

## **CHARACTERISATION OF ECOTOURISM EMPLOYMENT IN A DEVELOPING WORLD DESTINATION**

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**Abstract:** Low-wage occupations, casual employment, low skill levels and gender segregated jobs have been commonly reported as characteristics of tourism employment. Bearing in mind that the type of tourism will significantly shape the attributes of employment for local people, it is observed that little is known about the characteristics of employment in ecotourism. This paper aims to contribute to fill this gap by describing the findings of an empirical investigation looking at the qualities of ecotourism employment at an ecotourism park in central Mexico. Through the use of qualitative methods, the study reveals that while some characteristics such as low wages and low qualifications are present in the park, other attributes, not commonly documented in the literature, such as male labour and child participation, are also characteristics of ecotourism employment in the destination. The paper concludes that the characteristics of tourism employment will vary among destinations and depend largely on the socioeconomic and cultural conditions of each locality. Practical implications are also offered.

**Key words:** tourism employment, ecotourism, tourism impact, Mexico.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The adoption of tourism as a development strategy is commonly based on the benefits that tourism potentially brings to local people in destinations. One of the most frequently reported benefits of tourism is the generation of employment not only for those who live in the localities but also for those in surrounding areas or who temporarily immigrate in search of tourism income. While the contribution of tourism to employment at a macro level has been largely documented, little is known about the actual effects that tourism employment has on the livelihoods at a micro level. These effects will unquestionably be shaped by the specific characteristics of the tourism employment held by each individual.

The characteristics of tourism employment have been commonly cited by scholars. Attributes such as low income, seasonality and low wages, to mention some, have been used to describe tourism employment. While most of these characteristics

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may be commonly applicable to various destinations, it is reasonable to believe that such characteristics are not ever-present in the so called tourism industry. This recognition makes sense if we take into account that socioeconomic, cultural and political conditions vary among destinations. The specific qualities of tourism employment at a particular destination will be shaped by several factors, namely, the economic conditions existing in the destination, the social and cultural structures of local communities, and certainly the type of tourism activity.

As a very specific type of tourism, ecotourism also serves as a source for employment generation. Ecotourism is largely based on the local ecological and cultural resources, and it is often developed in isolated areas. In rural areas, where ecotourism as an economic alternative is commonly adopted, the economic conditions tend to hamper the number of labour possibilities for local people. Furthermore, educational and training choices are also limited in such areas. These and other factors all together define the specific characteristics of ecotourism jobs in destinations. Nevertheless, there is very limited research on the attributes of ecotourism employment, which represents not only a research opportunity but also a necessity for government touristic policies and organisational intervention. In this vein, this paper presents the findings of an empirical research aiming to identify the qualities of ecotourism employment in an ecotourism park in a developing country. In order to meet the objective, an ecotourism park in central Mexico was taken as a research case. The paper first presents a review of tourism employment literature. Particularly, it recognises the importance that tourism has in the creation of employment in some countries. It also presents the characteristics of tourism employment as reported in the literature. By acknowledging that little has been done with regard to the characteristics of ecotourism employment, it then offers an overview of relevant pieces of work on the social impacts of ecotourism. Afterwards, a brief description of the ecotourism park under study is provided, and the methodological description of the study is also declared. Then the findings of the study are presented. Conclusions and practical implications are ultimately drawn.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Tourism and employment**

Tourism has commonly been regarded as a mechanism for improving the livelihoods of local people in destinations. Particularly the potential of tourism for the generation of employment and income for locals has been one of the main reasons for the adoption of tourism. Tourism may also be useful for other purposes such as reducing out migration; in the case of some countries, for example, tourism has been adopted to provide more rural employment with special emphasis on the needs of the young population who form the bulk of out-migrants (Murphy, 1985). So significant are the role and contribution of tourism to employment that it may arguably be described as the world's largest source of employment in the world (Sharpley & Telfer, 2002), in both developed and developing countries. According to the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO, 2012), the current contribution of tourism to employment is estimated in the order of 6-7% of the overall number of both direct and indirect jobs worldwide, meaning over 260 million jobs in the travel and tourism and related sectors.

