

Caribbean Delight: Moving Beyond the Sustainability Discourse in Tourism

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Abstract

■ In the tourism literature a lot of attention is paid to different approaches towards tourism development, especially when it comes to developing countries. Often it is argued that it is necessary to come to a sustainable approach, whereby it is stressed that attention should be paid to the way tourism organizations influence (and are influenced by) the natural environment as well as the cultural, and economical context in which they are situated. Although the debates on sustainable forms of tourism development are a positive direction for the tourism field, we will argue in this paper that these debates will not really contribute to the progress of the field as long as there is a lack of local accounts of actors in such tourism destinations. By presenting empirical data from Belize and the Dominican Republic, the aim is to move beyond the dominant ‘sustainability discourse’ in the field of tourism in which mass-tourism is per definition ‘bad’ and small-scale tourism is ‘good’, and gain an insight into what is actually going on at the micro level.

Key Words:

Belize, the Dominican Republic, Sustainable Tourism, Micro Perspectives, Local Entrepreneurship

Resumen

■ En la literatura del turismo se presta mucha atención a los diferentes acercamientos al desarrollo del turismo, especialmente cuando nos referimos a países en vías de desarrollo. Se sostiene a menudo que es necesario un enfoque basado en la sostenibilidad, por lo cual se remarca que se preste especial atención a cómo influyen las organizaciones de turismo (y cómo son influenciadas) tanto por el entorno natural como el cultural y el económico en el que se sitúan. Aunque los debates sobre las formas sostenibles de desarrollo turístico son un camino positivo para el sector turístico, en este artículo analizaremos por qué estos debates no contribuirán realmente al progreso del sector mientras haya una carencia de agentes locales de tales destinos turísticos. Presentando datos empíricos sobre Belice y la República Dominicana, el objetivo es ir más allá del dominante discurso sobre la sostenibilidad en el ámbito turístico, en el que el turismo de masas es por definición “malo” y el turismo a menor escala es “bueno”, y hacer una incursión en lo que realmente está sucediendo a nivel micro.

Palabras clave:

Belice, República Dominicana, turismo sostenible, perspectivas micro, espíritu emprendedor local

Introduction

■ When it comes to the Caribbean most people think about sunny, white beach paradise islands, colourful cocktails and lively music. By many Western tourists it is seen as a dream destination: a luxury cruise or tropical beach vacation. However, there is more to the Caribbean than this bounty image. In fact, the region is very diverse and there are many destinations that offer more than sun, sea, sand (Roessingh et al., 2005).

What is common for most Caribbean destinations (if not all) is that their tourism industry “is vested in the branding and marketing of Paradise” (Sheller, 2004: 23). Whether beach paradises or Gardens of Eden with exo-

tic vegetation and adventurous caves, it is all about selling a certain image to attract tourists.

These images increasingly employ concepts such as ‘sustainability’, ‘eco-tourism’, or ‘green-tourism’, since there is growing awareness of the costs of tourism when it comes to the environment, local cultures and the difficulties for the local communities to benefit from the tourism industry. Coined with a wider globalization/neo-liberal discourse, the international tourism community, together with governments of tourism destinations (especially in the developing world) are actively stimulating and promoting alternative forms of tourism that

are (supposed to be) more sustainable (ecologically, culturally, and economically). Although these attempts certainly deserve credit, there are some important limitations and problems with this sustainability trend.

Over the years numerous scholars and practitioners have stated that the concept of sustainable development can be applied to all types of tourism development, activities and environments, regardless the size and scale (Clarke, 1997; Inskip, 1991; Saarinen, 2006). Nevertheless, the concept of sustainable tourism is, more often than not, being attached to specific types of limited size tourism, thereby implying that these are 'better' than conventional forms of tourism or better yet, 'mass' tourism (Butcher, 2003). According to Fennel (1999: 9) alternative tourism is "a generic term that encompasses a whole range of tourism strategies (e.g. 'appropriate', 'eco', 'soft', 'responsible', 'people to people', 'controlled', 'small scale', 'cottage' and 'green' tourism) all of which purport to offer a more benign alternative to conventional mass tourism". Brohman (1996: 63) even argues that "the concept of alternative tourism has emerged as one of the most widely used (and abused) phrases in the tourism literature" as it has come to "mean almost anything that can be juxtaposed to conventional mass tourism". On the whole, those types of tourism are expected to be devoid of the assumed detrimental effects of most forms of mass tourism, which is often foreign controlled, enclavic, unplanned, short-term, culturally destructive and environmentally unsustainable (Brohman, 1996: 66).

Definitions of sustainable tourism within the academic literature are manifold, as it was generally assumed that sustainable tourism could only be achieved after gaining understanding of what the concept actually means (Garrod & Fyall, 1998). Those descriptive attempts have been followed by numerous prescriptive models of good practice. Less attention has been paid to a critical analysis of issues of sustainability and tourism within practice (Mowforth & Munt, 2003). Stronza adds to this that although anthropological studies in tourism include "excellent descriptions of what can go wrong when tourism is introduced into local communities, the analysis so far has been strangely devoid of local voices" and therefore "we have learned relatively little about how locals themselves perceive the array of pros and cons associated with tourism" (Stronza, 2001: 269). This seems odd, since one of the central aspects of sustainable tourism is said to be the way the local community of destinations is able to take part in and reap the opportunities that are created through tourism development.

