

# Application of Participatory Development Theory in Wetland Ecotourism Initiatives —A Case Study of Baiyangdian in Anxin of Hebei Province

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**Abstract:** As one of the few ecological wetlands in North China, Baiyangdian bears multiple important ecological functions, including ①adjusting the ecological balance of North China; ②safeguarding the downstream areas, especially Tianjin City, the Beijing - Shanghai Railway and Huabei Oil Field; ③serving as the reservoir for the North - to - South Water Diversion Project and the emergent use of water for Beijing; ④conserving biodiversity. Wetland ecotourism is a scientific and wise use pattern for wetland resources, through which, a source of financing is provided for wetland conservation, economic alternatives are generated for local people to reduce overexploitation on wetland resources and the public awareness of environmental protection is enhanced. Since wetland ecotourism can benefit the co - existence between human and nature and promote social equity between people, it enjoys broad promise for popularization and implementation. The proactive cooperation and sound interaction between main stakeholders, and the wide participation of the community residents, will guarantee the sustainable development of wetland ecotourism. Based on the analysis of current status of participation and interactive relationships of the main stakeholders in Baiyangdian tourism, this article made an attempt to apply the theory of participatory development to the ecotourism initiatives of Baiyangdian wetland, discussed and brought forward the countermeasures to improve community participation in wetland ecotourism under the guidance of this theory.

**Keywords:** participatory development; wetland ecotourism; stakeholder; community participation; Baiyangdian wetland

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## 1 Introduction

Covering a total area of 366 km<sup>2</sup>, Baiyangdian is the largest fresh water wetland in North China, with 85.6 percent of the water area distributed in Anxin County, Baoding City, Hebei Province (Hou and Wang, 2000). The modern tourism in Baiyangdian took off in the 1980's. After more than 20 years' development and construction, a nature - based scenic area on a considerable scale has been built in Baiyangdian, Anxin. In 2006, Baiyangdian saw a record - high tourist arrival of  $87 \times 10^4$ , direct tourism revenue

of  $47 \times 10^6$  Yuan RMB, and total economic impact of  $5.8 \times 10^8$  Yuan RMB. Baiyangdian was designated as China's 5A tourist attraction in 2007 (Zhang, 2007).

Tourism in Baiyangdian, however, is still at the phase of mass tourism, with inadequate exploitation of the ecological culture of wetland and the indigenous culture of waterside villages. The community residents have not taken an active part in tourism development, and the vast majority of the residents have not substantially benefited from tourism. The fundamental way to solve these problems is to transform the mass tourism into community - based ecotourism, in an at-

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tempt to promote the sound existence of wetland ecosystem and the welfare of local communities.

The theory of participatory development, which centers on empowerment of people (Stiglitz, 2002), will be of high value in guidance and reference for wetland ecotourism initiatives in Baiyangdian. Since the 1980's, the theory of participatory development has enjoyed worldwide promotion and has been rapidly introduced as an approach for rural projects (Xie and Wen, 2005). Participatory development has twofold purpose: first, the decision making can better serve the interest and requirement of the people involved, the agencies for development can be more responsible, and the distribution of benefits can be more fair and more people can be benefited; second, the capacity of people can be realized and used in a creative way and a larger variety of choices will be provided to people, and the all-round and free development of people can be actualized (He, 2003).

In the wetland ecotourism initiative in Baiyangdian, efforts should be made to coordinate the relationship among the main stakeholders, to enhance their cooperation and especially to improve the participation of community residents, with reference to the theory of participatory development.

## 2 Interaction Analyses of Stakeholders in Ecotourism of Baiyangdian

### 2.1 Identification of main stakeholders

Wetland ecotourism development is a systematic project and will involve the participation and interest of various stakeholders. Stakeholder in tourism industry refers to groups or individuals who will affect or be affected by the achievement of goals in tourism development (Song, 2005). Based on this definition, the stakeholders in Baiyangdian wetland ecotourism can be listed as follows: government, tourism enterprises, local communities, tourists, non-government organizations (NGOs), academies, media, international organizations, the public, etc. According to the focus of this research, the following main stakeholders are selected as the objectives of this chapter.

