

Sustainable tourism in Holbox through local development

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Abstract

According to the Bank of Mexico, tourism is one of the most important economical activities due to its capability of promoting a wide range of activities of other kinds as well as facilitating the creation of new ones. All this can be presented thanks to the 20.6 million international tourists and its 8 382.23 million dollars received during the last year. In this context, Quintana Roo received 45% of the total amount of tourists that enter into the country; besides, the state concentrates 12% of global hotel infrastructure in Mexico with 57 906 rooms. However, the obtained benefits are concentrated only in five destinations of the state: Cancun, Cozumel, Playa del Carmen, Mahahual and Tulum.

The rural communities, therefore, are building their own enterprises and participating in the tourism activity in order to offer themselves the opportunity to improve their quality of life, by preserving the environment, getting incomes, and providing jobs for the local people. These actions represent an example of local development looking forward to sustainable tourism.

Holbox, a small rural town from Quintana Roo – Mexico, is a good example of this. Tourism has become the most important economical activity in this place while the natural and cultural resources are preserved. The inhabitants always look to improving the tourist activities such as the fishery, but controlling the number of visitors and appealing to a specific kind of consumer.

Through tourism in Holbox, the residents have had the opportunity to build enterprises in order to offer services to the tourists such as restaurants, small hotels and recreational attractions like The Kite Surf, Tours, and Swims with Whale Sharks. Although several natural resources of the community are the principal attraction for tourists, they appeal to a specific kind of consumer. That is why Holbox in Quintana Roo (three hours from Cancun by car), with a natural scene and kind people, is planning and organizing its economical activity through *local development* in order to participate in a global market.

Keywords: sustainable tourism, local development, Holbox.



1 The context

According to the Ministry of Tourism (Secretaría de Turismo), tourism has become a national priority because it generates many jobs and contributes to the promotion of other economical activities as well as it helping to better people's quality of life.

Quintana Roo is a state located at the Southeast of the Mexican Republic. The principal activity in this state is tourism as it produces 80% of the Gross Internal State Product (Producto Interno Bruto Estatal). In 2004, the state received 10.8 million tourists, which represents 45% of the international tourism demand in the country, besides, the entity has 12% of the lodging infrastructure of Mexico with 57 609 rooms (Gobierno del Estado de Quintana Roo, [1]: 11–17).

In particular, the promotion of natural and cultural offerings is directed to people from North America, and represents 88% of the total tourist international demand. In that way, the tourism activity is concentrated on five destinations: Cancun, Cozumel, Playa del Carmen, Tulum, and Mahahual.

According to the Ministry of Tourism of Quintana Roo, Cancun was visited by 3.3 million tourists spending 206 464 million dollars in 2004, and Cozumel is the most important destination of cruise ships as the island receives more than 2.8 million cruise passengers spending 229 77 198 million dollars. Additionally, Playa del Carmen and Tulum – known as Riviera Maya – obtained more than 152 million dollars through 2 418 623 tourists; and Mahahual – known as Costa Maya – the newest project of tourism, received 214 cruise ships during 2004; this is equal to more than 565 000 passengers.

The quality of life in these places is higher than in the entire national territory; for example, 99% of people with the capabilities to work have a job in Cozumel. However, the concentration of wealth and, obviously, the demand of services are in Cancun, Cozumel, Playa del Carmen, Tulum, and Mahahual.

Although these tourist destinations are considered the most important, others obtain incomes from tourism as well. Holbox – a small group of islands at the North of Quintana Roo- developed this economical activity to improve the quality of life of their inhabitants.

2 Holbox and its local development

Holbox in Mayan language means *black hole* and it is an island that has several natural attractions; for this reason, it has become a tourist destination; fishing does not provide the sufficient income for people. This place does not promote mass tourism as they preserve natural areas because Holbox is located far from Cancun (four hours by car), and it is very difficult to get there, not only because of the distance, but this place is considered an underdeveloped community.

The island has an extension of 40 kilometres of longitude and two in its wider side. Situated on the North of the State of Quintana Roo there are 34 kilometres of beach on the North side of Holbox while on the South side there are few islets where the mangrove swamp prevails (see Figure 1).





Figure 1: Holbox locality.

In Holbox, there are several natural resources and ecosystems. These are considered the most important attractions in the community, for example:

1. Yalahau Lagoon,
2. Bird's Island,
3. Passion Island,
4. Ojo de Agua Yalahau (natural pool), and
5. Ecological Reserve "Yum Balam".

The tourist can practice a lot of activities in these places, for example: tours in small boats, snorkeling, kite surfing, bird watching, sunbathing, tasting regional food, tours in the jungle and swimming with whale sharks are some of the reasons why people visit Holbox (see Figures 2 and 3).