In this article, we aim to shed a light on the perceptions of the local people involved in tourism in two different destinations in the Caribbean Basin, Belize and the Dominican Republic. Both countries, like most Caribbean countries, have a high dependency on the tourism industry. A large part of the local workforce is directly or indirectly involved with tourism. However the two

countries are very different when it comes to the size of the industry and the kind of tourists they attract. With regard to tourist arrivals (cruise ship arrivals not included), the Dominican Republic is currently the largest tourist destination in the Caribbean (with 3,965,055 tourist arrivals between January and December 2006) before Cuba, Jamaica, Cancun (Mexico), Bahamas, and Puerto Rico (Caribbean Tourism Organization, 2007). Belize, in turn, is one of the smallest (partly due to the small size of the country, its dense vegetation, and low level of population), but also one of the fastest growing destinations with 247,308 tourist arrivals between January and December 2006 and 655,931 cruise ship arrivals (Caribbean Tourism Organization, 2007).

While the Dominican Republic attracts mainly mass-tourists seeking the famous sun-sea-sand vacations, Belize's tourism industry is mainly aimed at 'alternative' ways of attracting tourists, by offering all sorts of adventures and small-scale accommodations. Although there are certain areas that could be classified as sun, sea, sand areas (for example San Pedro and Placencia at the Caribbean coast), generally the Belizean tourism industry might be better summarized by 'three Rs' (Blackstone Corporation, 1998: 1-3) than the famous Caribbean 'three Ss', since 'rainforest, reef and ruins' better encompass the Belizean tourism assets than 'sun, sand and sea'.

The specific focus of this article is twofold. First it aims to describe the situation these two countries find themselves in, operating in specific sectors of the tourism industry but both at a turning point in the process of development. The Dominican Republic has a well-established tourism industry, but few expansion possibilities, while Belize finds itself between two markets: involving small-scale nature and adventure tourism and the increasing popularity of cruise tourism. The article concentrates on observations of everyday experiences in two apparently different countries, in order to learn about how the concept of tourism is being shaped in daily practice. Second, the article focuses on the way people who work in the tourist industry, such as entrepreneurs or tour guides, reflect on matters as tourists, local participation, foreign investments, sustainability, and the way the government deals with these matters. The data presented in this article are the result of ethnographic research conducted in the Puerto Plata region from August 2003 until February 2004, and various ethnographic research projects conducted in Belize between 2003 and 2006. In most of these projects, the focus was on the micro-stories of a specific group of people, such as small-entrepreneurs, local hotel-owners, tour-guides, etc. In all cases, the researcher spent a significant period amongst the research population in their everyday settings, employing a combination of several qualitative research methods. These include (but are not limited to) participant observations, interviews with all kinds of stakeholders, numerous more or less informal conversations, and document analysis.

The authors have previously included part of the data resulting from these research projects in a collection of case studies from four different destinations in the Caribbean Basin (Roessingh et al., 2005). These case studies from Belize, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Suriname were aimed at showing the diversity of these four destinations, as well as to highlight a number of important issues and problems that local entrepreneurs in such destinations are confronted with.

In this article, the specific aim is to compare local accounts of two very different tourism destinations, in order to move beyond the dominant discourse in the

field of tourism in which mass-tourism is per definition 'bad' and small-scale tourism is 'good', and gain an insight into what is actually going on at the micro level. In the next sections, first the development of the tourism industry in Belize is described, followed by the story of local entrepreneurs in one particular region (Cayo District) in Belize. Then, the tourism industry of the Dominican Republic is introduced, in order to set the scene for the story of local entrepreneurs in the Puerto Plata region. Finally, in the concluding section, some of the most important issues from the empirical data will be highlighted and some more general conclusions will be drawn.

Tourism Development in Belize: Nature is calling

■ Belize's tourism industry started out in the 1960s, mainly with divers that were attracted to the second longest barrier reef in the world. Pearce (1984: 293) describes this first period as a development characterized by "individual effort and initiative and a general absence of planning and coordination". Private entrepreneurs took a leading role. This occurred in San Pedro, on Ambergris Caye, where small, mainly American investors started promoting Belize as a fishing, diving and snorkelling paradise (Barry, 1995: 52). The plans of the entrepreneurs from San Pedro reflect the active use of what the island and the barrier reef had to offer, as Sutherland (1998: 96) points out: "Their goal was to establish nature recreational tourism (sport fishing, wind surfing, sailing, snorkelling, diving) as well as some hunting-and-gathering tourism (hunting deer and peccary, shell collecting, archaeological ruins)". San Pedro today is a well-developed tourism town. But questions have been raised about the impact of tourism on the social and natural environment. Sewage problems, destruction of the reef, economic leakages and increasing cost of living amongst others, are major issues of concern. 'The case of San Pedro' is often cited as an example of growth without control, where the government could and should play a regulatory and facilitative role to diminish the negative impacts and increase the positive ones (Dachary & Arnaiz B., 1991; McMinn & Cater, 1998; Sutherland, 1998).

