

The Eco-tourism in the Coastal Region of Oaxaca: Between Development and Commonality

Rosa María Velázquez- Sánchez¹, Jesús Gómez-Velázquez^{1,2}, Adriana Flamenco-Hernández²

(1. Faculty of Business and Administration, Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca, México;

2. School of Humanities, University of Mexico City, México)

Abstract: The commonality is a concept recently coined to define the sustainability of indigenous communities as stated by Floriberto Robles Díaz and Cardoso (2009). According to SECTUR (2012) ecotourism is different from tourism because it considers that the travelers enjoy the natural environment and the inhabitant's culture. The concept of ecotourism includes the environment, community and its economic implicit goal. By reviewing studies that analyze the ecotourism in Mexico, ITAM (2008), the interest for the economic element and the enjoyment of the natural environment can be observed. However, the culture of the community has been an element of minor analysis. The community as a component of sustainable development may cause differences in the visitor preference. In this study we analyzed the elements of commonality in ecotourism destinations in the Coastal Region of Oaxaca and the relationship development-commonality from the consumer standpoint. Sustainability indicators were used, including commonality, to analyze thirteen ecotourism services in nine coastal natural places. The sample survey of 85 visitors, included commonality elements, and their preference for the place and their intention to revisit was classified. The results showed that visitors identify aspects of their own culture, their adequacy to development and the signs of local technology in the services they received, as important factors in their tourist destination decisions. The commonality in ecotourism development is related to the project development and the community. The cultural elements of the community explain the development of ecotourism in the coastal region of Oaxaca.

Key words: ecotourism; development; commonality

JEL codes: L83, O13, F18, A13

1. Introduction

According to the Tourism Secretary (2012), 650 destinations are also ecotourism projects in Mexico and the trend represents a growing supply. For the Development of Indigenous Peoples Commission (CDI, 2012), 106 destinations are offering ecotourism services in indigenous communities and are distributed in 29 of the 32 Mexican states. The development of ecotourism destinations is generating income for the community and enables

Rosa María Velázquez-Sánchez, Ph.D., Universidad Autónoma "Benito Juárez" de Oaxaca; research areas: ecotourism, development, commonality. E-mail: romavesa205@yahoo.com.mx.

Jesús Gómez-Velázquez, Universidad Autónoma "Benito Juárez" de Oaxaca; research areas: ecotourism, development, commonality. E-mail: agame_velasquez@hotmail.com.

Adriana Flamenco Hernández, Dirección General de Educación Tecnológica Industrial; research areas: ecotourism, development, commonality. E-mail: adrianaflamx@yahoo.com.mx.

the conservation of the natural environment and culture (CDI, 2012). In the working paper “Tourism in Mexico” of the Tourism Secretary (2010) is estimated that tourism represents 21.5 million tourists a year. According to INEGI (2013) the contribution to the national GDP by tourism-related activities was 3.7 points by the fourth quarter of 2012.

The problem of the current situation of Ecotourism in the indigenous communities of the coastal region of the Mexican state of Oaxaca lies between tourism development and community sustainability. Most of the ecotourism projects are embedded in indigenous communities, which are also characterized by having beautiful natural scenery and unique cultural elements. However, due to the contradiction between development and commonality, the following research question was raised: What are the aspects of commonality that are integrated by ecotourism projects in their services and, in terms of development, how are they expressed to the community?

Available studies on ecotourism published by TIES (2013) of the International Ecotourism Society mentioned that the ecotourism potential offers conservation of natural areas and poverty alleviation for local communities. However, the results do not allow for observation of the changes in the communities mentioned. In Mexico the study by CESTUR-ITAM (2010), through its SWOT analysis of ecotourism showed that it is an activity with potential for the development of communities that have natural areas and cultural sharing. In this regard Velázquez-Sánchez and Solana (2013), based on Luna (2003) analyzed the aspects of sustainability in indigenous communities and identified four categories with its corresponding indicators.

