16 Contributions of qualitative research to understanding the politics of community ecotourism

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Aims of the chapter

- To briefly review the literature on the politics of tourism research and practices.
- To discuss two qualitative methods – participant observation and in-depth interviewing – that I emphasised in my teaching about and research on community ecotourism in Gales Point, Belize.
- To discuss opportunities and challenges that these two methods afforded this project.
- To offer some suggestions for pushing the benefits of participant observation and in-depth interviewing further through critical reflection and, possibly, participatory research.

Introduction

Qualitative research has been instrumental for uncovering and elucidating the political dimensions and tensions of tourism. Among the many tools in the qualitative research toolbox, participant observation and in-depth interviewing can help to develop a holistic perspective on the context and political dynamics of politics. Though not without its own challenges, participant observation can enable opportunities for observing everyday tourism activities and for in-depth dialogue between researcher and subject. These conditions, as opposed to formal settings and procedures that can work against dialogue and a fuller viewing of tourism in practice, can reveal interconnections and power dynamics associated with tourism practices, and help in the creation of new theories. Given the newness of alternative tourisms such as community ecotourism, these qualitative methods are particularly suitable for assisting in theory discovery and generation following Burawoy's (1991) extended case method.

To illustrate these points, I draw upon my multi-year research on community ecotourism in Gales Point, Belize (Central America). The substantive findings of this research have been published elsewhere (Belsky 1999, 2001, 2003; Outside Television 2000).
The politics of community ecotourism

and economy rather than ideals of equality and social justice' (Hall 1994: 7). Nonetheless, some tourism researchers have studied how tourism unevenly affects different social groups within and across nations (Britton 1991). Ethnographic works by anthropologists are particularly noteworthy for paying attention to asymmetries in terms of power between hosts and guests, and analysing the impacts these have on each (Stronza 2001). Anthropologists and other tourism researchers to a limited degree have addressed political themes, including tourism and the global-local nexus (Cameron 1997; Milne 1998); class, commodification and tourism (Greenwood 1976; Patullo 1996); tourism discourse and tourism marketing (Urry 1990); and cultural politics (Chambers 1997; Greenwood 1976, 1989; Smith 1989). Cheong and Miller (2000) challenge tourism researchers to move beyond discussing how tourists, and especially wealthy Northern tourists, negatively impact Southern hosts, to how ‘there is power everywhere in tourism’ (Cheong and Miller 2000: 372). They advise increased scrutiny of how the exercise of power operates at individual, institutional, industry and state levels, and of how local peoples creatively respond to tourism not as passive recipients, but as active social agents. Similarly, Stronza (2002) notes that even in the anthropology of tourism attendant to political dynamics, the analysis is devoid of local voices, and especially fails to examine how local peoples themselves perceive and act on their perceptions regarding the array of pros and cons associated with tourism. Indeed, my research in Belize addresses these points exactly. It describes how different residents take advantage of opportunities differentially available to them through the community ecotourism project in Gales Point, with some joining, others resisting and a few people actively protesting against activities that they interpret as working against their own personal or household interests (Belsky 1999, 2000, 2003).

The rise of alternative tourism suggests an important opportunity for analyses of tourism politics precisely because of its explicit attention to the interaction of social and environmental forces and values. Alternative tourism includes ‘forms of tourism that are consistent with natural, social, and community values, and which allow both hosts and guests to enjoy positive and worthwhile interaction and shared experiences’ (Eadington and Smith 1992: 3). Ecotourism is an increasingly popular example of an alternative tourism. An often cited definition of ecotourism is ‘a form of tourism inspired primarily by the natural history of an area, including its indigenous cultures’ (Zilker 1989). The goal of ecotourism is for ecotourists to appreciate natural and cultural resources while contributing revenue and attention to local conservation efforts. Importantly, ecotourism researchers and others concerned about ‘sustainable tourism’ are paying close attention to the links between tourism and environmental sustainability, and to how culture further influences this relationship (McCool and Moisey 2001). Nonetheless, ecotourism has been criticised as
ogy and method. She writes, 'a research methodology is a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed' whereas 'a research method is a technique for (or way of proceeding in) gathering evidence' (1987: 2-3). Methodology frames the questions being asked, determines the methods and types of evidence to be used, and shapes the analyses. As Burawoy (1991: 271) says, 'If technique is concerned with the instruments and strategies of data collection, then methodology is concerned with the reciprocal relationship between data and theory.' Qualitative methodology and its portfolio of available techniques would seem well suited to tourism research that is critical of a value-free epistemology and attuned to particular contexts as well as the political dimensions of tourism practice. Indeed, Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 3) define the key, enduring features of qualitative research as contextuality, interpretation and subjectivity:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world ... qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

