

UNRAVELING ECOTOURISM PRACTICE: PROBLEM ANALYSIS BASED ON STAKEHOLDERS

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ABSTRACT: Despite the considerable literatures defined what Ecotourism is or should be, it is experiencing various practices with different features. Now the term "Ecotourism" is almost applied to all tourism activities which are based on nature. Faced to the flooding of those unqualified Ecotourism, it is of great necessity to put forward professional claim. The present writer holds that the key to the realization of rigorous Ecotourism chiefly lies in the relationships among the different interest groups involved in it. So the focus of this paper is just on giving a special analysis to the interest relations between those stakeholders which include local government, tour-operators, local residents and eco-tourists, and thus helping to find out what wrong is in those unqualified Ecotourism and the roots of those problems.

KEY WORDS: Ecotourism; stakeholder; interest relations

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1 INTRODUCTION

Ecotourism activities have been expanding rapidly over the past two decades. As we know, the National Tourism Bureau of China had designated the year 1999 as the Year of Ecotourism. When it went to 2001, its global importance was even recognized by the United Nations. The organization designated the year 2002 as the International Year of Ecotourism (IYE), and WTO (World Tourism Organization) coordinated with other international and regional organizations, as well as with its member states, affiliate member and other groups to undertake a series of activities before and during the IYE.

As a whole, almost all existing researchers focused their interests on its definition and characters, categories, destination choosing, planning and management, or case evaluation, etc. (MARTHA, 1994; JAMAL and GETZ, 1995; WALKER, 1996; WALLACE and PIERCE, 1996; HERATH, 1997; KHAN, 1997; BURTON, 1998; LEW, 1998; LUMSDON and SWIFF, 1998; ZHANG, 1999; CHEN and PENG, 2001; LI and ZHAO, 2001; CHEN *et al.*, 2001; LINDBERG, 2001; SPROULE, 2001; ZHOU, 2002; TUSON, 2000). Worthy of

concerning is that, foreign scholars' researches on Ecotourism have moved to a serious criticism stage, while much Chinese scholars' attentions are still paid to the understanding of Ecotourism or some thoughts about the development of it. Case studies are very rare indeed. It can be said that, even though many Chinese scholars are enthusiastic about Ecotourism, the researches about it is still in an early stage (CHEN *et al.*, 2001). Incontestably, Ecotourism is still quite a controversial topic whether in China or abroad, even the contentions on its connotation have never stopped. In China, there exists universal misunderstanding or lack of understanding on Ecotourism. The so-called "Ecotourism" in most people's eyes is actually "mass Ecotourism" or "ecotourismlike tourism" (some call it "extensive Ecotourism") (ZHANG, 1999). Such unqualified Ecotourism has contributed to nothing but severe destruction in preserved areas or beautiful spots during the practice. Especially in 1999, Chinese Ecotourism Year, almost all nature tourism was marked with an Ecotourism label in the national Ecotourism tide. Fortunately, some scholars have realized this problem and called on regulation for Ecotourism practice.

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However, there are strict requirements to the Ecotourism practice, especially when Ecotourism is still in its developing stage and the theory has not been in its autumn, few successful experiences can be seen. So whether to government or tour-operators, it is uneasy to do well in Ecotourism's development, operation and management. This article holds that the key to the realization of rigorous Ecotourism chiefly lies in the relationships among the different interest groups involved in it. Only when the problems are analyzed together with stakeholders, will all potential advantages or disadvantages be comprehended adequately and thus the roots of unqualified Ecotourism are further to open out. In fact, Western countries have widely adopted the approach of making various stakeholders take part in tourism planning, whose chief purpose is to achieve the advantage from "shared vision" within stakeholders in the more and more drastic competition of international tourism industry and remain invincible finally (ZHANG and WU, 2002). In China, such tourism planning approach is still at the exploring stage. The first attempt may be in Guilin's tourism development research presided by BAO Ji-gang and XU Hong-gang in 1999–2000 (BAO and ZHONG, 2002; BAO *et al.*, 2003). Following, that is in 2001 WU Bi-hu *et al.* took part in a city management project of the United Nation with meaningful work in Leshan's tourism development strategic planning (ZHANG and WU, 2002). Faced with the serious flooding of Ecotourism, this article's purpose is to give a deep analysis on the stakeholders by experiences and lessons in China and abroad for reference.

