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Can Pro-Social Tourism Foster Empathy?

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Title: Can Pro-Social Tourism Foster Empathy?

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Abstract:

The United Nations and the World Tourism Organization state that tourism can promote world peace through empathy. However, to what extent do tourists really let go of their conceptions of the world and actively listen to the ‘Other’ while on holiday? Empathy refers to a process by which a person imagines the thoughts and feelings of another person through perspective taking. It is developed by sharing experiences with people from a variety of contexts, and thus is considered as an “emotional pre-requisite for cross-cultural understanding” (Tucker, 2016). This gains importance, given the current international context—where crisis, war, and terrorism have hindered social cohesion through fear, diminishing the possibilities of creating bonds across cultures and geographies. Following a critical approach, the present research assesses the conditions that ignite empathy in tourism encounters: its manifestations, evolution, and subsequent effects. To achieve this, the perspectives and sentiments of tourists were assessed through semi-structured, in-depth interviews that were held prior to, during, and after their trip (which enabled the researcher to review changes in the interviewees’ perceptions throughout time). In addition, the researcher undertook a pro-social trip herself to engage in participant observation and gather further data on the social interactions that occur. She also used autoethnography to gauge her own process and cultural predispositions. Preliminary findings suggest that time constraints and language barriers posed relevant obstacles to the generation of empathy with locals. Actual pro-social behavioural changes were prompted by intellectual discussions with NGO stakeholders (which hold a heavily westernized perspective). This could imply that western cultures give more importance to intellectual content than to emotive content. Furthermore, it runs the risk of increasing the cultural gap between locals and visitors by maintaining current relations of power. On another hand, the use of storytelling (featured in audio-guides and conversations with locals) did seem to play an important role in generating identification, and thus should be the focus of further research. The present study is timely and relevant from a critical perspective because it fills the research gap between empathy, prosocial tourism, and social change. While current research focuses on the relationship between empathy and tourism, it fails to address its role in prosocial tourism specifically and whether it contributes to a positive social impact within this segment or not. It responds to emerging consumer behaviour trends that focus on social responsibility and addresses the risks that could prevent social change. Its findings could also inform policy-makers, local communities, and social organizations on the ethics of pro-social tourism, and thus help them tailor their products to increase their social impact.