The importance of tourism in the generation of employment has been evidenced worldwide. In the case of countries such as Hawaii, for instance, direct employment in the tourism industry has accounted for 24% of total civilian employment (Choy, 1995). By 2011, in Maldives, Malta and Mauritius, the contribution of travel and tourism to direct national employment was 22.7, 15.7, and 12 percent, respectively (WTTC, 2012). This includes mainly employment by hotels, travel agents, airlines and the activities of the restaurant and leisure industries directly supported by tourists. This certainly does not mean that tourism employment is restricted to occupations in which direct contact with

tourists is involved. Due to the multiplier effect of tourism, the benefits of tourism go far beyond this type of occupations; employment and income in other economic sectors may also be favoured, or somehow altered, by tourism effects.

In this vein, although the significance of tourism employment seems to be a generalisation, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to determine accurately the size of tourism-related employment. This is due to the difficulty in defining the boundaries of tourism, the lack of official and reliable statistics, and a tendency to focus on only occupations directly involved in dealing with tourists (Wall & Mathieson, 2006). Furthermore, when recognising the significance of tourism on employment, figures must be taken with caution. Rather than generating new employment positions, tourism may simply attract workers from more traditional sectors of the economy such as agriculture, mining and fishing. In this manner, tourism may thus not only have little impact on unemployment levels but can also lead to labour shortages in other economic sectors (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). While figures should therefore be treated prudently, the effects of tourism on global employment are undeniable.

Although tourism represents an important economic phenomenon worldwide, it should be noted that the specific role and contribution of tourism to employment varies from country to country, region to region, and location to location. The amount, type and quality of tourism employment are by no means the same in all destinations; thus it is reasonable to suggest that the characteristics of tourism employment are not universal and are commonly dependent on local economic and sociocultural conditions. Particular issues such as the type and scale of economic development, the type of tourism activity and the socio-cultural structures of local communities will shape and determine the attributes of tourism employment. These issues will thus determine the real contribution of tourism to job generation and therefore the quality of life of locals. As a result, tourism employment in destinations should be analysed in detail at a local level for the purpose of policy implications. Since the conditions and characteristics of tourism-related employment will vary considerably from destination to destination, general assumptions about *the* tourism employment should thus be treated with caution.

### **The characteristics of tourism employment**

Several studies have examined the contribution of tourism to employment within specific destinations. Many cases including Bali (Cukier & Wall, 1993), Gambia (Farver, 1984), Hawaii (Choy, 1995), the UK (Hughes, 1982), the Seychelles (Archer & Fletcher, 1996), to mention but a few, have been documented. A large number of these investigations have examined the effect of tourism on employment at a macro or national level, and very few have focused on very specific micro levels. Analysing the conditions of tourism employment at a micro level, particularly in developing countries, may be useful in the understanding and explaining the diverse dimensions of employment in the context of tourism. Consequently, it may also help to explain the various, diverse and complex relationships between tourism and employment at regional and national levels.

Based on existing research, general observations about what seems to be the “*inherent*” characteristics of tourism employment can be made. According to Wall and Mathieson (2006), tourism employment characteristics can be summarised as follows:

1. Employment and income effect are closely but not perfectly related,
2. The effects of tourism employment vary by tourist activity; some tourism activities are more labour-intensive than others,
3. Many jobs are self employed, particularly in destinations where tourism enterprises are small,
4. Tourism employment is characterised by being low-wage occupations, part-time and casual,

5. Tourism employment commonly requires low skill levels and low entry requirements. Where specific skills are required, particularly in poorly developed areas, the industry often turns to outside expertise rather than provide training for local people (Cohen, 1984; Murphy, 1981),

6. Tourism employment is strongly seasonal,

7. The effects of tourism employment are frequently not visible and hence not recognised; tourism may take people from other sectors of the economy and go beyond a narrowly defined destination area, and,

8. Tourism employment is structured by gender; the majority of jobs in most tourism tasks are held by women, particular the low-paid, part-time and seasonal positions. It has been estimated that over 70% of tourism employees are women (Marshall, 2001).

