

Title: Local Residents' Activism: Cultivating an Environmental Ethic among Beach Visitors in Northern Ireland

Author:

Susann Power

University of Ulster, UK

Abstract:

Leisure and tourism visits to coastal areas account for 26% of domestic tourism in Northern Ireland (NISRA 2018), and beach quality is the key decision-making factor in visitor choice of a coastal destination (Nelson & Botterill, 2002); particularly clean, litter-free sand and seawater (Tudor & Williams, 2006). Ballance, Ryan and Turpie (2000) found that up to 97% of the economic value of beach visits could be lost through lower cleanliness standards. However, on average, 473 pieces of litter can be found for every 100m of Northern Irish beaches (KNIB 2018). As a response to these poor beach cleanliness standards, local residents have taken to the beach, self-organising into groups of beach cleaners and dedicating their personal time to cleaning up – consequently not just improving local environmental quality but also the local tourism product itself. This research explores this extraordinary and relatively new phenomenon of beach cleaning as a form of local residents' activism and its implications for cultivating a wider environmental ethic and for coastal tourism policy. Using Charmaz's (2014) approach to constructing Grounded Theory, the researcher has immersed herself as a complete participant (Saunders *et al.* 2016) by joining various different groups of beach cleaners. She has participated in 20 separate beach clean-up events, taking place over the course of six months and equating to approx. 40 hours observation of close to 200 local residents as they engage in this activity. Conversations and observations were recorded through the use of a research diary and creating research memos, which were analysed using Constant Comparison Analysis – a staple of Grounded Theory methodology. The aim of this research is twofold: first, to develop substantive theory for the concurrence of local residents' activism and environmental ethics; and second, to develop a set of tourism policy recommendations for cultivating a wider environmental ethic among beach visitors. This is significant, as 80% of all coastal litter originates from human use of beaches (KNIB 2018). The research provides an original investigation of the active, yet inadvertent influence of local residents on shaping tourism policy and setting standards for a new ethic against littering. Much of tourism research focuses on residents' attitudes and perceptions, and less so on the potential of residents as activists, and thus, tourism shapers and movers. It also contributes a novel interpretation of environmental ethics in tourism research, which has to date focused on the dichotomy of biocentrism vs. anthropocentrism, animal welfare and rights, as well as tourist (mis-)behaviour. The findings highlight the need for a renewed focus on individual responsibility and a principle-based tourism policy for an otherwise hedonistic activity. Generational conflicts have also emerged as problematic in the cultivation of an environmental ethic. Storytelling around littering is used as a form of sense-making. Furthermore, tourism policy planners could benefit from reviewing family leisure activities in particular in a bid to improve local environmental quality, cultivating environmental ethics and improving the local coastal tourism product.

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