

Deconstructing mass tourism with “upscale, all-year-round” tourism: local residents’ perspective on mechanisms for mitigating seasonality

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*Acknowledgement This work was supported by the Slovenian Research Agency [grant number P5-0117].

Key words: local residents, seasonality, mass tourism, sustainability, tourism development.

Introduction

Tourism destinations, especially those subject to climate and weather conditions, are experiencing serious seasonality issues, and the best way to address these issues is through counter-seasonal strategies (Andriotis, 2005; Butler, 2001; Šegota & Mihalič, 2018). Many coastal tourism destinations face the rise in tourism caused by the influx of the ‘same place, same time’ tourists (Koenig-Lewis & Bischoff, 2005). This mass influx of tourism revolves around the seasonality of the venue and host community, with most of tourism activities occurring during the warm summer months, with no or little activity during the rest of the year. These short intervals of tourist concentration are repeated yearly, which creates challenges for the tourism destination managers to change or mitigate them (Šegota & Mihalič, 2018; Trajkov, Biljan, & Andreeski, 2016).

Evidently, tourism industry, destination managers, and governments are all trying hard to identify and establish policies and strategies to minimise the negative impacts of seasonality. Challenged by economic aspirations and lived realities, many coastal destinations decided to adopt policies to be transformed into tourism destinations that offer upscale, all-year-round tourist activities, whilst limiting the further growth of mass tourism (Ioannides & Holcomb, 2003). Many authors argue that tourism development and planning should be more inclusive for local residents (Murphy, 1985; Tosun, 2006), and that both "short and long-term tourism planning projects should be identified and prioritised according to their value to the community, value to the tourist and their advantage over competing communities", including both the offer at the destination (i.e. community's assets) and interests of potential visitors (Beeton, 2006, p. 97). However, these decisions are still up to the tourism managers and governments concerned, whereas, as destination hosts, local residents have scarce say in the processes of identifying counter-seasonal strategies due to still feeling uninformed or uninvolved in decision-making activities (Šegota, Mihalič, & Kuščer, 2017).

Aim

This study looks at the counter-seasonal responses from a resident's point of view, especially from the perspective of sustainable tourism development. The study focuses only on resident's perspective, since once a community becomes a tourist destination, it is difficult for residents to completely sidestep from experiencing or forming an opinion on tourism. Moreover, it is highly noted that residents are able to develop a sense of “how much better or worse the performance is perceived to be” (Oliver, 2006, p. 580) and can place value on different community resources (Andereck & Nyaupane, 2011; Mihalič, Šegota, Knežević Cvelbar, & Kuščer, 2016).

Hence, the main purpose of this study is to provide the perspective of local residents on mechanisms that are needed for transforming a mass tourism destination into the upscale, all-year-round holiday community.

Method

This study is framed as a qualitative exploratory research style with local residents' interviews as the main data source. Data was collected in two mainland coastal destinations – Rovinj in Croatia and Piran in Slovenia. The two destinations were chosen due to high similarity in tourism community characteristics: they are home to approximately 18.000 residents, boast with more than one million arrivals and two million overnight stays, of which the majority is recorded in summer months, and are champions of tourism influx in their respective countries for a consecutive number of years.

The interview process was guided by pre-defined themes related to the research objective. The research instrument consisted of open-ended questions in investigating the mechanisms among local residents for mitigating seasonality in the community. A total of 43 local residents were selected by means of convenient and snowball sampling, with the effort made to construct sampling that covered a broad range of ages, gender, direct economic dependency from tourism, and distance from the tourist zone. In-depth face-to-face one-on-one thematic interviews in Slovenian and Croatian were conducted between March and August 2017 until the saturation was reached (Connelly, Zweig, Webster, & Trougakos, 2012). The participants included 21 residents from the Municipality of Piran in Slovenia and 22 residents from the Municipality of Rovinj in Croatia. Content analysis was used to evaluate resident perceptions and opinions about tourism, its development and future of the community.

Findings

Diverse perceptions on mitigating seasonality were found among the 43 interviewed local residents in Rovinj and Piran. However, a common theme to emerge from the data pertained to mass tourism. Local residents perceive current tourism activity as highly seasonal, mass tourism. This phenomenon may be due to 'sensationalism' of tourism influx by local governments, media and destination management organisations; thus, boasting with information on high records in arrivals and overnights may influence residents more than discussion on efforts for limiting the further growth of mass tourism.

Upscale, all-year-round tourism, is one of the most common theme in residents' responses to seasonality. Over 60% of interviewees want for their community to attract high spending visitors, willing to enjoy community's natural and cultural heritage out-of-the-peak season. Residents believe that up-market tourists would also prefer staying in luxury accommodation facilities like 4* and 5* private rental apartments (and not only 5* hotels), offering the possibility for encountering local tradition and way of life. Increasing the quality of private accommodation is a very important factor in transitioning from mass tourism to upscale, all-year-round holiday community.

Choices of cultural and outdoor activities in the community are highly important to residents, not only for increasing the quality of visit, but also for increasing the quality of life. Almost 80% of interviewees felt resentment over hotels offering all-inclusive services to the hotel guests, and thus 'stripping' residents of the opportunity to economically and culturally benefit from tourists. Moreover, it was hotels that were perceived as greatly contributing to mass tourism; more specifically, it was hotels' ability to provide services to a greater number of tourists that was perceived as enabler of power to influence decision-making of local governments and tourism organisations to only promote tourism destination instead of making a real effort in changing the industry.

Some perceptions on cultural and outdoor activities diverse according to the local residents' age and distance from the tourist zones. Younger local residents would like to have abundant choices of restaurants and entertainment, whilst older residents prefer to see activities on co-creation of tourism experiences. Those in close proximity to tourist zones tend to be sensitive to crowding and traffic problems, thus suggesting the need for more outdoor activities on the periphery. On the other hand, those on the periphery tend to stress the need for cultural activities that are predominately in tourist zones. The latter phenomenon may be due to 'not in my backyard' syndrome.

Conclusions

From the findings, it is suggested that local residents might be a valuable resource of opinions and ideas when community's tourism development in relation to seasonality is being questioned. Increasing the quality of private accommodation, and diversification of cultural and outdoor activities are important factors in mitigating seasonality. Moreover, resident empowerment is needed to ease residents' resentment over local hoteliers in order to foster cooperation and stimulate discussion on the future of the community. Government have to be particularly careful not to overemphasise record tourism numbers, since this may lead towards overtourism; instead emphasise the economic and socio-cultural benefits of tourism to the community (for example, repeatedly emphasise how many infrastructural projects have been financed directly from tourism, show developmental plans, publicly discuss destination brand identity and image etc).

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