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The community participation process in ecotourism development: a case study of the community of Sogoog, Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia

Theories on community participation in ecotourism development advocate obtaining maximum levels of both community control and benefit to achieve sustainable tourism. This paper explores issues in community based ecotourism development in a small, remote community in Western Mongolia. It assesses the community's desire to develop ecotourism, their understanding of the issues involved and the feasibility of the process in a poor herding community, where 63% are herdsmen, frequently absent with their herds. Using responses from 100 participants together with interviews with key stakeholders, it describes and analyzes the difficulties in establishing community participation and ecotourism implementation. Findings revealed that long-term viable community-based ecotourism development in remote areas requires close collaboration and sustained support from trusted community leaders and from knowledgeable and committed outside stakeholders. Approaches need to be carefully tailored to local circumstances, not "one size fits all". Key areas of concern were environmental and cultural, including fears that their tradition of hospitality might be compromised, perceptions of the local NGO's benefits to the community, and local, often naïve, expectations of ecotourism development. Despite fears, over 90% of those interviewed were willing to participate in an ecotourism project in this high risk, unforgiving economic and climatic setting.

Key words: remote communities, community-based ecotourism, cooperation, Western Mongolia, participatory process, community participation

Introduction

It has become widespread knowledge that in order to successfully achieve sustainable ecotourism it is useful to attain not only the cooperation, but also the participation of the local communities in question (Beeton, 2006; Campbell, 1999; Drake, 1991; Jamal & Stronza, 2009; Mitchell & Eagles 2001; Ross & Wall, 1999; Ryan, 2002). Drake (1991), for example, notes how community participation enables local communities to play a key role in the outcomes of ecotourism projects, while Jamal & Stronza (2009) argue that successful long-term community-based ecotourism implementation requires a significant proportion of a community's population to be involved.

Theories on community participation in ecotourism development focus on obtaining a maximum level of control and benefit to the community (Scheyvens, 1999). Also subsumed in these theories is the belief that the process is more important than the outcome because what is learned, plus the connections made, carry the value of experience (Beeton, 2006; Laing, Lee, Moore, Wegner, & Weiler, 2009; Mitchell & Reid 2001; Okazaki, 2008; Shikida, Morishige, Takagi, & Miyamoto, 2008) and can, over the longer term, reduce the costs of resolving disagreement among stakeholders (Yuksel, Bramwell & Yuksel, 1999). However, since each community presents its own unique set of circumstances, it would be naive to suggest that suitable conditions exist in all potential tourist sites for a community-based development to flourish (Beeton, 2006; Belsky, 1999; Mitchell & Reid, 2001; Okazaki, 2008). Impediments, such as differing understandings about appropriate levels of participation among stakeholders, and concerns about how participation should be implemented at the field level (Michener, 1998), can prevent the effective implementation of a community participation process. These uneven beliefs can make the participatory approach overly time consuming and subject to conflict (Belsky, 1999; Jamal & Getz, 1999; Li, 2006; de Araujo & Bramwell, 1999; Reed, 1999; 1997; Yuksel et al., 1999). However, Li argues that at the initial stages of developing tourism, fairness is less important than efficiency because the process of involving the community is costly. Furthermore, recent case studies have revealed that even without a community-participation approach, tourism development can be successfully implemented to the community's benefit. (Dwyer & Edwards, 2000; Kontogeorgopoulos, 2005; Li, 2006; Simpson, 2008).

As an overriding principle, Simpson (2008) recommends what he terms a 'Community Benefit Tourism Initiative' (CBTI), which stresses that even without

direct participation or ownership in a tourism project, a local community should benefit socially, economically, and environmentally in a sustainable way. By focusing "on delivering livelihood and other benefits as a result of a tourism enterprise, [outside stakeholders can] design and deliver benefits to a community without the 'baggage' that can come with community involvement in the decision-making processes" (Simpson, 2008 p.2). Nevertheless, Jamal and Stronza (2009) argue that community-based partnerships for long-term considerations "should ideally work within a context of respecting local leaders and local processes for making decisions" (p.183) even though following these contexts will considerably lengthen the implementation process. Although possible disagreement among stakeholders over the nature of the decision-making process is increased if they are receiving support from outside development projects, the need for collaboration or partnerships from outside agencies such as non-governmental organizations (NGO), governments, and other agencies is essential (Beeton, 2006; Bramwell & Cox, 2009; de Araujo & Bramwell, 1999; Fennel 2008; Kernel 2005; Okazaki, 2008; Robinson, 1999; Simpson, 2008).

Case studies in ecotourism development (Drake, 1991; Jamal & Stronza, 2009; Jones, 2005; Mitchell & Eagles, 2001) also note that although community ownership and management of ecotourism ventures is possible, communities still require some form of collaboration or partnership with outside stakeholders, as an exemplary project in Bolivia (the community of San Jose and the Chalalán Ecolodge) (Jamal & Stronza, 2009) has revealed. However, this project, which was first initiated as a partnership between various stakeholders, had to overcome complex issues and has succeeded only with the participation of a few dedicated and perseverant community leaders (Jamal & Stronza, 2009). In the end, each ecotourism project constructs its

own unique developmental scenario with its own advantages and disadvantages, whether it involves community participation or not. Much depends on local circumstances. However, varying levels of accomplishment have even been witnessed within the same small African nation, Botswana, where Mbaiwa & Stronza (2010) report the success of community based initiatives, while Stone & Stone (2011) report serious problems.