A basic assumption of participant observation is that it is critical of the researcher as a neutral, objective interpreter and seeker of truth, emphasising instead the subjectivity of the research process and empathy between researcher and research subjects' (Berg 2001; Taylor and Bogdan 1998). Participant observation refers to the method of researchers making observations in the course of taking part in the activities of the people they study. Like other observational methods, it excels in the possibility of gaining an in-depth understanding of a situation in its natural or usual social context, and especially by providing a sense of what has been called an 'insider's view' of that situation and context. For example, participant observers have documented the benefit of this method for studying marginalised populations uncomfortable with interacting with professional researchers from a different socio-economic and cultural background. Women researchers have also noted the benefits of participant observation, as well as informal, in-depth interviewing, for researching other women. Women are often ill at ease talking to male researchers, especially if their concerns include critiques of men. Nonetheless, feminist and other scholars also continue to challenge participant observation on issues of scale, authority, significance and balance between researcher and research subjects' views (Clifford and Marcus 1985, Stacey 1991). Box 16.1, adapted from Adler and Clark (1992) and Neuman (2003), sets out the advantages and disadvantages of participant observation. It is to these complex issues that I turn now. What follows is based on my community ecotourism research in Belize.
I first went to Belize in 1976 as an undergraduate participant on a student study group to learn anthropological field methods for understanding applied development issues. Belize was still British Honduras (it did not receive its full independence until 1981) and there were few foreign travelers, at least in the remote coastal community of Placencia where I was 'immersed' for five months. The fishing economy and rural social structure were still very much thriving. When I revisited Placencia in 1996 I caught a glimpse of how transformation had occurred in one place. Whereas 20 years earlier one reached Placencia by air or boat, a road now connects the village to the mainland. The road is dotted with driveways with cars bearing foreign licence plates (mostly from California). The once coconut-lined beaches had been replaced by small lodges, restaurants, bars, diving supply shops and other tourist facilities. The fishing co-operative that was inaugurated during my stay in 1976 had closed that week, signalling quite dramatically the restructuring of Placencia from a natural resource-based economy to one largely focused on tourism, or ecotourism as its promoters contend. Expensive yachts replace the small wooden dories I remembered from my earlier time. In trying to learn how residents are making sense of these changes, I was able to reconnect with an elderly woman who, quite amazingly, remembered me from my earlier student days. Her comment exquisitely sums up at least one perspective on the changes. She told me, 'We have become a community without a soul.' Among other concerns, she told me about the poverty, prostitution and drug addiction that plagued the community and her own family. Her story remained with me as I moved through my academic studies of rural ecotourism in the nineties, as did the tremendous richness and insights afforded by the ethnographic methods I had learned so many years earlier.2

This research project began in 1992 when I returned to Belize as a co-instructor of a student field practicum on conservation and development issues. The field trip was one component of a larger, five-year linkage project between the University of Montana (UM) and University College of Belize (UCB) that developed exchange experiences for both American and Belizean students and faculty. The larger project was designed to be international, interdisciplinary, collaborative and action orientated in the form of fostering engaged scholarship and creating a new degree programme at UCB. Each year from 1992 to 1998, I and another faculty member from the University of Montana's School of Forestry brought 10 to 12 students to Belize to teach field research methods and examine conservation and development issues. Participants in the field trips included both Belizeans and Americans, and were diversified too in terms of social and natural science background and gender. Those attending UM were required to complete a semester-long background course, while Belizeans were provided with key texts from the seminar.

We first visited the village of Gales Point in 1992 to investigate the community ecotourism project that had just begun in this rural Creole
participant observation and, especially, note-taking. With regard to the latter, we kept copious notes, carefully differentiating between direct observation, inference, analysis and our own personal feelings (Neuman 2003). We also met daily as a team to compare what we had learned, identify themes for further investigation and validation, and draw up lists of questions for guiding if not structuring interviews.

