

PARADISE DESTRUCTION

THE ROLE OF GOVERNANCE IN MITIGATING SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND ECOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF MASS TOURISM ON THE ISLAND OF COZUMEL

MASTER THESIS

M.A. SUSTAINABILITY ECONOMICS AND MANAGEMENT

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OLDENBURG, DECEMBER 16TH, 2011

1 Introduction

Tourism as an economic activity and instrument of spatial planning lives on the existence of natural as well as cultural resources a destination possesses. At the same time its development and practice modify a destination's conditions causing various majorly negative impacts on biodiversity and both cultural and social circumstances. Due to the higher sensibility level of its components, these impacts become even more intensive when considering an island.

The thesis focuses on strategies to mitigate the socio-economic and ecological impacts resulting from spatial planning failure and insufficiently regulated tourism development.

Chosen as the subject area to be discussed and analyzed throughout the thesis has been the Island of Cozumel in the state of Quintana Roo, located in the Mexican Caribbean. It serves as an example for other areas with similar characteristics defined predominantly by the same economic, ecological and social conditions. Looking at Cozumel Island, tourism is the almost only and essential ingredient of its economy and at least 80 to 85% of its population economically depends on tourism. Infrastructure has been growing continuously since the 1950s accelerating with the island's discovery for diving practices in 1960 and the initiation of large-scale cruise tourism during the 1980s. Today, Cozumel is the number one port in cruise tourism arrivals worldwide while Quintana Roo alone represents 13% of the total hotel availability within the Mexican territory, incrementing in influx from 339,000 visitors in 1974 to 11,727,057 in 2011 (cf. SEDETUR 2011). On the Island of Cozumel, formerly existent tourism of excellence has been converted into mass tourism.

In spite of possessing a rather large territory, Mexico is a country of centralized authority and decision-making. Even though nature protection and environmental aspects have been integrated by the *Ley General del Equilibrio Ecológico y la Protección al Ambiente* (LGEEPA) (General Law for Ecological Balance and Environment Protection) in 1988, ecological degradation is constantly on-going. It is supposed that a rather centralized decision-making does not cope with local socio-economic and ecological problems. As territories are highly differing in respective characteristics generalized strategies of spatial planning and for areas of intense tourism development cause unpredictable, precarious results. Instead a governance approach as

a concept of political participation would be much more effective. The work assesses these hypotheses exemplified by the Island of Cozumel. Additionally, throughout the elaboration of the thesis the following questions are taken into consideration: Is further development possible without comprising condition and functioning of the island's ecosystems? Could the current state of biodiversity be conserved? What factors or components have to be considered to shape a region of economic, social and ecological resilience? And finally, which characteristics would an effective political participation concept have to fulfill?

The thesis combines quantitative and qualitative research methods: the discussion is based on information retrieved from both expert interviews and an opinion poll carried out throughout Cozumel's society. To do so, during spring 2011, a research stay of three months has been realized in-situ, adding personal experiences to the traditional methods of investigation. Combining the holistic view provided by the experts and a rather subjective perspective given by the local community permits a realistic evaluation of the island's current situation. Aiming at improving the region's planning system it is indispensable to determine if there is a common ground to the problems identified by the totality of stakeholders. Furthermore, by applying this complementary two-level approach it can be revealed if cooperation of actors of different levels and sectors is possible.

The transcription of the interviews in question has been done focusing only on the paragraphs and questions which are of importance for the analysis of the main ecological problems, the inconveniences in the spatial planning system and finally the development of recommendations. A similar methodology has been applied when evaluating the opinion of the local community: only those questions have been processed that contribute to the definition and understanding of the above mentioned aspects.

To start out an exhaustive description of the study area is given. Its location, social and environmental characteristics are explained, the economic and touristic development detailed, and the main conditions of the respective spatial planning system are outlined. Following, in order to provide the necessary theoretic background for posterior successful practical appliance, two scientific fields of investigations are elucidated. On one hand the value of biodiversity and ecosystem services to the human being, and on the other the extensive concept of governance in the field of political participation. Once the theoretical frame has been sketched, the main

discussion of the thesis based on the empirical quantitative and qualitative research conducted in the study area is elaborated. Here the principal and most pressing socio-economic ecological inconveniences of spatial planning and development arising on the island are identified. Accordingly, recommendations in form of a model for integrated, participative and overall sustainable island management is designed. To conclude those questions remaining unsettled and aspects requiring further investigation are pointed out.