Community Participation in Small Remote Communities

Some researchers claim that local communities have little protection, influence or power over uncontrolled tourism development unless they can self-mobilize and gain full control over all aspects of the development process by learning the politics of tourism development (Reid, 2003; Tosun, 2005). Accordingly, it has been argued that a management system needs to be implemented for community benefit before the influence of tourism becomes widespread (Ryan, 2002; Shikida et al., 2008). Such a system would allow the strengths of small communities, such as those outlined by Scheyvens and Momsen (2008) in their study of small island states, to be best utilized. Notable among these for the present case study of the small, remote community of Sogoog in western Mongolia are the "high levels of cultural, social and natural capital" (Scheyvens & Monsen, 2008, p.499). According to Mitchell and Eagles (2001), communities with high cohesion or social capital are more able to determine the degree of control of tourism development. However, gaining full control over all aspects of the development process of tourism does not guarantee equal distribution of benefits or satisfaction (Simpson, 2008), and as Kontogeorgopoulus (2005, p.19) argues, control 'trade offs' are sometimes necessary for successful development of ecotourism. For example, in southern Thailand, the successful adoption of one

principle of community-based ecotourism is usually tied to a trade off in another (Kontogeorgopoulus, 2005). Similarly, Campbell (1999) notes the need for locals to provide ecotourism services even though her findings reveal they enjoy only limited control and benefits from them. Findings from case studies in Costa Rica and Chiquian, Peru show that the low level of awareness among residents regarding specific opportunities in tourism resulted in little locally initiated entrepreneurship and thus fewer benefits from tourism (Campbell, 1999; Mitchell & Eagles, 2001).

Despite the potential benefits afforded by tourism development, Reid (2003) cautions that communities are often slow to organize the possibilities in their area, while outside companies are quick to exploit those same resources. It is in such cases that Simpson's (CBTI) (2008) may work best to alleviate some of the 'baggage' of the community participatory process while avoiding the possible negative outcomes that can occur when outside stakeholders' take control of tourism. Jamal and Stronza (2009) argue that rapidly developing tourism destinations in remote communities with multiple stakeholders "greatly increase complexity and uncertainty, creating a turbulent environment" (p. 172), which can result in no single stakeholder having full control of the planning. As a consequence the financial benefits from tourism expected by local communities are seldom attained (Reid, 2003). For this reason, mechanisms need to be put into place to ensure that benefits are distributed in a way that remote communities receive their fair share (Simpson, 2008). Indeed, because of the need to maintain the intricate balance among multiple stakeholders in vulnerable communities, a general consensus appears to be forming that a supporting mechanism between stakeholders and communities is essential (Bramwell & Cox, 2009; Hardy & Beeton, 2006; Jamal & Stronza, 2009; Kernel, 2005; McCool, 2009; Okazaki, 2008; Plummer & Fennell, 2009; Simpson, 2008; Tosun, 2006; Yuksel et al., 1999).

Purpose

Given the uncertainty surrounding the degree to which community participation can effectively contribute towards ecotourism in remote communities, the purpose of the present study was twofold: to assess 1) a community's desire to participate and develop a community-based ecotourism project and 2) the feasibility of implementing a community-based participatory ecotourism development project. The locale for the study was a small community in Western Mongolia called Sogoog *bag (administrative subdivision)*, Bayan-Ulgii *aimag (Mongolian administrative unit)*.

Encompassed within these two purposes was the need to achieve a better understanding about 1) the local community social structure; 2) self-perceptions about community issues; 3) local environmental concerns; 4) concerns about tourism development; 5) perceptions of the local NGO's benefits to the community; 6) perceptions of sustainable tourism; and 7) expectations of ecotourism development in the community and willingness to participate in the planning.

Background to the Present Study

Tourism in Mongolia

Prior to 1990, tourism in Mongolia was state regulated with only one company operating tours, the Zhuulchin National Tourist Organization, which was privatized in 1991 and renamed the Juulchin Foreign Tourism Corporation. Visitors to Mongolia were mostly from the former Soviet Union and eastern European communist-bloc countries with an estimated 236,540 international visitors in 1989 (Yu & Goulden, 2006). Since 1998 there has been 15%-17% annual growth in international arrivals to Mongolia, reaching 450,000 in 2007[i].

Saffery (2000) argues that tourism development in Mongolia, specifically in the Gobi Desert region, is best characterized as a 'race' towards securing the "financial benefits that tourism can bring" (p. 261). A similar situation exists on a smaller scale near the border of the Altai Tavan Bogd National Park and other parts of Bayan-Ulgii *aimag*. However, unlike the Gobi desert region, difficult access is currently restricting the number of visitors to the western part of the *aimag*[ii].

Saffery (2000) reports that in the eight years starting from 1990, the number of registered tourism providers in Mongolia increased to more than 200; however, these providers tended to bring their own guides when they visited remote areas, such as the Gobi Gurvansaikhan National Park, leaving little employment for the locals. This scenario dovetails with Mowforth & Munt (1998) who estimated that half the tourist expenditures in developing countries never reach the host.

