

MOUNTAINOUS TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN CRETE: LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

Vasiliki Avgeli*, Ali Bakir** & Eugenia Wickens

Hellenic Mediterranean University, Crete* Bucks New University, UK**

Abstract: Mountainous tourism is perceived as an effective catalyst of socio-economic development and is relied upon as a means of addressing the challenges that peripheral rural communities in Crete are facing, primarily those related to the decline of traditional industries. Studies elsewhere show that it has the potential to assist local communities, such as the mountainous village of Anogia, which is the area of research in this paper. This study examines residents' perceptions regarding the impacts of tourism development. The limited knowledge in relation to the residents' perspective of tourism development in mountainous areas was the driving force for undertaking this study. A qualitative method was employed for the purpose of this study. A purposive sample of 50 residents was interviewed using semi-structured and conversational interviews. The analysis of the collected data shows that mountain tourism can produce significant negative impacts as well as the expected positive outcomes. A significant finding of this study was that residents in Anogia support tourism development, but it is their view that such tourism should be responsible to, and respectful of their local traditions and customs.

Keywords: Mountainous tourism development, village tourism, local residents, impacts, responsible tourism, Crete

Introduction

Mountainous communities in Crete have been going through considerable changes over the past decades. Many of the primary industries on which communities are dependent have been declining, leading to economic hardships and a drive to explore alternative development strategies (Andereck & Vogt, 2000; Avgeli & Wickens, 2009). Mountainous tourism is perceived as a growing sector of the alternative economic activity, representing a significant source of income to rural and mountainous communities (Hummelbrunner & Miglbauer, 1994; Fleischer & Felsenstein, 2000; Avgeli & Wickens, 2009).

Alternative economic activities in the form of rural and mountainous tourism are born from two different demands (e.g., Anderson, Bakir & Wickens, 2014; Papastavrou, 2003). The first demand seeks new tourism "horizons" as an alternative solution to mass tourism, which would utilise unspoiled landscapes found in the countryside, particularly in agricultural and mountainous environments, such as Anogia. The second demand centres on a push for a sustainable development of tourism businesses as a complementary activity to agricultural businesses (Papastavrou, 2003).

Rural tourism is perceived to contribute to the economic growth of local communities such as those found in Anogia. It also revives the traditional cottage industries that would otherwise vanish, as well as, preserving local customs and traditional festivities (Tsartas, 1989; Getz, 1997; Roberts & Hall, 2001; Sharpley, 2001; George et al., 2009). It is argued that the future of this form of tourism is dependent upon the inclusion of the local community in determining the type and scale of this economic activity to ensure its compatibility with local needs and acceptability to stakeholders (Hall & Jenkins, 1998; Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004).

Setting the Scene: The Village of Anogia

Situated 55 kilometers from Rethymno, in the southeast, in the Mylopotamos Province of Rethymno Prefecture, Anogia is a remote village with approximately 2,500 permanent residents. It is located in the northern reaches of Psiloritis, at an altitude of 700-790 meters (see illustration 1).

Illustration 1: Anogia on the map of Crete



The landmark of Zominthos and archaeological findings in the area of Idaion Andron where, according to the Greek mythology, Zeus was born (Psiloritis Tourist Guide, 2010) point to the prehistoric roots of the village of Anogia. The village has a prominent tradition of resistance against dominant rulers of the area, as is the case with many other villages of the island of Crete. Anogia has a history that is both powerful and tragic. The village participated in the revolts against the Ottomans who burned the village. The independent spirit of Anogians is again demonstrated in resisting the German occupation during World War II, resulting in a total destruction of the village and the seizure and execution of every Anogian male who could carry a gun (Spanakis, 1991).

The archaeological site of Zominthos close to Nida plateau has become a tourist attraction. Excavations have brought to light the ruins of a Late Minoan settlement. The most interesting buildings of the area are the “mitata”, dry stone vaulted constructions used by farmers as provisional dwellings, and as places of storage for the local cheese left there to mature (Psiloritis Tourist Guide, 2010). The church of Saint Yakinthos, the protector of lovers is another tourist attraction found in Anogia; it is used for housing cultural traditional festivals. Religious and artistic events such as Yakinthia take place every year in the first week of July in the Cretan village of Anogia (Psiloritis Tourist Guide, 2010).