2 CONNOTATION OF ECOTOURISM

The term "Ecotourism" was first advanced by Ceballos-Lascurain in 1983 (WALLACE and PIERCE, 1996). After that, many scholars or organizations had given "Ecotourism" different or similar definitions. Much discussion has been given to the conceptualization and definition of Ecotourism and whether the term should be applied to nature tourism in general or to a more specific type of it (WALLACE and PIERCE, 1996). Among them the definition given by the Ecotourism Society in 1992 was relatively representative (ZHANG, 1999). According to it, "Ecotourism is travel which is respon-

sible to conserve the environment and improves the welfare of local people of nature areas".

It can be generalized that strict Ecotourism should include (ZHANG, 1999): 1) the destination of travel is "nature area" or "some specifically cultural area"; 2) its intention is "to learn the culture of local environment and the natural or historical knowledge", "to admire and study the nature landscape, wildlife and relative cultural character", etc.; 3) the principle of understanding is "to keep the ecosystem integrated" and "contribute to the conservation of nature resources and the welfare of local people". It is obvious that "Eco" is not just for ecological preservation but also for economic benefits, which are supposed to be equally distributed (KHAN, 1997).

3 PROBLEM ANALYSIS BASED ON STAKEHOLDERS

There are four main interest groups involved in Ecotourism: local government, tour-operators, local residents and eco-tourists (Fig. 1). It must be pointed out that local non-government organizations (NGOs) can be valuable partners in the process of developing Ecotourism enterprises in almost any area. They can be sources for training, technical assistance, advocacy at the national level, and in some instances, they can also provide financial assistance (SPROULE, 2001). But NGOs will not be discussed here, for it is not an indispensable part in Ecotourism and is not directly relative with this paper's subject.

This paper will adopt the means of one-one-relation analysis to analyze variances of existent or potential problems in Ecotourism practice from the view of stakeholders (Fig. 1). But it must be stated that the relationships existed in Ecotourism in fact are so complicated, because in many occasions more than two stakeholders are involved.

3.1 Local Government and Tour-operators

3.1.1 Vague position and function lead to improper tourism development

The areas being rich in Ecotourism resources are almost undeveloped regions. The development of Ecotourism and conservation of the environment needs a great need of investment from various fields. However, there lies an obvious discrepancy on the goal between local government and tour-operators. Local gov-

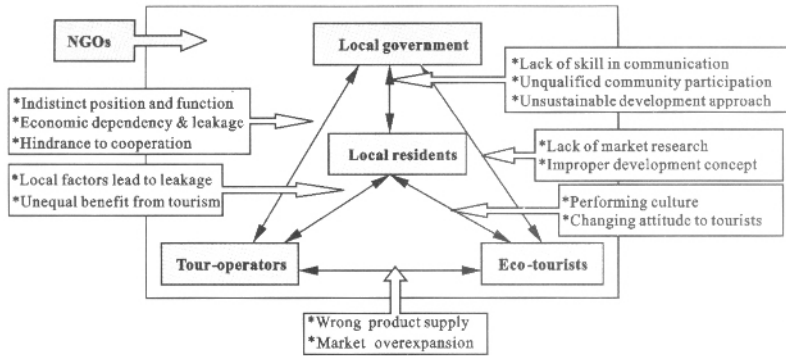


Fig. 1 Interest relation roots of unqualified Ecotourism

ernment has to take the harmony of socio-economy, culture and environment into account simultaneously. While to tour-operators, profit is everything and the measures they take to protect the environment are also rooted from the consideration of economic interest. Worthy of being concerned, however, when emphasizing the contribution of Ecotourism to the development of human society and the conservation of environment, more and more experts keep reminding people that Ecotourism itself cannot help the retrieval of the disappearing ecosystem and will even do harm to the environment and the interest of local residents if not being properly managed. Investigations show that in China 22% of natural reserves have been destroyed because of the development of Ecotourism, and 11% are undergoing nature resources' degradation (ZHANG, 1999).