Tourism in Bayan-Ulgii and Sogoog

The annual Bayan-Ulgii tourist arrival figures for 2008 were 1428, up from about 1000 in 2007. The majority consisted of Americans (742), followed by Japanese (379) and Europeans (288); Russians accounted for only 17 and Chinese even less, at two. However, the *aimag* government is presently in tourism development discussions with the Chinese government to open the Mongolian-China border in Bayan-Ulgii year-round. It is currently open for only a limited time in the summer. There is discussion of creating a paved highway from China through Mongolia to the Russian border, thus allowing the 10,000 tourists that visit that area in China to access Mongolia [iii]. Currently, the vast majority of tourists in the region go to wilderness areas on organized tours from Ulaanbaatar, although there are some independent travellers.

Sogoog is a small community located in the Bayan-Ulgii *aimag,* in the westernmost part of Mongolia. The town is nestled in the vast valley of the Sogoog River and is sparsely populated with 1200 residents. It is a tightly knit community with a wilderness area that offers great possibilities for outdoor activities while the local Kazakh heritage offers cultural tourism opportunities. The search for 'off the beaten track' destinations is already bringing an influx of travellers to the Altai Tavan Bogd National Park about 100 km west of Sogoog. Western Mongolia has the potential to become part of a tourism trend that "penetrate[s] ever further into new and as yet 'undiscovered' areas…[as] the more adventurous, authenticity-seeking tourists move further a field in quest of 'pristine' nature and 'unspoilt' natives" (Cohen, 2002, p.272). Mountaineering is already bringing many climbing expeditions to Western Mongolia's snow-capped Altai range (highest peak 4,374m). At present, however, the local community members and the herdsmen surrounding the national park have neither the experience nor the infrastructure to deal with an influx of tourists.

Access and conditions:

In addition to the existing difficulties of reaching Bayan-Ulgii, accessing Sogoog itself can be described as adventurous. The main form of transport for tourists between Western Mongolia and Ulaanbaatar is airplane. The alternative is a six-day drive on dirt 'trails' or roads that can be rough and tedious. Flying often presents its own difficulties with flights which, when not fully booked, are either delayed or cancelled without notice. Reserving tickets can be extremely difficult and frustrating because schedules change frequently. As of February 2009, one of two domestic flights servicing Ulaanbaatar and Olgii was discontinued for an undetermined period of time making the planning of a research trip very difficult. Adding to the difficulty, foreign credit cards are not accepted for reservations from outside the country. From

Ulaanbaatar, it is a three-and-half hour flight to an isolated gravel landing strip. The quickest alternative to flying is a non-stop, three-day express ride in a transport truck that switches drivers.

The community of Sogoog is located about 80km (2.5 hours drive) from Olgii city, the main jumping off point of tourists visiting Bayan-Ulgii. There is no access by public transport to Sogoog; transportation options include renting a private vehicle from a tour operator or taking a taxi. Adding to these difficulties, petrol can be in limited supply and frequent power outages disable the pumps.

Direct communication is limited to certain areas that receive weak mobile phone signals. Otherwise, communication is by postal correspondence. Email is only available when someone from Sogoog happens to go to Olgii for errands and checks in at the Internet café. Email inquiries often take weeks and sometimes months for replies.

Selection Rationale

In 2008, the Mongolia Lonely Planet guidebook published a paragraph on the community of Sogoog as a place of interest to visit (Kohn, 2008). The publication of the paragraph created a sense of urgency among the board of directors of the Kazakh Family Development, a local NGO, for developing a pro-active ecotourism plan for the community. The community of Sogoog, Bayan-Ulgii was chosen by the authors in order to study the community participation process in ecotourism development because its community-initiated programs were already in place through the Kazakh Family Development NGO established in 2006 using a community-participation approach process with the original goal of building and administering a kindergarten. Also, the location of the host community in Bayan-Ulgii, which is home to Kazakh Mongolians who have a different culture and language than the rest of Mongolia, adds

a unique cultural element to its tourism potential. Kazakhs are the ethnic majority in Bayan-Ulgii comprising 88.7% of the population. In addition, Sogoog is part of a wilderness area that offers significant potential for adventure tourism. As it is situated on the main route between Olgii and the Altai Tavan Bogd National Park, it is a natural rest stop location for travelers going to the Altai Tavan Bogd National Park (190 km from Olgii), one of the main tourist attractions of Bayan-Ulgii; however, the lack of infrastructure, knowledge and organization is preventing the community from benefiting from these tourists. Of the estimated 1428 tourists that arrived in 2008, a great many set out for the Tavan Bogd National Park with private tour operators such as Blue Wolf Tours (a local company) that in 2005, reportedly attracted 750 travellers to their *ger* (a type of tent dwelling) camp lodges in Sagsai *sum* (Mongolian territorial administrative unit) (Blackeney, 2006*)* rising to 1300 in 2008 (Tourism Provider Survey, 2009).

Methodology

An initial visit to the community of Sogoog took place in August 2008 in order to identify key stakeholders and informants and to understand the overall situation in the area of study. Informal and formal interviews were carried out with travellers in Bayan-Ulgii, local residents in the Sogoog valley, the local operating Kazakh Family Development NGO staff and administering board members, tour operators and the ministry responsible for tourism development in Bayan-Ulgii and in Mongolia.

