A tourism community at times of critical transition in its socio-cultural, political, and economic lives: The case of Petra, Jordan

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Area of Detail

Petra: One of the most dramatic sites in the world

- Located in the south of Jordan, Petra is a major historical site with antiquities dating back to 7500 B.C.

- Petra was a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1985 and voted in 2007 one of the “New Seven Wonders of the World”.

Goal of the work presented here is:

To capture a community at a time of critical transition in its political, economic and socio-cultural lives – all of which are entangled almost inextricably with tourism.
Petra has experienced an economic success and an exponential rate of transformation since 2007 as a direct result of its selection as one of the “New Seven Wonders of the World” (N7W). However, its increased value as a tourism destination has created socio-cultural tensions and ambiguities in the life of the community.

I use a combination of quantitative measures and qualitative description to construct a Geertzian “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the study community.

- **Archival sources:** Studies, reports, books, articles and government files.
- **Ethnographic sources:** Participant observation, broad-sweep surveys (700 surveys) and interviews of a cross-section of the Petra community (22 topical in-depth).

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**Local people’s perceptions about tourism in Petra**

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<th>Evaluation List: n = 606</th>
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<td><strong>Positive</strong></td>
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<td>36.2%</td>
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**On the positive side:**
- Increased income.
- New opportunities for better education.
- Understand other cultures.
- Develop services and infrastructure.
- Source of pride of identity.

**On the negative side:**
- People feel “like strangers in their own town”.
- Tourists take priority over residents.
- Uncertain income, political injustice, pollution, congestion, water scarcity and social inequalities within the community.
- Child labor, school leavers at an early age.

**Results**

- The rapid transformation in the form of the local government, local economy, development, and planning are driven by increasing tourism.
- Perception that foreign investment is being courted while local investment, development and job creation are ignored.
- The benefits of tourism are insecure due to the influence of regional events.
- The obsessive and anxious concern over decisions regarding land use.
- Envy of families in the tourism business.
- Resentment of tourism: increased tourism without reaping the benefits.
- Perception that tourists are given priority over local residents.
Potential strategies for the reintegration of the community

- Education on how to benefit local community from tourism revenue.

- Local government must be responsible for raising awareness about the issues that are disturbing the whole region especially negative socio-cultural impacts.

- Engagement of representatives of the local community in decision-making processes concerning their region.

Conclusions

- The sense that tourism is responsible for some problems in Petra was driven by people’s misperception concerning the direct, indirect and induced benefits of tourism.

- The traditions and customs – culture, in short – is built on a shared system of values and ethics which in Petra are perceived to be disrupted.

Thank you