However it was only in the 1980s, when the government changed seats for the first time in the electoral history of Belize, that the Belizean Government started to pay attention to tourism as a serious option for development. Until then the ruling People's United Party (PUP) had been resenting tourism, mainly driven by anti-colonial feelings (Barry, 1995: 53). Belize had to deal with many economic setbacks once it had acquired independence. In this period (the eighties) Belize's export consisted mainly of products from the agricultural industry, such as sugar, molasses, citrus fruits and bananas. Due to high oil prices, low sugar prices and a declining world market, the country was on the verge of bankruptcy in

1981 (Barry, 1995: 39). According to a tourism study from the United Nations, the government at that time "virtually frowned on the industry and from all accounts, did its utmost to discourage its development" (Woods et al., 1992: 83). This radically changed when in 1984, the United Democratic Party (UDP) embraced tourism as an option for development.

The UDP government, forced by the World Bank and IMF to diversify the Belizean economy after the worldwide recession, started to develop tourism as a potential sector for economic growth. The tourism industry was raised from seventh to second in the overall development plan of the country. Funding and loans were provided to improve the tourism infrastructure (Barry, 1995: 52; Woods et al., 1992: 82). The Ministry of Tourism was established and integrated with the Ministry of Environment. This already reflected the government's focus on the rapidly growing eco-tourism market. Tourist attractions were identified and a strategy plan was defined with recommendations for the institutionalization of the sector, the protection of national resources and the promotion of the industry as a whole (Berl-Cawtran Consortium, 1984). The preparations paid off. Ten years later this period was even referred to as the 'golden' years for Belizean tourism: "Although reasonably reliable tourist arrival estimates are not available until 1991, it appears that after twenty years as a diving destination Belize, in the late 1980s, entered a "golden" period of tourism growth coinciding with its appeal to the "new" ecotourism market. Arrivals grew rapidly, from less than 77,000 in 1991 to more than 100.000 by 1993" (Blackstone Corporation, 1998: 1-3). Between 1993 and 1997 tourist arrivals stagnated at approximately 100.000 annually and concerns were raised that without targeted action, the industry would further decline (Blackstone Corporation, 1998: 1-1).

In 1997 the Ministry of Tourism and Environment and the Belize Tourism Board saw the need for a long-term development plan. A study was undertaken by the Blackstone Corporation, resulting in a National Tourism

Development Plan for the next ten years; also known as the 'Blackstone Report' (Blackstone Corporation, 1998). The guiding principles were similar to the earlier strategy and action plans with a focus on a strong environmental ethic and a preference for smaller-scale development. Attention was paid to public-private partnerships, price competitiveness and market-driven strategies. In 2003 this resulted in the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Development. The latter reflects what the development of tourism in Belize is all about "a catalyst for economic growth" (Belize Tourism Board, 2003).

The Belize Tourism Board (BTB) was revitalized as a statutory board under the ministry and since then is responsible for marketing and public relations as well as tourism product development. Functioning as an executing government agency, the BTB communicates with the private sector, represented by The Belize Tourism Industry Association (BTIA). The BTIA (officially recognized in 1989) communicates the interests, views, needs and priorities of the private stakeholders in the Belizean tourism industry by marketing and promoting Belize as a tourism destination and by influencing the development of the tourism sector through the representation of the private sector, lobbies and by providing a network and forum to address tourism related concerns. Public-private partnership is highly valued by both sectors in Belize and together they engage in the concept of 'sustainable-eco-cultural tourism' as a market-driven strategy.

Though still focusing on eco-tourism Belize started promoting 'responsible tourism'. Responsible tourism refers to a way of doing tourism rather than a type or segment of tourism. It encompasses what can be called eco-tourism, but also 'natural heritage' tourism, diving and marine-oriented tourism as Belize's specific niche markets. It refers to an ethic and a set of practices that chart a sensible course for all types of tourism (Belize Tourism Board, 2003). It is expected that the 'new enlightened tourist' that forms Belize's most important existing and potential future market, will be attracted by the image of 'a destination that cares' (Blackstone Corporation, 1998: 4-1 & 4-2). Responsible tourism thus serves both

as a concept for sustainable development and as a marketing image to attract tourists.

One of the main attractions for local and national tourists (besides the reef) is the rich Maya heritage of Belize. Visitation numbers for major Mayan sites in Guatemala, Mexico and Honduras are evidence of the increased popularity of the Mundo Maya (Maya World) circuit amongst tourists. Belize however did not have a strong position in the Ruta Maya and was primarily serving as a through-way for tours between Mexico and Guatemala with minimal stops in the country itself (Blackstone Corporation, 1998: 5). Caracol (situated in the Maya Mountains, Western Belize) is recognized as an 'anchor destination' for its potential to 'rival' with major sites like Chitzen Itza in Mexico, Tikal in Guatemala or Copan in Honduras (Blackstone Corporation, 1998: 9-5). In order to put Belize on the Mundo Maya tourism map, a project was established for the development and conservation of the major archaeological sites. In 2000 the Inter-American Development Bank provided Belize with an \$11 million loan to strengthen the tourism sector and to preserve and protect environmental and cultural assets (Inter-American Development Bank, 2000).

An increasingly important segment of the Belizean tourism industry are the cruise-ships arriving to the country. With a growth of 564.4% in cruise visitor arrivals in 2002, Belize has been one of the fastest growing cruise tourism destinations in the region (Caribbean Tourism Organization, 2003). The rapid expansion of cruise tourism business in Belize has led to increasing tension between different actors, especially since the cruise industry is generally not compatible with the 'green' image of Belizean tourism (Berendse & Roessingh, 2005). In general, the opinions of different groups of stakeholders diverge when it comes to the costs and benefits of the tourism industry, as becomes clear from the following case study, in which the relations between local and foreign entrepreneurs in the Belizean Cayo District, as well as with the central government are discussed.