Management Committee for Baiyangdian: the

leading authority in tourism of Baiyangdian; it undertakes to manage and supervise tourism in Baiyangdian on behalf of the County Government.

Tourism Enterprises: including 9 scenic spots and 16 hotels, which comprise 5 star-style ones and 11 non-star ones. The investors are mainly tourism development corporations and hotel groups from Beijing and Tianjin.

Local Communities: Baiyangdian covers 39 inside-lake villages and 134 lakeside villages of Anxin County, with a total population of  $10 \times 10^4$ . Fishery, growing and production of reeds, as well as tourism, are the present main sources of livelihood for the residents.

Among the above main stakeholders, the local communities and their residents are the main objects of this research and termed as the Target Group, because they are supposed to be the major participants and beneficiaries of wetland ecotourism in Baiyangdian and the theory of participatory development has highly close ties with that of community development (Denman, 2001).

### 2.2 Interaction analysis of main stakeholders

Participatory development emphasizes the interaction between parties involved in social transformation (Li, 2001). Main stakeholders, driven by their own pursuits for interests, participate or engage in tourism of Baiyangdian in different forms, and have developed interactive relations between each other.

#### 2.2.1 Communities and Management Committee

The community residents depend on Management Committee to provide them with preferential policies to facilitate their participation in tourism and take solid measure to guarantee their sharing of tourism benefits. On the other hand, the tourism development led by the government must gain support from the residents. Only with the cooperation of the community residents, the tourism plan, headed by Management Committee, can be implemented smoothly.

#### 2.2.2 Communities and tourism enterprises

Tourism enterprises provide job opportunities and channels of benefiting from tourism for local residents, and inject momentum to regional economy; the

residents, on the other hand, contribute to the original cultural factors involved in ecotourism products because of their familiarization with the local environment and the folk culture reflected by their places for living and working. Therefore, the interaction and cooperation between tourism enterprises and community residents have the potential to create a win-win situation. When recruiting employees, tourism enterprises should give priority to residents from local communities.

### 2.2.3 Management Committee and tourism enterprises

Management Committee has the command of rights on leading the development of the scenic area and can legalize the action of tourism investors and operators; and the latter can contribute the indispensable funds for tourism development, and the taxes they pay can maintain the regular operation of Management Committee. However, when giving go-ahead and other preferential policies to developers for the sake of attracting investment, Management Committee should strengthen the guidance and supervision to prevent the conflicts between tourism development, resource conservation and community development.

## 3 Core Problems in Ecotourism Initiatives of Baiyangdian

In order for wetland ecotourism in Baiyangdian to develop in a sustainable manner, the primary obstacles should be addressed accordingly. To this end, the main problems, especially the core problem had been accurately identified through the analyzing approach Problem Tree.

### 3.1 Structuring of problem tree

Problem Tree is a kind of analyzing approach used for community assessment, which hierarchies the contributing factors of one issue, according to the cause-effect relationship (Zhen *et al.*, 2007). Generally, researchers proceed with the problem, and find out the original and most direct reason behind the problem (Zhang *et al.*, 2005).

The procedure of analyzing existent problems in tourism development of Baiyangdian through Problem Tree is as follows: ① identifying the primary prob-

lems: Through stakeholder workshops with governmental officials, tourism operators and community residents, the primary problems were collected through brainstorming. In combination with the second-hand data, the problems were collated and those did not accepted by the majority were deleted. Altogether 10 primary problems, including low tourism revenue, low quality of the staff, loss of traditional and folk culture, degradation of ecological environment, limited types of tourism products, lack of uniform and reasonable planning, inadequate management system and low management efficiency, unfair distribution of tourism incomes, insufficiency of community participation, absence of mechanism for participation and cooperation, were identified. ② Identifying the core problem: Based on the identification of primary problems, problem matrix was established and the relationships between them were discovered. In the matrix, 1 point was used to mark where the two problems have correlations and all points for each problem were summed up. The problem, which scored highest, was identified as the core problem. As the matrix shows below (Table 1), insufficiency of community participation has closest relationships with other problems and were considered as the core problem. ③ Drawing of the problem tree: Starting from the core problem, the reasons and outcomes were discovered along the branches; the relationships between the problems were also checked (Fig. 1).