The mountains that surround the village of Anogia represent the defining characteristics of the Anogians and their everyday activities. Stockbreeding is the main source of wealth in this particular area due to its mountainous morphology. Agricultural production is mainly based on the cultivation of olive trees, called ‘koroneiki’. The production of olive oil from these trees is considered as a protected variety particular to this region. The region of Psiloritis is also well-known for its wild herbs, such as thyme and oregano.

Tourism Development in Anogia

Local communities of Anogia, have recognized the importance of tourism in bringing social, cultural, environmental and economic changes (Beeton, 2006). People who previously were occupied with stockbreeding and agriculture have undergone a dramatic change with the coming of tourism. The spread of tourism businesses offered new job opportunities to the locals and was facilitated by the development of modern infrastructures. Rural tourism units, restaurants, workshops of folk art, shops selling souvenirs to the visitors offered new prospects for the area. The area of Anogia has been a visitor attraction for both Greek and international tourists. The archeological sites, churches and monasteries, the scenic mountain routes and the rich cultural celebrations have made Anogia a tourist destination predominantly for domestic and international visitors during the summer and winter seasons.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative research approach to explore issues concerning tourism development in the village of Anogia, located in the Mountains of Mylopotamos in Crete. This decision to adopt a qualitative approach was influenced by this study's aim, which was to gain an understanding of participants' perspectives of tourism development, and by a growing trend to use qualitative methods to study leisure and tourism (Wilson, 1996; Wickens, 2002; Bowen, 2002; Sealy & Wickens, 2008).

Interview Guides with open-ended questions were used for the purpose of this research. Fifty semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents, followed by conversational interviews. This allowed interviewees the opportunity and freedom of expressing themselves and discussing any other issues they thought were relevant to the study; it also allowed the local voice to be heard. The fieldwork was carried out during June and July 2009 and during June, July and August 2010. Thematic analysis was used to examine the masses of data. This is the most common form of analysis in qualitative research to gain insights into a specific research area. The method is very useful in identifying and organizing the data into themes (Alshaibani & Bakir, 2016). In this study, a rigorous thematic analysis produced insightful findings concerning the perspectives of different local stakeholders, enhancing our knowledge in this under-researched area. However, the study recognizes the shortcomings associated with this method. A reflective journal was used to record the steps undertaken in order to maximize the study's credibility, trustworthiness and transferability (Denzin, 1997; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Hammersley, 1992; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The collected data was abstracted to meaningful themes; these themes are discussed below.

Analysis and Discussion

Respondents' profile

All 50 interviewees were permanent residents of the village of Anogia. Fourteen respondents were 55 plus, ten between the ages of 45 – 54, eight between the ages of 35 – 44, five between the ages of 26 – 34, and thirteen below 25 years old. Half of those interviewed were stockbreeders, eight were in retirement, and the rest were housewives, and employees in the private and public sectors. It is worthy to note that thirty-eight residents interviewed were males and twelve females. This is because it is very rare for women to occupy a public space in Anogia. It is uncommon for a tourist visiting the village to see women walking around unless they have specific chores to do. Women do not sit in the local kafeneios, unless there is a festival, a wedding, a christening or a type of celebration taking place. Most of the women were interviewed in their homes.

Visitors in Anogia

The charming village of Anogia is visited by domestic and international tourists. Most tourists are day visitors, with a small number of domestic visitors staying between two and seven days. Fieldwork shows that the length of stay is one of the major challenges for sustainable tourism development in the village. Most of the residents reported that day visitors are “... *mainly international visitors, visiting the village through organized excursions; ... tourists arrive in tour buses in the village squares; ... they stay for coffee in specific kafeneios in a particular square; ... They visit the gift shops selling traditional crafts and textiles; ... staying for one or two hours and then they get back on the buses and they leave*”. As one resident remarked: “... *they leave without understanding anything about the village’s history, culture, customs or traditions*”. When asked whether the residents of Anogia would like to see year-long tourism in their village, the majority answered positively: “*tourism will increase our income*”; “*locals will be able to earn more money and they will be able to survive*”; clearly, they see tourism development in economic terms.

Impacts in Anogia through Tourism Development

Socio-economic impacts

One of the research objectives was to find out residents’ perceptions of the impacts of tourism in this village. All fifty residents expressed positive views of tourism; they concurred that tourism can help the village financially; they reported: “*The only thing we have in this village is stockbreeding and the mountains... we need tourism, it can be a great help to us...*”; “*People here find it difficult to survive, tourism can ‘bring’ money to locals and support our village financially*”.