Cayo District: Springboard for Indiana-Jones-like adventures

■ Visitors coming from Guatemala are most likely to arrive at the western border of the Cayo District. The border town Benque Viejo del Carmen itself is a rather small town and most tourists will directly continue to the district town of San Ignacio. This town serves as a springboard for Indiana-Jones-like adventures in what some people call "Belize's inland playground" (Cutlack, 2000: 52). This means that most of the tour guides and hotel owners live and work in this little town.

Cayo is undeniably the main destination for all tourism on Belizean mainland. Over 60% of the Cayo District

has been set aside as either a Wildlife Sanctuary, National Park or Forest Reserve (Belize Explorer, 2003). The Mountain Pine Ridge is a forest reserve full of rivers, pools and waterfalls. The Cayo region is home to numerous caves as a result of the abundance of limestone. Most of these caves were used by the Maya, which adds a cultural aspect to the adventurous tours. Hidden in the jungle of Chiquibul National Park you find Caracol. This ancient Maya city is assumed to have rivalled the famous city of Tikal (Guatemala) in the past (Bradbury, 1996: 150-153). With the popular ruins of Xunantunich and the easily accessible Cahal Pech in San

Ignacio, the region offers a lot for the archaeologically minded visitor.

Cayo has a long tradition of eco- or responsible tourism. Guides take visitors into the jungle for birding, national history or jungle survival trips. Belize's first jungle lodge, Chaa Creek, is located on the banks of the Macal river, close to San Ignacio. The lodge has become internationally recognized for its sustainable tourism concept. Amongst others it hosts a national history centre and a butterfly farm. Former neighbour Ix Chel Farm was known for its rainforest medicine trail based on the knowledge of Mayan healer Don Eligio Panti. Situated in the same valley, DuPlooy's jungle lodge operates the Belize Botanic Gardens. And further south on the Hummingbird Highway is Ian Anderson's Caves Branch jungle lodge, famous for its cave and wilderness rescue training and wilderness first aid. These lodges represent the broad range of activities available in the district.

Just as in Northern Belize, the atmosphere and culture in this part of the country is mainly Hispanic as a result of (recent) immigration from the surrounding countries (Peedle, 1999: 16). An important group of inhabitants in this area are a conservative religious community of Mennonites. Mainly on market days you can see them driving along the Western Highway in their horse-drawn buggies heading to San Ignacio to sell their commodities. The more progressive community of Mennonites from Spanish Lookout, north of the Western highway are important contributors to the agricultural economy with their poultry and dairy business (Roessingh, 2007). In addition they craft wooden furniture and merchandise auto parts and other mechanical devices that attract people from all over Belize because of the low prices (Bradbury, 1996: 190-191).

Next to tourism, citrus and cattle farming, Cayo is a governmental district with the new capital of Belmopan lying at the junction of the Western and Southbound Hummingbird Highway. It took almost ten years to build this artificially created capital and the result is a "tidy, well planned but, according to many, also dull" town (Cutlack, 2000: 44). Most tourists will not go further than the bus terminal. Heading South, the Hummingbird Highway provides for a "gorgeous and dramatic drive over the Maya Mountains and through foothills and valleys of citrus plantations" (Miller Carlstroem & Miller, 2002: 184). Passing the Blue Hole National Park, followed by the Caves Branch River system with ample opportunities for cave explorers, the road leads you to the junction of the Southern Highway and the turnoff to the East coast village of Dangriga in the Stann Creek district. Yet, most tourists instead take the bus in Belmopan to visit Belize City, also on the east coast. Many tourists also travel to Caye Caulker or San Pedro, the two most popular 'sun-sea-sand' and diving destinations of the country, and one of the most established tourism areas. In this case study we focus on the tourist entrepreneurs of the Cayo district. In contrast to

Caye Caulker and San Pedro, the tourism industry in the Cayo District is not yet clearly established. While Caye Caulker and San Pedro have a clearly recognizable image, the tourists that visit Cayo do not really fit a demarcated type. A hotel/restaurant owner in San Ignacio puts it as follows:

It's mixture tourism. At first, our tourism industry focused on basic and budget travelers. I love them; they are interesting people, educated too. They are really interested in the community and the culture of Belize and San Ignacio. A budget traveler is not automatically in the low-income category. I get people here who are very rich, they are doctors, professors or layers, but they want to get to know the real life, really down to earth. I think this is very important, I like these people. They come to see what the real world is about. Nowadays you also find a lot of middle-income tourist over here. They come here for the environment and to relax.

Carolyn, 55, hotel/restaurant owner

The lack of a clearly recognizable (and marketable) image makes it hard for entrepreneurs in the Cayo District to adapt their business strategies to the type of visitors and clients they receive. This is especially true for the local entrepreneurs who lack the international experience and contacts that many foreign entrepreneurs do have. It becomes clear that many local entrepreneurs in fact clearly dissociate themselves from foreign entrepreneurs. They perceive their business as inherently different from foreign entrepreneurs in the tourism industry. This attitude is reflected in the following statement from a (foreign) resort owner:

The majority of the locals do not think of themselves as capable to be an entrepreneur. They think this is only possible for the foreigners. This needs to be changed in order to stimulate local entrepreneurship. Education is of utmost importance to achieve this.

