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Sustainable Tourism: Opportunities for Economic Development in Eleuthera

Baili H. Roy^{1*}

¹Department of Agricultural and Consumer Economics, College of Agricultural, Consumer, and Environmental Sciences

*bhroy2@illinois.edu

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ABSTRACT

The Bahamas, composed of approximately 30 inhabited islands, is known primarily as a mass tourism destination. While mass tourism has many perceived economic benefits, questions arise about the sustainability of such large scale ventures. After examining the potential for sustainable, or eco-tourism in the 'Out Islands' of the Bahamas, The One Eleuthera Foundation proposed various ideas for the expansion and development of agritourism, heritage tourism, and the striking Lighthouse Point Beach. There are a variety of costs and benefits to further development on the island of Eleuthera, and ultimately, eco-tourism appears to be a viable solution for enhanced economic sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

To many, the Bahamas are known for their sandy beaches, clear waters, and large resorts. This classic stereotype attracts many tourists, fueling the mass tourism ventures that the island's natural habitat supports. According to the Bahamas Ministry of Tourism (2016), tourism accounts for approximately 60% of the Bahamian gross domestic product and employs nearly 70% of the population through direct and indirect measures. While tourism is crucial to the Bahamian economy, it is characterized by many unsustainable practices on prominent islands such as New Providence and Grand Bahama. Primary concerns stemming from mass tourism include waste and marine litter, in addition to a heightened trade deficit, and destruction of culturally and environmentally significant assets (UNEP 2015).

As the name implies, sustainable tourism is mutually beneficial in the long run, for both the tourist and the local Bahamians. By promoting and developing sustainable tourism, the 'Out Islands' of the Bahamas have many opportunities to maintain their cultural and environmental heritage while providing

opportunities for economic growth and development in their communities.

SUSTAINABLE VS. MASS TOURISM

Defined as, "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs," (Johnsen 2015) sustainable tourism sounds like an ideal concept. In reality, however, mass tourism is universally appreciated and seemingly more economically feasible in some locations. Not only do consumers buy into the lavish resort or cruise vacation, Weaver explains that mass tourism "...is often the model that government and communities prefer to pursue because of the perceived economic benefits that are conferred by size" (2006). A large resort, such as Atlantis in Paradise Island, Bahamas records quarterly revenues over \$100 million (Hospitality Net 2004) so it easy to see the motivation behind foreign investor's decisions to fund mass tourism ventures. The resistance from communities and governments in regards to implementing sustainable tourism is one obstacle to expanding

sustainable development, however, combatting this mindset is possible with the appropriate resources.

The repercussions of unsustainable development are costly. Failed resorts leave unsightly ruins, and with over 90% of food and beverage in the tourism sector coming from imports (Platt, 2015, p.11), prices will continue to increase and consumption will outpace production, resulting in food shortages. Furthermore, with limited space and infrastructure in islands such as Eleuthera, developable land is limited and will not be able to accommodate the growing number of massive resorts. The implementation of sustainable tourism can potentially mitigate these undesirable effects. Recently, consumer statistics indicate that travelers are more inclined to support a hotel that gives to the local community or takes responsibility for protecting the environment. Moreover, a growing number of large scale ventures portray themselves as eco-friendly in order to conform to corporate social responsibility standards. For the 'Out Islands,' implementing ecotourism goes even a step further and encourages cultural exchange in addition to a healthy interaction with the environment. With Eleuthera specifically, ecotourism is a feasible option, and with a "constant interest for green travel" a market is readily available (Bricker 2013).

In Eleuthera, there are various organizations in support of supervised development for the area. The One Eleuthera Foundation (OEF) is instrumental in their attempts to "strengthen the Eleuthera community by identifying and investing in high quality projects that further its economic, environmental, and social development" (OEF 2015). The organization is primarily featured in its attempts to raise money to buy the coveted, 720 acres making up Lighthouse Point in south Eleuthera. With various ideas for development ranging from a 'preservation model' to a 'compact waterfront model,' OEF seeks to gain control over the land before foreign investors buy the spot for mass development. Many community members support OEF's mission because previous investments on Eleuthera were abandoned during economic downturns (Ishmael-Newry, 2013), resulting in more harm than good to the Bahamian economy. The development of Lighthouse Point has the potential to provide a "natural park established so that Bahamians and visitors can enjoy the space" (2013). Not only would a national park provide a host of on-site jobs for the young population, increasing the amount of tourists traveling to Eleuthera would provide many opportunities for eco-tourist

companies, restaurant owners, souvenir craftsmen, and more to practice their trade.

