

CUATROCIÉNEGAS: TOURISM-BORNE CONFLICTS IN A NATURAL PROTECTED AREA

Ivo García Gutiérrez

Álvaro López López

Department of Economic Geography. National Autonomous University of Mexico
ivo_garcia@hotmail.com, lopuslopez@yahoo.com.

Tourism has become a very popular strategy for the promotion of national, regional and local development. Its ability to contribute to poverty reduction and generate surplus value in the agriculture, construction, services and transport sectors makes it extremely attractive, especially among the least-developed countries. A good part of tourism development in Mexico focuses on Natural Protected Areas (NPAs), which have themselves become instrumental to the promotion of economic development and the improvement of the quality of life of the local inhabitants, with safeguards for the natural resources.

In underdeveloped countries, NPAs are set in uninhabited areas, and therefore fulfill a social function. This is the case of one third of the Mexican NPAs (created by federal, state or municipal decree), where the majority of the resident population (up to 90%) faces some degree of social marginalization. Tourism is therefore promoted as an alternative economic activity for local populations. According to the latest figures, in 2007 Mexican NPAs received about 14 million visitors and registered more than 27,000 tourism-related jobs, generating revenue of as much as 8,345 million pesos.

However, when performed without proper planning and without the active participation of the local inhabitants, tourism can have negative impacts at the local level. This is especially true at the Mexican NPAs, where social marginalization and very fragile unique ecosystems converge.

Located at the center of the state of Coahuila, Mexico, the Valley of Cuatrociénegas was constituted as an NPA by federal decree in 1994. One year later, the publication in the *National Geographic Magazine* of George Grall's article on the area positioned it as a tourist destination of international note. In the last fifteen years, Cuatrociénegas went from receiving only a few hundred seasonal visitors annually to accommodating 18,503 tourists in 2008, with an estimated economic benefit of 29.2 million pesos.

However, with the increase of tourism its negative effects also increased, and this led to the closing of two sites on two occasions (2004 and 2008) by the Federal Attorney for Environmental Protection (Profepa), leading to various conflicts between government agencies and tourist service providers, as well as the local population.

This research combines quantitative and qualitative methods. Qualitative research was conducted from the perspective of a “participant observer” with a high degree of involvement, benefitting from the position and personal experience of the first author of this report. Former resident of Cuatrociénegas, and officer of the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas (CONANP) in the capacity of director of the Department of Wildlife Protection of Cuatrociénegas (February 2008 to November 2012), his perspective as citizen, researcher and government employee has been extremely valuable.

To complement this, interviews, working sessions, meetings and workshops on the theme of tourism were organized at the Cuatrociénegas NPA. These activities brought together entrepreneurs, service providers, government officials from all levels and civil society organizations, as well as the general public, composed of both tourists and locals. Similarly, a random survey was carried out from March to July 2012 to study the local resident’s perceptions and attitudes towards tourism. The population surveyed covered 374 residents of the municipality of Cuatrociénegas from all sectors of society (adults with more than one year of residence). The gender ratio of respondents was 239 women (64 percent) and 135 men (36 percent). To remove redundant information, the factor analysis technique was used. Also, 1,260 questionnaires were obtained from tourists at the Rio Mezquites spa, so as to learn about their place of origin, their socioeconomic profile, their knowledge of the site, the degree in which they found services satisfactory and their attitudes toward the impacts of tourism.

With the declaration of the Wildlife Protected Area of Cuatrociénegas, tourism began to grow slowly in the area, albeit with the limitations imposed by its geographical inaccessibility and the lack of infrastructure and services. Later on, by means of campaigns and the improvement of certain facilities, the number of visitors grew steadily, and the carrying capacity of the destination was soon exceeded. However, the local population interpreted this as an economic success and changed their perception of tourism. Mass tourism was seen as a positive effect, and a disorderly tourism with no regard for environmental conservation was encouraged.

This crisis led to the adoption by the Conanp of new strategies and actions. In order to safeguard the natural resources of the site while avoiding its decline as a tourist destination and economic stagnation, the need was felt to promote among local residents attitudes in favor of a long-term environmentally friendly tourist development.

The large majority of tourists interviewed (98 percent) were national citizens, and the remaining two percent came from other countries, including the United States, Costa Rica, Canada, Guatemala and Colombia. Domestic tourists come from the regional hinterland: 86 percent of them from towns in the state of Coahuila, and the remaining 14 percent from the states of Nuevo León (six percent), Chihuahua (three percent), Federal District (two percent), Guanajuato (two per percent) and Durango (one percent).

Although tourists are generally aware that they are entering an NPA, very few of them have any idea of its environmental importance and the need to preserve its resources. The same goes for the local population, as very few residents recognize the environmental services they derive from the site, which hinders the implementation of conservation practices.

It is evident that the negative impacts of tourism in Cuatrociénegas go unnoticed by both residents and visitors. Many among the latter would even maintain that tourism does not pose any threat to the conservation of the protected area, since visiting is in itself an environmentally responsible activity, regardless of what they do within its borders. As for the local people, they perceive tourism as an activity that strengthens the local economy and encourages the creation of locally owned businesses. However, the reality is quite different, as foreign investors have come to Cuatrociénegas, pushing the trade dynamics toward unfair competition and the displacement of local businesses.

Moreover, as the recreational and tourist activities in Cuatrociénegas are closely linked to the availability of water, wetland conservation is as essential to the development of tourism in the region as it is to the development of any productive activity not only of the residents of the valley, but of every other community benefitting from its water inside or outside the river basin. The coordination of agencies at every level of government is essential to ensure that tourism development in Cuatrociénegas be linked to long-term development projects in tune with the needs and aspirations of the local population. NPA administrators are not solely responsible for tourism development inside and around it. The City of Cuatrociénegas and the NPA combined present great opportunities for both local development and biodiversity conservation.

From its inception, this research project was directed by a quantitative approach. The interest was in understanding how tourism affected biodiversity, which seemed like an undisputed fact. However, as the project advanced, the complexity of the phenomenon became evident, as it involved multiple actors and social conflicts, not only within the ANP, but also in its surroundings.

In order to generate information that could influence future decision-making in tourist management, the need was felt to involve local people, investors and officials from the various levels of government. This led to the adoption of a qualitative-constructivist approach, which allowed for the combination of contrasting points of view on the impact of tourism on a fragile and important environmental reserve, as is the Cuatrociénegas NPA.