George, 38, owner resort chain

Most local entrepreneurs in the tourism industry consider themselves to be active in local business, without being a tourism entrepreneur. They are rather skeptical of the possibilities to gain a stable income from tourists. The tourism business is rather new and the confidence in the sustainability of the sector is still not very high. Therefore they remain to focus a large part of their business strategies on local clients:

Local business is more sustainable than tourism. That's why I first focus on locals. Tourism in San Ignacio can always go down the drain... at least I have my local guests.

Louis, 42, restaurant owner

This skeptical attitude among locals is related to the dominant position of foreigners in this branch. Those 'outsiders' come into the country and are able to invest

capital into this kind of industry. On the one hand locals see the advantages of these foreigners and their investments, because it creates jobs and opportunities, on the other hand they are critical because the foreigners take a niche in the tourist arena which is hard to compete with. Vice versa, the foreign entrepreneurs are critical towards this attitude among locals:

The foreigners are helping to develop tourism and are working on basis of high quality and service. This could challenge the Belizeans to provide better service. Beside this, the foreigners give the Belizeans a good impression of what the international market needs. This will raise the standards. There is some kind of jealousy towards foreigners, but this is based on individual frustration. This is not right.

George, 38, owner resort chain

Apart from the tensions between the local and foreign entrepreneurs, the government plays an important role in the tourism arena. They are responsible for policy development, decision-making and the legislation for tourism in the country. As such, the government is trying to create the most beneficial climate for tourism development in Belize. Nevertheless, this is very complicated and it is difficult to take all interests from different groups into account. In general there is a difference between the specific concerns of private (foreign and local) entrepreneurs and the government's general public concern. Though both benefit from developing a prosperous tourism industry, the interests of the public and private sector are not always the same and sometimes they even contradict, for example with governments allowing and disallowing specific practices or encouraging growth in certain areas rather than others. An informant stated:

The government does not support the entrepreneurs in any way. If you do not work hard enough, according to the government, you do not get a penny. Sometimes the BTB and the government are in contradiction. I remember that one day the government wanted to raise the taxes for hotel-owners. The BTB, however, was against this proposition and came to action. Thanks to them, the taxes were not raised.

Basilisa, 46, hotel owner

Keune and Dahles argue that, ideally, the government not only has to be active in developing "sound conditions for the expansion of tourism sales potential, but also in embedding that sector in conditions and interests

that offer guarantees for sustainable development in the broadest sense of the word" (2002: 158). Nevertheless, as was argued in the introduction of this paper, the concept of sustainable development is rather problematic, and it is very difficult to create a proper balance between different aspects and interests. With their case study of competing entrepreneurs in the Cayo district, Volker and Sorée (2002) show that government interference can lead to quarrels on the local level. This also becomes clear from the reactions to the growing arrivals of cruise-ships in the tourism arena in Belize. In principle, it is the task of the government to monitor and guide these changes, but in practice this is very difficult because despite the (economic) benefits from cruise tourism, most local entrepreneurs are very critical and the cruise industry is perceived to be contradicting the (responsible) image of Belizean tourism:

Cruise tourism damages Belize. It is too much pressure on what we do. It needs to be organized in a smaller way; it is far too big now.

Cesar, 54, restaurant owner

Cruise tourism can lead to the discouraging of overnight tourism. But still, the government encourages this cruise tourism, because they earn a lot of money from the taxes. This is quick money instead of long-term developments.

George, 38, owner resort chain

In general, entrepreneurs in the Cayo district are focused on issues as Maya culture, nature and activities like canoeing, bird watching. These (small-scale) activities are closely related to the 'eco' reputation of Belizean tourism, which is very much embedded in the universal dominant discourse of small-scale tourism versus mass-tourism. This is very much reflected in the stances towards the growth of cruise tourism in Belize. Most entrepreneurs distrust the government because they think that the government is more interested in "easy money" and not in the local opportunities of the Cayo district. Nevertheless, it is difficult to determine whether or not this is actually beneficial for the local community. As became clear in the examples above, local entrepreneurs in the Cayo District find it hard to establish themselves in the tourism industry and compete at the level of the foreign entrepreneurs. In the next case study, situated in the Puerto Plata region of the Dominican Republic, we will take a look at the situation for local entrepreneurs in a typical 'sun-sea-sand-sex', mass-tourism destination.

Tourism in the Dominican Republic: From Standardization to Diversification

■ Like Belize, the Dominican Republic started relatively late with the development of its tourism industry, compared to other countries in the Caribbean. This can principally be attributed to the political instability of the

country during the dictatorship of Trujillo between 1930 and 1961. It was not until 1967 that the Dominican government started to take an interest in the tourism industry as a means of development for the country

(Freitag, 1994: 538). In that year a special Ministry of Tourism was created and the government implemented a number of measures to stimulate both private and public investments in this new, promising industry. An example of such a measure was the so-called 'Tourist Incentive Law', which offered tax benefits for private investors who entered the tourism industry (Freitag, 1994: 540). The goal of the development of this new industry was to improve the economic situation in the country and to raise the living standard of its poor population.

