Tourism Research: Reflections on the Bali Field School

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ABSTRACT

Present study describes the evolution of a field school on the island of Bali, with a focus on the tourism research that has been conducted in the ten years that the school has been operated. With an original emphasis on the macaque monkeys in the Ubud Monkey Forest Sanctuary, the themes of the field school expanded beyond primatology to broader issues of sustainability. These issues were addressed by sociologists, anthropologists, and economists, working as a team. While some of the lessons learned may be unique to Bali, there are perhaps generalized concerns regarding hosts and guests that serve as guides to others initiating such projects.

KEYWORDS: Bali field, Host guest relationship.

INTRODUCTION

The Bali Field School initially brought together students from U.S. institutions, studying primatology and anthropology, in the exotic setting of Bali, Indonesia. The founders initially bridged the disciplines by using anthropology students to assist in the fieldwork taking place in the Mandala Wisata Wenara Wana, or Sacred Monkey Forest Sanctuary, located in Padangtegal, Bali. Professors from Bali’s Udayana University were integral in the development of the research projects from the beginning and have continued to support the field school. The BFS was initially called the Balinese Macaque Project; however, as it evolved to include themes and research issues beyond the macaques some of the participants began to refer to it as the Bali Field School.

This expansion into new themes began in 1999. A tourism researcher was included among the primary faculty component to assist in exploring tourism and cultural issues from both anthropological and economic perspectives. The affiliated faculty group expanded to include more external researchers as well as more Balinese professors willing to refine the understanding of both faculty and students through their lectures and participation. Students captured data from tourists regarding appropriate behaviors in a study to measure cultural conflict. The initial results were quite interesting and spawned further data collection in 2000 and 2001. An extension of this work involved the collection of data from shopkeepers in the host village of Ubud. These data, collected in 2001, provided the first empirical study of the resident population in relation to the Monkey Forest and the touristic culture. Many student research projects were carried out, global studies ensued, and the BFS worked through the trying periods following 9/11, the Bali Bombings, and SARS. These events caused logistical problems due to travel warnings and safety concerns, but they also caused some re-thinking of some of the central issues of the research agenda. New thrusts in sociological and sustainability research have been initiated, along with experimentation in documentary film making and closer involvement with pro-poor and other economic development strategies. Throughout, the intention of the project has been to incorporate the voices of indigenous researchers and disseminate these results in international forums or publications (Bendesa, 2001; Iverson et al., 2000). Disparate data collection and analysis led to focused reports on individual themes and attempts to integrate and summarize this tourism research focusing on the relationship between guests and hosts in Ubud.
TOURISM RESEARCH

The initial tourism research was prompted by the work of Robinson and Boniface (1998), specifically their explication of the various dimensions of cultural conflict. The most common dimension studied is the guest/host relationship, and often with the intent of reducing stress and conflict on the host community caused by external values and behavior. Anecdotal evidence from visits to Bali caused the researcher to question the extent of tourist awareness regarding appropriate behaviors in Bali. The initial research question, simply stated, was “Are visitors aware of Balinese cultural and behavioral norms?” A pilot study was conducted and the results were shared with an international tourism conference (Iverson et al., 2000). In total, 527 responses were collected from a convenience sample of tourists, primarily in and around the Monkey Forest. The complete results were analyzed and reported in the context of visitor awareness of Balinese taboos (Iverson, 2008). Working with Balinese colleagues, researchers had identified eleven taboos, behaviors that could be offensive to the host community. These ranged from seriously regarded offenses such as improper behavior when entering a temple, to minor things such as neglecting to use honorific salutations “Pak” or “Bu” (essentially “Mr.” or “Mrs.”) when addressing locals. Results showed the need for educating tourists, whether through improved tour guide training, short videos on the airlines, pamphlets, or other methods.

Of equal interest were ancillary research issues that emerged in the surveys. This was where the work Robinson and Boniface (1998) enhanced the inquiry. They noted that there are several dimensions in addition to the traditional guest/host relationship. There is also potential for conflict among elements of the host community and among guests. Additionally, guests might be offended by their hosts. In the Ubud surveys, visitors were asked if they were offended by Balinese behavior. Except for some complaints about touts and aggressive vendors, the tourists were very positive about their hosts, particularly in the Ubud area. Visitors were also asked if they were offended by other visitors. This elicited a wide range of responses indicating that visitors were quite observant of their fellow travelers and that other visitors’ behavior often negatively affected their experience in Bali. Complaints about loud and rude behavior, often stereotyped by nationality, about men and women taking underage local companions (with sexual implications), and other negative comments were quite prevalent. The open-ended responses to this question provided a glimpse into some of the opinions that reflect national stereotypes, concerns about sex tourism, and concerns about rude behavior on the part of fellow tourists (Iverson, 2009).

These data allowed for the exploration of several of the dimensions of cultural conflict described by Robinson and Boniface (1998). These extend beyond the obvious and traditional concern about guests impacting hosts, into areas of guest-guest conflict and host-host conflict. Since our tourist survey did not include the opinions of the host community, it was decided that a survey of residents would add data in this regard. In developing this survey, the focus was redirected in recognition that shopkeepers had more contact with tourists and might have a different view than residents in general. It was also more expedient to design a survey that captured data from the area of shops, restaurants, and hotels immediately surrounding the Monkey Forest. To conduct the survey, a Balinese graduate student was employed to interview 291 shopkeepers in three zones around the Monkey Forest. These data have been analyzed and are results are currently under review. The survey instrument focused on general observations about the Monkey Forest, the relationship of the Monkey Forest with the community, and tourist behavior. To sum up the empirical research, three separate data collection efforts with tourists resulted in 527 completed surveys, and one effort to capture shopkeepers’ opinions resulted in 291 surveys. As these data are reported elsewhere, the focus here is to comment on some general observations regarding conducting survey research in Bali.