However, determining the distinguishing characteristics of tourism employment at a global basis cannot, or should not, be an easy task. This is especially true when considering that the views of what tourism employment is like are various and sometimes opposing;

*“The image of tourism as a generator primarily of low-wage and low-skill employment is a misleading one, and underestimates tourism’s impact on overall wages and salaries. In fact, many of the jobs at the technical, managerial, and professional levels require education and training which command compensation commensurate with these qualifications”* (UNWTO, 1997, p. 213-214).

While the characteristics of a large number of tourism positions may concur with commonly held beliefs (see also Choy, 1995), they may also differ significantly from each other. The attributes of many, if not all, social phenomena (including employment) are rarely determined by only one factor. The characteristics and qualities of tourism employment are not to be defined exclusively by the alleged ‘nature’ of tourism, but also by the macro and specific micro economic, political and socio-cultural conditions in the destination community. Issues such as the economic development of the region, the type of tourism activity, and the existence of employment alternatives will be important factors in defining the attributes of tourism employment in each location, particularly in developing world destinations. As Mitchell and Ashley (2010, p. 39) argue, *“There is little consensus about the quality of tourism employment and wages of the poor. Much depends on the specific country, its labour market and tourism seasonality, and on whether the comparison is with desired norms, other sectors, or other countries”*; in summary, the specific conditions of the destination area will play an important role in defining at a micro level the characteristics of employment of any type of tourism.

### **Employment in ecotourism**

A detailed literature review reveals that little has been done in terms of the academic work on ecotourism and employment. This is not surprising bearing in mind that a large amount of ecotourism literature has focused extensively on the environmental impacts of tourism but little on the economic dimension (Wunder, 2000). Literature related to the topic though has discussed the issue of employment as a general indicator of ecotourism impacts rather than as a single factor. For example, in their study on the perceived benefits of ecotourism in the Amazon regions of Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, Stronza and Gordillo (2008) found that ecotourism has become a major source of income for local people either through direct employment such as managers, guides, housekeepers, and boat drivers, or from sales of foods, handicrafts, transportation or other services. The authors report that a few workers have abandoned other economic activities and shifted entirely to tourism; others have added tourism to traditional economic activities such as forest extraction and farming. This empirical evidence may support the idea that some of the occupations in ecotourism do not require indeed high skill levels, which allow people to participate in more inter-occupation mobility. Specific

scientific evidence is nonetheless required for assertions regarding the characteristics of ecotourism employment in this sense.

In a similar vein, Campbell (1999) reported that ecotourism development in Ostional, Costa Rica, has provided indirect employment through economic opportunities, but this has been mainly for minority groups including tour guides and business owners. More recently, in their study of ecotourism effects in Botswana, Africa, Mbaiwa and Stronza (2010) found that ecotourism employment is one of the main benefits that have improved the livelihoods of local people. The authors report that most of the jobs generated by ecotourism are cooks, cleaners, storekeepers and escort guides, which may be described as semiskilled jobs.

Although the empirical evidence on ecotourism employment is quite scarce, existing research indicates that ecotourism plays an important role in providing local people with more immediate opportunities for both direct and indirect jobs, and presumably in improving the livelihoods of local residents. This will eventually have implications in the livelihoods of local people; particularly of those whose paid work opportunities and income sources are somehow limited. From existing literature, it can be claimed that the employment generated by ecotourism is commonly low skilled though it may still represent a viable source of income for many residents (see also Ogutu, 2002). As Stronza (2007) acknowledges, more than other types of tourism, through employment ecotourism can cause large changes in the economy of families because it usually occurs in relatively rural isolated areas; a small increase in income tends to have a more marked effect on the household of the poor. Ecotourism employment may also well represent a valuable first step for empowering local residents in tourism destinations (Kiss, 2004).