In order to make the development of the tourism industry possible, the Dominican government had to make far-reaching decisions to allocate land and resources to this industry, at the expense of other sectors in the economy, like agriculture (Freitag, 1994: 541). The government and Central Bank joined their forces and created a public organization called INFRATUR in order to stimulate and coordinate the development of the necessary infrastructure in those areas that the government had designated as tourist zones (Wiarda & Kryzaneck, 1992: 90). The first region to receive wide attention from the government through this organization was the Puerto Plata zone (the 60-kilometer stretch of northern coastal land from Maimón to Cabarete), mainly due to the location of the cruise terminal in the port of Puerto Plata. Many inhabitants of the area saw an opportunity in the upcoming business and shifted from other industries (mainly agriculture) to try their luck with a career in tourism (Roessingh & Duijnhoven, 2004). Going back in the history of this region, the first tourist activities took place as early as the 1940s. Many Cuban and Spanish cruise ships would make a stopover in the port of Puerto Plata. It was not until the 1970s however that the regular stops of cruise ships turned Puerto Plata into a real tourism destination (Camarena, 2003: 402), creating a lively business of souvenir-salesmen, restaurants and other small tourism businesses. By the 1980s there were six transatlantic cruise lines that used the Puerto Plata port as a regular stopover.

Initially local investors and entrepreneurs dominated the Dominican tourism industry. In the mid-1970s, La Romana (in the southeast of the island) was the first destination in the Dominican Republic to have a foreign investor build a resort, the Casa de Campo (Dogget & Connolly, 2002: 162). It was not until the 1980s however that foreign investors started to show a wider interest in the Dominican tourism industry. Even as late as 1987, it was estimated that only 21% of the hotel rooms in the Dominican Republic were foreign owned (Freitag, 1994: 540). Today there is still a high level of locally owned tourism enterprises, although the major resorts generally belong to an international chain.

The tourism development in the Dominican Republic has always been primarily based on the all-inclusive resort development model, which means that special resort areas were created with all the necessary ingre-

dients to attract tourists. From the beginning of the tourism development in the 1970s, many resorts offered package holidays that included flight, transfer, accommodation and most of the meals (Vial et al., 2002). Because most developing countries, like the Dominican Republic, lack the necessary infrastructure to be able to attract large number of tourists, the choice of an enclave resort-developing model is considered to be the best option. The costs of developing the infrastructure and services in a few enclosed areas are much lower than developing the entire country in a random way (Freitag, 1994: 541).

By the late 1980s, the tourism industry had become an important source of income for the Dominican Republic and it was at that time that a private investor decided to develop the unpopulated area on the east coast into a luxury resort area. In the next decade this area (the Punta Cana/Bávaro zone) rapidly became the number one tourism destination of the Dominican Republic with its luxury hotels and white sandy beaches. What was different about this area was the use of an 'all-inclusive' system; a market trend in tourism that became popular in the Caribbean in the late 1980s. The all-inclusive concept originates from the famous Club Med in France in the 1950s (Piñeiro, 2001) and was soon being implemented in tourism destinations around the globe. In the Caribbean this concept was introduced in the late 1960s, first in Jamaica and later also in other destinations. The difference with the all-inclusive concept today, which is so widely spread throughout the Caribbean, is that the array of services has expanded significantly. While initially the packages included meals and maybe some activities, "hotels now offer a range of services including meals in informal or formal in-house restaurants, daily and nightly entertainment, and day excursions" (Vial et al., 2002: 25). Furthermore, the number of all-inclusive hotels has increased significantly and the low prices have given these destinations a low-class image, instead of the association with luxury and exclusiveness that the earlier resorts had (Patullo, 1996). Although there are variations between the different resort complexes and the services they offer, the basic ingredients are very similar and the trend is to offer all elements of a vacation in one package (Lumsdon & Swift, 2001). For tour operators, the all-inclusive concept is appealing because it allows a high level of standardization of the products, which is cost-efficient and therefore the prices can be driven down to enhance the competitiveness of the products (Lumsdon & Swift, 2001; Patullo, 1996).

Because of the competitive prices in the Punta Cana/Bávaro zone and other Caribbean destinations, due to this 'all-inclusive' structure, the remaining destinations in the Dominican Republic, like the Puerto Plata region, were forced to follow this new trend in tourism. This development meant another setback for the local businesses, as this all-inclusive system resulted in a further loss of business for the small shops, restaurants and hotels because tourists were provided with all the ser-

vices they needed within the resort. Most tourists do not even leave the premises at all during their stay. Up until today the all-inclusive system is dominating the Dominican tourism industry although in some areas (in particular the older tourist areas like Sosúa and Cabarete) small entrepreneurs still aim their business at attracting tourists that do not care for the all-inclusive holiday. Nevertheless, as becomes clear by a number of studies, these small entrepreneurs have a hard time competing with the large (foreign-owned) resorts and hotel chains (Duijnhoven & Roessingh, 2005), and increasing evidence indicates that this all-inclusive system has a number of negative effects on the destinations, such as a negative image surrounding these highly standardized, massive holidays (Pot et al., 2005). The all-inclusive concept is considered to be of little benefit to the local community, as many resorts are foreign-owned and there is a high level of leakages (e.g. Fennel, 1999; Lumsdon & Swift, 2001; Patullo, 1996; Weaver, 2001). The large degree of vertical integration (Crick, 1989; Lea, 1988), and the fact that food and drinks are paid for in advance make it extremely difficult for the local community to

participate in the tourism industry. "Once a resort supplies a variety of complementary services to its guests there is little market for outside providers to capture. Over time the result is a cycle that reinforces all-inclusive packages" (Vial et al., 2002: 25).