LIGHTHOUSE POINT DISCUSSION

All proposed examples for the development of Lighthouse Point in *A Vision for South Eleuthera Planning Report* (OEF 2010) were modeled off of previously successful ventures in different parts of the world. The least invasive, 'Preservation Model,' displays similarities to an on-beach camping site in Australia, promoting little to no permanent structure development (OEF 2010). This no frills approach maintains environmental sustainability and opportunities for community benefit, representing the emerging ecotourism sector. For tourists drawn more to enhanced infrastructure and private accommodations, the 'Low Impact Development Model' would provide an increase in potential jobs and businesses to aid in the construction and operation of the site. This model could preserve the surrounding land by offering above ground accommodations (OEF 2010). Finally, the 'Compact Waterfront Model' represents a modern condo-hotel style resort. Condo-hotel style operates as a hotel, but is owned condominium style. While the most difficult to sustain overall, the condo-hotel style ownership maximizes the possibility for local ownership and investment and has the potential to generate the most jobs and revenue (OEF 2010).



Figure 1. Lighthouse Point sans development.

While some argue that the natural beauty of Lighthouse Point should remain untouched, several case studies display that significant development can occur around the landscape while working towards sustainability goals such as consuming only locally produced food, operating a zero waste structure, and putting portions of annual revenue towards community projects (OEF 2010). The Rosalie Forest

Eco Lodge offers environmental education workshops and training, in addition to free tours for all school groups (OEF 2010). The potential, projects such as the eco lodge offer, to educate younger generations on cultural, environmental, and economic sustainability is instrumental in gaining long term support for sustainable tourism.

Another example of an alternative sustainable development model for South Eleuthera is the Soneva Fushi Resorts in The Maldives. The 100-acre island is largely preserved while operating a profitable resort. The resort is certified by Green Globe for meeting standards based on energy, water, waste, cleaning, and overall practices, and also has a marine biologist and environmental manager on staff. The air conditioning system reduces energy consumption by 20%, or \$200,000 a year, enough to break even after four years (OEF 2010). Soneva Fushi is just one example of many sustainable island resorts already in existence.



Figure 2. Soneva Fushi, an example of a 'compact waterfront' sustainable resort in The Maldives.

DEVELOPING AGRI-TOURISM

A potential obstacle to further development in Eleuthera is the lack of sustainable food production on the island. To combat the increasing demands on the food and beverage sector, the potential for agritourism is emerging. Agritourism possesses a variety of formal definitions such as, "rural enterprises which incorporate both a working farm environment and a commercial tourism component" (Phillip 2010), which accurately describes the farms and farmer's markets present in the Bahamas. For example, Island Farm, in Eleuthera, and Chiccharney Farm, in Nassau, offer small restaurants which sell their produce, in addition to other souvenirs and packaged food that can be taken home. While the soil for farming is not the most ideal in Eleuthera, businesses such as Field to Fork hope to incorporate

aquaponic systems into their farms to help growth, in addition to expanding in areas tourists might find attractive such as gardens, mazes, and pumpkin picking (See, 2013). Many farms in the Bahamas are owned by expatriates, who come to the island with funds to start an agritourism venture, but Clyde Bethel, owner of Island Farm, was born and raised in Eleuthera and saw rapid success in his farming business. Eight years ago, Bethel began planting for his yard, which quickly grew into a tourist attraction, implying that in conjunction with the correct farming system, agritourism is a feasible option.

Using the land effectively in South Eleuthera is key to developing sustainable tourism attractions and increasing job opportunities. An example of a successful community agriculture project that could be implemented in the Bahamas, is the Food Project in Massachusetts. The Food Project farms over 30 acres of land and places an emphasis on youth programs and internships. In addition to producing and distributing food, The Food Project helps people grow their own food through training programs and workshops within the community (OEF 2010). On a smaller scale, a community based agriculture program would benefit Eleuthera immensely.



Figure 3. Island Farm, an agritourism venture in Eleuthera.