### 3.2 Analysis of core problem

Since the prosperity of tourism, participation in tourism has served as one of the major sources of livelihood for local residents. At present, they acquire employment opportunities in forms of self-employed catering and accommodation, reed weaving as tourism goods, guide service, boating service, scenic spot and hotel service.

Obviously, except self-employed restaurants and owners of homestays, all the employed residents are taking jobs, which provide low position, low salary, poor working environment and ask for little skill due to their lack of formal education and special skills. Besides employment, other fields of participation

**Table 1 Problem matrix for tourism development in Baiyangdian**

Problem	Low tourism revenue	Low quality of the staff	Loss of folk culture	Degradation of environment	Limited tourism products	Lack of planning	Inadequate management	Unfair distribution of incomes	Insufficiency of community participation	Absence of participation mechanism	Score	Rank
Low tourism revenue		1		1	1						3	3
Low quality of the staff	1								1	1	3	3
Loss of folk culture					1				1		2	4
Degradation of environment	1								1		2	4
Limited tourism products	1		1			1			1		4	2
Lack of planning					1		1		1		3	3
Inadequate management							1				1	5
Unfair distribution of incomes									1	1	2	4
Insufficiency of community participation		1	1	1	1	1		1		1	7	1
Absence of participation mechanism		1						1	1		3	3

are even more limited.

Weakness in participation of communities has been discussed from exterior and interior factors.

### 3.2.1 Factors of exterior environment

The main defect lies in the relative monopoly in management, operation and development rights. Management Committee is in the leading position of owning and operating rights over the tourism resources and performs centralized management. Under such system, communities have almost no voice in tourism planning and decision - making. Because Management Committee aims at the maximization of economic benefits of the whole scenic area, rather than promotion of the social fairness in the area, community par-

ticipation is considered only when it is helpful to increase tourism revenues; besides, Management Committee rarely distributes any revenues to communities. As the biggest beneficiaries, tourism enterprises that mainly seek to make profits and lack sense of responsibilities for communities employ local residents only as a way to reduce cost.

### 3.2.2 Factors of interior conditions

The long existent defects of the communities themselves are also factors leading to poor participation (Fang and Liu, 2006).

#### 3.2.2.1 Lack of money

Baiyangdian is located in underdeveloped region, and the whole area includes 24 provincial poverty

