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# A critical look at community based tourism

Kirsty Blackstock

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**Abstract** Community based tourism (CBT) could be one way of creating a more *sustainable tourism* industry. This article critically reviews the CBT approach in light of fieldwork in a North Queensland tourism destination. The literature on CBT has three major failings from a community development perspective. Firstly, it tends to take a functional approach to *community involvement*; secondly, it tends to treat the host community as a homogeneous bloc; and thirdly, it neglects the *structural constraints* to local control of the tourism industry. Attention to these issues could contribute to a more sustainable and equitable tourism industry.

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## Introduction

Community based tourism (CBT) centres on the involvement of the host community in planning and maintaining tourism development in order to create a more sustainable industry (Hall, 1996). The tourism industry is dependent on local resident involvement, through their role as employees or local entrepreneurs, and on resident goodwill towards tourists (Laws, 1995; Dann, 1996, Taylor and Davis, 1997; Cole, 1997). However, the majority of literature is content with a brief note that tourism will be more successful if residents are supportive (Laws, 1995; Stabler, 1997; Jamieson, 1997).

In contrast, the CBT literature takes the local community's relationship with tourism as the main premise for analysis. Pearce (1992) suggests CBT delivers local control of development, consensus-based decision making and an equitable flow of benefits to all affected by the industry. Murphy (1985, 1988) argues that tourism planning and implementation should incorporate resident values and visions, whilst Haywood believes that 'healthy, thriving communities are the touchstone for a successful tourism industry' (1988, p. 105; see also Harper, 1997). Blank (1989) discusses the 'community-tourism industry imperative' and concludes that local control of tourism is a win-win situation for most rural communities. Pearce, Moscardo and Ross (1996) believe 'resident responsive tourism is the watchword for tomorrow' (p. 9).

CBT shows obvious parallels with broader community development and participatory planning philosophies, which also advocate greater community control of processes at the local level (Ife, 1996). Community development can be defined as 'building active and sustainable communities based on social justice and mutual respect' (Gilchrist, 2003, p. 22). Thus community development explicitly seeks to dismantle structural barriers to participation and develop emancipatory collective responses to local issues.

Advocates of CBT, however, diverge from the ethos of community development in three ways. Firstly, CBT accounts lack the transformative intent of community development, as CBT is presented as a way of ensuring the long-term survival of a profitable tourism industry rather than empowering local residents. Secondly, local communities are presented as homogeneous blocks, devoid of internal power struggles or competing values. Thirdly, CBT accounts ignore the external constraints to local control. Thus, CBT can be perceived as an example of community development 'imposter' driven by economic imperatives and a neo-liberal agenda, rather than values of empowerment and social justice (Mayo, quoted in [Craig, 2003](#)).

## The study setting

This article was inspired by my community study of an Australian tourism destination, Port Douglas. This explored the everyday reality of living in a tourism town, in order to advocate for change. Unlike most tourism research, the study focused on residents living with tourism rather than the experiences of tourists. During the fieldwork (1997–2000), several research methods were employed, including fifty in-depth unstructured interviews with a purposive sample of residents; a structured face-to-face questionnaire using randomly sampled households (useable data sets,  $N = 96$ ); participant observation and thematic analysis of the local newspaper, tourism association and local government minutes (Sherlock, 2001).

Port Douglas is one hour's drive north from Cairns, the main tourism and regional centre for North Queensland. It was transformed from a small fishing village with less than 200 inhabitants in the 1970s to an international resort by the development of the \$183 million Sheraton Mirage integrated resort in 1987 (Craik, 1991). The 1990s saw a rapid increase in tourism development, with the number of tourist beds doubling to approximately 16,000 between 1997 and 1999 (Douglas Shire Council Minutes, September, 1999).

The current population is approximately 4,000, although difficulties in counting the transient population makes exact figures impossible (see [Sherlock, 2001a](#)). The majority (86%) of survey participants and 54% of

interviewees worked in tourism or tourism support industries in the town. The residents have been attracted by the combination of world heritage listed natural beauty, 'small town living' and sophisticated local facilities including designer shops and café-restaurants (see <http://www.pddt.com.au/>; Sherlock, 2001a). While Port Douglas is different from traditional community study sites (Sherlock, 2002), it is typical of post-fordist service towns that might adopt the CBT approach.