Figure 2: Bird's Island.



Figure 3: Whale Shark Island.

2.1 The participation of the community

Through tourism, the local people have had the opportunity to create some tour enterprises, hotels, restaurants, and other services to give tourists all facilities to

be comfortable. With these, the community offers itself the chance to progress. That is why they have a positive attitude with respect for this economical activity and tourists, because they have the possibility to interact with local people and know their traditions, background, among other socio-cultural features.

Another important aspect for the *local development* is the restrictions that the community establishes to preserve their natural areas, as they set up all of what it involves such as the constructions which must have a specific design. For example, the buildings must be made of materials from the region to conserve the natural and typical environment, another important element which motivates foreign people to have the journey.

In the community there exists a specific union between the people, due to the meetings that the Communal Committee carries out. Thus, they can put their opinion about the tourism development and the way they do it, so the interest to promote the tourism as the base of their economy is always looking for a better quality of life. Unless they usually reject criteria or proposals around the interest of foreign management or modifications to the landscape of the island, this concern motivates locals to be interested in international brands of tourism that do not want to manage mass tourism. Thus, local people are working for a specified segment of tourism which is interested in natural sceneries.

Tourism is very important for the community and the impacts that it generates, as positive as negative. About the economical impact, it fluctuates because the tourist can stay in Holbox for a week but most of the time lots of people prefer to stay for a month. In this moment, it is not possible to describe the total arriving number of tourists, nor even the money. Unless an office of the local government exists, it only operates to rule the commercial activity like an intermediary between the community and the municipality.

Nowadays, the community of Holbox is organizing the tourism activities because there is not an office of the government related to it. Local enterprises know that the high season is from May to September because of the arrival of the Whale Shark, and then they have the chance to hire some people from other places in the country with the objective to supply the best service to the tourists. A positive action of the government is about the budget for the promotion of the attractions of the island.

Being a small town and territorial conditions (2 200 inhabitants), Holbox does not have the infrastructure to offer higher education. Therefore, they are providing the opportunity -to young people- to go out to the island to study a bachelor's degree with the incomes of this activity, specifically to the larger cities in the Peninsula. Some examples of these schools are the Autonomous University of Yucatan (UADY) in Merida, Yucatan; and, the Anahuac University and the La Salle University (private schools) in Cancun, Quintana Roo.

These actions are considered elements of *local development*. It means that *local development* creates an economical policy, which pretends to improve the quality of life among the communities; in other words, it refers "to the local actors united by a common goal, to take charge of the development of their territory, in function of their needs and local resources" (Rozas, [3]: 150).



For that reason, this local project combines economic growth, social development, and ecological sustainability with the purpose of increasing the quality of life of the people and families who live, work, and interact in their territory, always contributing and participating in the moment of the community decisions.

Thereby, local development appears as an option for the communities that are in poor conditions and its economical and social development has stopped. In Holbox, tourism activity means a factor to generate employment, to get foreign exchange, as well as to promote the participation of the private sector in order to afford the necessary capital that this economic activity needs like goods and services for leisure.

Even though *local development* only takes into consideration the partaking of local people, government and private sectors are crucial because while the first normalizes the operation of the enterprises, the second grants the infrastructure to employ the people of the community. When the three actors work together, local development is going to reduce the social inequality that exists in the rural communities of the third world, which lives with high indicators of illiteracy, unfinished primary schooling housing without drainage, with no electricity, and incomes lower than the minimum salary.

Fortunately, Holbox is working without the participation of the government and because some people of the community are playing the role of the private sector when they invest in the creation of new enterprises that provide the services to the tourism activity. Thus, with the incomes of tourism they can promote the fishing activity. Nowadays there exist seven fishery cooperatives principally dedicated to the production of lobster, octopus and snail.

3 Conclusion

Neoliberalism has been expanded by globalization of the economy, and local communities of the third world have suffered the biggest negative impact, poverty. Although tourism has affected the new economy, these localities have seen in this economical activity the alternative to develop themselves. However, the funds of the federal and state government are directed to destinations such as Cancun which are promoting basic tourism (sun, sea and sand), “because this kind of tourism attracts many visitors, and only enrich a specific place that can not provide the elements to develop the whole region” (Palafox et. al., [4]: 6).

As consequence, Holbox has found the alternative to develop the place implementing *local development* with important results, not only for its economical growth, but also in aspects like education, social security, health service, and preservation of traditions and natural resources; it means that the purpose of development is to improve the quality of life of people.

The people of Holbox work together with the objective of giving themselves the opportunity to preserve their natural and cultural resources through tourism, used as the basis of their economy, achieving a sustainable tourism.



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