

COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM IN NATURE RESERVE OF CHINA

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ABSTRACT: This paper introduces a new concept of community-based ecotourism (CBET) that originated in foreign countries. Then it analyzes the significance of CBET development in nature reserve (NR). The authors think that community participation is the inevitable choice of nature reserve's conservation and development. CBET, as the self-improved model of ecotourism, can promote tourism community sustainable development. Based on the stakeholder analysis of CBET in NRs, this paper addresses the reality, especially the problem of CBET development in NRs of China. In order to develop CBET in NRs of China, this paper takes some suggestions to promote the community participation: 1) gradual political empowerment, 2) deep level economic incentive, 3) widespread educational support, 4) impartial distribution of community benefits, and 5) stakeholders cooperation.

KEY WORDS: community-based ecotourism; community participation; tourism development; nature reserve

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Definition of Community-based Ecotourism

Community is a social definition, depending on the social structures in the area concerned. The authors think community is a natural and social entity. Community involves not only the human group, which has the self-identity, common culture and close relationship but also the activity region that human group inhabited. The community-based ecotourism (CBET) emphasizes the local community has owned the substantial control over, and participated in the development and management of tourism, and remained a major proportion of the benefit within the community (REGINA, 1999). It is deemed that only when tourism creating enough ecological, economic and social benefit and promoting the community sustainable development, it shows its real signification.

1.2 Presenting of Questions

The conservation and development of natural reserves (NRs) in China, a developing country, is confronting with serious man-land confliction, poverty-environment confliction and stakeholder confliction. As we know, tourism, especially ecotourism of natural reserve

has been urged for its potency to provide incentives to these areas, to improve community living and production patterns, and to promote sustainable development of ecosystems. However, the stakeholders and the objectives of NR are multiple. There are many problems of ecotourism development in NR. One of the most important problems is the carelessness for community. In recent years, community participation (CP) has become one of hot issues of research on NRs and tourism development. CBET, being considered the community benefit plentifully, is looked as a hopeful tool to harmonize the conflict between NR and community. So, it has the important practical and theoretical value to study the construction of NR and its ecotourism development through taking CBET as a new development idea.

1.3 Study Progress

The direct study of CBET in NR is scarce in China. ZHUGE *et al.* (2000) studied approaches to involve local community in management of natural resources in Wuyishan National Key Nature Reserve and put forward the setting up of joint-stock cooperation tourism enterprise. Fortunately the previous researches on community tourism and the CP in NR are relatively plentiful. Concerning of the CP in NR, ZHOU(1999) studied

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the theory and management patterns of CP. HE *et al.* (2002) discussed the sustainable development of NR and its adjacent community. TANG(1998) studied the communitification of tourism development and community tourism. Many authors discussed the factors, processes, mechanisms and obstacles of CP theoretically (LIU, 2000; LI and ZHAO, 2001). Some pursuers have expounded the CP and community tourism development (PAN and LI, 2002; HU and ZHANG, 2002). LI and ZHAO(2001) discussed the theoretical problems of CP and tourism development. CEVAT(2000) studied the limitation of CP in developing countries. BAO and WANG *et al.* studied the tourism plan and CP theoretically and practically(BAO and SUN, 2003; WANG and ZHOU, 2003). The previous researches, either community tourism or CP in NR, were mainly theoretical and focused on top-down approaches and mechanism of CP. The facts have proved that top-down community management does nothing to improve CP degree, power imbalances or underlying conflicts.

2 SIGNIFICANCE OF CBET

The relation between CBET and conservation of nature reserve is showed in Fig. 1. The significance of CBET development in nature reserve can be analyzed from three aspects.