The critiques and problems surrounding this type of tourism have given rise to debates about and growing attention to alternative types of tourism. Among these are approaches and initiatives belonging to movements/labels like eco-tourism, community-based tourism, ethical tourism, and sustainable tourism (Smith & Duffy, 2003: 135). In the Dominican Republic these discussions have also led to increasing attention for alternative tourism enterprises. Although the country is still mainly focussed on and known for its mass-tourism holidays, since a few years the government is starting to emphasize the possibilities for alternative forms of tourism (Secretaría de Estado de Turismo, 2003), and to at least change the marketing strategies towards more emphasis on natural beauty, adventures and Dominican culture to attract tourists.

Puerto Plata: Springboard for Foreign Investors and Resort Tourism

■ The stereotypical description of the Dominican Republic as a tourism destination is one of massive, cheap, luxury vacations whereby tourists come to enjoy the three S's without having to bother to get to know the local culture or to participate in any exciting adventures. Although this sounds rather extreme, this comes rather close to the reputation of the Dominican Republic. According to a foreign tour-operator, stationed in the Dominican Republic, the country's tourism industry was caught in a downward spiral through a number of negative accounts in Western media, displaying the country in line with the above.

The Dominican Republic had a very bad image for a while, caused by several very negative reports in the media in Western countries. For instance, I saw a TV programme from [a Dutch TV station] a couple of years ago in which all kinds of elements from the Dominican culture were completely taken out of proportion. It was a horrible account of a number of extreme incidents and that was displayed as if the whole country was like that. That kind of representations can really harm a destination like this.

Susan, 38, representative of a foreign tour operator

The introduction of the all-inclusive system in the Dominican tourism industry has led to a rapid expansion of the number of visitors, making use of the negative image of the country to promote the safe and comfortable environment within these luxurious resorts. People were told that it was not safe to go out of the resort unless with a guided tour (organized by that specific tour operator) or that the food outside the resort was

dangerous and unhygienic. A local beach vendor who used to work in a big resort told us:

I have seen how the representatives of the large tour operators tell the tourists that it is better to stay in the resorts. They tell them that it is dangerous to go outside because the locals will swindle or even rob them. The food and water is unhealthy and the restaurants unhygienic. This is of course not true, but the large foreign enterprises are manipulating the tourist to stay inside the resort, buy all the souvenirs there, and only participate in the excursions they organise. It's all for their own profit.

Antonio, 42, beach vendor in Puerto Plata

The rise of the all-inclusive business has created a lot of problems for the local businesses in the tourism arena. Traditionally, from the start of the tourism industry in the Puerto Plata region, a large amount of local entrepreneurs shifted from their previous business (usually agriculture) to try their luck in the tourism business. Restaurant, bars, and shops were opened, street vendors and individual tour guides became a regular sight in the port area, and the (motor) taxi business grew significantly. Many of these entrepreneurs were forced to start working in the tourism industry simply because there was no alternative. As a local owner of a *colmado* (small bar/restaurant), who had to change his business due to changes in the economy, stated:

The whole region depends on tourism, we had no choice, all the other industries were taken away from Puerto Plata during the [Trujillo] dictatorship and later

because of tourism. The only option for us to earn some kind of living was in tourism. I used to be in the import business, I imported all kinds of goods from Europe, like butter, cheese and salami, there was a lot of trade in this region, but later all this business moved away and I had to do something else.

José, 68, local restaurant owner

For a while, small-scale tourism businesses appeared to be successful and the region was prospering thanks to this new industry. This apparent success is seen in many developing countries where the initial development of tourism takes place before this industry becomes a point of interest to the government, thus leaving the development up to the initiatives of the private sector (Dahles, 1999). Nevertheless, as soon as the tourism industry becomes more established and the government becomes more involved, the environment for local initiatives changes. Since countries like the Dominican Republic offer highly substitutable products, the governments are forced to adapt their policies and strategies on the demands from the dominant actors in the international tourism industry, creating a tendency among these governments to favour the large-scale development of (multinational) tourism enterprises. The idea behind this strategy is that, apart from international clientele, such enterprises usually bring along large investments, knowledge and technology, and therefore contribute more to the economical growth of the country (Kamsma & Bras, 1999).

In the case of the Puerto Plata region, this meant that small entrepreneurs increasingly encountered difficulties to sustain their businesses and to continue to be able to compete with international entrepreneurs. Apart from the fact that tourists from the resorts are 'kept' inside the resorts (Pot et al., 2005), those tourists that look for more independent forms of vacationing in the Dominican Republic generally book their trip through international tour operators and remain out of reach for local entrepreneurs. The foreign hotels are either owned by multinational chains or small foreign entrepreneurs with the 'right' connections in the important tourist markets, knowledge about the demands and standards of these western tourists and money to invest; all assets that the local entrepreneurs did not have, making it difficult for the rest of the entrepreneurs:

Initially I got some guests from a Western tour operator because the demand was so high due to a very rainy summer in Europe and they would otherwise have to cancel guests. I thought this would be the same every high season and was very excited about the future; I even made plans to buy a second building. The next year, however, things were very different. I had mysteriously disappeared from the tour operators' list. They told me that that was because my building was too far from the resort where all the other accommodations are located, while it's only 15 minutes away. Later I found that it was because all the

other hotels belong to international chains and they profit from selling only those accommodations. The only tourists that come here now are satisfied guests who return or tell about my place to friends and relatives.