### **First failing: Co-opting or transforming the community?**

The CBT literature is focused on sustaining the tourism industry, unlike community development's commitment to social justice and empowerment. Proponents do not challenge or question the development of a tourism industry, but seek to make tourism more acceptable to the local residents. In fact, some proponents claim that residents who resist tourism development, do so from ignorance (Blank, 1989). Echoes of this attitude were found in Port Douglas as the local tourism association chairperson argued that anti-tourism sentiment was due to the lack of understanding of how tourism benefits the town (Port Douglas Daintree Tourism Association Annual General Meeting, December, 1996).

The language used by CBT advocates suggests a focus on economic profitability not local empowerment. CBT seeks to ensure the industry's long-term survival rather than social justice. Murphy (1988) illustrates how failure to involve local residents could have significant implications for the profitability of industry. Hall (1994) suggests that residents' negative attitudes to tourism are perceived as a problem *because* they are an impediment to growth. Social and environmental impacts are to be avoided only as these may undermine capital investment.

The CBT paradigm is functional, as it seeks to identify potential problems and overcome these before the tourism industry is damaged by adverse local reactions. The community is co-opted into supporting tourism through an illusion of power sharing but they are not empowered to reject tourism as a development option. Thus, CBT lacks the transformative intent of community development, which starts from a recognition that current economic, political and social structures must change (Stettner, 1993).

### **Failing two: Who speaks for 'the community'?**

The CBT literature takes an atheoretical and apolitical approach to the concept of community. The use of the term 'community' is widespread in the tourism literature, yet such literature rarely recognizes the term's conceptual difficulties (see [Liepins, 2000](#); [Silk, 1999](#)). For example, McIntyre,

Hetherington and Inskip (1993) define community as 'any *homogenous* place capable of tourism development . . . below the national and regional levels of planning' (p. 1, italics added). The advocates of CBT are working from a stereotypical idealization of community described as 'a bonding of people and place, which creates its own distinctive character and force for survival in an increasingly impersonal business world' (Murphy: 1988, p. 96). This presentation of community is an *ideal* masquerading as social *fact*.

This failure to engage with the contested nature of community means the CBT paradigm assumes shared interests and a consensus on the preferred tourism outcomes. However, most communities are heterogeneous, stratified and sites of power relations (Cowlshaw, 1988; Hoggett, 1997). This conceptualization of community ignores how 'community' groups can act out of self-interest rather than for collective good (Ireland, 1993; Silk, 1999), leading to outcomes that build exclusive 'club capital' rather than inclusive social capital ([Winter, 2000](#)).

Local control does not automatically lead to participatory decision-making, despite the tendency to link the two in the CBT literature. Wyllie (1998) illustrated that the outcome of local decision-making depends on who is in power at the local level. In his case study of tourism development in Hawaii, lobbying of a local pressure group by local economic interests effectively silenced alternative local voices. In short, 'power relations may alter the outcomes of collaborative efforts or even preclude collaborative action' ([Reed, 1997](#), p. 567).

The CBT literature fails to address the structural inequalities within communities that influence the local decision-making process. For example, Harper (1997) refers to pro-tourism local 'influencers' in his analysis of community involvement in rural tourism in Cumbria, but does not establish them in a context of class and status inequality. [Bourke and Luloff \(1995\)](#) conclude their analysis of rural tourism with a call for partnerships within communities, but do not view these as problematic, even though their case studies illustrate division on the grounds of class and gender. McIntyre, Hetherington and Inskip (1993) admit that different stakeholders may not share compatible values and goals, but do not explore this potential conflict in collaborative decision-making. Thus, 'implicit in such stances is a belief that conflict can be resolved and that ultimately, if with difficulty, heterogeneous communities will come to accept a homogenous view of what is acceptable' ([Prentice, 1993](#), p. 219).

