

Community-based tourism: Getting down to the grassroots?

Some Peruvian Experiences

By Jane Carnaffan

Community-based tourism is growing in popularity as a way of redressing the glaring inequalities created by the mass tourism industry. Mainstream tourism has long been criticised for excluding local, indigenous people whose 'exotic' images promote tourism in iconic destinations such as Peru. Community-based tourism has been established for nearly 40 years on the islands of Taquile and Amantani on Lake Titicaca and many similar projects are starting up throughout the country. What lessons can be learnt from them about community-based tourism development? How successful is it at tackling inequalities at the grassroots?

Rural idylls

As Western tourists, we think of indigenous communities in terms of their imagined differences to us: we see ourselves as corrupted by money and individualism and local people as pure and spiritual. It's pleasant to believe in harmonious, rural idylls, where people are poor, but happy, and work together to make their lives better. As one American tourist who trekked through communities on the Inca Trails near Cuzco, in Peru, recounts: The people here are amazing, they have so little but have so much to offer. I learned a lot from them about gratitude and friendship, changing my perception of poverty; we who live in big cities lack so much in spirituality which they, in return, have in abundance.

Trouble in paradise

While it's true that many communities in the Andes preserve traditions of communal decision making and sharing work, it does not follow that everyone in these communities is equal. As a Swiss tourism consultant who works in Southern Peru puts it: Communities are very difficult as they are not the untouched world where everything is fine. They are often highly hierarchical and divided along economic, education, family and gender lines. Community-based tourism accentuates these inequalities because it builds on existing power structures and further brings communities into markets.

Travel agents and NGOs work with the more well-off, well-connected and better educated in a community. Most typically, this means community leaders and their families. This is because tourists demand certain standards of comfort, hygiene and attention. Richer groups have the money to invest in improving facilities for tourists. They also have the language and social skills to work with tourists, travel agencies and NGOs. A Peruvian travel writer and TV presenter cites the educational level of community members as being crucial to the success of tourism projects: The level of education makes a great difference in the quality of service. Language is important too, and educated people are better able to have a business vision. It seems a very simple thing, and it's true, educational level determines the success of a project.

As a result, less successful community members are left on the sidelines, or integrated into tourism businesses at lower levels: tending the fields and cleaning the houses of those looking after tourists. An Indigenous Rights campaigner comments on what she has seen happening in Taquile, which has long been held up as the model for community-led tourism in Peru: I had the idea of Taquile as an indigenous community that was self sufficient, that managed tourism itself, for the benefit of the community as a whole. But we visited recently and found that the free market had arrived there as well because some families have been successful and have developed handicraft shops, restaurants, accommodation, and these are growing, but there's another part of the community that's only carrying water for these restaurants, or cleaning the rooms so it's as though they've lost what they had before.

The increased domestic work needed to cater for tourists is done by women, who are held back from leadership roles through tradition and lack of education. Some of the women involved in a community tourism project in Northern Peru expressed their desire to get involved in the administration of tourism projects. They were especially concerned about their lack of Spanish and literacy. They were unable to go to NGO organised training courses and meetings because they can't leave their village due to domestic duties and the perceived dangers for women travelling outside their communities.

Conflict

Doing business in the free market is tough. More responsible operators negotiate a price with communities and stick to it but unscrupulous travel agencies upset these agreements. They are often blamed for favouring certain families over others in return for discounts. This brings down prices and causes conflict among community members. However, not everyone has access to better tour companies, and those who want to be involved in tourism, but perhaps lack the contacts or training, accept lower prices. One indigenous community leader explained the situation on the island of Taquile in the following words: It's a free market, a community or organisation should hold its ground and stick to one price for everyone, but agencies come and disrupt this system, everything changes and this brings conflict and envy.

Often only a handful of families are interested in starting a tourism project with the support of an NGO or the State. It's only when tourists start to arrive that more people want to get involved. A community leader from a project near Cusco thinks that new groups should be excluded from receiving tourists because of their lack of training: Other groups are starting to get organised, and want to receive tourists too, without being trained, copying what we're doing, but it's no good, they're not trained, they're improvising, it's a bit bad.

Spreading the benefits

Some projects in Peru have found ways of minimising conflict by spreading some of the benefits of tourism. There is a long established tradition on the islands of Taquile and Amantani of taking turns in hosting tourists among tourism associations. This system has been taken up by other projects. Also, families involved in tourism give work, albeit at a lower level, to those who are not. Some projects make donations to local schools or look for funding for other development projects to help others in the community.

Conclusions

While community-based tourism helps those marginalized by the mainstream tourism industry, as these experiences from Peru show, it tends to benefit the more privileged. If community-based tourism is to live up to its grassroots principles, and avoid causing conflict in often volatile areas, it needs to address the essential questions of who benefits and how much? Once answered, tourism projects need to plan ways of spreading the benefits of tourism development more equitably throughout communities.

About the author

Jane Carnaffan is a PhD Candidate in Human Geography at Newcastle University, UK. She did her fieldwork on community-based, homestay (where tourists stay in family homes) in various sites in Peru in 2005.