The present research is organized as follows. In the literature review the results available on the study of tourism and ecotourism in Mexico are presented, the analysis of the concept of ecotourism and the indicators used to certify ecotourism services. The Methodology section includes sample characteristics, the operational definition of the variables, the procedure followed to design the interviews, its application and the data analysis. In the results section, tables are used to facilitate data presentation and summary explanation. The findings allow us to compare the results with the stated objective and show the relevance of this study to comprehend commonality factors as elements in the development of ecotourism projects in the coastal region of Oaxaca.

2. Literature Review

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines ecotourism as “any environmentally responsible form of tourism that consists on traveling and visiting to relatively undisturbed natural areas in order to enjoy and appreciate studying the natural attractions (landscape, flora and fauna) of these areas; as well as any cultural manifestation (present and past) that can be found there, through a process that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, provides of an active involvement with the local population and gives socioeconomic welfare” (Ceballos-Lascuráin, 1993b). To the Tourism Secretary of Mexico SECTUR (2001), ecotourism is an alternative to traditional tourism. It is a type of tourism that has distinguished by its commitment to the contemplation of the natural environment and because of the cultural sharing of the host communities. There is a contradiction in both definitions, because while IUCN highlights touristic activity as environmentally responsible, the Tourism Secretary includes the culture of the communities as part of the natural attractions.

Martínez (2003) mentions that community and development are two diametrically opposed concepts, however, the indigenous communities have integrated into their culture some aspects of the so-called development. Martínez called it adequacy and is a form of resistance to preserve their culture and adapt to development. In this regard, Díaz (2004) coined the concept of commonality as a way to demonstrate the sustainability of indigenous

communities. The commonality has to do with the worldview, the relationship with nature conceived as integral to the mankind and not as a foreign and available element for use. Ecotourism as a development way involves changes in the communitarian forms, firstly related to their worldview and gradually on their cultural manifestations, but it also provides of infrastructure and available resources to maintain and mediate with given changes.

To analyze ecotourism in a profound way, it would have to take into account what Coca-Pérez (2007) mentioned; in order to understand their worldview, “the analysis of community must be made taking into consideration its historical determination, its evolution on its specific territorial context and its current situation”. According to the concept of Daltaubuit-Godás and Valenzuela Valdivieso (2010), ecotourism is “an option proposed for achieving sustainable development with the direct participation of the organized rural community” to rationally and properly exploit natural and cultural heritage. In regard to Development, the Mexican Association of Regional Development Science AC, AMECIDER (1993) conceptualized it as “the cultural, social, economic and natural circumstances that attain people’s welfare” and that is present on the quality of life. So far there are no empirical studies on ecotourism coming from the perspective of community and even less coming from the commonality criteria, used to analyze projects seeking development, coined by Diaz (2004), categorized by Martinez (2003) and operationalized by Velázquez and Solana (2013).

3. Methodology

On this work, two samples have been used. Based on the texts of Martínez (2003) and Robles Hernández & Cardoso Jiménez (2009), the defining characteristics of sustainability in the communities were reviewed. Two semi-structured interviews aimed to thirteen eco-tourism providers and to eighty five service’s users in the indigenous communities of Oaxacan Coast were designed. The following variables were included: Ecotourism services and commonality. The study was conducted at seven different ecotourism sites along the Oaxacan Coast. 85 visitors and 13 ecotourism service hosts were interviewed and organized in nine sites distributed along the coast of Oaxaca. The obtained data has allowed for a first identification and definition of the development and commonality indicators shown in the Oaxacan Coast ecotourism.

3.1 Operational Definition of Variables

Ecotourism Services: it was defined by the offered services and considered as a numeric variable, was measured based on the answers given by the interviewed visitors. *Commonality:* it was considered as a numeric variable based on the indicators developed by Velázquez and Solana (2013). It was measured based on the responses of the interviewees.