There were many advantages to conducting participant observation and in-depth field interviews. These included observing the daily activities and demands of ecotourist hosts and organisers, holding conversations in an informal, more naturalistic and less hierarchical manner than is possible in formal interviews, and, related to this, developing relationships and trust between researcher and research subjects. Rather than being the ‘object’ of research with little or no control over what is discussed, many ecotourist hosts raised important issues during interviews. Many of the bed and breakfast hostesses were particularly comfortable sharing their concerns regarding increased workload, trade-offs between tourism and historical natural resource extractive activities, and ensuing conflicts over leadership and policies upheld in the various ecotourism associations (Belsky 1999). The bed and breakfast hostesses as well as the nature and boat tour guides whom we paid for their services greatly appreciated the economic business our group provided, an important but rarely acknowledged benefit of participant observation. The bed and breakfast hostesses were particularly pleased about having a guest for multiple days and that every bed and breakfast association member received a guest. During interviews with bed and breakfast hostesses many complained about inequities in the allocation of and competition between bed and breakfast hostesses for guests (Belsky 1999). Lastly, the fact that most of the student participant observers were young and some were Belizean (though from different ethnic groups and from urban areas) afforded additional intersections to reduce difference and hierarchy between researcher and research subjects. I think these characteristics increased the willingness of many in the village to engage with us, not just answering questions but posing questions to us as well. Our ongoing interaction offset some of the inevitable discomfort rural Belizeans may have felt with us and especially me, a formally educated, non-Creole-speaking foreign professor.

I suggest that another advantage of participant observation, most pertinent to the role of qualitative methods in tourism research, was an ability to gain an understanding of power dynamics and the politics of ecotourism from the perspective of different community members. These methods were particularly successful for facilitating communication with women, especially the least materially well off women from the least powerful families and factions in Gales Point. The views of women, and especially the poorest women, are usually not sought or given adequate attention when development projects are discussed or implemented (Smith 1999). Formal approaches such as requesting quantitative information can be
analysis. By working to explain the particulars of a single case, but also why there are differences across cases, it becomes possible to acknowledge the historically specific causality of a case, but to move to broader generalisations by checking how it informs or challenges some pre-existing theory that is then reconstructed. The significance of a case then relates to what it tells us about the world in which it is embedded.

In addition to Gales Point, we visited and revisited other rural communities involved in ecotourism and integrated conservation and development projects. These included the Community Baboon Sanctuary, the Crooked Tree Wildlife Sanctuary, the Maya Center and the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife (Jaguar) Sanctuary, and the Rio Bravo Conservation and Management Area. Where possible, we replicated exercises we conducted in Gales Point, including staying with and conducting participant observation with bed and breakfast hostesses, tour guides and random household surveys. As Burawoy (1991) suggests, these other cases provided a broader context for understanding the particulars of Gales Point and enabled me to develop some comparative observations and work towards challenging and reconstructing theories about community ecotourism. This was particularly helpful, since some scholars have argued that our understanding of community conservation models has been based on uncritical popular images and boosterism, rather than on what is actually happening on the ground in particular places (Brosius et al. 1998). The case study approach, which combines multiple qualitative methods attendant to the politics of practice and representation, seemed well suited to addressing these concerns.

The Gales Point case study did not suffer from the common limitations of case studies to explicate the link between micro and macro levels of analysis and constituting the social situation in terms of the particular external forces that influence it. My approach to community ecotourism in Gales Point explicitly situated the case study within a nested-scaled approach across multiple spatial and temporal scales. I deliberately sought information on both place- and non-place-based political-economic-cultural factors and assessed their influence on attitudes and practices in Gales Point. This included collecting oral histories from residents as well as project planners as to the reasons for environmental change; studying the available literature; and holding interviews with key state and private actors on colonialism, nation-building, racism, debt and structural adjustment mandates, and programmes involved in the conservation of biological diversity. In contrast to critiques that tourism research typically fails to assess how macro forces influence micro events (such as community ecotourism in Gales Point), I suggest that this study was deliberate about making such connections.
suggesting again Hall's critique that tourism research is political and value laden. Discourse analysis emphasises the value-laden and reflexive nature of research. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Smith reminds us that:

Research is one of the ways in which the underlying code of imperialism and colonialism is both regulated and realized. It is regulated through the formal rules of individual scholarly disciplines and scientific paradigms, and the institutions that support them (including the state). It is realized in the myriad of representations and ideological constructions of the Other in scholarly and 'popular' works, and the principles that help to select and recontextualize those constructions in such ways as the media, official histories, and school curricula.