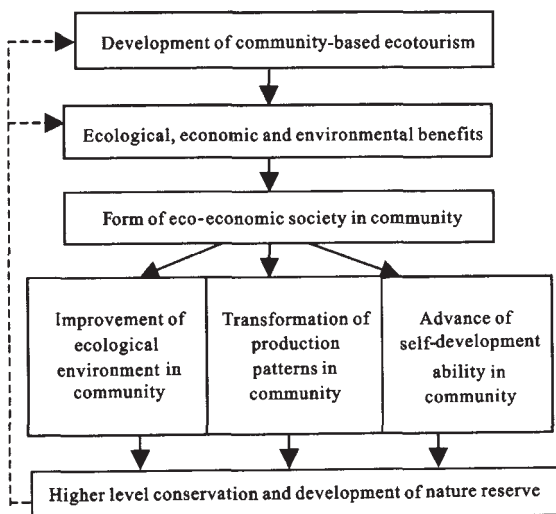


Fig. 1 Relation between CBET and conservation of nature reserve

2.1 CP—New Paradigm of Nature Reserve

Before most of nature reserves in China were founded, people have been already living there, and human influence has presented. The nature reserves are the re-

sources and environment basement on which the local people depended. From the point of economics, the NR is public property with external positive benefit, but its spatial extension is concrete and local. Before the setting up of NR, the resources and environment benefit was much more local one. The setting up of NR deprived the community power to utilize the resources, externalized the internal income of local community, and cut down the community welfare. This is the ultimate reason of conflict between the NR and the community. The traditional, top-down exclusionary protection approaches intensified the conflict between the NR and the community. In order to pursue self-benefit, the local community exploited the peripheral region of NR excessively, which has made the NR become an ecological "isolate island", so much as the poaching and presumed collection in NR. So even if the government has invested giant money to protect the nature, the effect is not as expected. In the latest two decades, the major paradigm of NR conservation and development has changed gradually (KATRINA, 2002). Now the new paradigm adopts recent insights from ecology concerning the understanding of the dynamics and disequilibria of different ecosystems, and rejects simplistic notion of wilderness and pristine environments into acknowledging the role of human intervention in shaping biodiversity. The authors think that both conservation and development are the main purposes of NR, of which protection is the basement and means of development, and development can promote the protection. The development should be propitious to realize the inner-generation and inter-generation fair. The designation and management of nature reserve cannot deprive local community of the rights to survive and develop, and should integrate nature reserve into the economic and social context locally, regionally and nationally.

2.2 Promoting Sustainable Ecotourism

The primary tourism product comprises elements that are produced by tourism industry and geography, history and culture (HÉCTOR, 2001). Most of the tourism activities are based on the community as well. So any type of tourism needs the community participation. Following the tourism development, the community gradually realized the value of local resources and environment, and felt the tourism cost increasingly as well. But tourism mainly caters to the tourists and tourism operators, less cares for the community's interests, costs and sustainable development in the traditional tourism development pattern. The CP is passive, and

spontaneous, thus most of tourism benefits also flowing out the community is expected. Because tourism agencies and operators are easy to move from a degrading site to another pristine area. The people who suffered from the main impacts of tourism are those who living in the tourist communities. So the principle is made that who endures negative impacts from tourism is who controls and benefits from its development. In order to assure its own interests and social-economic sustainable development, the community should control the tourism decision, plan and operation, assessment and supervision in tourism influence. This is just what the CBET advocated. So the CBET is propitious to advance the community's sustainable development, and ease up the conflict between community and NRMC (Natural Reserve Management Committee).

2.3 Self-improved Model of Ecotourism

The ecotourism emphasizes to bring economic benefits and direct revenues to local people living in and adjacent to NR by making the use of community-owned facilities and services (NA *et al.*, 2003). However, previous research has shown that ecotourism has different historical root (NOELLA, 2002). The travel operator is inclined to look at community participation in ecotourism as a tactic to expand market scope. Ecotourism is no more than eco-imperialism, demanding that host destination's supply complies with tourist perception of nature and culture (NOELLA, 2002). The NR and the

community are both the tools of tourism enterprise to pursue the interest. The ecotourist and non-government organization (NGO), who really want to help community, have seldom found the good means to foster community the self-development capacity except for the donation, voluntary activity or direct participation of operation. The previous study indicated that the ecotourism often got bogged down as soon as the assistant power withdrawn. CBET emphasizes that the local community substantially controls over, and participates in development and management of ecotourism. CBET commits itself to reverse the top-down ecotourism development and management via empowering the community in economic, political and social aspects. So CBET is the approach to realize the ecotourism objectives as well as the self-perfection of ecotourism.

