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COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM, HERITAGE CONSERVATION AND IMPROVED URBAN DESIGN – SANTA MARÍA DEL TULE, OAXACA, MEXICO

Daniel Barrera-Fernández and Marco Hernández-Escampa

20.1 Introduction

Community-based tourism emerged in the 1970s as a locally driven response to the negative effects of international mass tourism (Cater, 1993; De Kadt, 1979; Hall & Lew, 2009; Murphy, 1985; Petric & Pivcevic, 2016; Smith, 1977; Turner & Ash, 1975). It can contribute positively to host societies in many different ways. It is an alternative way to diversify local economies traditionally rooted in agriculture, farming and fishing (Lepp, 2007; López-Guzmán, Sánchez-Cañizares, & Pavón, 2011; Maldonado, 2007; Teh & Cabanban, 2007). In addition, it provides visitors with greater environmental and cultural awareness (Shrestha, Stein, & Clark, 2007). Furthermore, community-based tourism contributes to the conservation of cultural and natural resources. It also helps build job opportunities and reduce poverty of the communities involved (Amir et al., 2015) with a relatively low level of investment (Lindberg, Enriquez, & Sproule, 1996). As a result of these positive impacts, community-based tourism has become an important tool for achieving sustainable development (Sebele, 2010).

However, there are also some negative impacts derived from community-based tourism. One of the most important adverse side effects is the loss of cultural identity that happens when the local identity is treated as just another tourist resource (Dyer et al., 2007). The degradation of natural resources is another negative factor repeatedly mentioned (Teye, Sonmez & Sirakaya, 2002). In addition, there is sometimes a monopolistic control of tourism development (Cavus & Tanrisevdi, 2003), where decisions are taken by the industry and national governments, and communities are just the objects of development but not their main subject (Mitchell & Reid, 2001). This results in low life expectancy of community-based activities after external funding ends (Sebele, 2010) and in the exclusion of the poor from community structures (Mowforth & Munt, 2003; Zapata et al., 2011). Finally, when community-based tourism is much more profitable than other activities, there is a competition for working time (Ashley, 2000), resulting in disinterest for traditional labours. When the hosting society perceives that negative impacts brought by community-based tourism outweigh its benefits, community satisfaction is reduced (Faulkner & Tideswell, 1997; Ko & Stewart, 2002; Mathew & Sreejesh, 2017), and they may reject tourists.
This chapter aims to focus on the positive impact of community-based tourism in improving urban design. The study case is Santa María del Tule, located in the state of Oaxaca, in southern Mexico. It is a community with strong Indigenous roots and keeps its traditional self-governing institutions. Thus, the key points of discussion are public participation in urban planning, the role of community-based tourism in the regeneration of public spaces and the town’s infrastructures, social structure and attachment and the contribution of tourism to preserving the Tule tree, the community’s most valuable natural heritage resource.

20.2 Theoretical framework

20.2.1 Community-based tourism in communities ruled by uses and customs

The relationship between tourism and local communities has been studied deeply. However, the conditions of how community-based tourism is developed has its particularities when it is promoted in self-governed communities where traditional ways of administration apply, the so-called uses and customs in legal terms. The issue of community-driven development has become mainstream in development theory (Petric & Pivcevic, 2016). This theory is rooted in Gandhian notions of collective action for the purpose of achieving a common goal through self-reliance and small-scale development, which Gandhi saw as an antidote to the corrosive effects of modernisation and colonial rule (Mansuri & Rao, 2004). These kinds of communities are based on solidarity, meaning the willingness to sacrifice resources or immediate gratification for the welfare of others out of a feeling of unity or doing something for others without the prospect of material reward (Galjart, 1976). Communities achieve agreements and define rules for the use of common resources, with the aim of conserving them in the long term (Ostrom, 2011).