Take Costa Rica for example. Although the government tourist board—known as the Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT)—acknowledges a role in the provision of a framework for the development of tourism, it is primarily concerned with coordinating the promotion of Costa Rica to the market. There is an implicit acceptance that the tour-operators, and hoteliers or lodge proprietors will regulate the market by themselves, ensuring that demand does not outstrip the capability of the existing infrastructure. In fact, this policy has encountered many criticisms, and Costa Rica is also at the crossroads in terms of the strategic choices faced in the development of tourism (LUMSDON and SWIFF, 1998).

3.1.2 Lack of restriction induces economic leakage and dependency

Originally, the dependency theory means that Western countries have choked the growth in the Third World by draining away the capital and by killing

the local industry through unequal competition. KHAN argued that such a dependency relationship and economic leakage also existed in large-scale mass tourism development in Third World countries. The facts that many of the goods and services required by a typical tourist have to be imported from Western countries, and that the large amount of capital needed to invest and promote tourism development, along with the expertise and knowledge required, have to be imported, together that the expatriates hold most of the managerial level jobs, yet all semi-skilled or unskilled jobs are held by locals, result in a major proportion of tourism expenditure leaking out from local economy (KHAN, 1997). Ecotourism, however, with its small-scale development, provides rights for local empowerment, encourages the use of local knowledge and labor, promotes local ownership, perpetuates local identity, and strengthens economic equity. Hence, KHAN suggested that Ecotourism can be seen as a viable option for self-sustaining tourism development.

But in reality, it is not the whole story. Without carefully control and management, economic leakage is unavoidable even during the development of Ecotourism. In Australia, most reserves are poorly managed due to inadequate funds. It appears that little economic value of tourism is captured by the nation or local residents (HERATH, 1997). MARTHA's field survey (1994) on Ecotourism development in Galapagos Islands and Monteverde also showed that the income held by local community from Ecotourism was too small and large enterprises run by urban entrepreneurs controlled and captured most of the income.

According to LINDBERG, the impact of Eco-

tourism, or any economic activity, can be grouped into three categories: direct, indirect, and induced. And the economic leakage chiefly lies in those indirect impacts. By identifying the leakages, or conversely the linkages within the economy, the indirect and induced impact of tourism can be estimated. In addition, this information can be used to identify what goods are needed but not being produced in the region, how much demand there is for such goods, and what the likely benefits of local production would be. This enables policy makers to determine priorities for developing inputs for use by many industries (LINDBERG, 2001).

3.1.3 Various risks making great hindrance to cooperation

Rather than accumulate and gain control over scarce resources, cooperation means firms are being asked to share resources (skills, knowledge, etc.) in some ventures and compete in others. The sharing of resources could induce "hitchhiking", whereby some stakeholders may depend on others in the collaboration to produce necessary benefits. Hence, an organization may be deterred from being in the collaboration due to a perceived risk of hitchhiking participants. Additionally, organizations that are not familiar with collaboration may refuse to take part in cooperation, and fear of losing control over the planning and development domain. They might also feel that the resources they possess could be better utilized by adopting a more familiar strategy, even though that strategy may have produced less than optimal outcomes in the past. Furthermore, municipalities might also perceive risks in collaborating together for tourism planning and destination management, because they are often involved in competing with each other in striving for scarce funds, and attracting private investment. Concerns about loss of control over decision-making may also prevent local authorities from entering into collaboration (JAMAL and GETZ, 1995).

3.2 Local Government and Residents

3.2.1 Inexperienced and unrepresentative in developing community participation

LINDBERG (2001) suggested that there are three ways to increase local benefits with less negative impacts: increasing spending per visitor; increasing backward linkages (reducing leakages); or increasing local participation in the industry. Generally

speaking, community participation includes benefits share and decision-making, which necessitate certain costs in human resources, material resources and financial support. Worthy of concern is that those residents in reserves, on one hand maybe do not fully understand the potentially social, economic and environmental impact of tourism development, and on the other hand when their interests cannot be regarded and equally treated, they will not collaborate with or even believe in government, so it is strongly advised by many experts that local residents should be involved at an early stage in the planning process and be made known of all potential advantages and cost (HERATH, 1997). Besides, resident perceptions and opinions on tourism development may be influenced significantly by changing variables. Hence, community participation has to take a form that is dynamic and active, in order to enable tourism planning and development to be adjusted as the economic, social and environmental perceptions change within the community (JAMAL and GETZ, 1995).

