

Rural Adventure Tourism and Social Entrepreneurship

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Summary

The intent of this research is to provide a comparative analysis of several innovative social entrepreneurial businesses operating within the realm of rural adventure tourism. This qualitative, case-based research explores six companies, which have been able to incorporate rural adventure tourism with projects aimed at addressing human and environmental issues. Each company is examined to better understand the novel ways in which these organizations meet their complex business challenges.

The notion of tourists “doing good” or “giving back” as an integral part of their vacation experience is not a completely new concept. Tourists often seek the opportunity to donate some resource to the destination they are visiting. In specific cases, they have sought to involve themselves in a work project or visit an orphanage while visiting a destination. However, the concept of social entrepreneurship, which might be described as the application of innovative solutions to pressing social issues, within the tourism industry pushes the idea of tourists “giving back” to another level. Greater numbers of tourists are seeking to have a real and meaningful impact on the destinations they visit. Growth in niche tourism activities such as voluntourism, travel philanthropy, educational tourism among others is an indicator that many tourists are no longer satisfied with merely observing. With the aging of the boomer population as well as the growth of more travel savvy college-student population, there is greater demand for meaningful travel experiences that serve a purpose.

The challenge of many tourism firms and/or non-governmental organizations is how to meet this increasing demand for quality, purposeful experiences without creating tourism activities that are intrusive, exploiting and/or disruptive to local destinations.

In this in-depth analysis we highlight and define emerging “best practices” of these firms that have begun to successfully exist within the growing niche of social entrepreneurship as it pertains to adventure tourism. The primary goal of this exploratory research is to advance the notion of a flexible, effective model for social entrepreneurship within the tourism industry.

Several key issues are explored through this research. They include:

1. Implementation of social entrepreneurship: although countries often face similar issues – education, health, resource development (water use, environmental conservation), solution implementation may be unique from country to country
2. Traveler philanthropy: Discuss issues with traveler philanthropy including monitoring and measurement, upset to social balance in rural communities, corruption
3. Real world examples: Describe current models in practice: PEPY (Cambodia), Relief Riders International (India), Generosity in Action, Explorandes (Peru), Global Sojourns (several countries in Africa), Los Ninos (Mexico)
4. Tourism and Non-governmental Organizations: Describe challenges for both tourism and NGO partners:
 - Bringing tourism into the realm of assistance or development activities can be distracting for aid workers, it can take a small NGO well out of its daily business to coordinate and manage tourists.
 - NGOs and tour operators must weigh the cost/benefit of partnering with each other. For tour operators - the cost of implementing, the new issues around insurance, the balance of tourist desires with aid work.
 - From a business perspective specific to tour operators, explore answers to the classic buy/build question when it comes to doing aid work – discuss benefits/ costs of trying to build capacity in house or partner with NGOs.

Methodology

As previously stated, as this research is exploratory in nature, a qualitative approach is utilized. This example-based approach involved a limited number of organizations (six). The researchers employed an in-depth examination of each of these six organizations. This is achieved through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with lead staff in each organization. The information gained through the interviews is paired with a review of the existing literature on this topic. Following the findings from the literature review as well as the interviews, the researchers identify emerging best practices or lessons learned.

Conclusion

Overall, the purpose of this research is exploratory in nature. Social entrepreneurship as it pertains to the tourism industry, specifically adventure tourism, has not been explored in great depth within the tourism literature. This research presents several examples of companies that have incorporated social entrepreneurship into a successful tourism product. It is anticipated that the findings of this exploratory study will further this concept within academic research as well as provide practitioners with some guidance as to how to incorporate these concepts into a successful business model.