3 STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS AND SITUATIONS OF CBET IN NATURE RESERVE

3.1 Stakeholder Analysis of CBET

The stakeholder analysis is the study basement of situation about CBET development in NRs of China. The main stakeholders of CBET are NRMC, ecotourism operator, ecotourist, community, and tourism planner. They are different in many aspects, such as interest orientation, problems, participation capacities and approaches etc. showed in Table 1.

Table 1 Stakeholders analysis of CBET in NR

Stakeholder	Interest orientation	Problem	Participation capacity	Participation approach
NRMC	Nature protection	Lack of fund	Dominating the property-right, operation and management	Strict management
	Resources sustainable utilization	Conflict with community		Approving plan and project
	Employees' welfare	Environmental destruction		Supporting community
Ecotourism operator	Economic benefit	Multiple tourist demand	Controlling the capital, technology and institution	Catering to ecotourist
	Market expansion	Restriction from policy of NRMC		Bribing NRMC
		Community attitude		Benefiting local people
Ecotourist	High quality experience	Uncertainty caused by impartibility between consumption and production of tourism products	Money-voting right	Donating to NRMC and community
	Protecting the nature		Donation	Purchasing ecological products
	Benefiting the community		Voluntary activity	
Community	Sustainable development	Lack of information, human resources, finance resources	Lower capacity	Being employee, small operator
	Welfare benefit		Familiar with community	Limited decision-making
Planner	Economic benefit and market	Unfamiliar with local environment	Endowed by law	Making tourism plan
			Controlled by client	Supervising plan implement

3.2 Reality of CBET in NR

According to statistics, in the nature reserve which has undertaken tourism, the proportion of nature reserve benefits for a half community family, 20%–50% community family, less than 20% family and no community

are 10.7%, 7.3%, 49.3%, and 22.7%, respectively (LI, 2000). Besides less economic participation, the CP in the ecotourism decision-making, management, operation is scarce yet.

3.2.1 CBET dominated by external stakeholders

(1) The property and management monopoly of NRMC. In NRs, which have set up the management committee, NRMC dominates property, operation and supervision of ecotourism. The ecotourism development in NR is not driven by the community, but by the NR committee and local elite in conjunctions with outside tour operators. This top-down vertical management pattern results in the great communication gap between communities and decision-makers and professional management elite. The community residents only participate in ecotourism passively. The dignity and demand of local community are seldom considered in ecotourism.

(2) The elitism in ecotourism planning. The community must participate in the ecotourism exploitation and planning as well as ecotourism operation and management, if it wants to get the fair benefit distribution. The previous CP mainly embodied in financial support and job opportunity supply (which is the important and basic means of CP), but less in tourism decision-making (partly owing to the low capacity of CP). The ecotourism planning is dependent on the professionals and expertises of NRMC and outside elites. Most of them neither have close contact with local people nor accept CBET as available approach. Community participation may also cost them more time and money. But the steering committee to oversee the planning exercises is more concerned about outputs rather than objectives. Even if project planners viewed community participation as more than a token input, but did not take any steps to understand the local context of this participation, or to build a project structure that might enable or support more empowering activities. Hence, in most circumstances, notion of CP is an icon to current planning jargon rather than realistic implemental parameters.

(3) The relative monopolization in ecotourism exploitation and operation. According to the statistics, the tourism income occupies 54.24% in 1998 of the total income of NR (XU, 2001). The NRMC occupied primary ecotourism benefit by taking entrance fee and resources-utilization rent. The exploitation and operation of ecotourism have been centralized in a way that contributes to achieving pre-determined objectives, such as the economic income or the promotion of nature conservation. CP is considered only when it is useful to realize the management objectives of NR. The NR seldom reallocates the benefit to community either. As the secondary stakeholder of ecotourism exploitation and operation, enterprises take economic profit as their main objective, take the operation-concession and market-monopolization as competing means. The community

residents are just cheap labour force who can reduce cost. So the CP degree in the ecotourism exploitation and operation is very insufficient.

