Social benefits of ecotourism: The Monarch Butterfly Reserve in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

It is frequently stated that ecotourism can contribute to environmental conservation and the improvement of livelihoods in protected areas. It may also become a relevant agent of both positive and negative socioeconomic impacts at the local level. However, the socioeconomic impacts of ecotourism have seldom received scholarly attention in Latin American destinations. Based on qualitative methods, this paper presents the results of a project looking at the socioeconomic benefits of ecotourism on a local community in the Monarch Butterfly Reserve in Mexico. Semi-structured interviews with local people were adopted in order to obtain a deeper understanding of the benefits as experienced by community residents. The data from interviews were considerably informed by on-site observations. This exploratory study revealed that ecotourism has substituted most of the economic activities in the locality; particularly, the use of forest resources for individual consumption and local trade was greatly replaced by ecotourism-related activities. For many, therefore, ecotourism provides local people with a supplementary or the only economic activity during the butterfly season. Other perceived benefits included the increased locals’ awareness of natural resources and a more systematic organisation for economic activities within the community. Although the actual advantages of ecotourism in the destination have been questioned by other scholars, this study concludes that ecotourism has certainly brought socioeconomic benefits particularly to the individual life of residents in the Reserve.

KEYWORDS: community development, ecotourism, Mexico, socioeconomic impacts, the Monarch Butterfly Reserve