LESSONS LEARNED

Most of the faculty affiliated with the BFS were not native Indonesian or Balinese speakers and had little experience in the Balinese culture, except as tourists. With good fortune, contacts were made with researchers such as Hildred Geertz, Michel Picard, and Adrian Vickers – each of whom has completed major studies in Bali. Dr. Geertz was kind enough to visit the BFS and interact with the students and faculty. From these works one learns to approach the study of the Balinese culture
with caution, as there is quite a bit of diversity in the application of their religion and customs from one village to the next. Picard (1996 & 1997), in particular, exposes other researchers views as rather narrow and naïve and he demonstrates the resilience of the Balinese to withstand outside influences and retain their culture. Similarly, Vickers (1989 & 1996) shows how the external image of Bali does not always reflect the real changes that have taken place in the island’s culture. Even with an open mind, it is easy to make simple mistakes by ignoring basic cultural norms, as evidenced by the lessons learned through survey research. When developing a self-administered questionnaire in an international context, language issues often surface. Since the students assisting in the data collection were English speaking, this limited the domain to tourists who were comfortable with English. As a relatively mature destination, Bali already caters to the international traveler with English-language signage and training, as most are able to read and communicate in English. Most tour guides and virtually all staff who have direct contact with tourists are conversant in English. However, there is a significant minority of tourists who are not comfortable with English. This, couple with interviewer selection bias, resulted in under-representation of Japanese visitors and emerging markets such as the Chinese visitors from Taiwan and mainland China. To compensate, two affiliated faculty with natural language abilities in Japanese and Chinese were tasked with the administration of surveys to convenience samples from these markets. Results from these sub-samples reinforced the conjecture that Asian tourists were more aware of body posture and the positioning of the body, and thus were less likely than non-Asians to offend in this regard (Chiang, et al., 2006).

Conducting the shopkeeper survey, using a Balinese interviewer, produced some interesting anecdotes regarding cultural behavior in survey research. With a limited budget, there was some concern about the lack of a pilot study, and uncertainty regarding the response rate of locals. The sampling procedure was crude but effective in the end. Considering the geography of the setting and the desire to survey three zones around the Monkey Forest, it appeared that surveying half of the estimated businesses in the zones would result in a sufficient data set. The researcher, then, simply went to every-other business and asked to speak to the manager or person in charge. There was concern that refusals could frustrate this process and create an undercount. With only one interviewer, the process took several days, so an intervention was planned to check on refusals and non-response after the first day. The finding in this regard was a relief. Not only did the interview experience zero refusals, but as she skipped to every-other business, the staff at the enterprise that she skipped would stop her to say “why don’t you want my opinion, why aren’t you interviewing me?” Thus the news of the project was quickly assimilated into the gossip stream and preceded her through the village. Another cultural difference appeared when checking the completed surveys after the first day. The instrument was developed with a western perspective that demographic information should be captured in categories to lessen non-response. Age categories were used instead of recording the actual age; yet the interviewer had dutifully recorded the actual age of each respondent in the space provided. When it was explained that respondents don’t want to provide their actual age, the Balinese interviewer was mystified. Why not? – she asked. She went on to explain that it is quite common in the Indonesian culture to ask one’s age, and respondents had no problems with this. These anecdotes only serve to reinforce the importance of the involvement and communication with local researchers when conducting interdisciplinary research. External faculties are not always carefully prepared for international contexts or in techniques to incorporate indigenous understanding when conducting fieldwork in foreign settings. When this is neglected, results often do not reflect local conditions, local opinions, or local consensus. This has led some Balinese academics to mildly complain about “Baliologists” – those who make their reputations based on research in Bali but often present a skewed interpretation of the culture or traditions.

This leads to the final lesson learned, perhaps shared with every non-Balinese student and faculty member connected with the field school. To a person, the most common reflection from the work was one of humility. Interaction with the host community eventually strips away the façade of “developing country” and the stereotypes of third world challenges. Indeed, life can be hard in Indonesia, but the grace and hospitality of the Balinese people, regardless of the state of
their personal economic condition, is unmatched. This feeling of admiration for a people who have retained their culture through decades of Westernization and globalization is found in tourist survey responses, in student essays and films, and in the works of the affiliated faculty. Like many scholars who have preceded them, many doubtful of the longevity under this sort of cultural onslaught, there is also a sense that change may be afoot. As the rice paddies are gradually lost to new development, there is some concern that the people will lose their connection to their agricultural roots and their culture.

CONCLUSION

The future of the Bali Field School lies in the exploration of various issues, including the impact of the internet, the political ramifications of an increasing expatriate community, and the immigration of workers from poorer regions within Indonesia. Greater attention to the voice of indigenous researchers is also an aim of the project, and extensions into the broader fabric of the non-tourist regions of Bali. Will there be a return to primatology research? Whither the monkeys in the Ubud Monkey Forest? Not to worry about them; the improved management of the Sanctuary, in part based on the research of the Bali Macaque Project, has led to an increase in population from 112 in 1998 to over 300 monkeys at present, now distributed in four troops.

REFERENCES