The impact of tourism in a community is affected by a number of factors, such as the level of involvement of the local community, the level of control it has over tourism and the number and type of tourists (Nyaupane, Morais, & Dowler, 2006). The involvement of the community in tourism usually provides more opportunities for the host residents to benefit from tourism development (Blackstock, 2005; Sebele, 2010). The level of involvement is closely related to the community’s attachment. At this point, some authors have concluded that community attachment directly and significantly affects support for tourism development (Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Lee, 2013), while other authors have not found that direct link (Choi & Murray, 2010; Gursoy et al., 2002). In relation to control over tourist activities, many communities have established their own cooperatives allowing them to manage their own tourist resources (Lepp, 2007). Communities generally keep local control and ownership, they regulate the type and distribution of employment and community integration allows for a relatively equitable distribution of benefits in terms of revenues and employment (Mitchell & Reid, 2001). Finally, receiving a small number of visitors means more contact with the local culture and a less invasive attitude towards private aspects of the local culture.

Nevertheless, the challenges that traditional communities have to face go beyond residents’ attachment, control over activities and visitor numbers, since they are usually in a defensive position against major economic forces, especially when possessing natural resources, cultural heritage or social identities that could be commodified and transformed into major tourist attractions. Thus, one key aspect in community-based tourism is the collective decision on what will not be compromised for the sake of growth. Other main limitations that local communities have to face when developing tourism projects are lack of financial resources, infrastructure or know-how, outside interference in local politics.
and decision-making and potential conflicts between the different public administrations (Mitchell & Reid, 2001; Nyaupane, Morais, & Dowler, 2006). Furthermore, communities have to face political threats by multinational companies (including large hotel chains) allied with neoliberalist governments, which in too many cases leads to people expulsion and land dispossession (Maldonado et al., 2015; Palomino Villavicencio, Gasca Zamora & López Pardo, 2016; Quintero Santos, 2004).

Participation in community-based tourism can take different forms. For example, in the so-called “manipulative participation”, actual power lies within groups beyond the local community. The its counterparts are “interactive participation” and “self-mobilisation”, when local people actively get involved in decision-making (Pretty, 1995). On the other hand, Tosun (2006) identified three forms of community participation: coercive participation, induced participation and spontaneous participation, the latter being the highest level of community participation, which can generate trust, ownership and social capital among residents (Petric & Pivcevic, 2016). Community participation is more effective when it combines moderate amounts of structure and flexibility. It is common for most members to resist change or loss, yet resilient communities do not view the change with helplessness; rather, roles are reorganised and changes are viewed optimistically as venues to build a new equilibrium. A rigid community, on the other hand, tends to operate at the extremes of being either overly inflexible or chaotically unstructured (Amir et al., 2015). Communities are not homogeneous and, as a result, different groups become involved in different ways and power is not evenly distributed, because specialised skills (such as handicraft weaving, guiding, cooking, language knowledge, etc.) are scarce. Therefore, particular persons may claim a more equitable share of the profits (Galjart, 1976; Okazaki, 2008).

In Mexico, community-based tourism has thrived in Indigenous communities with common land ownership. Its development started around 30 years ago thanks to a combination of factors. First, tourism became one of the federal government’s priorities, which encouraged the industry’s diversification. Second, there is a vast catalogue of preserved natural and cultural resources in Indigenous territories. Third, a large share of government benefits has gone to Indigenous communities, traditionally the most deprived ones in the country. Finally, several Indigenous organisations perceived community-based tourism as a way to recover licenced lands, leading to further local empowerment. As a result, there are currently around 400 municipalities with community-based initiatives, distributed across 27 states, especially in Chiapas and Oaxaca, which are, in turn, the states with highest Indigenous population (Palomino Villavicencio, Gasca Zamora, & López Pardo, 2016).