Surveys

Having identified key informants within the community, it was possible to have assistance in translating and administering a community assessment survey of 21 items translated into Kazakh on various topics including community structure,

community self-perceptions, understanding of sustainable tourism, environmental concerns, perceptions of the local community NGO, concerns with tourism, benefits of promoting tourism and willingness to participate in the planning process between November 2008 and January 2009. The survey was partially modelled after the questionnaires used by Stone and Wall's case study (2003) of ecotourism and community development on Hainan Island and Jones's (2005) on community-based ecotourism ventures in the Gambia. A total of 100 questionnaires were collected from a sample of convenience of Sogoog-area residents. An NGO field manager and her staff distributed and collected the survey when they went to visit families, or when residents came to the local kindergarten or school. Because of the extreme remoteness and access difficulties coupled with the fact that herder families usually live in small groups of a few families in close proximity, the survey operators took some non-traditional collection methods. For example, it is common for neighbours to spend time at each others' residences and this simplified the task of having to translate and explain the survey repeatedly, although there was the drawback that respondents who answered on the same occasion might all consult each other and write the same answer.

Using a mix of quantitative (questionnaire) and qualitative (interviews) methods, the present study identified several points as needing deeper investigation. In addition, a different 21-item survey was administered to the four major tourism providers in Bayan-Ulgii operating from Olgii including one company operating from abroad. This survey inquired about the company operating structure, perceptions of Bayan-Ulgii, potential destinations, the perception of sustainable tourism, concerns with tourism in Bayan-Ulgii, the perception of who benefits from sustainable tourism

practices in Bayan-Ulgii, community improvement that tourism can bring and the perception of the local people's level of comfort with tourists in their communities. The research instruments used can be found in an appendix to this paper in the online version of this paper.

Interviews

In-depth interviews with key informants and stakeholders were conducted on four occasions from August 20th 2008 to October 25th 2009. Thirty-three key informants, including NGO board members, NGO staff, local residents, herdsmen families, tourism providers in Bayan-Ulgii, tourism providers from Ulaanbaatar, a tourism provider from Europe, government officials and tourists were interviewed. The interviews, which were recorded and transcribed, were conducted with the aid of an experienced translator and accompanied by a written version of the questionnaire translated into Mongolian. Interviews were conducted in Sogoog, Olgii, Ulaanbaatar and Japan (the home of the authors and some of their Mongolian contacts when the study was conducted). Informal interviews were also conducted with tourists in the Olgii airport. In addition to the interviews, the official Bayan-Ulgii *aimag* tourism planning documents were reviewed in order to understand which issues to prioritize for development.

Results

The findings reported here are from the 100 questionnaires of the preliminary study from December 2008 to January 2009, and the interviews of August 2008, March 2009, July 2009 and October 2009, including observations.

Sogoog Survey

Although the survey contained 21 items, more than half of these concerned demographical and biographical information, such as, the number of years residing in Sogoog, age, gender, size of family, and nomadic nature. Other attitudinal items contained a Likert-style scale; however, due to difficulties with translation and understanding of concepts in the survey instrument, the scale on some items was different from that on others. In effect, it was highly unlikely that any of the residents had ever seen a questionnaire before, so each item required delicate negotiation with the translators in order to make the meaning clear. Most items used a three- or four-point scale, but one item used a 10-point scale in order to determine finer nuances.

The respondent age group and gender distribution is represented in Table 1. Eighty-seven percent of respondents were married. As for the social structure of the town, which has a population of around 1,200, 63% reported being herders, although many people who were not herdsmen reported owning animals. The animal distribution was 46% goats, 39% sheep and the rest separated into horses, yaks, cows, camels and eagles. To highlight the importance of on the ground contact, a new category of animal, “eagle,” had to be added to the original questionnaire by the field administrator. The main environmental concern was overgrazing cited by 49% of respondents followed by the lack of water (20%) (Figure 1).

The reported level of understanding of sustainable tourism development was measured using a Likert scale from "1" (no understanding) to "10" (complete understanding). The more detailed distinctions offered by this scale enabled finer nuances of this critical point to be drawn out. The mean score was 5.5 (SD 3.2); however, this rather high standard deviation reflects a wide variance with 47 percent

of the total scoring "3" or less, while 30 percent reported almost complete understanding ("9 or "10").

Using a four-point scale (yes a lot / yes a little / sometimes / no not at all), 83% of respondents showed a desire to participate ‘a lot’ in the planning and development stage of the project. This willingness is expected to decrease as time passes because initial enthusiasm tends to fade when the demands of work and time increase. This is especially the case for Sogoog where travelling from pastures to town by resident herdsmen can be long and arduous. However, in this small conservative Muslim community it was surprising that even though one-third of the respondents were women, most of these expressed a keen desire to participate. The willingness to participate in the community NGO corresponds with the desire to participate in the planning and development of tourism in the community with 83% wanting to participate a lot and 11% wanting to participate at least a little. The improvements to the community, under the Kazakh Family Development NGO, were cited as mostly related to health care and kindergarten, but varied between male and female respondents (Table 2).

