

ADVENTURE SPORT TOURISM IN RURAL REVITALIZATION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EVALUATION

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Context

The world is becoming increasingly urban, and the pace of urbanization continues to accelerate (United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, 1996). One of the side effects is a growing imbalance in the economic and social development of rural regions relative to urban centres. The imbalance can become a self-amplifying process as younger and better-educated rural residents move from rural areas into cities (where opportunities are thought to be greater). This has two immediate effects. First, the social fabric of rural communities is eroded. Second, rural areas become less desirable places to live or work, with the result that the economic base of rural areas deteriorates. Governments throughout the world are increasingly concerned to find means to revitalize rural areas. Although a number of tactics have been tried, the introduction or elevation of tourism, particularly adventure forms of sport tourism, as a revenue source has been a fairly common tactic (Kneafsey, 2000).

In order for a sporting activity to contribute to the overall tourism development of a host destination, that activity must be integrated with the other tourism products and services like accommodation, meals, shopping (Chalip, 2001). Sport tourists may desire activities for accompanying family members who do not participate in the sport. They may seek additional activities for themselves to enhance their overall experience. However, sport organisations typically lack the networks, structures, and skills required to work effectively with tourism providers (Weed, 2003). This can serve to further weaken the value of sport to a rural community's economy.

Despite widespread advocacy of sport tourism as a rural development tool, and high hopes for the benefits it is expected to bring, very little is known about its effects on rural communities. In particular, the separation of sport from tourism in governance structures, and of sport and tourism from other economic development infrastructures has been shown to inhibit its application (Weed, 2003), suggesting a need to examine the efficacy of sport tourism as a tool for rural revitalization.

Methods

This study employed ethnographic methods to explore the opportunities and disappointments associated with a Portuguese rural community's use of paragliding in its mix of tourist attractions. Fieldwork was conducted during June and July 2003. Data gathering included observation, interviews, and review of archive materials. Specifically, the first author observed the daily life of Linhares da Beira. This included mingling with crowds around paraglider landing sites, attending the local church, eating in local restaurants and cafés, and socialising informally with locals and paragliders. Observations were logged in a research journal, and the informal socialising with paragliders and community residents was complemented with formal interviews. One set comprised detailed interviews with 6 female and 3 male key informants (either leaders of local paragliding groups or people playing a central role in the community's political and economic life), and the second of opportunistic interviews conducted as opportunities arose (15 paragliders and 27 local residents). Further, diverse published and unpublished reports providing background data on Linhares da Beira and its tourism marketing were reviewed.

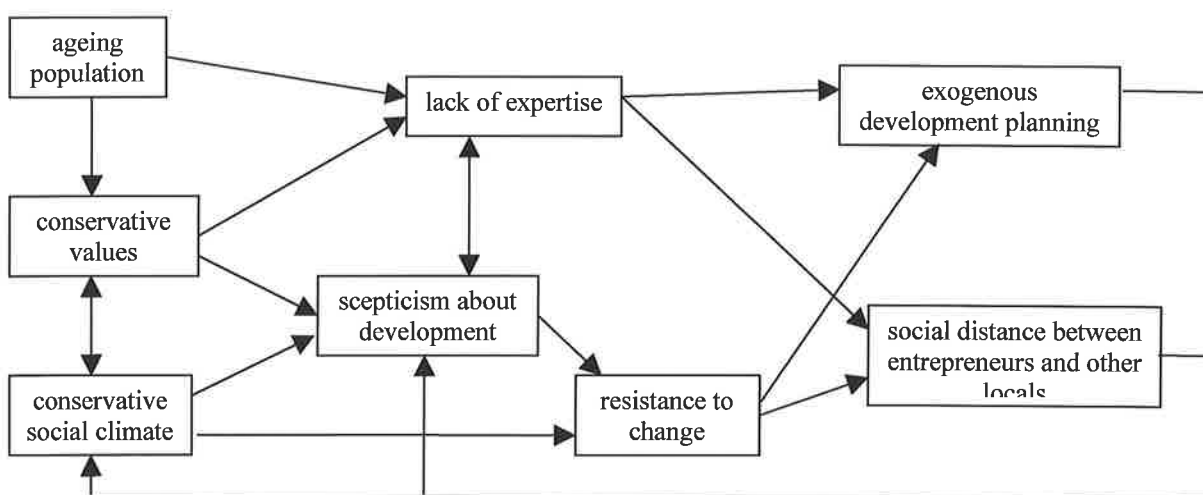
Results

Although paragliding in Linhares da Beira has been popularly identified as a successful application of adventure sport tourism for rural revitalisation, interviews with local business people, observation of paragliders and their own descriptions of their behaviours suggested that paragliding was not well positioned to contribute substantially to the local economy. Except for a one-week tournament in August, when local accommodation and restaurant were filled with competitors, spectators and their families, paragliding has only a small impact on the community because most gliders are day trippers, prefer to socialise with one another, and shop and eat outside the community. Throughout the

interviews it became clear that the lack of business from paragliders was treated as a given, rather than as a business challenge, and consequently local business people have made no effort to determine what activities, menus, pricing, or merchandise would appeal to paragliders or their companions. But, as several interviewees pointed out, paragliders could become a tourist attraction, and generate media attention to help build the community's tourism brand.

Regarding social and cultural dynamics, the out-migration of young and well-educated people has been the most obvious effect of community decline during the past half century. Consequently, local residents generally lack skills or training in business or community development, and most have retirement incomes and are, therefore, somewhat comfortable. These two conditions facilitated approaches to development that were largely exogenous to the community. The rhythms and social tradition of the community are reinforced by a social climate that frowns on public criticism, entrepreneurial individualism, or blatant zeal for change. The community's social self-reinforcing forces are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Community social forces



Discussion/Implications

A sport that appeals to tourists has the potential to contribute to the economic development of a rural community. In the case of Linhares da Beira, paragliding attracts repeat visits, and paragliders are willing to purchase food and activities for family members accompanying them. At present, however, paragliders are a low yield market. The absence of strategic market planning contributes to the community's failure to capture a larger spend from paragliders, or to generate tourism revenue from accompanying markets. Ageing of the local population, a conservative social climate, and tourism planning that is exogenously driven underpin development and marketing deficits. Findings are consistent with other research in rural development and sport tourism, suggesting that participative planning focused on integrating and leveraging a rural community's assets will be necessary to optimise the role that sport plays in revitalisation.

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