Residents seem to consider the benefits of tourism not only for themselves, but also for the local entrepreneurs, as one respondent stated: “... *we are all dependent, both directly and indirectly*”, thus recognizing the positive economic impacts of tourism. When asked whether tourism provides a valuable source of income for locals, all respondents answered positively, as one stated: “... *the only thing we have here in Anogia is stockbreeding... we have nothing else; there are no prospects for another type of development and only tourism can provide a significant income to the locals*”.

Overall, respondents were positive as to whether the benefits of tourism are spread broadly around the community, as this respondent stated: “*It is circular dependency; everyone gains either directly or indirectly*”. Another expressed it as: “*we all benefit from tourists; but most of the tourists are Greek; we would like to see more international visitors... in order to increase the economic benefits Anogia gets from tourism*”. This tourism dependency is illustrated by this respondent, who told us: “... *lately benefits have become less for us..., no tourists, no good for the village*”. A serious indication of the severe economic situation of the village was articulated by several residents; as one commented: “... *the benefits from tourism indeed spread around the community*” but only “*when tourists visit the village*” or “*due to the economic crisis we don’t have tourists and those who visit do not stay for long*”.

However, several respondents pointed out that “*only those who have a business in tourism and come in contact with tourists, like shops selling traditional products, hotels, tavernas and kafeneios*” benefit from tourism. When asked as to whether tourism could help sustain the village socio-economically, all respondents answered positively; as one respondent put it: “*Anogians are very sociable people, we like to meet new people, make new friendships and learn what is*

happening outside our village” or “we meet new people from different cultures and we exchange news and ideas”.

Although Anogians were very positive of the social benefits of tourism, some voiced concern that *“international tourists do not know our customs and traditions and do not stay long to understand and experience our authentic village culture; our food, customs, costumes...”*; or *“this cannot easily happen with international tourists, it is very difficult for them to interact with, and understand the locals”*. Throughout fieldwork we frequently met men wearing the Cretan traditional baggy trousers, tucked into their boots.

Environmental impacts

Participants have positive perceptions of the environmental impacts. Fieldwork shows that: *“tourism can help sustain the environment.”*; *“...due to tourism, locals themselves know that they must take care of the image of the village and the environment”*. This is also echoed in another participant’s comment: *“...this feeling is already developed in the residents of Anogia”*. An interesting point is made by a respondent that *“...tourists are more careful with, and respectful of the village’s environment compared to residents”*. There is a consensus among Anogians, articulated by a number of them that: *“... part of the profits from tourism should be invested in the village itself; “both residents and tourists look after the environment”, and “Anogians themselves, each one of them, constitutes a guardian of the area”*.

However, some concerns were raised by the residents as to whether an increase in tourist numbers visiting Anogia would have negative impacts on the natural beauty of the village. Concerns were also expressed on *“inappropriate tourist behaviour...”*; *“...we don’t want shameful things and behaviours in our village”*. These statements demonstrate that residents appear to be aware of both positive and negative effects derived from tourism development. Residents in Anogia support tourism development, with an overwhelming majority expressing positive feeling for tourists, as long as visitors *“comply with our rules... and do not through their behaviour ...treat our village in a disrespectful way”*.

Anogia’s Distinct Attractiveness

Residents’ perceptions as to what tourists find more attractive about Anogia, focused on: natural and physical attractions, cultural attractions, heritage and peoples’ authentic and distinctive hospitality. The natural and physical attractions mentioned by respondents included: *“...the altitude and fresh air”, “the mountain Psiloritis”, “the scenery”, “the natural beauties of the village”, “being located in the mountains and our idiosyncratic character, making us different from the other Cretans...”*.

The cultural and heritage attractions singled out by residents comprised: *“local customs and traditions”, “the traditional Anogian cuisine”, “the archaeological site of Zominthos”, “the museum of Nikos Xylouris”, “old churches in the village”, “Saint Yakinthos and the Yakinthia festival”, “the mitata on the mountain Psiloritis”, “Idaion Andron (where Zeus was born according to the Greek mythology)” and “the local weavings and local products”*. As one resident stated: *“...tourists come here because of what they have heard about Anogia. Our reputation brings them here. Those who come for one day visit, leave disappointed; those who stay more understand more about Anogia, the way we behave, our local customs and traditions, they come to our festivals and attend our weddings..., those tourists never leave disappointed and they always return”*.