With different ways of management, communities have developed collective initiatives of managing their natural and cultural resources by themselves, thus contributing to their own social and economic reproduction (Rodríguez, 2010). Four management principles determine performance of community-based tourism initiatives in Mexico: land ownership (which affects use and profit share), conservation regulations, community’s governance and institutions and the consent to create private companies (allowing the introduction of innovative know-how). Having said that, community-based initiatives take different forms of organisation; many of them are business-like, being able to attract government funds, others are more similar to cooperatives. Half are managed by traditional uses and customs, led by communal committees and the tasks are distributed based on voluntary work or partial profit. Binding decisions are taken collectively and horizontally, meaning that stakeholders are co-responsible and that transparency and accountability are key factors in generating trust and solving collective problems (Palomino Villavicencio, Gasca Zamora, & López Pardo, 2016).
20.2.2 Urban regeneration and public participation

The public space is where the first collaborative experience of a town’s residents takes place. It is where people from different families and neighbourhoods meet (Hernández Bonilla, 2008). Nevertheless, the consolidation, transformation and use of public space is a matter of social conflict, where a wide range of internal and external stakeholders compete for space, resources, time and representation. Some of them promote publicly shared values, while others promote privatisation and constrain people’s rights. Facing these trends, organised communities undertake the defence of public spaces. Especially focussing on community-based tourism, they fight against its commodification and residents’ exclusion through a redefinition of the physical environment and its values.

At this point, it is relevant to mention the concept of attachment to a place, used by social scientists and urban planners. However, the visions of each discipline is rarely interwoven, and a combination of them can provide a fruitful understanding of how impactful urban planning is in our experience of the place, and how the emotions, cognitions and behaviours of the community towards the place can influence their own planning and regeneration. The incorporation of strategies that favour inhabitants’ identification with public spaces allow the creation of a social “anchor” that is necessary to generate a sustainable use of space and care for the physical structure, quality and value of the space. In this sense, participation and communication are mechanisms that favour appropriation (Berroeta & Rodríguez, 2010).

The United Nations (2009) agrees with this statement, declaring that urban planning of the future must fully understand the challenges and opportunities of democratising ever-greater decision-making as well as be more aware of the average citizen’s social and economic rights.

In Latin America, the incorporation of citizen participation was adopted in the agreements reached at the XII Ibero-American Summit of Heads of State (Bárbaro Declaration, 2002), which stated the need to promote actions based on citizen participation in matters of public life, mentioning sustainable tourism as a way to achieve it. However, there are still major challenges to ensuring social participation, such as the inclusion of vulnerable groups of the population (Flores-Xolocotzi & de Jesús González-Guillén, 2007), the embracement of cultural and social diversity and the inclusion of ecology as an active factor in the process of sustainable development (Amado et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, there are some interesting examples of inclusion of Indigenous communities’ world views in urban planning and urban design. World views are related to religion, politics, economy and the environment. It puts into words the relationship of people with their gods, the structure of the community’s life and the myths about the origin of the world (University Programme “Mexico: Multicultural Nation”, no date). One first relevant example is the application of TeAranga & Maori design principles in the development of new neighbourhoods in New Zealand (Auckland Council, 2019). There is a similar case in Chile, where the national government has issued design guides to include Aymara and Mapuche communities’ world view in urban and architectural design (Chilean Government, 2016a, 2016b). The case presented in this contribution is another application of a community’s own world view in their urban environment, where decisions are taken organically. However, maybe in the future a Zapotec guide to urban design could be developed.

20.3 Case study: Santa María del Tule, Oaxaca, Mexico

Santa María del Tule is located in the region of the Central Valleys of Oaxaca, in southern Mexico. It has got a population of 8,500 inhabitants, of which around 1,000 consider
themselves Indigenous, namely Zapotecs. It belongs to the metropolitan area of the city of Oaxaca, which includes 22 municipalities and a population of more than 600,000 inhabitants (National Population Council of Mexico, 2010). The town is at a distance of 10 km from the capital city, connected by highway 190, leading from Mexico City to the isthmus of Tehuantepec and the coast of Chiapas. Until the 1990s, it was also connected by a railroad, which was converted into a cycle path that is very popular among families and sportspeople, especially during weekends.