(1999: 7)

Others critique the 'deconstruction' method on other grounds, especially that it is long on critique and short on constructive alternatives. Indeed, Smith argues that in a 'decolonizing framework', unravelling meanings and their deployment for particular agendas is part of a much larger project:

Taking apart a story, revealing underlying texts, and giving voice to things that are often known intuitively does not help people to improve their current conditions. It provides words, perhaps an insight that explains certain experiences – but it does not prevent someone from dying.

(1999: 3)

The latter point suggests the importance of tourism research that not only documents subjects' concerns, but also results in action.

Participatory action research combines concerns that research is both 'participatory' and 'action orientated'. *Participatory research* differentiates itself from other forms of action research by the fact that it emerges from the felt needs of a community, while *action research* refers largely to research with a practical outcome. Neither of these types of research is motivated by academic concerns or those of an outside expert's views of what ails a particular group of people. Rather, they are driven by concerns and, in the case of action research, practical outcomes as defined by the people themselves, who take control of the research topic, process and product. Participatory research entails 'people learning with and from each other about themselves and, secondarily, about the social conditions affecting them' (Park 1999: 3). Under the right circumstances the investigative activities can lead to a cycle of community actions, further reflection, knowledge generation and additional collective action. The ideal participatory action research process and products are emancipatory and empowering. The fact that the 'research subjects' provide their own interpretation of a situation has made it attractive to anthropologists concerned
topics and strategies to understand if not directly challenge the domination of its tourism industries by foreigners (increasingly Americans). But it is also fraught with challenges.

Taking up the example in Gales Point illustrates the range of complexities and challenges faced in participatory action research. Though desirable to many residents, working on behalf of understanding and developing a more individualistic approach to tourism, if not ecotourism, might be beneficial to a few individuals and households, and could undermine the ecological commitment hoped for through ecotourism. It raises questions regarding how to decide among the interests of competing ‘participants’ in considering how best to base a participatory action research effort, and, though this is not noted as important, what happens if they conflict with those of the researcher? In Gales Point there is no unified community interest among resident ‘participants’ (Belsky 1999). Even in the relatively small, rural community of Gales Point it would be extremely challenging to identify issues that would be relevant to a broad and inclusive group. Rather, perspectives and possible action agendas would depend on particular individuals and groups within the ‘community’ of place, or within the ‘community’ of interests (i.e. local and foreign conservation organisations, state and other regional actors). Neither group of potential participants is homogeneous, nor would they be in agreement with the other regarding key topics and preferred actions. An example is that attention to ecological sustainability, though the primary concern of biodiversity conservationists involved in the Gales Point ecotourism project, was not the key concern among residents struggling with livelihood security, though it became important to residents benefiting from ecotourism. As a result, there were considerable tensions and conflicts over the practice and meaning of ‘biodiversity’ both among residents and with those of outside organisers, and most likely there would be questions regarding some of these views as against my own.

In thinking about the applicability of participatory action research to tourism, it is likely that (conventional) tourism researchers would raise both practical and theoretical issues with both the methodology and its particular techniques. If qualitative research may be viewed as overly subjective and unscientific, it is likely that participant action research would be criticised as even more so, and derided as advocacy rather than research. Nonetheless, supporters of participatory action research would credit it as a valid knowledge-building process, and no less subjective and advocacy based – only in this case, advocacy on behalf of particular groups of peoples and social justice values.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this chapter has reviewed the notion that tourism research has insufficiently recognised politics in tourism practice and the practice of
The student group also assisted me in conducting a randomised household survey in 1994 using both open- and close-ended questions. The field practicum included ecological studies using sampling methods along random transects and vegetative plots. I would like to acknowledge my co-instructor, Stephen Siebert, who was also the innovator and principal investigator of the entire UM-UCB linkage project.

Though all researchers and research subjects spoke English, most of the Belizean students held conversations in their native Creole language. Speaking in the local dialect also increased the naturalness of the setting and the ease of subjects. To facilitate translation as well as enhance interdisciplinary learning, whenever possible American and Belizean students worked in teams, paired to balance nationality, gender and scientific discipline.

To maximise the naturalistic setting, sense of informality and comfort of the bed and breakfast hostesses to raise critiques, I chose not to tape-record any interview or conversation. Instead, the students and I kept extensive field notes.

References


The politics of community ecotourism

291