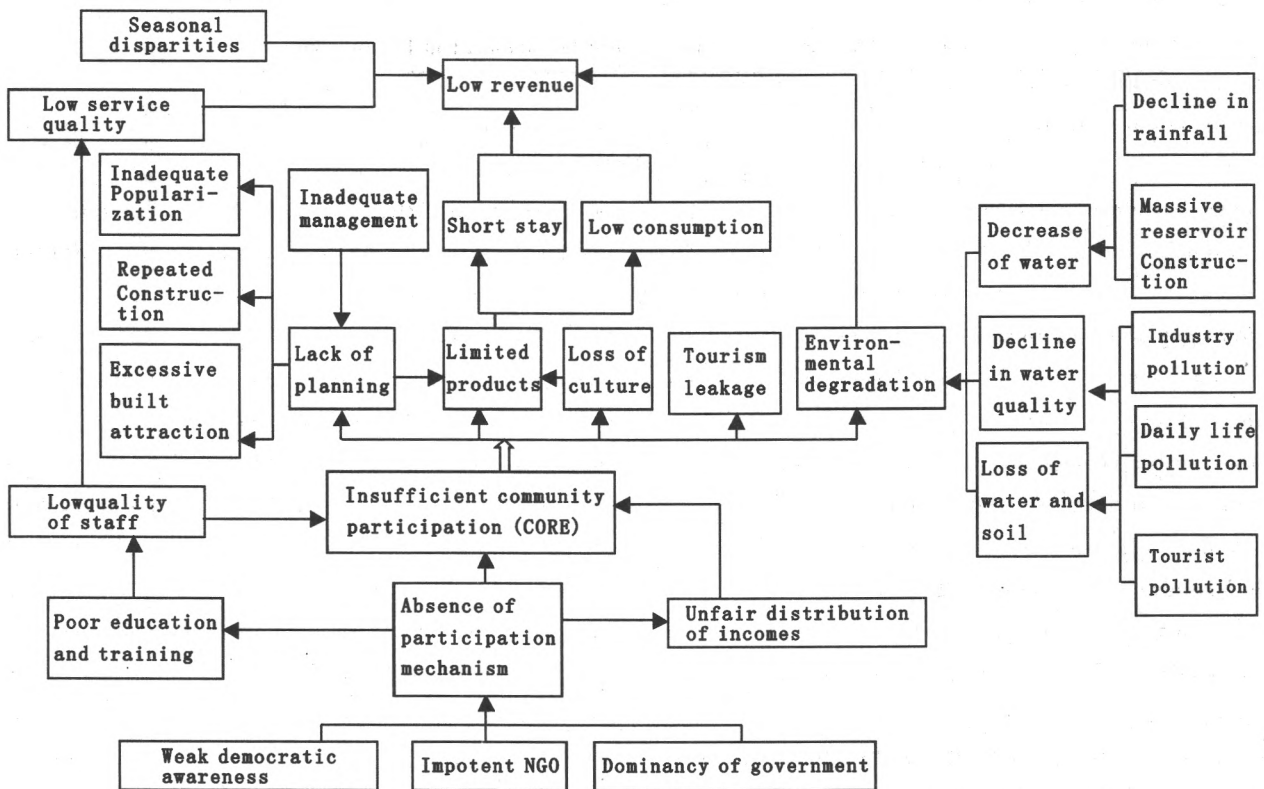


Fig. 1 Problem tree for tourism development in Baiyangdian

villages with 8 000 absolutely poor people whose annual income is below 668 Yuan RMB. Under the circumstances of severe poverty, communities have huge difficulties raising funds for tourism development, which, in turn, led to the influx of outside capitals.

### 3.2.2.2 Shortfall of talented personnel

Poor regions always also suffer from inadequate education. The illiteracies and poor learning abilities of the local people, compounded with little attraction for talented personnel due to neglect of training or efficiency in training mechanism, ultimately resulted in the lack of special personnel for tourism. Therefore, community residents participate in tourism as service employees or self-employed, as opposed to decision makers, operators or managers.

### 3.2.2.3 Shortage of information

The insufficient supply of information, caused by the sluggish economy, has set the communities in a disadvantaged position in tourism development. Up till now, still a large number of residents in Baiyangdian are unfamiliar with the concept of ecotourism and

ignorant of the operation and management of ecotourism, which will definitely raise the cost for information for community participation. In such case, the communities would rather give away the leading rights for tourism development to Management Committee and tourism enterprises.

## 4 Participatory Countermeasures to Ecotourism Development in Baiyangdian

On the basis of participation analysis of stakeholders in tourism development of Baiyangdian and according to the theory of participatory development, a series of recommendations for ecotourism development have been proposed, for the purpose of reversing the disadvantaged situation of the target group, or the community residents and paving the way for their involvement.

### 4.1 Improving the ability to participate—education and training

It is much more profound to teach people how to fish than to simply give them fishes. Management

Committee should undertake to organize the education and training for the community residents, and the main contents should include: first, knowledge and awareness of environmental protection especially for wetland, skills to conserve environment such as centralized treatment of garbage and prevention of water eutrofication; second, knowledge of tourism, including concepts of tourism and ecotourism, contents and procedure of ecotourism planning, cost and benefit of participation in tourism, related state policies, etc; third, training of skill for service, operation and management in ecotourism, including helping the residents to renovate their residence into homestays to engage in accommodation service; training women as tour guides and working staff in scenic areas and hotels and teach them reed weaving techniques to solve the problem with women's employment in ecotourism.