The state of Oaxaca is one of the most visited regions in Mexico. In 2017 it received 5,006,248 tourists, 249,319 of which were from abroad, especially from the United States of America and Canada (Oaxaca’s Tourism Department, 2018). The Central Valleys is the most visited region in the state; people are attracted by Oaxaca’s colonial city centre and the archaeological remains of Monte Albán, Mitla and Yagul, all of which are included in UNESCO’s World Heritage List. In addition, large numbers of tourists enjoy El Tule tree (which we will talk about below), Hierve el Agua cascades, arts and crafts like the traditional textile industry and decorative figures, gastronomy and festivals, where the annual event of the Guelaguetza stands out. Furthermore, Oaxaca is one of the most diverse states in terms of biodiversity and Indigenous cultures. There are 18 ethnic groups with their own languages and cultural manifestations, making this a unique place in Mexico, which is particularly attractive for cultural tourists and independent travellers.

The Tule tree is the most important tourist asset in Santa María del Tule, and the origin of the town’s name too. The “tule” or “ahuehuete” (*Taxodium mucronatum*) is considered
as one of the biggest organisms in the world. Ahuehuete means “old man of the water” in Nahuatl, so the trees are named for their growth following water currents. The specimen at Santa María has a trunk circumference of 42 m and a diameter of 14 m. It is considered one of the oldest trees on the planet, with an estimated age between 1,400 and 1,600 years, although some authors estimate up to 6,000 years (Conzatti, 1921; Debreczy & Rácz, 1997; Pakenham, 2002). Currently consensus tends towards an age of more than 2,000 years for this tree, as is explained on the plaque at the site. In 2001, it was placed on a tentative list of UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites. According to an Aztec legend, it was planted by Pecochcha, a priest of Ehecatl, the god of wind. Therefore, it has been considered a sacred entity since early times. The Catholic Church assimilated the region to Christianity and, since then, the tree has been included in the temple’s atrium, continuing its reverence. The Tule tree is not only a major tourist attraction, but it is also a unique living being admired for its botanical features and is the cultural symbol of the town. Nevertheless, it has had to face some threats. The location of the highway on one side of the tree and the massive arrival of tourists by car who park nearby were major issues for the survival of this special living being. In the 1990s, it was reported that it was dying due to water shortages, pollution and traffic. Since then, a number of reports and plans have made recommendations on how to manage visitor flows to guarantee the tree’s survival (Passola, 2011; Santa María del Tule Town Council, 2011).

It is interesting to note that the community of Santa María del Tule is organised by uses and customs, meaning that many decisions are taken by the community itself, as was

Image 20.2 Giant trunk of the Tule tree. Notice human scale
Source: The authors.
explained above. The Mexican Government and the state’s law in particular recognise the validity of the internal norms of Indigenous communities in the field of family relations, civil life, the organisation of community life and in the prevention and resolution of conflicts (Oaxaca State Government, 2001). In the town, as in other communities in Oaxaca, the land is of community ownership, relevant decisions are taken in assembly and codes of mutual support prevail, which are implemented through forms of non-salaried cooperative work on the basis of reciprocity and solidarity. It is expressed in practices such as “tequio” and the system of posts. Tequio is the unpaid mandatory task that each citizen grants to the community, such as roads and school maintenance, cleaning of common areas and preparation of local festivities. Not participating in tequio can be replaced by a payment or punished with jail time. The system of posts includes seven types: city council, administration of justice, agrarian issues, religious services, development management, intermediation and festivities (Fuente Carrasco & Ramos Morales, 2012; Hernández-Díaz, 2007; Vargas del Río & Brenner, 2013). In the particular case of Santa María del Tule, every male citizen between 20 and 60 years old must provide community service for 11 years, for women it is not mandatory and they cannot be elected for the highest posts. For residents that are not born in the community it is not mandatory to provide community service and they cannot be elected as representatives (Oaxaca’s Electoral Institute, 2011).

