of responsible, soft alternative and sustainable tourism that include the diversification of the sector and its development where cultural heritage tourism is ultimate. The role and importance of sustaining the growth of tourism for national development is highlighted by the Namibian government (National Sustainable Tourism Growth and Development Strategy, 2016; National Development Plan 5, 2017, Vision 2030, 2004) and thus the growth of the industry is essential and needs to diversify its current product offerings to meet the targets set in the National Development Plan 5 (NDP 5) to have visitor number exceed 1.8 million by 2022 (Nakashole, 2017). One of the strategies set out by NDP5 is to develop new tourism products by incorporating culture and creative sectors into tourism (Nakashole, 2017). Thus, this study provides an overview of the challenges and issues faced by the local communities through their participation in tourism.

Literature Review

Many African countries are celebrated for their abundant wildlife species, rich and diverse cultural heritage (Saarinen, 2016), and cultural tourism attractions are increasingly utilized in local development strategies (Chok, Macbeth and Warren, 2007). As such, cultural heritage tourism has taken a center stage as an inexpensive mechanism to attract tourism development. Additionally, an integration of local cultural heritage assets is increasingly viewed as a progressive approach to local involvement and participation in tourism development (Kavita and Saarinen, 2016). Cultural heritage tourism has thus become an appealing economic diversification option for many developing countries. A case in point, Namibia tourism which is promoted as a wildlife and open landscapes destination, has identified cultural heritage tourism as a key growth area.

Cultural heritage tourism can be defined as the subset of tourism concerned with visiting places that are significant to the past or present cultural identity of a particular group of people and their customs (McKercher, Ho and du Cros, 2004). Cultural heritage tourism can also include tangible or intangible objects. While a range of tourism activities can provide a number of opportunities for local people to participate, to acquire a meaningful benefit, the tourism value chain need to be aligned with basic ideas of community-based tourism development (Kavita *et al.*, 2016). During these experiences for example, the tourists can interact with various cultural attributes such as; the physical (built heritage), the general (daily life of the host community) and the specific activities of the host community (rituals and cultural festivals).

Cultural heritage-based tourism, furthermore, requires the protection of scenic, historic, and cultural resources, among others. This is necessary because without meaningful and attractive resources, there would be no cultural heritage tourism. However, concerns have been expressed around the ability of cultural heritage tourism to be sustainable in the long run. Concerns revolve around increasing the numbers of tourists (Shackley, 2000), the ability of tourism providers to fulfil tourists' demands (Sharpley, 2004), and consequently, extensive manipulation of cultural heritage resources and facilities (Timothy *et al.*, 2003). In addition, Timothy and Boyd explain that in order to be sustainable, authorities need to understand the market requirements. In fact, consideration should be given as to "...whether or not a long-term market actually exists and if certain attractions have a long-term product and experience to offer visitors" (2003:179). In line

with the discussion, however, many of the arguments within cultural heritage tourism suggest that not all tourist activities can be described as cultural heritage tourism. Hence, the capabilities of tourism suppliers to develop tourism products from cultural heritage resources are put to the test. Evidence suggests that there may be types of tourists, who progress from general travelers to specialized tourists (Timothy and Boyd, 2003; du Cross, 2007). Tourists' activities that are motivated by the need to enhance personal knowledge and understandings about the destination's cultural heritage are referred to as "special interest travels," whereas activities that are more general tend to demonstrate the characteristics of mass tourists.

Methodology

The theoretical discussions will require extensive research of secondary data, which are valuable in examining the concepts of heritage, sustainable development, and the consumption of heritage in the tourism industry. Content analysis is applied for reviewing the issues and challenges from past studies and tourism frameworks and policies.

Results

The study identified two scenarios involving cultural heritage tourism in Namibia: the nature of cultural heritage tourism and the challenges and benefits that cultural heritage tourism has for Namibia as a tourism offering; the role of local communities in sustainable tourism development and to address how local communities can benefit from cultural heritage tourism both in tangible and intangible ways.

Conclusion and Discussion

One of the main factors encouraging the development of cultural heritage tourism in this region is tourists' demands for new travel destinations and products. Cultural heritage tourism is presented as the new or *alternative* tourism, emerging as a niche market whose visitors are said to be different from mass tourists in terms of travel characteristics and behaviours (McKercher & du Cross, 2003). Cultural heritage tourism is also often perceived as an activity that is in harmony with the everyday

life of a community (Sharpley, 2004). Furthermore, cultural heritage tourism offers multiple opportunities for communities to protect and project their cultural diversity, to stimulate intercultural dialogue, and to contribute to individuals' economic and social well-being (Cater & Beeton, 2004). In fact, cultural heritage tourism is recognized as a means of achieving a balance between conservation and development, through the revival of traditions and the restoration of sites and monuments (Swarbrooke, 1999).

Linked to cultural heritage tourism is the theme of sustainability. Much literature supports the notion of sustainable cultural heritage tourism development (Carter and Beeton, 2004). Many scholars in the area agree on the contributions of heritage tourism to economic restructuring and sustainable development (Cross, 2007). This is in line with the Namibian government's broader policies on the tourism industry, which emphasize sustainable tourism development (Ministry of Environment and Tourism, 2008). In this sense, the development of cultural heritage tourism in Namibia is not exceptional. However, considering that cultural heritage tourism has only recently begun to be recognized and emphasized in Namibia, a long-term focus with respect to planning is necessary to ensure its sustainability.

Based on review of these two scenarios, the study concludes that successful cultural heritage tourism is most likely to occur when the tourism value chain is aligned with basic ideas of community-based tourism development. A clear framework need to be developed that take into consideration on every issue and challenge, so that the decision making process is reliable to optimize the value of cultural heritage tourism sector in the country.

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