3.2.2 Community participation transformed in practice

Residents' opinions on tourism development within a community can vary greatly. And with the influx of various stakeholders and the complexity of the tourism domain, it will be quite difficult to make out an apt policy that can satisfy different interest groups. In fact, there are scholars who oppugn the maneuverability of several aspects of community participation, such as LI and ZHAO (2001) and TOSUN (2000). INSKEEP pointed out that (LI and ZHAO, 2001), there is no evidence shows that community-participated tourism development in developing countries has broken though the forms of community consultation and symbolic participation. And although there have been numerous efforts to create "guidelines" for ecotourism development and local participation, MEADOWS found in her research on community-based ecotourism ventures that, they tend to view local participation as something launched from "outside" incorporated into the design and implementation of ecotourism enterprises; additionally, they tend to focus on the quantitative dimensions of participation (e.g. number of people involved, revenue generated) rather than qualitative aspects of local participation (positions in the ecotourism enterprise) (SPROULE, 2001). Moreover, there are

questions about whether those poorest residents are preferable to get more chances and sound benefits. Researches found that it is impossible for poor people to be equally benefited in tourism development and the chances for the 20% poorest population are actually tiny (ZHOU, 2002).

In fact, tourism development research is not the only field that is involved in the issue of community participation in tourism. Many other disciplines may have great connections with it, such as politics, sociology, anthropology, economics and public administration etc. That is to say, when studying community participation in tourism, we cannot make clear about the vast panorama of existing or potential problems if our eyesight was restricted in a limited field, and thus community participation cannot be implemented successfully and eventually. Although the discussion on the topic of participation gets more and more popular, the real development and realization of community participation is still a tough task.

3.2.3 Non-intrinsic development resulted from deficiency of education and management

Undoubtedly, community development is one of the most important goals for tourism development. But what does the development really mean? Indeed, the improvement of local residents' welfare is one aspect of development, and the enhancement of local residents' culture is another one. While in local residents' views, it is natural that development should also means at least extrinsic urbanization and modernization, which will consequently, impairs its originally unique attractions to eco-tourists. However, this will not be recognized and understood by local residents without effective educations. So in the instance of lack of planning and control, the beauty sport will gradually lose its pristine features and gradually go to its winter.

3.3 Local Government and Eco-tourists

3.3.1 Market research shortage leads to immoderate destination exploitation

According to the statistics from WTO, Ecotourism only occupies a very small quotient about 3%–7% in the international tourism market (ZHANG, 1999), which may be even smaller in China. In general, the status of Ecotourism in the whole pedigree of tourism product will not take a qualitative change in a long period of time with the exception in some specific countries and regions. But in practice, the researches on ecotourists' demand and their behavior

are very weak. There is a great lack of proper analysis on the real characters of eco-tourists market, which has led to the inconsiderate exploitation of Ecotourism and its uneco-development that provide similar cheap products. In the instance of fund shortage, the overrun of Ecotourism will bring not only heavy financial burden to local government but also serious destroy to the environment.

3.3.2 Concept of development cannot reflect the real demand of eco-tourists

When planning an area for Ecotourism, how to make an apt concept for development? This is undoubtedly a synthetically analysis process, but such issues must be taken into account as "Is the result of present planning the kind Eco-tourists want?", "Does the present planning help to build up the attraction to Ecotourists?" and etc. It can be said that the concept of planning should mostly come from these considerations, which were not often taken into account in fact as expected however. Therefore, the possibility to realize real sustainable tourism development is under suspicion.

3.4 Tour-operators and Local Residents

3.4.1 Local macro-economic factors partly responsible for the economic leakage

At micro-economic level, it has been discussed above that employment opportunities and the utilization of local resources are not only the main sources for local community to benefit from tourism development, but also the lurking-place of economy leakage. However, it must still be mentioned that at macroeconomic level the competing ability of local economic is usually quite limited and it is difficult for local economic to supply the modern market demand, so economic leakage seems unavoidable. WALLACE and PIERCE (1996) found in their research on "eco-tour" lodges run at Amazon region that, both the owners and the community members admitted that there was not much available to buy; most owners felt that production was on too small a scale and too irregular to meet their establishment's demand; some owners gave a reason for not purchasing local products that such products were not being harvested on a sustainable basis, and that this could have a negative impact on the community in the long run.