3.2 Description of Procedure

Based on the information obtained by the Tourism Secretary (2010) and SEMARNAT (2009), nine locations in the coastal region of Oaxaca were observed, from where the thirteen-ecotourism projects were selected. They are included in Table 1 to be discussed under the headings of Commonality and Ecotourism Development, its categories and indicators were also included. For the Commonality variable four categories were included and for the Ecotourism service variable, three; giving a total of 14 indicators for commonality and 11 for ecotourism services.

According to the supply of eco-tourism destinations available at the ecotourism services promotion in Oaxaca, there are 57 main destinations in the regions of the state of Oaxaca. In North Sierra region the highest number with 22 destinations are located. The central valley region reported six destinations. In the Mixteca there are 5, in the South Sierra, 11 and on the coast, 13. In the Coastal region, preferred as a destination for sun and beach, ecotourism has

attracted the interest of visitors and is identified as an alternative for domestic and foreign tourists. Table 2 presents the list of the nine projects selected for this analysis. Out of the thirteen destinations located in the Coastal region, those who accepted the application of the instruments of data collection among its visitors, were included.

Table 1 Operational Definition of Variables Commonality and Ecotourism Services

Variables	Categories	Indicators
Commonality	Own culture	Technology Knowledge Production Social norms
	Adequacy	Originality Values Harmony
	Culture	Medicine Food Creativity Worldview
	Own technology	Materials Tools Man-land relationship
Ecotourism services	Hosting	Traditional ornaments Regional bed cloth Regional window and bath cloth
	Food	Traditional food Traditional utensils Traditional tablecloth
	Recreation	Visit to the natural area Birdwatching Camping Bike riding Horse riding

Note: Categories and indicators of commonality and ecotourism services variables are observed. Variables are numeric and included in the analysis of the relationship between ecotourism services and commonality. Four categories with the 14 indicators of the commonality variable can be observed. And finally, three categories and 11 indicators for the ecotourism services variable.

Source: Authors.

Table 2 Analyzed Ecotourism Projects Sample in the Coastal Region of Oaxaca

Ecoturism project
La Escobilla
Rancho Tangolunda
Rio de los Humedales El Zapotalito
Rio de los Humedales La Vainilla
Rio de los Humedales La Laguna de Chacagua
Mazunte
Ventanilla
Yiimtii
Casa Mermejita

Note: The nine tourism projects analyzed in this research. They are located in the nine ecotourism sites in the Coastal region of Oaxaca. The destinations included in this study represent the main tourism centers determined by the Tourism Secretary. Destinations of San Pedro Pochutla, Puerto Escondido and Huatulco were also included.

Source: Author, with available data at the region.

3.3 Description of the Analyzed Ecotourism Projects

La Escobilla. Located in Santa Maria Tonameca, it belongs to the Pochutla district in the state of Oaxaca. It is a cooperative that brings together native fishermen of the community. The main natural attraction is the arrival and nesting of the Olive ridley sea turtle observation. The hosting service is provided with 8 cabins with basic services; hot water and a fan, a multipurpose room, a camping area, restaurant, guided tours around the forest and the turtle arrival watching at day and night.

Rancho Tangolunda. Even though it is categorized as an ecotourism site, it is an adventure tourism project designed to have luxury hotel category, as it has most services for visitors. This is a hotel. Packages include breakfast and even life insurance, zip-line attractions, rafting, climbing and rappel. No community involvement is observed.

Río de los Humedales. A second level regional organization, composed of community groups, civic and productive organizations. These projects include El Zapotalito ecotourism, La Vainilla and Chacagua Lagoon, and are located all along the coast of Oaxaca from Puerto Escondido to Pochutla. They have flora and fauna sightings, mangroves, tourist activities, local cuisine and regional exhibitions. They have no accommodation in the specific area. They also have sustainable technologies such as solar power and ecological septic systems.

Mazunte. The huts called El Copal Mazunte, offer a relaxing place where there is no cell signal and night lights to the candlelights, hammocks and a traditional restaurant. Community involvement in the service is observed, but not in the administration of the place.

