



Public perception of development issues: Public awareness can contribute to sustainable development of a small island

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Available online 21 April 2006

Abstract

Many development projects are undertaken in communities where the local inhabitants have little or no input to the planning and implementation of such projects. Encouraging the active participation of local communities in development projects, through capacity-building and environmental education, has become a major objective of sound development programmes. We have successfully included the local community of Holbox Island, Quintana Roo State, Mexico in our programme for long-term monitoring of coastal pollution in and around their Island. Here we report the progress made by different sectors of the Holbox community over a four-year period during which they have become increasingly responsible for the scientific and technical aspects of assessing water quality. A face-to-face, structured survey was used to evaluate attitudes and perceptions with regard to coastal water pollution and other development issues that concern the Holbox Island community. People in Holbox identified coastal pollution, coastal erosion and garbage dumping as major environmental concerns and have acquired a good level of awareness about the causes and consequences of these issues. Our results also indicate that the public has an improved understanding of the interrelationship between their own behaviour, and that of others, and these environmental issues. Our contribution in the Holbox Island has made a positive step towards providing the local community with essential knowledge regarding environmental, development and social issues, thereby enabling them to become actively involved in the environmental conservation of their island. Continuing efforts in capacity-building and environmental education aim to provide the local community with the knowledge and skills that are necessary for making appropriate choices for the preservation and development of Holbox and the surrounding ecosystems. In the long term, the local community will not only be able to contribute

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directly to on-going development projects, but will also be in a better position to participate with government agencies in the decision-making process.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable development has been advocated since the 1980s and has gained strong support from the recent World Summit for Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002. Nonetheless, unplanned development projects are still being carried out in many parts of the world, causing enormous environmental destruction and great social disparity [1]. Despite efforts to solve various environmental and social issues through development projects, there is a need for more highly integrated methods to improve the implementation and outcome of development programmes [2,3]. Public participation has been recommended as an effective means to establish sound sustainable development practice [4]. To ensure the active participation of the local community in planning and implementing a sustainable development programme, it is necessary to understand their perception of development issues that affect their community, and to be aware of their knowledge, feeling and behaviour.

We have established a long-term interdisciplinary project to involve the local community Holbox Island, Quinta Roo, Mexico in the study of coastal pollution and other development issues of the Island and the adjacent ecosystem of Yalahau lagoon. The project is three-fold and combines: (1) a scientific assessment, where data concerning water quality provide information for coastal pollution monitoring, (2) a social component, which aims to involve as many sectors of the local population as possible in the long-term monitoring of coastal pollution, and (3) an education component, which involves capacity-building for the local community providing them with technical knowledge and skills. The aim of the project is to enable members of the local community to take an active, hands-on role in the planning and implementation of on-going development activities that affect their island community. Here we report the results of our evaluation of this project with emphasis on the progress that has been made in the perception of development issues by the local population. Our objective was to assess the change in people's attitudes, including their knowledge, feelings and reactive behaviours with respect to coastal pollution and associated development issues over a four-year period from 1999 when a coastal pollution monitoring programme was established in the area. Our results provide essential information for governments and responsible development organizations that advocate sound development practice in developing countries, and facilitate the planning and implementation of feasible sustainable development and coastal management programmes. Our results also provide background information necessary for planning an effective environmental education programme for the Holbox Island community.

The environment surrounding Holbox Island and the adjacent Yalahau lagoon has experienced the detrimental effects of development, such as tourism, consumption pattern, unplanned and/or unsuitably planned development activities. The geographical details of the study area have been described in detail elsewhere [5]. The island population is officially 1276 habitants [6], but at the time of our survey, unofficial sources suggest that the number of people living in Holbox was upwards of 2100 people (Local community in

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