

MASTER'S THESIS

Impact of tourism development on the Wolong Nature Reserve, China: perceptions of tourists and local residents

Li, Jia

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**Impact of Tourism Development on the Wolong Nature Reserve, China:
Perceptions of Tourists and Local Residents**

LI Jia

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Principal Supervisor: Prof. WONG Kenneth K K

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ABSTRACT

Researches on the impact of tourism development on the eco-environment of nature reserves have received more attention in recent years. However, few studies examine the impacts from the perspective of stakeholders of the nature reserve. This study addresses this concern by using the case of the Wolong Nature Reserve (WNR), China. The WNR is the leading centre established to protect the endangered giant panda. But its eco-environment has undergone significant changes due to tourism development and associated activities in recent years. This study focuses on three major aspects: evaluating the environmental impacts of tourism development, identifying the causes of the dilemma between nature conservation and economic development, and suggesting a viable solution to tackle with the dilemma. Diverse methods are used to collect the information and data for the analysis, which include documentation, interviewing, field observation and questionnaire survey.

The findings of the study revealed that the overall environmental quality of the study area was generally perceived to be good by respondents. However, with the growth of the tourism industry, increasingly more negative impacts surfaced. The existing tourism operated according to the “mass tourism” model, which is less sustainable when compared with the “ecotourism” option. In the study, both the tourist and resident respondents agreed that the development of tourism facilities and associated activities have created negative impacts on the eco-environment of the study area. Therefore, a dilemma exists between the goal of conserving environment and the quest for developing local economy. In addition to the impact of tourism, the dilemma was accentuated by the problematic functional zoning of the WNR and the failure of the resident’s relocation program. Thus, in order to sustain the reserve, ways to reconcile nature conservation and development in the WNR are needed, and one of the options is to develop the reserve as an “ecotourism” site.

In contrast to traditional mass tourism, ecotourism has been widely conceived as a viable solution in tackling this kind of dilemma. When closely monitored and properly managed, the WNR could further strengthen its conservation roles, while at the same time contribute to the socioeconomic development of the WNR. The study suggests that appropriate ecotourism products should be designed to cater to the interests of different

tourist groups. Meanwhile, local residents should be encouraged to engage in ecotourism development actively. In addition, other supportive policies such as an environmental education program to enhance the environmental awareness of tourists and residents should be developed. To mitigate the impacts, a detour road should be built to minimize the negative traffic impacts in the WNR. It is anticipated that the findings of the present study will shed light on balancing the development and conservation needs of the WNR and nature reserves in other countries.

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