When asked whether they were comfortable with foreign tourists coming to Sogoog, 58 male and 28 female respondents claimed to be comfortable with the idea, while only one male and one female were uncomfortable and 6 males and 5 females had no opinion either way. For both sexes, 57 male and 30 female, their main concern with tourism tended to be connected to a loss of respect for their culture. This concern has links with the majority of respondents who claimed that Kazakh culture and the people of Sogoog made their community a special place (Table 3). Sixty three

percent of respondents were in complete favor of promoting tourism in Sogoog with 36% willing to try, divided roughly evenly between genders.

A multiple answer format question revealed 39% of people felt that the Kazakh Family Development NGO would receive the most benefit from tourism promotion, followed by the herdsman (20%), the whole community (15%) and tourist companies (10%) (Table 4). Using the same question format, Table 5 shows that respondents believed promoting sustainable tourism practices would benefit the community by bringing economic benefits to the whole community (18%), increasing employment (17%) benefiting individuals (16%), enhancing foreign networks (15%), improving child education (13%), increasing the standard of living (12%) and nothing, i.e., sustainable tourism will bring no benefits at all (9%).

Sogoog Interviews

The interviews, 13 semi-structured and 21 unstructured, provided a rich glimpse into the informants' overall perceptions about their community, including beliefs about sustainable tourism development and their expectations of tourism development. Raw interview data consisted of detailed notes of responses to a series of pre-established questions from the 33 informants. The raw interview data were then classified according to themes related to the present study's focus: 1) ecotourism development; 2) sustainability; 3) community participation; 4) cultural preservation; 5) social structure and 6) impediments. However, among these the importance of preserving the local culture emerged as the most prominent.

One of the surprising findings was that the Sogoog River valley is the first place that was settled as a semi-permanent pastureland by a few family clans of Kazakh people. This realization poignantly connects with the wholehearted local concern over the importance of retaining their unique culture. They described their

culture as helpful, friendly and respectful of the elderly and guests. However, there was a sincere worry that these traits might diminish with incoming tourism. Other key points revealed in the interviews pertaining to culture, scenery, history, fauna, flora, people, as well as a few quotes, are included in Table 6.

Regarding respect for their culture, another key point concerned the custom among the Kazakh people to welcome guests into their homes at anytime. A point of anxiety with the present tourist experience was that sometimes tourists arrived unannounced, producing conflicted feelings. Although arriving guests must be welcomed in their culture, surprise arrivals bring considerable stress because families wish to present their homes as best they can. Similarly, past experiences with tourists brought uncomfortable feelings among the locals about their own poverty and social conditions. This was not reported in the preliminary survey findings, but was discovered after careful questioning. There were incidents where tourists took photographs and movies of the imperfect side of the community and sold those images to magazine and television programs. For the local people, life is hard with few of the conveniences and comforts of western life, such as indoor plumbing and electricity. To have one's 'dirty laundry' figuratively and literally exposed to the world by outsiders created a negative self-image. These experiences imbedded a sense of mistrust towards tourism.

Interviews with local herdsman revealed a deep appreciation for the Kazakh Family Development NGO's improvement of the children's education and health in the community. They also voiced great concern over the recent poor grass harvests along with the drying up of the river. With few alternatives to providing costly imported feed for their animals, tourism development in the community seemed to offer some hope from the worsening economic conditions associated with herding.

Respondents revealed a recent understanding that the few remaining intact historical monuments, e.g., the Turic stones in the area along with those that have been vandalized or used for other purposes in the past, hold considerable value for tourism development. In one interview, a local herdsman commented, “we now understand the value of the Turic stones as having importance for tourism, and we will protect them from further abuse.” Hence the possibility of tourism development as a means of preserving cultural artefacts is highlighted.

Social Context

An awareness of the social context is critical to understanding the challenges facing ecotourism in Sogoog. As previously mentioned, establishing a participatory approach in a community can be an arduous process and developing proper guidelines is not an easy task (Tosun, 2005). Semi-nomadic communities such as Sogoog have had to rely on each other’s help and cooperation for generations in order to survive the difficult environmental and social conditions. The relationships within the community are strong, cooperative, helpful and forgiving. These are the main characteristics that the people described as making their community a special place.

Despite the strong sense of community among the residents, the acceptance of the participatory approach with the Kazakh Family Development NGO as an integral part of the community structure has been time consuming. Interviews revealed that the community managed their affairs almost exclusively on a “who you know” basis. In other words, an outsider’s personal contacts in the community were much more important than his or her qualifications in gaining trust. This process of administration is considered quite corrupt by Western standards; therefore, it has taken three years for the participatory process to be understood and accepted by the Sogoog community.

Many social factors are responsible for the continuing corrupt practices. The expression 'winter is survival'[iv] carries a deep desire for the survival of one's own group members. It is a sense that cannot be well understood by communities of people who have not lived for generations in severe cold, who often wake up wondering whether their children will have enough to eat, or whether their animals – basically their life insurance – have survived the night. With this said, the winter of 2010 was absolutely brutal for Mongolian' herders. After suffering through a drought the previous few years, the 'white zhud' of 2010 (excessive snow and cold temperatures) killed approximately 10% of the country's livestock ("Mongolia's zud: Bitter tool," *2010*). As seen after the zhud of 2000, the number of herder families moving into towns all over Mongolia is bound to rise. Some families have lost up to 90% of their animals, the equivalent of losing one's life savings and pension.

