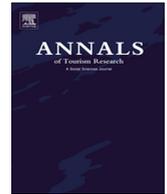




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Contested surf tourism resources in the Maldives

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ABSTRACT

We analyse contests for control of a newly valuable tourism resource, namely surf breaks in the Maldives. Conflicts are shaped by: the resource, economics, culture, legislation, and politics. There are seven stakeholder groups: island resorts, resort-based surfing tourists, live-aboard charter boats, boat-based surfing tourists, local surf-related enterprises, independent travelling surfers using those enterprises, and local resident surfers. We identify a transition from exogenously to endogenously-controlled political processes and power. These are driven by tourism growth, and accelerated by specific trigger events related to political change, land tenure, and development projects. Tourism destinations have seldom been studied in the context of control over natural resources. The transition model constructed here applies across destinations, adventure activities, tourism subsectors, and other industries.

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Introduction

Many tourism subsectors rely on particular sites and their natural resources, and commercial tourism enterprises compete to obtain and/or control access and use of those resources. Such competition may occur through social, economic, administrative or political processes. Here we analyse these processes for a newly valuable and heavily contested tourism resource, namely surf breaks in the Republic of Maldives.

The theoretical framework adopted for this analysis is that of property rights. Property rights are a key but complex component in the structures of most human societies, and in consequence, have been analysed in considerable detail. There are many different types and classifications of property rights (Sikor, He, & Lestrelin, 2017). For example, they may be classified according to the subject of the right, such as land, physical objects, or intellectual property. They may be classified according to the degree of exclusivity and excludability, differentiating open-access, common, public, communal and private rights (Ostrom, 2015). They may be classified according to their social basis, distinguishing traditional or customary from modern legal rights (Murtazashvili & Murtazashvili, 2016). Or, they may be classified according to the bundle of specific rights included within a particular concept of property, such as rights of access, use, destruction, transfer, trade, lease or sale. These characteristics are commonly cross-linked.

Of particular relevance to this study are the ways in which rights may be defined or reallocated through political interactions between governments, private citizens or corporations, and individuals with customary rights, including those held in common. The degree to which such changes have occurred through political contests, and the consequences for the var-

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ious stakeholders concerned, have been examined over an extended period, for many different industry sectors and geographical regions (Ahn et al., 2016; Buckley, 1994; Grainger & Costello, 2016; Murtazashvili & Murtazashvili, 2016; Ostrom, 2015; Sikor et al., 2017; Slaev, 2016; Webster, Wu, Zhang, & Sarkar, 2016). These analyses note, for example, that there are many instances where locally-recognised historical rights may be changed or coopted as they are incorporated into national-recognised systems, often with deliberate or unintentional economic redistribution effects. They also note that any government powerful enough to enforce property rights is generally also powerful enough to seize them, whether for projects intended to provide public good, or for the private good of corrupt officials or corporations.

Property rights are of major importance in all forms of tourism and recreation, from hunting and harvesting (Sténs & Sandström, 2013; Øian & Skogen, 2016) to international hotel investment (Assaf, Josiassen, & Agbola, 2015; Balli, Balli, & Louis, 2016; Lee, 2015). Formal (“bankable”) land tenure titles are critical in attracting tourism investment. This applies, for example, in: rural communities with communal titles (Ho, 2013; Lamers, Nthiga, van der Duim, & van Wijk, 2014); rural areas converting from primary production to tourism (Matilainen & Lähdesmäki, 2014; Roxas & Chadee, 2013); urban areas with poorly formalised historical ownership systems (Xu, Liu, Qian, & Wang, 2017); developed nations where property may be held under devolved multi-level (“strata” or “condo”) titles (Easthope, Hudson, & Randolph, 2013); and marine and coastal environments and developments (Kerr, Colton, Johnson, & Wright, 2015).