Another respondent, pondering over Anogian heritage, enthusiastically spoke about *“the shining history of our village, the house of Nikos Xylouris, in my view ...the best known lyra-player in Greece.... Anogia has produced many worthy people like politicians, musicians, singers, they are all part of our heritage”*. Anogians are very proud as far as their heritage is concerned, as another resident commented *“There is nothing worth noticing concerning the structure and architecture of our village. It is mostly our history, the local dialect and the Anogians’ difference, if you know what I mean”*.

One Anogian encapsulated the overall essence of residents’ perceptions of Anogia’s attractiveness and uniqueness: *“the authenticity of the locals, the traditional way of dressing, the traditional pronunciation of mountaineers, the characteristic hospitality, the sense of humor, teasing each other in a witty way, and even use sarcasm amongst themselves. The mountainous air provides confidence; struggling with the elements of nature in the harsh environment we have to survive”*.

Fieldwork shows that when questioned about the unique selling points that differentiates Anogia from other villages in Crete, the cultural and heritage characteristics were always emphasized, with most respondents identifying the hospitality and authenticity of local ways of living. They view their culture as *“unique”* and believe they are *“descended from the Minoans”*, or as a resident mentioned *“a large percentage of the residents in Anogia come from the Venetians, as our village appears in 1200 A.C.”*. Others perceived Anogia as: *“... divine, something which is difficult to determine or define”*. Further commenting that what differentiates Anogia from the rest of the villages in Crete is *“the mentality of the locals (the unique way they think) and their differentiation from the rest of the residents of Crete”*, *“the sense of honor, dignity and generosity Anogians have”*. There is a deep sense of community spirit of mutual help that characterizes the residents of Anogia.

There are several contrasting views that can be detected from the findings of this study. International tourists spend less time in Anogia than domestic tourists, as persistently echoed by the locals we interviewed. This finding is clearly demonstrated in their comments: *“... unlike international tourists, Greek tourists do not visit the village for half an hour, and they spend more money”*; *“Greek and Cretan tourists because they stay more, and they leave more money in Anogia”*. There were also concerns about mass tourism development, as echoed in their responses: *“we don’t want mass tourism”*, *“we don’t want to become like Hersonissos and Malia”*. They further commented: *“...all tourists are good as long as they spend money when they visit the village”*, *“we want everyone; tourists wherever they go they will leave something, they will spend some money”* and *“first of all Greek tourists, but we want international tourists as well, we want all our visitors to become ambassadors of Anogia”*.

Conclusion

A significant finding of this research was that residents of Anogia demonstrated an extreme emotional attachment to their village and a pride regarding their origin, customs and traditions. They are very proud of their culture and feel different from the rest of the Greek population in terms of their history and unique mentality. While residents believe that tourism creates economic and cultural benefits for their village, they are also aware that tourism could have negative influences on their community. Anogians appear to remain unchanged over the years, passing their culture, traditions, customs and values from one generation to the next. They support further tourism development as long as it is responsible and respectful of their local traditions and customs. Although they are also aware that tourism creates dependencies, nevertheless, they are willing, for economic reasons, to welcome more visitors to the village.

Fieldwork shows that Anogians reject mass tourism and viewed destinations such as Hersonissos and Malia as bad examples of tourism development. They would prefer tourists to spend more money when visiting the village and stay longer. This research paper shows that Anogians view tourism development as a viable economic tool, a type of development that would help sustain their village financially, socially and environmentally. Although they are aware that tourism development is likely to have both positive and negative impacts on their village, they are confident that they can limit the negative impacts and control the number and type of tourists, and tourism development. Their expectation is that social change would be minimised as they would not allow or accept mass numbers of tourists who would disrupt their way of life, their customs, culture and traditions; displaying the Cretan independent spirit and Anogians' idiosyncrasy. The majority of the residents, young and old, are aware of the local reality and talk about it on a daily basis through their special ways of communications that they have inherited and continuously reproduced in the kafeneios. This research note shows that Anogians display several contrasting characteristics which have constrained tourism developments over the years.

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Contributors: Dr Vasiliki Avgeli, Hellenic Mediterranean University, Crete, Greece; Dr Ali Bakir, The Business School, Bucks New University, England, UK; Prof Eugenia Wickens, Oxford, UK.

Corresponding Author: Dr Vasiliki Avgeli. Email: vasiliki.avgeli@gmail.com