Whilst existing research evidences that ecotourism commonly provide work and income opportunities for locals, it seems that very few studies (if any at all) has focused exclusively on analysing the characteristics of ecotourism employment. Specifically, there is limited scientific evidence about the characteristics of ecotourism employment from the perspective of ecotourism workers. In other words, how ecotourism employment is characterised from the perspective of people who actually experience it is still uncovered. The attributes of ecotourism employment, due to the specific characteristics of ecotourism, should then be examined. This is particularly necessary if we take into account the assertion that "*ecotourism may not be the panacea for solving endemic unemployment, particularly in remote and rural areas*" (Wearing & Neil, 2009, p. 126), such as those in developing countries, where local conditions may significantly define the characteristics of employment.

### **THE SETTING**

The aim of this study was to analyse the distinguishing characteristics of ecotourism employment in a developing country destination from the perspective of ecotourism workers. For this aim, an ecotourism park, namely Parque Ecoturístico San Miguel Regla (San Miguel Regla Ecotourism Park, hereafter SMREP) was selected for the study. The SMREP is located in the state of Hidalgo, which is located in central Mexico and is one of the twenty-two federal geopolitical entities in the country (Figure 1).

Specifically, the Park is situated within the municipality of Huasca de Ocampo in which the most important economic activities have for long been mining and agriculture. While the former is not anymore as important as it used to be, the latter employs over 37% of the total population and is concentrated mainly in corn, sheep, cows and goats. Commerce consisting of tourism and goods and services for local people accounts for 35% of the municipality's total employment ([www.e-local.gob.mx](http://www.e-local.gob.mx), accessed 13.01.2013).

The SMREP offers several ecology-related leisure activities including trout fishing, boating, canopy, all-terrain vehicles (ATV), camping, swimming pools, and horseback

riding within a total area of ten hectares. The park is open from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm, and the entrance fee is \$25 Mexican pesos (around two USD) for adults and \$10 Mexican pesos (one USD) for children. The SMREP is an autonomous organisation and is administered for and by *ejidatarios*<sup>1</sup>. Most of the decisions made about the tourism activity in the park are based on the outcome of *ejidatarios* assembly, and the benefits obtained from the tourism activity are distributed among them. Since the park is for *ejidatarios*, mainly *ejidatarios* themselves or their relatives are allowed to work for the park. This becomes one of the main, if not the most important, criteria for gaining a paid work position within the park.



**Figure 1.** Location of San Miguel Regla Ecotourism Park, Hidalgo, Mexico.  
(Source: Google maps)

In the park, there is also a food and craft centre (*Parían*) with several stalls, 37 in total, offering typical food and crafts. These stalls are owned by *ejidatarios* and operated by them, their relatives or other local people. Depending on the season, there are approximately 80-90 employees in total, distributed in the different areas in the park. Tourist flows are clearly defined by seasonality. Major tourism flows are present during Easter and December. However, the SMREP is open and visited all year long. Visitors arrive mainly on weekends, and the vast majority come from Mexico City and other nearby locations.

## METHODS

A large number of studies on tourism employment have been undertaken on the basis of quantitative methods (Brown & Connelly, 1986). Quantitative approaches seem to be more reliable and more valuable for policy design and the intervention of governments due to the potential for representativeness. However, qualitative approaches offer a valuable alternative in examining the characteristics of tourism employment from the

<sup>1</sup> Ejidatario is the possessor of an area of communal land used for agriculture. Ejidal land is communally held, mortgaged, transferred and possibly privatised (Brown, 2004)

perspective of informants. Through the eyes of informants, the actual attributes of employment in ecotourism can be not only listed and described, but also explained and illustrated in depth through the experiences of those involved in ecotourism jobs.

Bearing this in mind, a qualitative approach was adopted for the aim of this study. In particular, in-depth interviews, participant observation and a large number of informal conversations with employees in the park were used as research techniques for the collection of data. For the interviewing process, a series of guiding questions were designed to explore the specific properties of employment in the park. Based primarily on existing literature, questions about seasonality, level of skills, wages, training, to mention some, were incorporated in the instrument. At the same time, visitations to the park permitted to observe certain characteristics that had not been sufficiently cited in the literature; these included issues such as staff turnover, contracts, recruitment procedure and child labour, and were therefore incorporated in the instrument.