20.4 Objectives and methodology

The objective of this contribution is to analyse the measures that the community of Santa María del Tule have developed to manage tourist flows while preserving their natural and cultural heritage. Secondary objectives of this research are to identify the following strategies:

1. Measures related to spreading visitors around the town, rerouting them in new itineraries and diversifying tourist profiles.
2. The community’s regulatory particularities to protect its heritage.
3. Measures to make residents benefit economically from tourism.
4. Initiatives to enhance visitors and residents’ city experience.
5. Community-led improvement in town infrastructure and facilities.
6. Good practices in communicating and involving local stakeholders.
7. Good practices in monitoring heritage-threatening tourism-related activities.

In order to achieve the objectives, a mixed methodology was developed based on direct observation, key informant interviews and an analysis of policy documents, which will be described below.

20.4.1 Direct observation

Direct observation was applied to identify physical transformations in urban design, city infrastructures and facilities. It served to check measures mentioned by key interviewees and other ones that, although not expressly cited, were of relevance according to the previously mentioned objectives. Direct observation was carried out by the authors and by students of the Faculty of Architecture at the Autonomous University of Oaxaca “Benito Juárez” during three site visits to the community. The results of these observations are summarised in the table and map below.
20.4.2 Analysis of policy documents

This method complemented direct observation and key informants’ interviews. It was useful for identifying good practices and the community’s measures in the medium term. Documents included the local development plan (Santa María del Tule Town Council, 2011), national regulation on metropolitan areas (National Population Council of Mexico, 2010), the local uses and customs regulations catalogue (Oaxaca’s Electoral Institute, 2011) and the state’s tourism indicators (Oaxaca’s Tourism Department, 2018).

20.4.3 Interviews with key informants

Key-informant interviews were administered to obtain a more detailed perspective of traditional values, uses and customs, power relationships, tourism sector parameters and other pertinent factors. Ten persons both in the village and outside were selected for their extensive knowledge of the community or involvement with the local tourism sector and planning initiatives, including guides, community representatives, salespersons and merchants.

20.5 Key findings and discussion

The residents of Santa María del Tule have developed a number of good practices to consolidate community-based tourism. Many of the initiatives affect urban design and the town’s infrastructures and facilities, while others are related to management and tasks organisation. Some measures have been introduced by the Town Council, others were directly decided in assembly, and other have been put into practice through collaboration with the federal and state government, particularly with the tourism and transport departments. Table 20.1 shows the measures that have been implemented and their goals.

Measures related to spreading visitors around the town, rerouting them in new itineraries and diversifying tourist profiles were identified. Among such strategies, it is possible to highlight the creation of a car park at the entrance of the town, which also allowed the pedestrianisation of the main street and the diversion of passing traffic. This is the initiative that had the most impact on urban design among the tourism-related initiatives taken by the community. As a result, the main square, where the Tule tree stands, could be extended. The Tule tree was saved from pollution, visitors and residents can walk safely and the visitor economy has flourished. Privately managed shops and restaurants have opened along the main pedestrian streets. After the success of these initiatives, a cycle path was developed from the town to Oaxaca in order to attract more excursionists and sportspeople. This cycle path over the former railway lines contributes to sustainable mobility, one of the first examples of the kind in the state. These major works were possible thanks to the collaboration of the community and the state and national governments. A remarkable aspect is that after the work was finished, the community took over its maintenance, showing their attachment and involvement in decision-making, contrary to many other examples where the government invests large amounts of public funding but the facilities or infrastructures finally remain closed or underused (for example, the neglected Turtle Museum in Zipolite, the closed visitor centre in the Mixteca Geopark or the abandoned eating and shopping facilities in Hierve el Agua, just to mention some cases in the state of Oaxaca).

