

Community participation in the Vava'u Whalewatching industry: A local perspective



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Community Participation

- Community participation is a vital component of sustainable tourism development (Botes & Van Rensburg, 2000; Cole, 2006; Porritt, 1998; Okazaki, 2008).
- Increased community participation redistributes power amongst the host population and shares benefits and costs evenly between stakeholder groups.
- Local participation is required to obtain community support and approval of tourism development and ensures that the benefits reflect local community needs (Cole, 2006, p. 630).

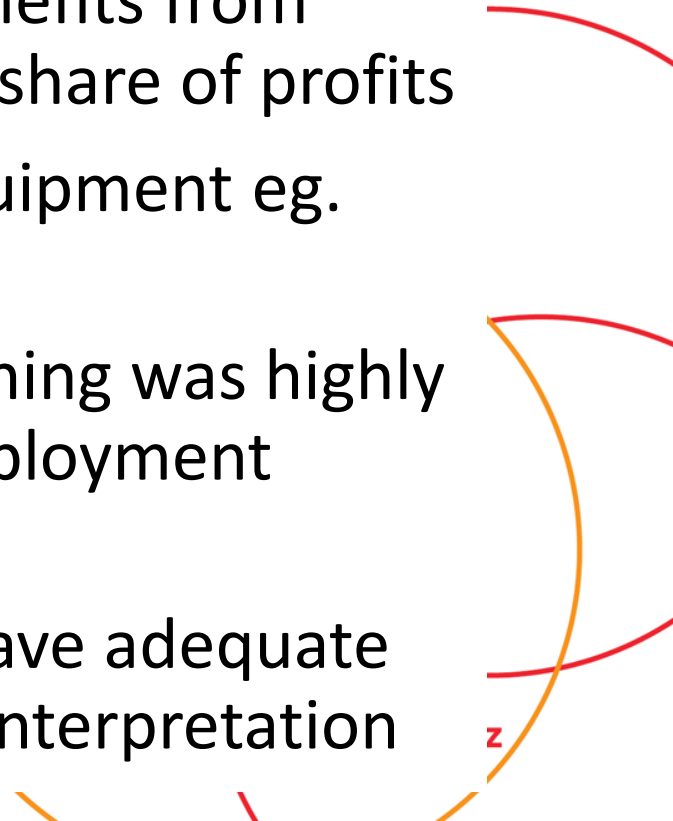
Challenges to community participation

Community participation in practice is hard to achieve for a number of reasons:

- Residents' lack of tourism knowledge, confidence, time and interest (Cole, 2006, p. 631).
- Limited of ownership, skills and resources limit a community's capacity to control their participation in tourism development (Holden, Sonne and Novelli, 2011).
- Inadequate training of state tourism agency employees, poor coordination among government agencies, and limited education and training (Saufi, O'Brien and Wilkins, 2014).

Community Participation in the Vava'u whalewatching industry

Observations and discussions from a pilot study in January, 2015- Semisi Taumoepeau

- Local people see the economic benefits from whalewatching but do not receive share of profits
 - Do not have capital to invest in equipment eg. Tour boats
 - Off season most of the whalewatching was highly seasonal and there was limited employment opportunities
 - Highly skilled industry but do not have adequate training eg. Whale behaviour and interpretation
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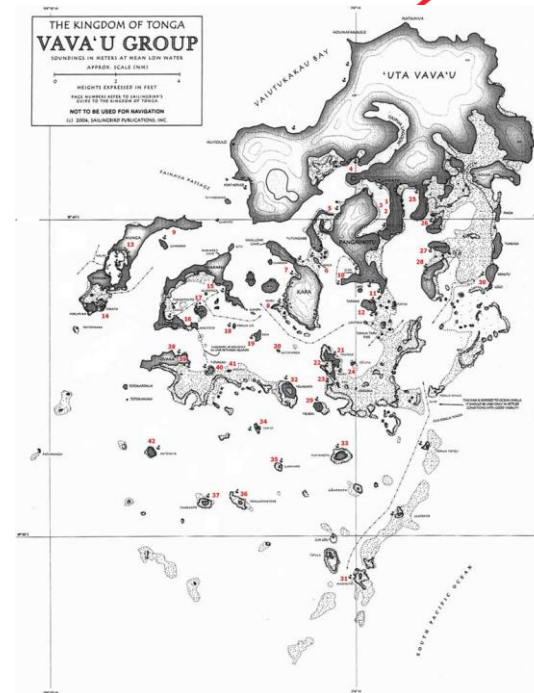
“...marine ecotourism that does not properly address the principles of sustainability, or only pays lip service is unlikely to meet the needs of the local community....” (Garrod & Wilson, 2003, p.7).