A total of 36 interviews were undertaken with people at the SMREP in 2012. Consent was granted by the general representative of the park for the administration of interviews to workers. Due to the fact that most of the time employees work in open air spaces, tape recording the conversations was difficult. Whilst some interviews could be tape recorded, relevant notes were taken during the rest of the interviews. Undertaking interviews within the park facilitated to find, contact and gain access to a larger number of informants. It also helped informants to easily illustrate *in situ* their assertions. Several visits had been made to the park since 2009. However, seven research driven visits were exclusively made in 2012 and 2013 to focus on the type of employment and other related issues existing in the park.

## **FINDINGS**

The different areas of the park offer several activities for tourists. These activities in turn largely define the type of employment required. In the case of canopy, for example, employees are required to have basic technical training. The employees operating this area are somewhat permanent and little rotation exists with other workers due to the technical training held only by a few of the personnel. However, in the vast majority of the rest of activities, people do not require specific skills, knowledge or training for operating. These include, for instance, people renting boats who just indicate visitors what they should not do (boats are manually moved), hand out vests to visitors, and push and pull the boats to start and finish the ride, respectively. Many employees are responsible for charging entrance or services fees; these can be found at the two entrances of the park, at the trout tanks-where visitors are charged to see and feed the trout-, at the fishing lake, and alike.

Fieldwork suggests that several characteristics of ecotourism employment are applicable to the SMREP. However, other ecotourism employment attributes, that have not been sufficiently documented, were observed and reported at the park. Regardless of whether these characteristics have been documented or not, the following are of major importance.

### **Age**

One of the features of ecotourism employment not commonly cited in the literature is that of under-age labour. In many developed countries, the issue of child work is highly regulated and therefore it may not be a serious and common issue in the tourism industry. However, the study reveals that within the SMREP, child labour exists. Children under fifteen can be observed working in the boats and horse riding areas. They are not hired by the park, nor are they paid for their work. Children work "*voluntarily*" at the park and their income depends on tourists' tips. They help pushing and pulling the boats, and help visitors to board and descend the boats (see Photograph 1). They all study, so they work mainly on weekends. On a "*good*" day, these children can make \$160 or

\$180 Mexican pesos, on a “*bad*” one, \$50 or \$70. The issue of children working in ecotourism economic activities in the park may be widely explained on the fact that child labour is a common phenomenon in developing countries due to fairly high levels of poverty (Admassie, 2003; Levison et al., 2001).



**Figure 2.** Child labour may be a characteristic of ecotourism employment in developing countries

### **Gender**

The literatures suggest that tourism employment is highly gendered. There are a large number of women working at the tourism industry. Although gender-based segregation of labour exists in several employment sectors (McKenzie, 2007), tourism employment has been reported as being highly feminised. This study provides evidence to state that employment in ecotourism is not always dominated by women. In the SMREP, the largest amount of employees are actually men. This can be easily observed in the different areas of the park, particularly in the boat, canopy and horse riding areas, where practically there is not any woman working.

Although in some cultures tourism work is considered a man’s activity (Tucker, 2007), according to informants, the domination of males is justified on the basis that many activities in the park require special physical effort, which represents a difficulty for women. Based on this belief, the administration of the park has opted to hire more males than females. In general, there is one woman in three men. This finding certainly offers opportunities for tourism research. While there already exist a number of investigations on women’s participation in tourism employment (see for example Cone, 1995; Tucker, 2007; Vandegrift, 2008), much of this research has emphasised the prescriptive nature of gender norms to explain how women are prevented from participating from tourism benefits. However, according to Tucker (2007), it is important to move beyond conceptions of fixed gender associations to consider more nuanced understandings of the complex interrelationships between gender and other social influences, economic and political influences. This will certainly help to gain a wider recognition of how the presence of males and females in tourism employment is shaped by a large number of local conditions.