Figure 20.1 shows the tourism-related initiatives to improve urban design introduced by the community, by themselves or with external support.
### Table 20.1 Community-based initiatives to foster tourism and improve urban design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures implemented</th>
<th>Goals achieved by the measure</th>
<th>Stakeholders involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Car park at the entrance of the town</td>
<td>1. Spreading visitors around the town, rerouting them in new itineraries and diversifying tourist profiles / 3. Make residents benefit economically from tourism / 5. Community-led improvement in town infrastructure and facilities</td>
<td>Secretary of Tourism, Secretary of Mobility, Town Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing an entrance schedule / Access is controlled during opening times</td>
<td>2. Community’s regulatory particularities in order to protect its heritage / 7. Monitoring heritage-threatening tourism-related activities</td>
<td>Town Council, employed local people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedestrianisation of the street to the Tule tree / Diversion of passing traffic</td>
<td>1. Spreading visitors around the town, rerouting them in new itineraries and diversifying tourist profiles / 3. Make residents benefit economically from tourism / 4. Enhance the visitors and residents’ city experience / 5. Community-led improvement in town infrastructure and facilities</td>
<td>Secretary of Tourism, Secretary of Mobility, Town Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prohibition of cutting branches and leaves</td>
<td>2. Community’s regulatory particularities in order to protect its heritage</td>
<td>Town Council, police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation of a cycle path to Oaxaca City: excursionists and sportspeople come especially in weekends</td>
<td>1. Spreading visitors around the town, rerouting them in new itineraries and diversifying tourist profiles</td>
<td>Secretary of Mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local people are employed in cleaning, police and selling tickets / New shops and restaurants have opened</td>
<td>3. Make residents benefit economically from tourism / 6. Communicating and involving local stakeholders</td>
<td>Town Council, employed local people, entrepreneurs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School children serve as tourist guides, children have a small income and responsibility / Public signage in Zapotec</td>
<td>6. Communicating and involving local stakeholders</td>
<td>Town Council, school children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gardens in the main square / Sculptures, fountains and artistic lighting throughout / Artistic gates</td>
<td>4. Enhance the visitors and residents’ city experience / 5. Community-led improvement in town infrastructure and facilities</td>
<td>Secretary of Mobility, Town Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation of a new gastronomic market and an arts and crafts market, where many local families work / Tourists are offered local specialties and products</td>
<td>3. Make residents benefit economically from tourism / 5. Community-led improvement in town infrastructure and facilities</td>
<td>Town Council, families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring water supply, pollution and aggressive species</td>
<td>7. Monitoring heritage-threatening tourism-related activities</td>
<td>Town Council, specialists</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source**: The authors.
The community established a number of regulations to protect its heritage, the most conspicuous examples being the control of the entrance to the tree garden and the prohibition of cutting branches and leaves. Heritage preservation does not limit itself to taking care of the tree. The linguistic landscape has been modified, adding signs written in Zapotec, the main native language, followed by Spanish and English translations. This initiative is almost unique in the Central Valleys and has served to increase the cultural visibility of the community’s values, especially in a context where native languages are in danger due to globalisation and external cultural and economic powers. Constant action of guarding the tree and an intangible heritage presence has strengthened local sense of belonging, as well as pride.

In order to ensure residents benefit economically from tourism, both the new car park and the pedestrianised main street contributed to the extension of the tourist area and to the opening of new shops and restaurants. In addition, local people are employed in cleaning, police and selling tickets; new gastronomic and arts and crafts markets have been built, thus increasing the availability of traditional and locally made products. The bicycle path has also contributed because visitors use this infrastructure, especially on weekends. Even

Figure 20.1 Map showing tourism and urban design related initiatives
Source: The authors.
if they already know the tree and might not pay to visit it again, they do join in groups and consume food and beverages regularly. First-time visitors, especially foreigners, are also guided in tours that include this destination. The promotion of such tours occurs mainly in the capital city.