Ventanilla. It is an ecotourism project where, to some extent, is possible to observe a harmony between the external factors within community conservation, environmental technologies and knowledge of the region by the community. The Zapoteco language still exists in the region. There is a crocodile farm in the mangrove lagoon nearby the sea.

Yiimtii. It's a familiar ecological reserve located in the community of Zapotengo nearby Pochutla. It is characterized as an ecotourism and agro-tourism project promoting awareness and sustainability. The route has tropical dry forest and pristine beaches. Its services include accommodation and camps, guided tours and a natural and traditional restaurant. It was founded by a couple of foreigners and is currently operated by their daughter. She works in collaboration with other alternative small projects in the community.

Casa Mermejita. It is a house-hotel in one of the best beaches in Mexico. Built in 1998 and respecting the natural environment, the silhouette of the buildings was adapted to the existing trees. They feature spa, cabins, dining terraces, massage and access to Punta Cometa. There was no presence of community actors observed, but an excellent service.

3.4 Data Analysis

Factor analysis of the data from the eighty-five interviews to the visitors was performed. The results showed the formation of three features in the commonality variable. *Own culture, adequacy and own technology.* The elements distinguished by visitors are grouped into the three categories proposed by Martinez (2003) for the variable commonality. The factor analysis evaluation to the nine eco-tourism projects is summarized in Table 3. They are ordered by the project itself in the first column, the elements of commonality identified by the visitors in the second column and the preference expressed by the visitors in the third column.

4. Key Results

In Table 3 below, the results showed the identified factors of commonality in ecotourism projects and the

preference of the visitor. In *La Escobilla* the commonality factors are distinguished, own culture by the community organization, adequacy of services incorporated to ecotourism infrastructure and own technology in the preparation of food by the community. In *Rancho Tangolunda* no commonality factors were identified.

In the organized community of *Río de los Humedales*, the factors of own culture are distinguished because of the way the community is organized and collaborates. Also in the elements presented at the ceremony for the preparation of traditional foods such as mole of chichatana and iguana tamales. In lodging places and food, the use of local materials is distinguished.

Meanwhile in *Mazunte* commonality factors were observed as well as adequacy of own technology to recreational activities, mainly in the use boats. In *Ventanilla*, own culture factors are present in the organization and participation of the community residents as travel guides of the lagoon and their use of native language. In *Casa Mermejita* and *Yiimtii* no commonality factors were identified.

Table 3 Analysis of Commonality Aspects Identified by Visitors in Ecotourism Services of the Coastal Region of Oaxaca

Ecotourism project	Commonality elements	Visitor preferences and intention to come back
La Escobilla	<i>Own culture</i> in the communitarian organization. <i>Adequacy by including services</i> to the ecotourism infrastructure. <i>Own technology</i> on food preparation.	80% of the interviewees were interested in coming back and to recommend the site, mainly because of its food and the bed & table linen of the place.
Rancho Tangolunda	Unidentified	There is no concern in ecotourism
Río Humedales	<i>Own culture</i> based on the communitarian collaboration. They share food for ceremonies.	70% of the interviewee's showed interest in coming back and would recommend the site.
Mazunte	Own technology adequate to recreational activities.	The main attraction was the turtles and its habitat care by including visits on traditional boats to their arrival sites. Eighty-five percent of the respondents are willing to return.
Ventanilla	Own culture. Native language use.	The journey through wetlands, the lizard's hatchery, and the community sharing manifested an intention to return in sixty percent of the respondents.
Yiimtii	Does not integrate the commonality elements.	It is not ecotourism.
Casa Mermejita	There is no commonality.	It is not ecotourism.

