

TITLE: GETTING READY FOR THE CHINESE WAVE: EXPLORING THE TOURISM SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN PACIFIC SIDS

ABSTRACT

Tourism features in the national development plans of most Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Data deficiencies make it difficult to effectively monitor the tourism development process and to assess the effects of current developing strategies. While China has increasing presence in the Pacific SIDS in investment, Pacific SIDS destinations are trying to find ways to attract this lucrative market. Facing this overwhelming trend, it is necessary for policy makers and tourism planners to understand local residents' perceptions towards this fast-growing tourist market and adjust the existing strategies. Focusing on three cases (Cook Islands, Vanuatu, and Yap), the current study aims to explore the perceptions of residents in Pacific SIDS towards Chinese tourists and to assess the social sustainability level of tourism on a regular basis. The result obtained from this research will have wide spread applicability to SIDS in other parts of the world.

Keywords: *Pacific SIDS; Chinese outbound tourism; social sustainability*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism plays an important role in the development of Pacific SIDS economies due to their peculiar characteristics including limited resources, remoteness, susceptibility to natural disasters, vulnerability to external shocks, excessive dependence on international trade, and fragile environments (United Nation, 2015). Thus, it is essential to monitor the impact of tourism on community development and sustainable management of resources in Pacific SIDS (UNWTO, 2014).

China is the largest outbound travel market of the world, spending US\$165 billion globally in 2014 (UNWTO, 2015a). Similar to most destinations, tourism planners of Pacific SIDS have made an all-out effort to attract the big Chinese spenders, for instance, providing visa-on-arrival (Palau and Vanuatu) or visa-free policies to Chinese tourists (Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu). While governments are keen on embracing more Chinese tourists, the next question is whether they and residents are ready for more tourists from China.

As the development of the outbound tourism of China, overwhelming Chinese travellers extend their trips to the Pacific SIDS. For example, Palau welcomed just shy of 141,000 visitors in 2014, up 34 percent on 2013, largely on the back of the Chinese visitors (Jiji, 2015). In which, Chinese visitors leaped more than 300 percent to 39,383, over Palau's total population (UNWTO, 2015b). Tourism accounts for close to 85 percent of Palau's GDP, and while profits are up, some are worried the long-term damage may be too great (Jiji, 2015). These figures in the Pacific SIDS in general lead to the questions that how the society sees such a prodigious change caused by the dramatic development of tourism.

To address the concerns in those emerging and sensitive markets, the current study aims to explore the perceptions of residents in Pacific SIDS towards mainland Chinese tourists and to assess the social sustainability level of tourism on a regular basis. This study will focus on three cases: the Cook Island, Vanuatu and Federal States of Micronesia (YAP). These three countries are Pacific SIDS who have strategic partnership agreement with the current People's Republic of China (PRC) government. Compared with other Pacific SIDS, they have the least experience of Chinese tourism in the region and are experiencing some of the highest growth rates of Chinese

visitors (but from a very small base). Based on Butler's (1980) Tourism Area Life Cycle (TALC), social effects are present at each stage of the cycle (Yang, Ryan & Zhang, 2014). However, the majority of the existing research emphasized the effects in the consolidation and stagnation stages, where such kind of effects have been exacerbated (Aledo & Mazon, 2004). In that case, it is necessary to explore the social effects in an early stage of tourism development and to provide timely suggestions to those unexperienced destinations as the three islands.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As the tourism industry continues to expand globally, growing concerns have been expressed about the negative effects of visitation, prompting researchers to develop tools that assess tourism sustainability from different perspectives. Sustainable development consists of three core dimensions, namely: economic, social, and environmental sustainability. According to the definitions that are provided by UNEP and UNWTO (2005), social sustainability calls for the upholding of human rights, the provision of equal opportunities, the equal distribution of benefits, and the alleviation of poverty. The concept also focuses on enhancing the livelihood of local communities, maintaining and strengthening their life support system, preserving traditional cultures, and preventing exploitation.

Achieving social sustainability involves making significant efforts that would contribute to local communities by balancing and monitoring the social effects of tourism, notably on hosts' quality of life, on the distribution of benefits, on life supporting systems, and on cultural preservation (UNEP & UNWTO, 2005). Studies of tourism sustainability have often emphasized the tendency of tourism development to produce diverse results. The negative effects brought by tourism include traffic congestion, individual and organized crime, drug addiction, and alcoholism. On the other hand, positive effects of tourism relate primarily to economic aspects, such as employment opportunities, increased income, improved living standards, and a growth of the tax base (Milman & Pizam, 1988; King, Pizam & Milman, 1993).

Measuring social sustainability of the tourism development needs to involve community perspectives in term of host and guest relationship, local acceptance of tourists, and the level of social tolerance (Qiu, Fan, Tse, & King, 2016). The Social Sustainability Scale which has been developed in the context of mainland Chinese traveling to Hong Kong can provide an instrumental reference to measure the impacts on local communities arising from rapidly increasing numbers of tourist arrivals (Qiu et al., 2016).

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the research objectives, mixed methods with sequential exploratory design will be adopted in the study. First, in-depth interviews will be conducted with the residents in Cook Island, Vanuatu and YAP to obtain the perceptions of local residents towards Chinese tourists. Existing social sustainability measurement by Qiu et al. (2016) will be modified according to the interview results. Second, a survey with the newly developed measurement will be conducted with local residents in the three countries to assess the level of tourism social sustainability.

EXPECTED FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Upon the completion, the study will pioneer the tourism studies in Pacific SIDS with the focus of exploring residents' perceptions and level of readiness toward the emerging Chinese tourist market. Results from this study can assist the tourism planners and policy makers to assess the current tourism development, develop appropriate strategies for Chinese tourist market and

upkeep the balanced development of tourism. For destinations such as Pacific SIDS, even small changes may create great influences on the local resources allocation, community lifestyle, and fragile environments. Therefore, with the annual resident survey, tourism planners and policy makers can be able to monitor the influences of booming Chinese tourists on local residents and their communities regularly and to protect the long-term destination sustainability.

Theoretically, this study investigates the emerging source markets' influences on Pacific SIDS destinations. This is one of the leading attempts to assess the social sustainability towards a fast-growing market. This dynamic attitudinal trend will provide a holistic picture of how tourism affects local residents in destinations' different developing stages. It will also contribute to the existing theory with empirical evidence.

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