Regarding the enhancement of the visitors’ and residents’ city experience, the most successful measures implemented by the community were the pedestrianisation of the main street and the complete refurbishment of the main square, which was also pedestrianised as has been explained above, and the new gardens and sculptures that were installed. In this renovated area, public art and gardening have replaced car parks, thanks to their relocation to the entrance of the town. Thus, the urban landscape has significantly improved.

Community-led improvement in town infrastructure and facilities can be observed in the new car park at the entrance of the town, the pedestrianised main street, the new gardens at the main square and the new markets, as already explained. A number of handicrafts stores and restaurants have appeared as the destination has received more visitors. Children’s playgrounds have also been installed in the downtown area, contributing to both locals’ and foreigners’ experiences. At this point, both locals and visitors benefit from the changes achieved in the town and so far, no signs of tourism rejection have been noticed. Instead, enthusiasm about increasing visitors prevails in the discourse. Being a moderate-sized destination, it is unlikely that overcrowding could become a problem anytime soon.

Communication and involvement of stakeholders was crucial for the success of the explained measures, particular initiatives in this sense were the employment of local people in

Image 20.3  Linguistic landscape in Zapotec in Santa María del Tule
Source: The authors.
cleaning, policing and selling tickets, the participation of school children as guides and the public signage in Zapotec, explained above. The good practices presented in this research have contributed to increasing residents’ pride in their community, as well as their attachment. In this sense, a special initiative is the participation of school children as tourist guides around the Tule tree. They explain the botanical and ethnological importance of the organism to visitors and earn a voluntary contribution, always under adults’ supervision. This is a useful way of making children feel part of the community and it is currently a distinctive feature of the destination.

Finally, the community monitors heritage-threatening tourism-related activities through the control of the access to the tree garden and surveillance of the water supply, pollution and aggressive species that might damage the Tule tree. As it was explained above, the Tule tree is not only the main tourist attraction in the community but also its most important cultural symbol. The installation of a fence around it, a ticket office, visiting hours, a water level and aggressive species control system and some restrictive regulations have served to preserve it for future generations. Furthermore, these actions have contributed to creating jobs and increasing economic benefits from tourism.

20.6 Conclusions

The measures developed by the community of Santa María del Tule had a main objective of reducing the damage caused to the Tule tree by massive tourist arrivals. Not only has this objective been achieved, but other benefits have also been noticed for the visitors’ experiences and the citizens’ well-being. The pedestrianisation of the city centre, together with the establishment of a car park in the periphery and the diversion of the highway, has made it possible to enlarge the tourist route and create a number of new tourism-oriented facilities and services. In addition, it has become a quieter and safer zone for tourists and residents alike.

The community’s position on cultural and natural heritage conservation has changed from a defensive one into a more proactive attitude, focussed on revitalisation. There is no cultural appropriation from foreigners, it is the community instead who decides what to present to visitors, when and how. As a result, local pride has increased, as well as community empowerment and attachment, reflecting in positive social psychology values such as community cohesion. In fact, cohesion and organisation have been crucial to attract national and state funding, unlike other communities that are not been able to do so due to internal conflicts and lack of coordination.

Traditional governance methods have been reinforced with the increase of tourist activities. On the contrary, other more aggressive economic sectors, such as mining, intensive agriculture and energy production, that have been devastating in the communities where they were imposed. On the contrary, economic benefits go directly to the community of Santa María del Tule, with few intermediaries. There are no significant negative attitudes towards tourism that would be reflected in over-tourism or “tourismphobia”. The collaboration between public agencies, private initiatives and the community in a context of strong social participation and identity has proved a positive strategy to developing sustainable tourism initiatives. It is possible to conclude that well-managed tourism positively contributes to Indigenous communities in terms of sustainable development and respect for cultural values. We believe that this experience can be useful in communities where natural or cultural assets are fragile and at risk due to a low control of tourism activities.
Santa María del Tule, Oaxaca, Mexico

References


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