3.2.2 CBET lacking of management

On the other hand, many NRs of China are still lack of special management institute or expert manager. The development of this type of NR is disorder. According to the investigation, 1/3 NRs are lack of special management committee. Many reasons work on this circumstance, of which some are low grade, some are out-location, undeveloped in which NRCM cannot be set up for lack of enough money. The bottom-up management system is still in pregnancy; on the other hand, the management and support to community participation are scarce yet. In many of this type of NRs, the ecotourism development is in troubled waters, and the CP is spontaneous and mainly disorder.

3.3 Community Itself Reasons

Low degree of CP is no doubt related to the reasons mentioned above, however the community itself factors cannot be overlooked too. Most of communities located in the nature reserve are undeveloped, and the screaming for the living standard improvement made the local people urge to participate in ecotourism. But the community participation capacity is weak. The local community is closed, lack of information, technology and fund, and has low level of education. The community participation is scarce not only in the ecotourism exploitation and planning, operation and management, but also in natural conservation. Some of these disabilities will be analyzed below.

3.3.1 Lacking information

In most nature reserves, ecotourism data are insufficient, even the collected information may not have been disseminated to the citizens in ways that are comprehensible to them. Most residents are not well informed regarding tourism development and less aware about ecotourism benefits and costs. Therefore, the information cost of community participation is very high. In this circumstance, community would rather keep "reasonable ignorance" and let NRMC and tourism operator dominate the tourism exploitation and management. For example, when the ecotourism project with the opportunity to invest in small-scale was first announced, many local people doubted its feasibility consequently missed those opportunities.

3.3.2 Lacking human resources

Human is not only the labor but also the carrier of information and knowledge. However, many communities of NR are lack of trained human resources. Be-

cause of the lack of educational opportunity and low level of education, the local talent training is difficult. The local people mainly participate in ecotourism as employee or individual operator rather than decision-maker or tourism operator. The attractive jobs requiring high skills are also occupied by foreigners and well-educated people. The low status, unskilled jobs associated with low wages and hard working conditions have been left for members of local communities. This has limited the participation of local people in ecotourism. Naturally the main benefits flow away from the community.

3.3.3 Lacking financial resources

Investment is one of the most important variables that can determine dominant power of tourism industry. In many undeveloped communities lying in and around NRs of China, financing for ecotourism is not sufficient at local level. The control ability of local community is low at the beginning. Following the ecotourism development, in spite of the local community want to accumulate the capital, the tourism demand increases rapidly, and the community residents and managers are eager for quick success and instant benefit. In order to improve the adjustability of local small enterprise (owing to the seasonal variation and sensitivity of tourism), the community-owned enterprises inclined to cooperate with outsider large investor and company (FANG and LIU, 2002). Thus, the intensified dependence on outside capital and human resources is inevitable. When financial resources originate from non-local interests, the loss of control emerging from outside investment is not easy to overcome.

4 SUGGESTIONS

CBET cannot be realized under the current top-down management structure of NR that limits and excludes CP, unless deliberate measures are urgently taken to empower local community through structural and economic reform, widespread educational support and balanced benefit distribution etc., which can foster the community participatory capacity and sustainable development ability by itself.

4.1 Gradual Political Empowerment

Communities have the rights to be informed and consulted, and the right convey their views on matters that affect them, such as natural protection, resources exploitation and tourism development etc. CP in ecotourism planning and decision-making is the main aspect of political empowerment of community. The

planner and manager must respect communities' rights, help them participate in ecotourism planning and decision-making, embody local community demand in planning and management. And the CP in tourism planning and decision-making should be fixed in legal form. The tour operator and NRMC should cooperate with and assist the community in the concrete ecotourism project.