This failure to ground CBT in a recognition of the power structures within each community makes the adoption of the CBT model for Port Douglas difficult. Thus 77% of survey respondents believed some form of class system stratified Port Douglas. There is rarely one 'community voice' in Port Douglas, even when there seems to be consensus on some issues. The

findings support Kenny's (1994) belief that expressed needs tend to reflect the more articulate and powerful sectors of the community. As the following example illustrates, community action is often local class action, (Bell and Newby, 1978; Gray, 1991), instigated by the articulate and wealthy residents (Tonts and Greive, 2001; O'Hare, 2000).

The 'Keep Port Douglas Unique Campaign', began in 1997 to protest against the planning applications for a fast food outlet, an airstrip and a large supermarket. These were perceived to be symbols of suburbia, which threatened the specific sense of place, a 'transition zone between developed Australia and the undeveloped wilderness area' (Keep Port Douglas Unique Campaign advert, Port Douglas Mossman Gazette, 19/2/98, p. 15). There was an organized campaign within the town, consisting of meetings, petitions, demonstrations and fundraising to legally contest these planning applications.

The campaign focused on defending Port Douglas's difference from mainstream Australia. This was crucial to the local tourism industry's destination image as well as being very important for many residents' sense of place. The most vocal campaigners were local tourism operators who masked their economic motives with a discourse of 'community interest'. The 'Keep Port Douglas Unique Campaign' employed a professional PR person, whose salary was paid by a number of local small businesses that were directly threatened by the proposed developments. This economic self-interest was disguised by a discourse of aesthetics and the need to retain the 'authenticity' of Port Douglas.

Although the campaign was presented as locals resisting externally imposed developments, many local residents supported the proposal for the fast food outlet and the supermarket. This was an income-based split, for as one resident put it 'do these people who oppose the idea of affordable shopping work for the low wages most employees receive?' (PDMG, 9/4/99, p. 2). The new supermarket was expected to bring down the household grocery bill, explaining why over 1,000 residents signed a petition in support of the proposal (PDMG, 26/2/98). Many residents who believed there is a lack of family friendly venues in town also supported having a fast food outlet.

In contrast, non-business campaign supporters included part-time residents, tourists and retirees, all of whose economic and cultural capital meant their lifestyles valued fine dining over fast food, and using the local shop rather than having cheaper groceries in the town. The 'community' protest focused on protecting the positional goods of the middle classes and ignored the needs of the less affluent. This example illustrates how community action can merely reflect the interests of those in position of power, an issue ignored by advocates of CBT.

### **Failing three: Constraints to local control**

Not only does CBT require an understanding of internal structural divisions within communities, but it also requires an understanding of external barriers to local participation and local control. As CBT functions to sustain the profits of the tourism industry, it is unlikely to lead to empowerment if the 'recommendations are perceived as adding to the cost of doing business or as irrelevant to the earning of a profit' ([Haywood, 1988, p. 107](#)). The tourism industry resists community participation in decision-making as they perceive it will increase costs and decrease profits (Chenowneth, 1994; Hawkins, 1993), and public participation is often reduced to a legitimating process of approval (Garlick, 1999; [Gilchrist, 2003](#)). However, the CBT literature sidesteps the barriers to local participatory decision-making.

The research participants were cynical about public participation in planning tourism development in Port Douglas. They were aware of the massive contradiction between the rhetoric of community participation and the continuing structural inequality between the external developers and their local opponents. Over half of the survey participants thought there was too much tourism development in Port Douglas and 32% thought it was just right (August 1998). However, development statistics show that both the rate and amount of development in the town continues to accelerate (Douglas Shire Council Minutes, September, 2001).

The disjunction between the rhetoric of empowerment and the experience of the increasing penetration by global capitalism meant participants felt increasingly powerless. One interviewee said: 'there is too much money involved. Port Douglas is not an island and there are powerful players, global players like the Sheraton involved. They are not community-based things. We can't control big companies.' This explains why 81% of survey participants agreed that 'certain groups had too much influence on Port Douglas', with speculative developers being the most cited example.