#### **4.2 Providing the opportunities to participate—financial assistance**

To ensure equal opportunities for the residents to participate in ecotourism, Management Committee should try every means possible to provide them necessary start-up capitals or introduce related economic incentives.

A certain proportion of the annual poverty alleviation funds allocated from superior government agencies and the profits of the high-revenue tourism enterprises in Baiyangdian can be raised as community fund for tourism development; the ownership of the fund belongs to all the villagers and the money can only be borrowed within the village.

Management Committee can cooperate with financial organizations to introduce a low-interest and small-amount credit system, and provide mortgage assurance for the local poor residents. Such poor residents willing to run tourism business as to buy a boat to operate boating service or to open a homestay can apply for the loan.

Tourism enterprises are encouraged to train and employ the local rural residents. Tax-deduction policies can be allowed to scenic spots and hotels in which local employees reach or above a proportion of

the total employees. Management Committee can exempt one to two years' taxes from the poor rural households who run tourism business in order to help them take an active part in tourism and get better off through tourism.

#### **4.3 Creating the approaches to participate—tourism planning, decision making and community-based ecotourism products**

Management Committee and the planners must respect the rights and interest of communities. Round table meetings, household interviews and questionnaire surveys can be applied to reflect the demands and interests of the communities in tourism development and planning.

Participation of communities in development, production and distribution of ecotourism products can increase their direct income from tourism and diversify the tourism products to alleviate the negative influences of disparity between peak and off seasons. Community-based ecotourism products mainly include fishing performance, folk culture tour and homestay service.

#### **4.4 Guaranteeing the effect of participation—sharing of benefits from tourism**

Benefiting from tourism economically is the ultimate goal of community participation (Hou, 2006). Fair and reasonable distribution of tourism benefits is the necessary remuneration to the dedication of the community residents and can provide incentives for community participation in conservation of resources and environment.

Besides direct participation in tourism revenue sharing, local residents can also benefit from ecologic compensation for their loss of resources in tourism development, and stock companies funded by community collective, residents, Management Committee and other investors. Effective mechanism should also be in place to ensure part of tourism revenues can benefit the welfare of communities in aspects like education and medical care.

## **5 Discussion**

Owing to its high function of production, wetland

ecosystem is always inhabited by dense population, so the residents who live in Baiyangdian are the factors that must be taken into consideration in ecotourism development. To strengthen the directive of the theory of participatory development in wetland ecotourism will make sense in ensuring community residents become the main participants in wetland ecotourism and ultimately fulfilling the function of ecotourism to sustain the livelihood of local populations.

The sound development of wetland ecotourism is the result of the collective efforts of the multi-stakeholders, and the existence and development of multi-stakeholders is the precondition for this result. Therefore, the lack of some stakeholders and the inadequate function of them will constitute constraints to wetland ecotourism development. For instance, in China, NGOs are very weak with limited influence and fail to contribute to ecotourism development as much as expected (Liu and Bao, 2005). Even the several Baoding-based NGOs, which are closest to Baiyangdian, have played no proactive role in planning, supervision and management in ecotourism in Baiyangdian. In the meantime, NGOs are expected to act as the arbitrator between government, communities and enterprises because NGOs have no conflicts for interest with other stakeholders. So, in the process of promoting wetland ecotourism in China to more matured stage and actualizing the overall participation of community, the growth and advance of NGOs are inevitable. Besides, since beginning, ecotourism has been targeted to travelers and communities, so ecotourists should be another important stakeholders and their influence should not be overlooked. Their wide participation, especially their awareness and behavior towards nature conservation and culture preservation, including their willingness to pay as to environment protection and their attitude towards community culture, will be another important factor in wetland eco-

tourism.

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