3.4.2 Unequal benefits gestates crisis in tourist destination development

The resources possessed by tour-operators and local residents are greatly unequal, and so is their economic

status. After tour-operators and eco-tourists enter into the natural region where local residents live in, tour-operators and local residents, the former becomes the biggest beneficiary of environment while the latter endures any negative impact of environment. The resources that originally belong to local community and even local residents' daily life as well as their activities are part of the commercial product offered to visitors by tour-operators. If tour-operators simply stress their own benefits, crisis will be laid in waiting for future. Because when this situation develops to certain stage, conflict of benefits will inevitably take place, which must bring fatal shock to local tourism development.

3.5 Tour-operators and Eco-tourists

3.5.1 Product supply breach the principle of eco-tourism to meet diversified demands

With the rapid expanding of the market, it is hard for the originally pure motivations of learning the cultural, natural or historical knowledge of local environment to avoid getting complicated. In terms of the marketing environment, many operators are simply engaged in the process of selling a mixture of eco- and adventure tourism, without having an in-depth awareness of the possible implications of this process (LUMSDON and SWIFF, 1998). The survey of tour-operators suggested that by far the largest increase in visitors to Costa Rica has been in what could be described as the participant eco-tourist rather than the eco-specialist market. The participant eco-tourist is seeking a wide range of experience within a "soft" adventure holiday. Whereas the specialist is concerned essentially with the close observation of nature over a long time, the eco-adventure tourist seeks to consume locations at a faster pace, generally in a greater comfort. And many tour-operators have re-positioned themselves in the market to take account of this change (LUMSDON and SWIFF, 1998). LEW found in his survey to 228 tour-operators in Asia-Pacific region that they seem less concerned about over-development and the loss of pristine environments and traditional cultures, which is ascribed to over-severe market competitions and lack of criteria (LEW, 1998).

3.5.2 Dilemma between capacity controlling and benefits maximization

To increase economic benefits, the traditional approach is to attract more visitors. So it seems a couple of inharmonic contradictions to control the scale of

tourists and achieve maximum economic interest. HERATH (1997) reckoned that the entry fees may be raised without any serious decline in revenues and the opportunity to tap increased revenues is high even if the visitor numbers fall because the demand for such resources proves inelastic. However, choosing optimal process is a sticky problem as they depend on the elasticity of demand for ecotourism resources and complementary services and the nature of the pricing regime in those sectors. But the viewpoint of BOZE (CHEN and PENG, 2001) is that it is unable to work a lot on economy simply putting the emphasis on increasing the quantity of tourists but not on "quality" to enhance the tourism income. Instead, with people's increasing awareness of environment and the applying of sustainable principle onto the industry, there emerges a trend of the syncretizing of Ecotourism and mass tourism, which may bring more direct or indirect benefits to the economy. But up to the present, little discuss on this aspect can be found in research field.

3.6 Local Residents and Eco-tourists

3.6.1 Low-quality performing culture comes into being for tourists' consumption

In Ecotourism, the contact with local residents is one of the most important experiences to ecotourists because of their cultural discrepancy. Especially in those undeveloped areas, eco-tourists look forward to more chances to contact with local people and enjoy the rustic trait. While for local residents, it is urgent to get rid of poor and barbarism and realize modernization, to which the development of tourism is undoubtedly the activator. Thus, to protect for the sake of tourists' demand or to destroy interest of local community's self-development gets an unharmonizable contradiction, a result of which is the appearance of "performing culture". And this will be worse in those underdeveloped areas if irrelevantly making decisions, because of their lack of money, human resources and technique to launch into infrastructure and safeguard (ZHANG, 1999).

3.6.2 Local residents' attitudes change along with their benefits from tourism

The concept of community-based ecotourism, which was brought forward in the mid 1980s, affirms that the key for ecotourism industry to succeed lies in local people's attitude to tourism and their acquirability to development chances (CHEN *et al.*, 2001). However, because of local residents' different degrees of intervening into tourism, their respective benefits will be

quite different. And if the environment maintained by the whole community only benefits a small part of people, the others may feel dissatisfied and dispute the coming of tourists or even destroy local resources. Such dissatisfaction will also rise when the tourists scale surpasses a certain threshold on which the negative impacts on environment are serious enough to disturb the natural life.