Positive example: Whalewatch Kaikoura is a local community trust owned and operated in partnership with Ngai Tahu Maori tribe.



The Study

- January- March 2017
- Vava'u Island
- 17 Semi structured interviews with relevant stakeholders
- Interviews were in Tongan then transcribed into English.



Research questions

- (1) What are the views of local people towards community involvement in the whalewatching Industry in Tonga?
- (2) What are appropriate roles of local people in the whalewatching Industry?
- (3) To what extent do local people participate in the tourism development decision-making process?
- (4) To what extent have the local Tongan community benefited from whalewatching Tourism (both operators and locals)?
- (5) What are the views of the local people on the contribution of whalewatching tourism towards poverty reduction?
- (6) What are the chief challenges for locals to gain greater involvement in the whalewatching Industry?
- (7) Any suggestions for improving the local community's involvement in the industry?

Overall the respondents were supportive of whalewatching

“Whalewatch an excellent revenue/financial opportunity for Tonga”.

“Very supportive as this Tonga marine resource/asset brings in a lot of tourists”.

“Great opportunity for Tonga, helps individuals and businesses as well as overall economy of the land.”



What is the level of involvement for local Tongans?

“Tongans not involved in management and decision making but few are involved in running accommodation, Tongan feasts and cultural activities, handicraft production and selling, tours and marine transfers.”



Locals felt the industry was dominated by **palangi**

“Only a very few are involved in managing the industry, only the leaders, more stakeholders should be involved.”

“30% local input to the industry and the rest are from the expatriates and foreign investment.”

“Tongans are involved as skippers, guides and swimmers and office information roles.”

Challenges to participation

- Education- Financial literacy
- Limited training
- Start up cashflow
- Licences not prioritised for locals
- Seasonality



Education- Financial literacy

“Good business but beyond capability of locals as needs capital and skills.”

“Teaching locals on how to run businesses is a good start and can open up opportunities and prevent poverty.”



Limited training

“Language barrier, poor communication skills and not knowing enough about the whalewatching business are some of the barriers for ordinary locals to participate in the whalewatching industry.”



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Start up cashflow

“Government to supply/assist with fully furnished boats, train the Tongans and to ensure compliance and monitor operation.”

“Operation cost high, Tongans can’t afford e.g. boat \$30k, engine \$30k, equipment \$15k, fuel \$25k, labour wages \$10k, other costs \$7k. Total operational cost per season \$117k average....”



Licences not prioritised for locals

“Issue more licence to local Tongans but ensure boat specifications, skills, marketing and customer service.”

“Government to be involved is setting up couple of companies for the Tongans, control licence to expatriates, less licence to overseas operators.”

“Most of the whalewatching licence are issued to foreigners and investors as they have the capital, the know how etc and Tongans are still struggling to get in. But it helps fight poverty and bring in some incomes to locals.”

Seasonality

“Short season 4-5 months but this industry brings in a lot of money for the people of Vava’u.”

“Lots of families are looking forward for the whalewatching season. This is the time they will get a bit of income to help, church obligations.”



Improving local community participation

- Government funding scheme
- Diversification of tourism product
- Industry specific training- Skipper and guiding
- Realistic licencing costs



Government funding scheme

“Needs government assistance in grant or low interest capital for locals to operate.”

“Government to be involved is setting up couple of companies for the Tongans, control licence to expatriates, less licence to overseas operators.”

“If government works with the banks on an incentive scheme, low interest, grant assistance? For local businesses and Tongans aspiring to become involved in the industry.”

Industry specific training

“Key jobs that Tongans take are the boat skippers and tour guides.”

“Need a training institute or programmes to teach tourism, whalewatching activities and other tourism subjects to ensure fuller.”

“Language barrier, poor communication skills and not knowing enough about the whalewatching business are some of the barriers for ordinary locals to participate in the whalewatching industry.”



Realistic licensing costs

“License and compliance fee too high if you could lower them or seek support from elsewhere.”

“Unfortunately, Tongans are not adequately equipped financially to start off a whalewatching business. Too expensive to get a license.”

Recommendations

- Disseminate research findings to a broad range of stakeholders

Whales in a changing ocean perfect platform

- Make results visible to **Tongan government**
- **Case study** for other Pacific Islands to involve more locals in the industry and promote community based initiatives that help to diversify the tourism product.

Concluding remark

Increasing community participation leads to greater local ownership, which is vital for the long term sustainability of the whalewatching industry in Vava'u.



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