### **Hiring**

The conditions of hiring deserve special attention as a specific characteristic of ecotourism employment at the park. The number of people hired during the peak seasons (Easter and December) is higher than that of the rest of the year. However, these are the minority, as most of the employees work all year long. This may have to do much with the nature of tourism activity at the park, since it is visited most of the year and mainly on weekends. What is important to notice though is the fact that employees at the park do not sign a contract. The hiring process is through an interview with the representative. This in turn discusses the specific application with other *ejidatarios*. If they agree, then the person is “hired”. The inexistence of a formal contract is justified on the basis that only *ejidatarios’* siblings can work. It should also be noted that most of the staff work full time and their schedules are fixed.

### **Qualifications**

As indicated above, employees are not required to hold specific qualifications for working at the park. Entry requirements are not difficult to be met in terms of academic education, since no proof of even basic education is needed to work at the park. In fact, most of the staff only received basic education at public schools. It is of interest to notice that in the whole park none of the employees holds a professional certificate. Within the community, those who have the opportunity to get a professional degree often immigrate to other cities where better chances for professional development and higher incomes can be found. As indicated above, perhaps the most important requirement for getting a job at the park is being an *ejidatario’s* descendant rather than the level of professional qualifications.

### **Reliance**

Tourism employment is reported as often being complementary to other traditional economic activities such as agriculture, farming, mining and fishing. The data obtained during fieldwork supports this assertion. It was found that for some people, employment at the park is just a complementary activity, mainly to increase income. Some employees work at the park only on weekends, when more visitors arrive, and have a full-time job outside the park from Monday to Friday. An employee working at the trout area commented: “*I work here [at the park] only on Saturdays and Sundays, but during the week I become a mechanic assistant, otherwise, I could not make ends meet*”. Similarly, a man working at the horse riding area reported: “*I bring my horses for rent on weekends at the park. From Monday to Friday I work as a blacksmith, I make doors, windows, and stuff like that. What I make as a blacksmith is not always enough, sometimes there is work, sometimes there is not, so I work at the park on Saturday and Sunday, to make more money*”.

### **Training**

Although the training of human resources currently represents a *sine qua non* condition for the tourism industry competitiveness (WTO, 1997), most of the literature suggests that little training is a characteristic of tourism employment. This is empirically evidenced at the park under study. It was reported that only employees responsible for the canopy area receive certain kind of essential training. This training is provided by the Tourism Ministry of the State of Hidalgo, specifically by a certified extreme sport instructor. People who are interested in working in this area of the park receive training each year within the premises of the park. For practically the rest of activities, training is neither required nor believed to be necessary. It seems that training is needed only for specific activities in which the safety of tourists is highly involved. No kind of training is given or requested to the rest of employees, nor is any induction course provided to workers at the park. As the informant in charge of personnel claimed, “*Training at the park is not necessary at all*”.

### **Wages**

Wages in tourism employment are commonly reported as being low. In the case of employees at the park, the salary received ranges between \$100 and \$200 Mexican Pesos (7 and 14 USD, respectively) per day. The salary is defined by the *ejidatarios* representatives. The exact amount is determined according to the area and the specific activity for which the employee is responsible for. For example, the personnel administrator makes \$200 every day as do those who have worked for minimum 15 years at the park. Those in the canopy and all-terrain vehicle areas make \$150, while general employees make \$100.

For many people, the wages at the SMREP may be regarded as low. While it is true that many jobs in tourism, especially those at managerial levels in large resorts, generate much higher incomes for employees, it is important to recognise that for many people at the park, ecotourism income is one of the most attractive salaries that they can receive. In rural areas, as in the case of the park, economic opportunities are considerably scarce. While agriculture and mining may be a choice for some, for others ecotourism represents a more stable means of income. This supports the idea that “*rather than simply stating that tourism employment offers low-wage occupations, researchers should specify which sector they are focusing on and whether the low wages occur across employment levels*” (McKenzie, 2007:490).

The above characteristics of ecotourism employment are by no means exhaustive. Their identification is based mainly on those reported by existing literature and the visibility of such characteristics in the park. All these attributes together define the job positions and work experiences of some local people not only in terms of quantity but also of quality. Particularly the latter should be revised if labour force patterns in the park are to be considered.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

This study recognises that although the characteristics of employment in the tourism industry have been commonly listed, little is known with regard to the specificities of such characteristics and how they are shaped by the type of tourism activity. This study therefore aimed to contribute to the understanding of ecotourism employment characteristics by adopting a case study in a developing country. While several conclusions can be drawn from this study, three considerations deserve special attention.