Table 3: Results of the data analysis of eighty-five visitor-interviewees in the nine eco-tourist destinations located in the coastal region of Oaxaca, México. The results emphasize the identification of the commonality factor and the visitor preferences of the observed elements in their stay. Among the nine destinations analyzed and promoted as ecotourism, it appears that Rio Tangolunda, Casa Mermejita and Yiimtii do not integrate elements of commonality and its manifestation affects the visitor preference.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The results highlight *La Escobilla* organization as a cooperative with local engagement. As mentioned by Ceballos-Lascuráin (1993), it meets the standards of an ecotourism destination because of the focus that the community has given to the visitor's enjoyment of the natural environment in coexistence with locals. The adequacy of services and building materials manifest the importance that ecotourism development provides to the community. CESTUR-ITAM (2010) demonstrates that the growth potential of ecotourism depends on the communication and collaboration within neighbor communities to create a tourist route or to extend their reach. For instance, with the integration of the community *Barra del Potrero*, even when Coca and Ruiz (2007) presented different results.

Rancho Tangolunda does not include the community involvement. The visit to natural places is designed in

packages that include the practice of adventure tourism and extreme sports. Thus, there is no environmental conservation. As assessed by the classification of CESTUR-ITAM (2010), it is concluded that this site should not be promoted as an ecotourism destination but as an adventure tourism site.

Being a regional cooperative network, *Los Humedales* interested the visitors, who observe the community participation in the provision of services. The harmonious coexistence between Chatino and Zapotec, the culture in food, the native language and their clothing, allow identifying the commonality coined by Diaz (2004). Also there is a coherent use of the term ecotourism because the conservational effort of the natural environment is clear. The way to share the attractiveness of the site and to receive a symbolic fee for the community, is the sign of an adequacy strategy to development manifested by Martinez (2003).

In *Mazunte* the presence of the community in the project is only observed in the service and as employees of the foreign owners of the site. This relationship cannot be considered as inclusion of the community in the project. However, it is promoted as ecotourism destination because there is a sustainability vision towards the environmental and conservation. The minimum participation of residents of the community cannot be considered as commonality; therefore the project cannot be evaluated in terms of Adequacy to development as stated by Martinez (2003).

In *La Ventanilla* is possible to observe the presence of people from the community. The interest in the project and the preservation of their language and traditions is emphasized (Diaz, 2004). The organization makes it an ecotourism destination and a strategy of adequacy to development. Therefore commonality can be observed. With the inclusion of ecotourism there is a push from the external factors able to harmonize with the elements of the community. They work with people from outside the community to improve the site and to establish conservation actions. They could also coordinate with the Punta Cometa destination.

Yimtii is a source of jobs for the inhabitants of the community. It does not encourage commonality as direct participation within the community. It is a tourist destination with foreign origins and a private grant. It is promoted as an ecotourism destination only because of the visit to natural places. Even when it promotes the caring for the environment, in essence it is a tourist destination. The respondents' do not identify it as ecotourism, according to the definition of the Tourism Secretary (2001).

The destination *Casa Mermejita* does not include the community nor contributes to its development. This is a closed and exclusive destination for foreign visitors that also exploit the virgin beach. There may be environmental care, but to some extent there is an area takeover without inclusion of the community. Taking in consideration the SEMARNAT (2009) categorization, its development vision should not be shown-off as an eco-tourism destination.

The results obtained in this study allow answering the main research question. The inclusion of commonality elements in the services offered by ecotourism destinations in the coastal region of Oaxaca enable the adequacy of communities to the development and also contribute to the preference of the visitor.

The results allow us to contribute to the body of literature with a methodology to assess the relevance in naming the ecotourism destinations. The evaluation of the importance of the elements of commonality for the preference of the visitor can observed as the advantage that represents Culture in ecotourism. It also contributes to the understanding of the strategy of adequacy to development and proves that community resistance is a form of integration and that ecotourism development is an alternative as long as keeps track on the community inclusion.

5.1 Limitations

Within the limitations of this study can be considered the characteristics of the region, the time in which the study was conducted, the type of visitors interviewed and the ecotourism destinations included. Other studies in different regions or countries and in different periods could be conducted.

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