Survey and interviews with others

Interviews with tourism providers from both Ulaanbaatar and abroad echoed concerns about a change of attitude among local people towards tourism in the Altai Tavan Bogd National Park area. The most commonly voiced concern was the unreliable air link between the region and the capital which caused frustration to tourists, providers and local people. Another issue voiced in interviews was the negative impact of cultural change brought about by tourism development. For example, the negotiation process between locals and tourists over the rental of camels and other services near the national parks has become more and more toxic. Disputes over remuneration are the main focus.

As for which party benefits the most from tourism, interviews with operators from Bayan-Ulgii revealed that providers from Ulaanbaatar and private individuals do. From the tour operators' perspectives, promoting sustainable tourism in Bayan-Ulgii

would increase employment as well as the quality of life of local residents. However, the main beneficiaries of tourism in Bayan-Ulgii were identified as tour companies in Ulaanbaatar. Only one company reported having any interest in the development of sustainable ecotourism in Sogoog.

Discussion

This discussion addresses future ecotourism project development initiated by the Kazakh Family Development NGO in Sogoog, Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia. The survey results and interviews have produced useful findings regarding the possible long-term implications of an ecotourism project in Sogoog which may also be significant for other remote areas. The two main research questions arising from the study are: 1) how does a remote community cope with the challenge of integrating the participation process into a community-based ecotourism project? 2) how can a remote community deal with a lack of expertise in ecotourism development?

Community participation in tourism development for small remote communities:

Interviews with key informants revealed that Sogoog, with three years of participatory experience under its belt, seems to have overcome the trials of establishing a community NGO originally created for improving education for children at the kindergarten level, and other related projects. With a population proportion of 63% herdsmen, full participation in the community decision-making process is limited to the winter months. As a result, community participation is limited to elected representatives in the Kazakh Family Development NGO. Because remote communities often have their own set of unique circumstances, such as, in this case, nomadic herders who are absent for long periods (the population drops from 1200 to 400 in the summer), the community participation process often proceeds slowly and carefully so that the community is assured that all voices are represented.

Given the potential of tourism development, the challenge for Sogoog's community participation process will be to continue operating with the high integrity of the Kazakh Family Development NGO which understands the 'survival mode of life,' and envisions how tourism can contribute to the community. The benefits of tourism, unlike the current funding for the NGO (which is shared by the whole community) are more likely to benefit only certain individuals. However, when individuals are likely to benefit, even communities with strong social cohesion and participatory integration in tourism can relent to individualism and consumerism (Mitchell & Eagles, 2001). Tourism can quickly lapse into social disempowerment when the inequities in communities are "exacerbated by the introduction of a somewhat lucrative industry to which all will not have access" (Scheyvens, 1999 p.248). In tightly knit remote communities where group cohesion is essential for survival, and group solidarity is essential for the integration of tourism (Mitchell & Eagles 2001; Mitchell & Reid 2001), any dissension can literally threaten the community's existence.

Crucial to the successful acceptance of the participatory process in establishing the Kazakh Family Development NGO was the integrity and pro-active vision of the leaders as trusted members of the community. With the help of outside expertise in NGO administration, the Sogoog experience has revealed that careful and ongoing monitoring and effective leadership is required during the process of setting up community participation with small positive achievements leading to eventual local acceptance of new ways of administering community interests.

When Western models of management, such as community-based tourism planning with their new protocols for communicating and decision-making, are introduced into remote areas, there is a real danger that traditional knowledge and ways of proceeding will be lost (Wearing & McDonald, 2002). However, community-

based tourism planning with its new style of management can serve as a tool for helping communities communicate and voice opinions (Wearing & McDonald, 2002) and "may decrease potential impacts since communities conceivably have direct control in setting the terms and conditions for tourism development" (Mitchell & Eagles, 2001 P.25). On the downside, power relations can be swiftly disrupted in the community which inevitably brings changes to social organization (Wearing & McDonald, 2002).

The interview and survey findings reveal that the local residents support their Kazakh Family Development NGO and want to participate in the planning process of tourism (Table 7). However, they will need to accept the present circumstances which will likely prevent Sogoog from following a total participatory or decision-making approach to tourism development. As seen in other case studies, there are two likely scenarios, among many, that could help this community benefit from ecotourism development. The first scenario could involve a long-term partnership between outside stakeholders and the community. In Sogoog's case, the NGO's understanding of the community's interests makes it the most likely representative capable of creating programs tailored to the community's needs. However, lacking the tools and knowledge to create such programs, out of necessity they may be forced to request outside consultation with stakeholders who possibly have different agendas. Such requests are not unusual. At the initial stages of ecotourism development, remote communities are dependent on outsider knowledge until they have enough knowhow to forgo the help of outside stakeholders and claim control, as was observed in the Chalalán Ecolodge in Bolivia (Jamal & Stronza, 2009). The strong leadership of the community NGO in Sogoog, shows it has the potential to follow a similar pattern as that of the remote community of San Jose operating the Chalalán Ecolodge in Bolivia,

where effective leadership within the community was needed to acquire experience with the cooperation of reliable outdoor stakeholders followed by the implementation of knowledge in line with the specific needs of their community (Jamal & Stronza 2009). A second scenario for Sogoog, could follow a different model of tourism planning such as the CBTI which can also deliver "a range of livelihood and other benefits without, necessarily carrying the potential baggage of significant community ownership or involvement" (Simpson, 2008, p.15). With possible control trade-offs, as seen in Kontogeorgopoulus's case study of southern Thailand (2005), foreign entrepreneurs can create beneficial tourism development for the community without full community participation. Such a scenario could face challenges in Sogoog, however. Key informants there revealed that entrepreneurs from outside the community would likely face trust barriers within the community given the strong cultural reliance on connections, thus making it difficult to integrate the local population in ecotourism development.