Port Douglas is a good example of the structurally weak position of tourism communities on the 'pleasure periphery' compared to the network of global capital at the core of the tourism industry (Laws, 1995). This lack of local control over global capital penetration means that the focus on equitable decision-making at the local level may be misplaced ([Edwards and Foley, 1998](#)). As Gramming and Freudenberg (1990) argue, better participatory methods at the local level do not alter the external pressures, and these have the power to structure the destiny of each community.

As de Kadt (1992) makes clear, a socially equitable tourism industry is resisted as it challenges the vested interests of capital invested in tourism growth. The neo-liberal philosophy adopted by the Australian state explicitly seeks to enable capital investment and increase economic activity

([Ranald, 1995](#)). The national tourism policy is premised on promoting growth and encouraging private enterprise whilst minimizing 'interference' ([Moore, 1997](#); Office of National Tourism, 1998). Attempts by local government to control development have undermined the introduction of the *Integrated Planning Act* (1997) which is designed to streamline development applications and remove impediments to growth ([Moon, 1998](#); [Nolan, 1999](#)). Thus, state policies undermine conditions for local control and local empowerment.

The CBT literature fails to assess constraints to its implementation. Blank (1989) makes references to the large national and trans-national firms that dominate the tourism industry but does not seem to see any contradiction between this and his emphasis on the need for local control of the industry. [McIntyre, Hetherington and Inskip \(1993\)](#) note that sustainable tourism development should be linked to the global context but make no reference to the constraints to local action in a global arena. The *Manilla Declaration of the Social Impacts of Tourism* (WTO, 1997) aims to equitably disperse the benefits of tourism development, but again, no comment is made regarding how this might be achieved in the context of widening global inequality ([Chambers, 1997](#)).

## Conclusion

The three failings outlined in the paper mean the current conceptualization of CBT is naïve and unrealistic. Although CBT uses the discourse of community development, CBT sidesteps community development's social democratic tradition of social justice and local empowerment ([Mayo, in Craig, 2003](#)). Instead, CBT focuses on maximizing the economic stability of the industry. This is done through legitimating tourism development as locally controlled and in the 'community's' interest.

The example of Port Douglas has illustrated the contested nature of 'community' involvement in tourism development. The 'Keep Port Douglas Unique Campaign' demonstrated how the ability to resist external development and/or determine local tourism development is dependent on the resident's access to social and economic resources. In particular, the campaign was crucial to the material interests of the local business elite but against the interests of low-paid local workers. Thus, the rhetoric of 'community action' must be deconstructed, and attention paid to whose voices are speaking and whose interests are being served ([Cox, 1995](#)).

But even if local consensus is achieved, few communities can successfully defend their vision against regional, national or global players with an interest in maximizing profit ([Massey, 1996](#); [Jameson, 2000](#)). The internal divisions within any tourism community are overlaid by unequal



relationships between local and national/global capitalists and bureaucrats. Participants differentiated between local entrepreneurs, whose long-term interests were rooted in Port Douglas, and external speculative developers, seeking short-term gain. Again, Port Douglas showed how CBT is likely to perpetuate inequality if it does not challenge existing social structures and acknowledge barriers to participatory decision-making. Thus, CBT is influenced by, and must be aware of, existing structural inequalities, globally and locally.

Applying the insights from community development could help CBT proponents in their quest for a socially just tourism industry. The bottom-up, anti-oppressive, empowering ethos of community development would be a significant advance on the current tokenistic legitimization of an industry seeking to maximize its profits. Understanding the relationship between local participation and local power structures, a key aspect of community development, will help to dismantle rather than reinforce barriers to local democracy. Lastly, locating the structural constraints to local control in a globalized world, central to contemporary community development practice, would ground CBT in its broader socio-political context. Acknowledging the three failings is the first step in tackling them.

Community development has an important role to play in local tourism communities, such as Port Douglas. A CBT that is informed by a community development ethos could provide an important tool for residents who wish to ensure that tourism enhances rather than destroys their communities. With the industry dominating more and more communities in the world, a critical and emancipatory approach to tourism has become essential.

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