First, through the empirical evidence of this study, it can be pointed out that *the* characteristics of tourism are not always the same, or at least in the same conditions. Whilst some characteristics can be existent, there are other tourism employment qualities that are highly dependent on specific conditions. It was found that while low wage and low qualification levels largely apply to the context of the ecotourism park, the assertions about issues of gender-based segregation of labour should be revised. Many studies have noted that the majority of most tourism tasks are held by women (Wall and Mathieson 2006: 135). In the case of the San Miguel Regla Ecotourism Park though, the situation is actually the opposite. The vast majority of tourism positions are held by men. From the perspective of informants, this is due to the physical strength required for ecotourism tasks at the park. Regardless of the possibility that such gender segregation is a culturally defined issue rather than a real differentiation of physical strength, this finding suggests to recognise that tourism employment is now always dominated by women, particularly in tourism activities in which gender roles can be easily mirrored.

In a similar vein, this study offers evidence to widen the spectrum of employment characteristics, at least within the context of ecotourism in poor countries. Specifically, the participation of children in ecotourism labour was reported as an existent phenomenon in the park. The participation of children, whether voluntary or perhaps somehow forced, seems to be strongly related to the conditions of the destination in

question. The high levels of poverty in rural areas in Mexico and other countries may lead children to look for economic opportunities to contribute to household incomes. Ecotourism, and particularly the administrative and legal norms of parks, may provide children with such opportunities.

Second, the context adopted for this study suggests that when analysing the characteristics of ecotourism employment, or of any other type of tourism, special attention must be paid to the local socioeconomic and cultural conditions. The analysis of fieldwork suggests that some employment attributes such as the complementary character of ecotourism labour is a consequence of the limited income that locals can gain from other productive activities locally, which is at the same time a manifestation of poor economic conditions in several localities, regions and countries. The issue of gender segregation of ecotourism labour may also be defined by the cultural structure of local communities. In the case of rural communities, where traditional gender roles are highly dominant, the participation of women in tourism work may also be largely restricted by gender roles that are socially and culturally defined.

Third, while the specific characteristics of ecotourism employment in the park have been identified and commented on already, special attention deserves the meaning that local workers assign to the characteristics of their work and to their labour conditions. As stated above, for some people making \$7 USD a day may be considerably low. This certainly can be from the perspective of those who work in other tourism destinations, where salaries are much higher, or in other more generous economic sectors. However, for many people in rural areas, labour choices are considerably limited. While agriculture or farming may be an alternative for many locals, ecotourism employment offers a more attractive and stable and constant income for their households. Despite the possible drawbacks that ecotourism employment may have, it still represents one of the very few choices and possibly the most promising source of income for alleviating poverty in several rural communities.

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Besides their possible theoretical contribution, the findings herein presented have practical implications. Knowing the characteristics of ecotourism employment can help determine labour patterns. This can help local governments to design policies for providing local people with educational courses and training programmes. This in turn will help workers to be able to have access to other jobs both in the tourism sector and in other productive activities. Training will eventually have a positive impact on the tourist experience, as more professional services can be provided by the personnel at the park.

Additionally, the information herein provided may be useful for monitoring the participation of under-aged workers in the park. While ecotourism-generated income may be fairly valuable for children's households, special attention must be paid to their participation in employment in order to protect both their psychological and physical integrity. Similarly, the finding that employment is largely dominated by males at the park offers an opportunity for government and organisational intervention. From a gender perspective, work policies can ensure that both women and men have the same opportunities for work and get same salaries within the tourism industry. If tourism is properly planned, it can stimulate equitable development (Amalu & Ajake, 2012) for both women and men. Through informed intervention, gender-based discrimination can thus be reduced, particularly in rural areas in developing countries where women are often highly excluded from the benefits of tourism.

### **Aknowlegments**

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