INCORPORATING HERITAGE TOURISM

While agritourism might not appeal to all, another type of traveler is the cultural tourist. According to the OEF (2010), nearly half of all international

travelers can be considered cultural tourists. Furthermore, “places characterized by a strong vernacular culture all had a public market, an arts and culture venue, or an area of ethnic significance or heritage site that helped stabilize the area and attract people and businesses” (OEF 2010). The development of an arts in residency program, or a community theatre has the potential to draw in the cultural tourist, as well as providing a venue for local and international artists and business owners. The Bahamian Junkanoo Carnival gains international attention, highlighting the fact that festivals have the potential to integrate citizens and tourists in a celebration of cultural heritage (BNFC 2014).

The Artists in Residency Program, proposed by the One Eleuthera Foundation, would not only provide ongoing economic benefits, but also help in developing relationships with schools, foundations, and amongst artists. Moreover, OEF proposed resident and studio spaces be created from existing vacant buildings, which effectively utilizes the ruins and makes them profitable again. An Artists in Residency Program would allow “young people in the community to be exposed to, and in return, can participate in the positive influence and opportunities of creative and participation in the creative economy” (OEF 2010). While additional international funding would be necessary, cultural wealth is a very delicate asset that could easily be lost in the next decades.



Figure 4. Ruins in Eleuthera that have the potential to serve as a base for future development.

The profitability of sustainable tourism is evident based on a variety of previous successes. Creative communities promote networks of artists and attract a variety of cultural tourists. Examples

include Santa Fe Creative Tourism in New Mexico, and Granville Island in Vancouver, Canada. Granville Island boasts a large public market and numerous galleries, theatre groups, and independent artists (OEF 2010). Similarly, Santa Fe Creative Tourism offers over 90 experiences including tours, workshops, and classes geared towards “developing mutually beneficial relationships between the existing arts and tourism infrastructures” (Creative Tourism 2012). The development of these creative communities not only attracts tourists to the area, but also helps foster positive relationships between tourists and the local population. “Once people in rural and small communities see evidence that something works they will make sure it continues” (Creative City New 2010). By “beginning slowly and helping citizens develop ownership” there is a higher chance for success.

LIMITATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

As mentioned, a majority of the proposed development plans for Eleuthera have high start up costs and risk involved. Groups such as the One Eleuthera Foundation or the non-profit microfinance organization, Kiva, are examples of ways in which contributions are made to help implement development from within the community, avoiding a foreign developer. In order to raise awareness, community and international outreach is a key component that could be strengthened. By utilizing social media and other tactics, OEF was able to raise awareness for their campaign to save Lighthouse Point. Social media is a relatively inexpensive and easy way to market to the international population, however, it is important to take into account those within the communities themselves. In poverty stricken areas, it is much less likely to have internet access and community centers. Therefore, it could be beneficial to consider implementing programming within schools, which would also spread knowledge to younger generations.

In addition to researching potential for the development of Lighthouse Point, OEF implemented two programs focused on economic development through entrepreneurship in the community. In Eleuthera, approximately 50% of the population is below age 35 (OEF, 2010). With a population of this demographic and a void in post secondary education, the Center for Training and

Innovation (CTI) was founded in order to serve as a vocational school to residents. Workshops teaching relevant job skills are offered to the community, and a recent program in August attracted nearly 100 participants (OEF 2015). Similarly, The Enterprise Center was developed to provide education by means of teaching hard and soft skills necessary to succeed in small business foundations on the island. Most importantly, the center provides loans to help entrepreneurs begin farming, starting small businesses, becoming caretakers, or joining the hospitality industry. An initial investment or loan is often necessary in order to stimulate change, but OEF hopes that the community will reap the benefits over time.

CONCLUSION

With an abundance of natural beauty, but a large trade deficit and stark contrast between impoverished communities and lavish beach homes, The Bahamas has the potential to improve its economic position. While mass tourism has fueled the development of some of the main Bahamian islands, the remaining “Out Islands” have the potential to serve a growing ecotourism sector. By implementing tourist attractions that maintain a degree of sustainability in their practices, the Bahamas can continue to remain a favorite in the tourism industry while also appealing to a variety of travelers. Overall, sustainable development in Eleuthera is a work in progress that should be continually promoted in order to reap the long term benefits. Ways to promote further development include educating younger generations, encouraging both local and international support via social media, and conducting outreach efforts within Bahamian communities.

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