The decentralization of political right and administration measure hereinbefore should be paralleled to the constitution of bottom-up CP system and management. As a social and political entity, most of communities of NRs in China are lack of effective social system to realize the CP. The social structural system of community should be re-organized to defend, reflect and realize concerns and interests of local people in their administrative territory. CP must respect the rights and interests of each resident and exert their rights, but the collective power is more important than single person's. Affected by land-contract, the CP is full of individual characters, and the residents do not care for collective enterprise and decision. Hence, we must push the political right's decentralization gradually, and reinforce the construction of democratic and legal system in local community. Once the bottom-up system is established, the financial and educational instrument is easy to be done.

4.2 Economic Incentive in Deep Level

Political rights are critical to the empowerment process, but sustainable ecotourism resources management cannot be maintained unless livelihood is secured. The political decentralization and the economic incentives must be meet simultaneously. If local people earn sufficient cash from ecotourism, they will pay more attention to NR resources, and take actions to conserve nature resources and environment. The community residents have so scarce of capital and skill that they can not participate in ecotourism effectively, and obtain little benefit merely. Providing the job opportunity is the basic economic incentive of CP (RICHARD, 2001; SVEN, 2000). The furthermore economic incentive is the construction of the new economic organization system. The joint-stock system is a good assumption to empower and stimulate community economy. There are three property rights in NRs of China: state-owned, collective-owned and personal-owned. Joint-stock system can make the community turn into one of the real owners. This system has been used in forestry and agriculture resources exploitation and management in some of NRs of China such as Wuyishan NR (ZHUGE

et al., 2000). LIU Yan *et al.* (2002) put forward the conception of joint-stock system in ecotourism and the approaches to realize it in east coastal region of Xiamen Island. The authors think that it can be generalized to ecotourism operation and management in NRs. The joint-stock system in ecotourism is propitious to realize the share of benefit and responsibility, the democratic decision-making and the common wealth.

4.3 Widespread Educational Support

Because of the isolation and originality of local community, the exploitation and management of ecotourism and the conservation of resources and environment in NRs are both strange to community. So the education support from NRMC, NGO and private operators to local community is necessary. The educational support includes culture education, tourism education and environmental education. The education support must be applied to all the community residents such as decision-makers, women, children etc. Decision-maker is the powerful and admirable figure in community. Changing their concept and getting their support is useful to promote the ecotourism. Women as another educational objectives cannot be ignored. Because women usually have the superiority in ecotourism participation compared to man, whose activities such as firewood utilization, forest by-products collection also influence the sound utilization and effective protection of resources in nature reserve directly. Children are the future dominators of local community, so the educational support must take more care to them, and the culture diathesis education, ecotourism education, environmental education can be integrated to children in school. Community education should fully utilize the farmer leisure time and tourism off-season.

4.4 Impartial Benefit Distribution

No any community is homogenous and without internal conflicts. The influences on all habitants are socially differentiated in a number of ways including ethnicity, sex, and caste in economic and political terms. The unbalanced benefit distribution will result in restructuring of community. The change of community structure will influence the maintenance of traditional community culture furthermore. In addition the high ecotourism income has demonstrative effect. The irrational benefit division will result in the over-centralization of population and industry, thus bring the environmental problems. The demonstrative effect also can be led to the traditional industry (forestry, farming) declination and the community economic over-dependency on eco-

tourism. Because of the seasonal and sensitive characters of tourism, this over-dependency will increase the frangibility of community industrial structure. So the balance of ecotourism benefits must be done not only in economy, ecology, culture and society, but also to each resident in NRs and neighbor to NRs.

4.5 Stakeholders Cooperation

CBET does not mean that the community has no necessary to cooperate with others. The ecotourism development and the conservation of NR cannot depart from the cooperation among NRMC, local government, tour operator, planner and community. Each actor has its own benefit demand, virtue and capacity in participation. Limited by the space and research emphasis, this paper does not address much to these theses.

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