HARMONIZING HERITAGE TOURISM AND CONSERVATION IN THE ROCK-HEWN CHURCHES OF LALIBELA, ETHIOPIA

A Dissertation
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Abstract

There is a wrong dichotomy between conserving cultural heritages and ensuring tourism development. The former is usually considered as an exorbitant luxury in which developing countries can ill afford and hence usually accorded low priority. Thus, developing countries are often characterized as indiscriminately pursuing mass tourism with diminutive consideration for culture and social values. This exacerbates for cultural values to be sacrificed for commercial gain and cultural assets can be presented as commoditized tourism products. On the other hand, there are situations when tourism is also compromised to ensure that cultural values are not sacrificed merely for the benefit of tourism. Therefore, the relationship between tourism and heritage conservation is often characterized by contradictions whereby one sector is antithetical to the other. Several studies have acknowledged the necessity that such contradiction to cease and, instead, harmonization of tourism and conservation must advent. However, finding the possible ways or strategies to harmonize the two sectors has seldom been discussed in the literature.

This doctoral dissertation aimed at harmonizing heritage tourism and conservation in one of the flagship world heritage sites of Ethiopia, the rock-hewn churches of Lalibela. We used local residents’ attitudes, tourists’ perceptions, and stakeholder collaboration as prominent parameters to harmonize the two sectors. Data were collected from 348 sample residents to investigate attitudes, awareness, and commitment of local residents toward both heritage tourism and conservation. Data were also collected from 110 tourists to explore their perception about the tourism service facilities in Lalibela. Likewise, interviews have been conducted with around 30 key stakeholders consisted of government officials,
UNESCO officers, church owners, and other tourism business-oriented stakeholders so as to understand the extent of their collaboration for promoting tourism as well as conserving the church. Yet, prior to examining these three major harmonization parameters, the dissertation examined how the heritage conservation system evolved and has been implemented in Ethiopia, by taking Lalibela as a case study. The findings show that despite Ethiopia has well-designed conservation proclamation, acute lack of finance and expertise remains to be a bottleneck for effective implementation of it. Failure to facilitate conservation efforts and absence of specified site management plan as well as pre-determined carrying capacity limit exacerbates the deterioration of the churches.

This doctoral dissertation found that local residents were deeply committed to the conservation of the churches in their daily life activities. However, without better awareness about the scientific ways of conserving cultural heritage, their commitment in some cases had negative impact on heritage values. In the case of residents support for tourism development, those residents who were less educated, resided away from the churches, and had no tourism related jobs tended to be less interested and committed for tourism development. Local administrators also performed weakly in both sectors, and provide little or no support to residents who would like to engage in the tourism industry, particularly in commercial activities. The negative impacts of tourism on the socio-economic spheres of Lalibela were also found to be not negligible.

On the other hand, to harmonize the two sectors through stakeholder collaboration, this dissertation examined the extent of stakeholder collaboration and commitment both to promote tourism and conserve the rock-hewn churches. Hence, the results shows that the
relationships between stakeholders in Lalibela are often characterized by full of conflict and mistrust whereby the informal commission based linkage among few groups distort the tourism industry. In addition, tourism-oriented stakeholders have had no participation privileges in the decision-making processes of the town’s tourism and conservation issues. Finally, this dissertation was also aimed at harmonizing the two sectors through analyzing tourists’ perception. Tourists perceived several negative features of Lalibela, among others; poor signage, lack of restrooms, sanitation problem, begging and pestering, poor hotel amenities, and lack of water supply were the most irritants to tourists.

To sustainably harmonize heritage tourism and conservation, we suggested that the government should start pre-conservation studies of the heritage as a first step in line with preparing a site management plan and carrying capacity limit. In doing so, both financial and human resources has to be secured for conservation. The government should consider several conservation financing approaches by linking the tourism industry with conservation sector. Tourists are also expected to share a part of these costs through many ways. At the same time, local residents’ commitment to conserve the church must be also maintained through enhancing their level of awareness, and protecting them from undesirable tourism influences. A mutually beneficial relationship free from undesirable conflict among stakeholders must also exist if one aims to harmonize the two sectors through stakeholder collaboration. Importantly, a special attention must be also given to alleviate the unfavorable tourism service facilities of the town so as to boost tourists’ satisfaction and comfort at the destination.