John, 56, foreign owner of an apartment building

The level of exclusion of small entrepreneurs in the tourism industry became even higher when, in the early 1990s, the multinational resorts introduced the all-inclusive structure. By this time the number of hotel rooms in the Dominican Republic had grown to some 56,378 (Banco Central de la República Dominicana, 2003), the vast majority of which belong to large hotel chains, indicating the immense market share this type of tourism holds within the sector. These hotels work together with international tour operators and local independent hotels have a hard time reaching the tourist because they cannot compete with the prices offered by the strong network of resort hotels and international tour operators. One of the major criticisms is that all-inclusive resorts have very little association with their environment. They appear to be enclaves or bubbles (Cohen, 1972) that are shut off from their surroundings by high protective walls and armed guards. These bubbles "confine and isolate mass tourists by 'protective walls' of the institutional and other arrangements of the travel and hospitality industry, the physical places created for tourists and – significantly – the attitudes and beliefs of tourists" (Jaakson, 2004: 44-45). The question is whether they are designed to keep the outside out or the inside in. There seems to be a mutual misunderstanding between the resort tourists and the local community. The small entrepreneurs have a hard time maintaining themselves in the local tourism arena. Unless they have some sort of arrangement with the tour operators from the large all-inclusive hotels, they are experiencing difficulties in attracting customers. At the same time it makes it clear that the tour operators have a very powerful position because they can decide to a large extent where their guests go and what they do.

Increasingly, there is attention for the problems related with the tourism development in the Dominican Republic. Although the tourist arrivals are continuing to be growing for the country, there are signs of saturation. Furthermore, it is recognized that the benefits for the local community are small, due to the dominance of foreign hotel chains and the monopoly position of the all-inclusive resorts. According to several tour operators, there is little room for growth left in the current situation. The government also recognizes this and is working on tourism development plans that focus on diversification and competitiveness. The director of the National Competitiveness Council argues that "In order to beat competition, we should move on to promote a tourism that balances luxury with authenticity" (Dominican Today, 2007a). According to another article in the Dominican Today, the Dominican tourism industry will increasingly move away from promoting

traditional sun and beach holidays and instead focus more on health tourism, diving, golf, culture, etc. (Dominican Today, 2007b). The question is the extent to which such initiatives will be able to move beyond the

application of diversified labels and marketing a different image, and actually changing the current situation in the Dominican tourism arena (as well as in other destinations).

Conclusion

■ The main conclusions that can be drawn from the comparison of these two cases can be divided into three different levels of analysis. The first level is that of the governments of these countries. It becomes clear that they have a very critical position when it comes to the direction of the tourism development in the country. Influenced by the dynamics in the international tourism industry, these governments tend to invest in specific projects or segments of the tourism business that can generate the biggest economic benefit for the country. In that sense, they tend to operate at the macro level and with a short-term planning in mind. This attitude is stimulated through the dominant actors in the international tourism arena, who have access to the largest groups of prospect clientele and important resources.

Here we come to the second level, the international investors and international entrepreneurs. This group of actors has a very specific interest in the development of tourism business in these countries. They are working together to construct different tourism destinations, with different reputations and opportunities, in order to control the flows of tourists and resources. They create paradise and have an interest in keeping it this way. This might seem a rather harsh and normative judgment of this group of actors, but at the end of the day their goal is to earn a living, and the most effective way to guarantee their business is to control the market.

This brings us to the third level of analysis, the level of the local community. Some locals are able to obtain a position within the tourism market, while others would like to enter the market but due to diverse reasons are not able to compete. What becomes clear in this article is that although these different groups of actors all participate in the same tourism arena, they are operating on rather different levels, creating boundaries between them.

The problems resulting from the lack of mutual understanding between the different levels of actors are increasingly recognized; nevertheless, the discourse resulting from this situation focuses on the creation of alternative forms of tourism development, that should consider the multiplicity of positions and interests. However, the solutions that are developed are mainly based on the perspectives of the first two levels (governments and the international tourism community), since they are the most influential in the arena and as such have the power to define the criteria for these alternative forms of tourism. The result is that the strategies for creating alternative tourism are manifested mainly on the level of marketing and promotion. Tourism products that employ labels like eco, green, authentic or small-scale, are deemed to be better or more sustainable than large-scale, luxury resorts, regardless the actual costs and benefits for the environment, economy or local community. The perspective of the local community is hardly included, despite the fact that local participation is one of the pillars of alternative, sustainable forms of tourism.

When we take a closer look at the micro level of two destinations at each end of the continuum (one mass-tourism destination and one eco-tourism destination) it becomes clear that the differences are not as apparent as might be expected. In both countries conflicts and tensions between government, international entrepreneurs and investors, and local entrepreneurs are abundant. This supports the suggestion to look beyond the images and labels connected to the different destinations in light of the sustainability discourse and include perspectives from the micro level to gain an understanding of what is actually happening. When we want to move the tourism industry forward in a responsible direction, all three levels of actors should be equally regarded in order to create a dialogue and mutual understanding of each of the standpoints and interests.

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