4 CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

After the above analysis, it comes to a conclusion that local government's plan as a whole is crucial to the development of Ecotourism, and that local residents' participation and support are the essential assurance indeed, notwithstanding that the ingress of tour-operators and the demand of tourists are undoubtedly important impetus to Ecotourism development. But in reality the roles and functions of local government and residents are often undervalued.

In fact, when discussing unqualified Ecotourism problems based on stakeholders analysis, different

problems that rooted from different interest relations will have certain applicable range. If take BUTLER's Tourists Sites Life Cycle Theory (BAO and CHU, 1999) for reference, such applicable ranges (Table 1) can be achieved.

It may seem that the criteria as to what constitutes Ecotourism are complex and it may be unlikely that even the most committed operators or operations would meet all of the features outlined. As WALLACE and PIERCE (1996) pointed out, that strict Ecotourism is a far cry from the everyday tourism activities that occur in a natural environment and that are known as nature-based tourism. Even so, it does not represent that Ecotourism can be a label which describes all types of tourism that occur in a natural area. Faced with the flooding of unqualified Ecotourism, there is great necessary to advocate professional requests. The above problem analysis shows that rigorous Ecotourism has strict criterions and obligations to every stakeholder (Table 2).

Table 1 Rang applicable to practical problems in Ecotourism based on stakeholders analysis

Responsible couples	Stage with problems	Typical destination
Local government and tour-operators	Development stage	Undeveloped countries or regions
Local government and local residents	Involvement stage	Undeveloped countries or regions
Local government and Eco-tourists	Any stage	Undeveloped countries or regions
Tour-operators and local residents	Development stage	Difficult for most destinations to avoid
Tour-operators and Eco-tourists	Consolidation stage	Difficult for most destinations to avoid
Local residents and Eco-tourists	Consolidation stage or stagnation stage	Destinations taking local community culture and human atmosphere as its important attraction

Table 2 Ecotourism Development Requests on Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Request of rigorous Ecotourism
Local government	Establish effective policy framework and restrictions under the guide of rigorous Ecotourism development concept; negotiate the communication and cooperation among stakeholders; supervise the behavior of tour-operators; adopt feasible measures to help ecosystem protection; promote effective community participation; provide education and training chances for local residents; pay attentions to the intrinsic development of local community while developing of Ecotourism.
Tour-operators	Hold strong responsibility to environment conservation; take full advantage of local resources; ensure the emphasis of management not on increasing the quantity of tourists but on "quality" to enhance the tourism income; strive for harmonious relationship with local community; provide most of the employment and training opportunities to local residents.
Local residents	Take part in the Ecotourism development through various ways; protect nature environment with self-conscious; keep in mind that best entrainment and honest people as well as local culture are the greatest abortion to eco-tourists; learn to respect and cherish the traditional character and culture bear by local community; realize that knowledge and ability are the only way out to self-development.
Eco-tourists	Have clear intention "to learn the culture of local environment and the natural or historical knowledge", "to admire and study the nature landscape, wildlife and relative cultural character", etc; restrict self-behavior in Ecotourism destination to ensure the least negative impact to environment.

To find out the root of those problems of unqualified Ecotourism on the interest relationships base is the principal process to stan darize Ectourism practice. And the analysis can be developed based on the framework showed in Table 3.

Although this paper gives a special analysis to those different interest groups' relationships, and also discloses some problems embedded. However, deep studies into effective measures to settle the problems are still needed, and case studies are en-

Table 3 Framework of Diagnosis for Unqualified Ecotourism based on interest relation analysis

Problem	Interest relations root
Too many tourists (lack of control)	Tour-operators and eco-tourists
Unqualified community participation and deficient contribution to local community	Local government, tour-operators and local residents
Deficient education and information supply	Local government, tour-operators and local residents
Poor environment conservation and management	Local government, tour-operators and eco-tourist
Random building and sight pollution	Local government and local residents

tailed to support or recruit the analysis. When the analysis is supplied to the given areas, practical status is indispensable to be taken into account.

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