Legal and practical tenure and ownership of valuable natural resources is commonly contested through national or regional scale political means, with many different public, private, and communal ownership models in use worldwide (Ballet, Bazin, Koffi, & Komena, 2015; Colvin, Witt, & Lacey, 2015; Dyer, 2016). To date, these processes have been studied principally for extractive natural resources such as minerals, forests, fisheries, agricultural lands, and water (de Rijke, Munro, & de Lourdes, 2016; Derkyi, Ros-Tonen, Kyereh, & Dietz, 2014; Moffat, Lacey, Zhang, & Leipold, 2016). In adventure tourism and recreation, in contrast, tenure of most well-established sites is well defined, and conflicts over access are managed largely through local administrative approaches such as recreational capacity measures and site regulations (Buckley, 2015a,b). This applies, for example, to coastal tourism destinations (Lucrezi, Saayman, & Van der Merwe, 2015; Navarro-Jurado, Mihaela-Damian, & Fernandez-Morales, 2013) and to outdoor recreation in national parks (Leung, Spenceley, Hvenegaard, & Buckley, 2016; Manning, 2007).

Some sites, however, whilst newly valuable for adventure tourism, lack any established legal right or precedent to control recreational access. At such sites, contests over access rights can involve very active local and national-scale social and political conflict (Wan & Bramwell, 2015; Williams, 2001). These processes are more closely analogous to political conflicts over extractive resources, than to administrative management of recreational capacity at long-established sites (de Rijke et al., 2016; Dyer, 2016; Kerr et al., 2015; Omar, Pretzsch, & Darr, 2015). It is these conflicts that we examine here: contests over the ability to control access to sites newly valuable for adventure tourism and recreation. We adopt a broad definition of conflict, as “incompatibilities in stakeholders’ interests, values or priorities” (Adams, Brockington, Dyson, & Vira, 2003), including antecedents, context, issues, causes, dynamics, and resolution (Derkyi et al., 2014). We analyse this process using a single adventure tourism activity in a single nation.

The surf tourism sector provides a good model for the analysis of contested site access across the entire adventure and other tourism sectors, for several reasons. First, it is a large and widespread subsector, with 35 million participants in over 160 countries (Martin & Assenov, 2012; Ponting & O’Brien, 2014). Second, growth to the current scale has occurred rapidly and recently, during only a few decades (Ponting & O’Brien, 2014). Third, different sites, known as surf breaks, differ greatly in their attractiveness to surfers. Surf breaks rely on ocean swell exposure and wave climate, and ocean floor topography (bathymetry), to generate a consistent supply of high-quality surfable waves (Hutt, Black, & Mead, 2001; Scarfe, Healy, & Rennie, 2009). The size, shape, speed, and consistency of surfing waves differ greatly between surf breaks, and surfers are prepared to invest substantial time, money, and effort to surf the best breaks (Buckley, 2002a,b; Buckley, 2010; Ponting & O’Brien, 2014; Towner & Orams, 2016).

Fourth, the number of surfers continues to increase, but the number of surf breaks remains constant, so demand for surf breaks increasingly outstrips supply. Increasing crowding in peri-urban settings drives demand for surf tourism to more remote and less crowded surfing destinations (Buckley, 2002a,b; Buckley, 2010; Dolnicar & Fluker, 2003; Martin & Assenov, 2012; O’Brien & Ponting, 2013; Ponting & O’Brien, 2014; Scorse, Reynolds, & Sackett, 2015; Towner, 2016a,b; Towner & Orams, 2016). Many of these new surf tourism destinations are in developing nations with no local history of surfing, and hence no prior crowding (O’Brien & Ponting, 2013). Fifth, however, local residents at some of these sites have indeed become skilled surfers (Buckley & Ollenburg, 2013; Towner, 2016a,b), so there is now competition for access between local resident surfers, and visiting foreign surfers including commercial surf tourism clients. The Republic of Maldives illustrates these factors well.

Sixth, the existence of local-scale conflicts between individual surfers or groups of surfers is well documented, including phenomena such as surf rage and localism, surf fashion and tribalism, and privatization of specific surf breaks (Anderson, 2016; Ball, 2015; Beaumont & Brown, 2016; Buckley, 2003a; Deats, Martinez, Shearer, & Shearer, 2016; Usher, Goff, & Gomez, 2016). Here, however, we take a broader perspective, treating surf breaks as contested tourism resources, and analysing the political and practical processes adopted by competing surf stakeholders.

Whilst the theoretical framework is that of property rights, the methodological approach adopted is a case-study with qualitative data collection and analysis, analogous to the approach used in grounded theory. That is, we identify a specific case study site to test and examine the property-rights framework; compile information from both documentary sources and oral interviews; and analyse documents and interview transcripts using iterative conceptual deconstruction and

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