

## Benefits of Promoting Local Culture for Sustainable Tourism: Stakeholder Involvement and Challenges

**Audrey Bonvin Dechoux**

The research was undertaken to show the importance of promoting local culture as a contribution to sustainable tourism in Seychelles. In doing so, attention is drawn to the involvement of various stakeholders and the general population for the inclusion of cultural heritage in the provision of tourism. It was a qualitative case study, adopting constructivist grounded theory along with an ethnographic approach to explore the views of local respondents.

To put this into context, tourism is now acknowledged as a major activity and source of income generation across the global economy. It has the potential to bring benefits to all concerned although there are also costs that must be taken into account. Creating a model of sustainability – to accommodate growth without degrading the places visited – is, therefore, an essential element of tourist planning and development. Robust plans are needed and the participation of stakeholders should encourage the inclusion of local cultural features as a source of attraction.

In Seychelles, tourism is the main pillar of the economy and, if it is to continue to be so in the long term, it has to be managed effectively. As such, the case study provides an illustrative example of challenges and opportunities.

Important concepts encountered in the course of the research were:

- ◆ Sustainable tourism paradigm
- ◆ Local culture and cultural heritage
- ◆ How the two can cohesively influence profitability
- ◆ Stakeholders' responsibility and involvement
- ◆ Local desire to preserve the cultural heritage
- ◆ How stakeholders can contribute positively towards both profit and preservation.

As the research progressed I was led, increasingly, into an exploration of different aspects of human behaviour, giving rise to the following questions:

- ◆ What is generally understood by ‘sustainable tourism’?
- ◆ What is the benefit of promoting local culture in Seychelles, and will it help to achieve sustainable tourism?
- ◆ How can tourism stakeholders promote local culture and sustainable tourism?
- ◆ What is the importance of culture?
- ◆ How can local culture contribute to sustainable tourism?
- ◆ Do the authorities place enough emphasis on local culture and sustainable tourism?

The research reached out to local respondents from different backgrounds, age groups and gender in order to get sufficient diversity in response. It was undertaken along the border between theory and practice, deliberately embracing elements of both. While I saw this essentially as an academic project, designed to meet specific requirements, I also wanted it to yield practical benefits – in particular, to show how cultural tourism can help to achieve sustainable tourism, but also to demonstrate the attention that is being placed on the latter.

I carried out my empirical work in my home country, Seychelles. As with any qualitative research the validity of the outcomes is heavily dependent on the reliability of the data collected. For instance, I chose to use a questionnaire rather than focus groups, as the latter can lead to peer pressure on some respondents. Most of the sample resulted from random selection although some participants were chosen because of their respective roles in the tourist industry. I designed the questionnaire with a combination of structured and open-ended questions so that I could include personal views as well as data collected on a uniform basis.

While questionnaires enable individuals to respond according to their own beliefs, one problem is that it is rarely possible to obtain a response from all of the target population. In this case, I issued 50 questionnaires and received a 60% response rate. That inevitably limits the validity of the outcome, although it was judged that there were still sufficient numbers to produce meaningful results.

In any case, I supplemented my findings with material from other sources. I used, for example, official reports, archival collections, advertisements, newspaper articles and books to provide secondary data. I also undertook a number of site observations over a two-week period.

In the event, the research showed that most respondents were aware of and supported the idea of sustainable tourism. A majority believed that limiting numbers of tourists and carefully targeting the market would help to achieve the sustainable tourism label.

However, inevitably, tension is present between maximizing profits and being sustainable. It was asserted that there should be continuing education about the need for sustainable tourism and management strategies developed by relevant government agencies.

There was concern about the erosion of local culture and, in particular, the effects of social media. My own belief is that, while structures and policies are important, individuals and communities should have more influence on the process. More information, about the importance of tourism, sustainable tourism, local culture towards sustainable tourism, should be put in place from an early age.

The whole tourism strategy in Seychelles is presently directed to increasing visitor numbers, and capitalizing on the natural qualities of the islands. Much less emphasis is placed on cultural factors but this can be changed through well-designed and managed policies. The cultural heritage of the small island nation is unique and it can help to distinguish the offering of Seychelles from that of other competitors. It is something in which the local population can participate and from which it can enjoy the benefits, whilst preserving the islands. My research concludes that this is a challenge but also an opportunity to create a new brand of tourism in Seychelles.

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*Audrey Bonvin Dechoux (formerly Beaudoin) undertook this research in connection with a Master's in Business Administration degree with the University of Roehampton, London. Despite the subject being unfamiliar for a 'business' case, Audrey saw an opportunity to highlight something she is passionate about, featuring her motherland.*

*Audrey graduated from Roehampton University with a distinction in 2018. Prior to her MBA, Audrey's career path brought her to work in the Hospitality and Tourism sector in Seychelles, before pursuing her studies – and then her career – in the same field in Switzerland. She is now working in project administration for the Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL), a prestigious establishment that focuses on education, research, technology and innovation.*

*Audrey is also the co-author of Modern Business Etiquette a book published in 2011. Aside from her family, Audrey is passionate about continuing learning and development, believing that the share and exchange of information is the key to moving forward and gathering fresh knowledge.*

[audreybonvin@gmail.com](mailto:audreybonvin@gmail.com)