Issues in community participation for ecotourism development in remote areas

One of the main concerns uncovered by the survey and subsequent interviews was the somewhat naïve optimism held by locals regarding the introduction of ecotourism in Sogoog. When key informants were questioned about their understanding of sustainable tourism, it became apparent that only three or four people in the whole community truly understood the concept as it is generally conceived in ecotourism circles. For example, in ecotourism development discussions with local leaders, they often suggested building 'ger camps', hotels and restaurants focusing only on economic gain while ignoring the social and environmental aspects of sustainability in the community. It became apparent that "sustainability" has a completely different meaning for those living in an environment where for a substantial portion of the year

'survival mode' defines everyday life. This different understanding suggests that key terms, such as "sustainability" need very clear explaining with examples of how tourism projects can go right as well as wrong.

Some challenges to the implementation of an ecotourism project were singled out in the survey item regarding concerns about environmental issues. The main environmental concern as pointed out in (Figure 1) is overgrazing followed by the lack of water in the community. This chronic shortage carries the most direct consequence on the carrying capacity of the local environment if the demand from tourism were to increase the use of water resources. Without prior knowledge of the local environmental conditions, the majority of tourists may take their use of water for granted. Kolbonat Tairan, the Sogoog Elementary school principal, stated that a few years earlier a tourist provider from Ulaanbaatar suggested Sogoog make showers for tourists who are returning from mountaineering expeditions. However, the shower has not yet been made, in part because the water supply is unreliable and indeed would be an unsustainable luxury. Another environmental concern voiced in the interviews was the amount of garbage created by tourists' activities. Thus, deciding how water resources are managed and how garbage is disposed of are two key issues that need resolving in remote communities if sustainable ecotourism is to be developed.

Cultural sustainability was another key issue brought out by the study. The survey findings revealed a keen sense of unease over how Sogoog's unique culture could be negatively affected (Table 3 & 6). Interview respondents identified some aspects of the local culture that they believed make their community a special place worth preserving (Table 3 & 6). While changes are inevitable due to globalization, Beeton explains that tourism is "a major agent of change" (2006, p.17); however, if the multifaceted type of change (Simpson, 2008) is not recognized early in the

development stages, the costs can have a huge negative impact (Beeton, 2006). On the other hand, changes brought by tourism, when integrated properly, as seen in two Peruvian case studies in Taquile Island (where it was successful) and Chiquian (where is was not successful), (Mitchell & Eagles, 2001), stand to benefit communities with strong solidarity, and can also strengthen the community's social capital (Jones, 2005). The surveys and interviews identified special local traits such as helpfulness towards each other and respect for elders and guests that are most at risk of change under the influence of tourism. These local traits highlight a fine line in the community cohesion between wanting to reap the rewards of tourism and the desire to retain their culture. Because their community is dependent on mutual cooperation to an extent that is unknown by the vast majority of outsiders who visit, any change to this social cohesiveness can threaten the very existence of the community. Such a concern may be shared by other remote communities where any threat to the glue that links the interdependence of community members may have dire consequences for long-term community sustainability. As Mitchell and Eagles (2001) suggest, carefully encouraging community integration at the beginning of tourism development which is sympathetic to the delicate nature of the culture in remote communities, such as the example mentioned above of preserving the local artifacts[v] in Sogoog initiated by local people, can help prevent unfortunate results.

Limitations

Backman and Morais (2001, p. 600) argue that ecotourism literature is recurrently characterized by studies written on the basis of a few short visits in which data of limited value is gathered. While such an observation may be valid for the present study, certain logistical realities as discussed above exist when researching remote communities. This study has taken certain liberties in gathering information via

surveys which, in some cases, needed to be adjusted to suit the local language and culture. Indeed, because the surveyors were asking questions in which personal attitudes were being elicited, respondents may have been reluctant to answer with any reply other than what was generically expected. Furthermore, because of access limitations to Sogoog, coupled with a complete lack of "paid for" accommodation, a deep qualitative understanding and description of the community was not possible. In this sense, the present study endeavours to provide a preliminary snapshot of a remote community onto which future studies may wish to build.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was first to evaluate a community's desire to participate in an ecotourism project. The second was to assess the feasibility of implementing a community participatory ecotourism development project that is based on the community participation process.

As this study focuses on the viability of a community participatory approach to tourism development in a remote community, it should be understood that Western notions of community participation may have different conceptions in a developing country such as Mongolia. Ideally, sustainable tourism management systems can be devised and implemented before tourists arrive in greater numbers in remote communities with limited resources. Above all, a *one-size-fits-all* approach to remote community participation in ecotourism initiatives must be avoided (Belsky, 1999; Jones, 2005; Okazaki, 2008; Simpson, 2008). In the case of Sogoog, any ecotourism venture would have to take into account the powerful social cohesiveness of the community and include mechanisms to avoid upsetting this. Without considering the implications of unequal power and the social relationship networks within a

community on a deep level, the true ecotourism notion of socio-cultural preservation and environmental conservation cannot be fully attained (Belsky, 1999).

It should be noted that the present study has acted as more than simply an information gathering exercise. It has also given some Sogoog community members the opportunity to voice their awareness and appreciation of their own heritage and the social capital which serves as their greatest asset. In this sense, somewhat inadvertently, the research instruments may have brought this awareness to the surface which may allow them to better understand how to use this asset in positive and meaningful ways.

Another issue arising from the present study is the overriding importance of building trust. When NGOs and other stakeholders enter a remote community, perhaps the single most essential requirement is the trust of community members towards the outsiders (Okazaki, 2008). Such trust can only be secured over time because remote communities, by their very nature, have built up mechanisms of inter-reliance among community members based on trust rather than formalized means such as contracts, common in the urban world. Any outside stakeholder or entrepreneur is likely to face similar conditions regarding trust when establishing projects in remote communities.

It is hoped that lessons from the Chalalán Ecolodge in Bolivia, as well as other eco-tourism projects referred to in this study in Belize, Thailand and Peru, among others which benefited not only from full community participation, but also agency collaboration or outside control can be taken on by Sogoog with the help of the Kazakh Family Development NGO and organisations that have concerns for nomadic culture as their foremost consideration. Although communities are often slow to organize (Reid, 2003), this study's findings suggest some possible alternative

directions to full community participation and control for community-based ecotourism development. As the community supported the local Kazakh Family Development NGO in education and health programs, the same continued support from the community will be needed to sustain long-term ecotourism integration in Sogoog.

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Table 1. Age and gender distribution of survey respondents.

Age Category	20 – 29	30 – 39	40 – 49	50 +	Under 19
Male n=66	21	23	11	10	1
Female n=34	10	15	6	3	0
Total	31	38	17	13	1

n = 100

Table 2. What are the most valuable improvements the Kazakh Family Development have brought to Sogoog

Improvement	Health	Kindergarten	Greenhouse	School	All	Other	N/A
Male n=66	38	8	3	2	6	3	6
Female n=34	16	3			11		4
Total	54	11	3	2	17	3	10

$n = 100$

Table 3. What makes Sogoog a special place

Community trait	Percentage of respondents
Kazakh Culture	44%
People	35%
Nature	18%
Scenery	3%
Total	100%

n =100

Table 4. The perception by residents of who will receive benefits from tourism in Sogoog.

Benefactors	%
KDF NGO	39
Herdsmen	20
Whole community	15
Tourist companies	10
Businesses in Olgii	6
Town inhabitants	6
Government	4
Not certain	2
Total	100

$n = 100$

Town inhabitants refers to only those who stay in town during the summer months.
KFD NGO refers to Kazakh Family Development NGO

Table 5. The perception by residents of what will be the benefits from sustainable tourism in Sogoog.

Benefactors	%
Economic leakage to the whole community	18
Increase employment	17
Individual benefits	16
Enhancing foreign networks	15
Improving child education	13
Increasing the standard of living	12
Nothing	9
Total	100

$n = 100$

Table 6. Interview results on self-perception of town residents (Key points).

Category of items	Key Points describe by the interviewees as special to their community
Culture	foods, milk products, baby cribs, semi-nomadic lifestyle, religion, games, horse races, eagle hunters, handicrafts, various traditional ceremonies, Ramadan, Nowruz (Kazakh New Year on the 21st March)
People	Friendly, hospitable, helpful towards each other, hard working Quoted 'Education level is good'
Historical	Sogoog was the first place settled by the Kazakh when they arrived from China around 1840 Petroglyphs Akhrova (Turic stone or burial mounds)
Scenery	Mt.Bayan (West side), Mt.Kurun (East Side), Khato Canyon, Hovd River Valley,
Fauna/ Flora	Ibex,wolbes,foxes,grounds squirrels, marmot, mountain cats Various trees and flowers growing near the river
Quotes	'Sogoog is the central (original point) of Kazakh people' 'Sogoog people keep Kazakh culture' '…it makes it a special place within the Kazakh people' 'Sogoog is surrounded by mountains which gives it an appeal'

Table 7. Willingness to participate in the community NGO

	Yes a lot	Yes a little	Sometimes	Not at all
Male n=66	58	7		1
Female n=34	27	4		3
Total	85	11		4

n = 100

Figure 1. Environmental Concerns of Sogoog Area Residents

[i] Ministry of Road, Transport and Tourism of Mongolia, now the Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism.

[ii] Information about the increase in the number of tour operators since 2002 was gathered from interviews with tour operators.

[iii] B. Khabden, Head of industry, infrasctructure and nature, Policy coordination division, Governor Administration Office of Bayan-Ulgii a*imag*, interview, March 12, 2009.

[iv] Sandrine Tissier, Director of Pied sur Terre NGO, interview, March 10, 2009

[v] Tourism in Mongolia was discussed in an interview at the Ministry of Road, Transport and Tourism of Mongolia (now the Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism) in Ulaanbaatar on September 1st, 2008 (Lutaa Enkhnasan, Deputy director, Tourism Department)