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Introduction

International schemes for protecting local nature expose the complexity of local politics of nature by provoking a sense of injustice within the affected communities (Lange et al., 2007; Martin et al., 2016; Paloniemi et al., 2015; Strzelecka et al., 2021). For Budowski (1976), tourism provides ground the reciprocal relationships between the local communities and nature conservation (e.g., Buckley, 2004; Christ et al., 2003; Eagles et al., 2002; Mehta & Heinen, 2001). However, Nyaupane and Poudel (2011) note, this view neglects the complexity of interactions between people, tourism, and conservation. In response to this criticism, tourism scholars have deployed numerous theoretical remedies to examine the tourism and nature conservation relationship through livelihood approaches (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2011), political-ecological lenses (Nepal & Saarinen, 2016; Saarinen, 2016), and critical perspectives (i.e., Whyte, 2010). Yet, these studies rarely accentuate a socio-psychological view to elucidating how tourism can help mitigate place-based conservation injustices.

Residents' empowerment from tourism can provide valuable insights into how tourism mechanisms build foundations to mitigate local conservation conflicts in rural communities. For example, Strzelecka Boley and Strzelecka (2017) show that empowerment is an essential benefit for rural tourism in less developed tourism regions. However, it relies on residents' bonds with the place they live in. While most recently, Aleshinloye et al. (2021) examined the role of economic benefits from tourism and respondents' involvement in tourism as predictors of empowerment. They also show that perceived empowerment from tourism can affect residents' quality of life (Aleshinloye et al., 2021).

While many scholars have established the importance of resident empowerment in tourism, we still do not understand how such empowerment translates into other domains of everyday life in rural communities, such as the conservation of local nature. Therefore, this project examines interlinkages between empowering benefits from rural nature tourism, support for rural nature tourism, and residents' perceptions of the intergovernmental conservation program Natura 2000 (Figure 1). To that end, this project crosspollinates the theory of empowerment in tourism (Boley & McGehee, 2014; Strzelecka & Bolye, Woosnam, 2017; Aleshinloye et al., 2021) and critical justice theory (Fraser, 2008) from political domain to conceptualize and operationalize the relation between resident empowerment from rural nature tourism and their perceptions of this conservation program.

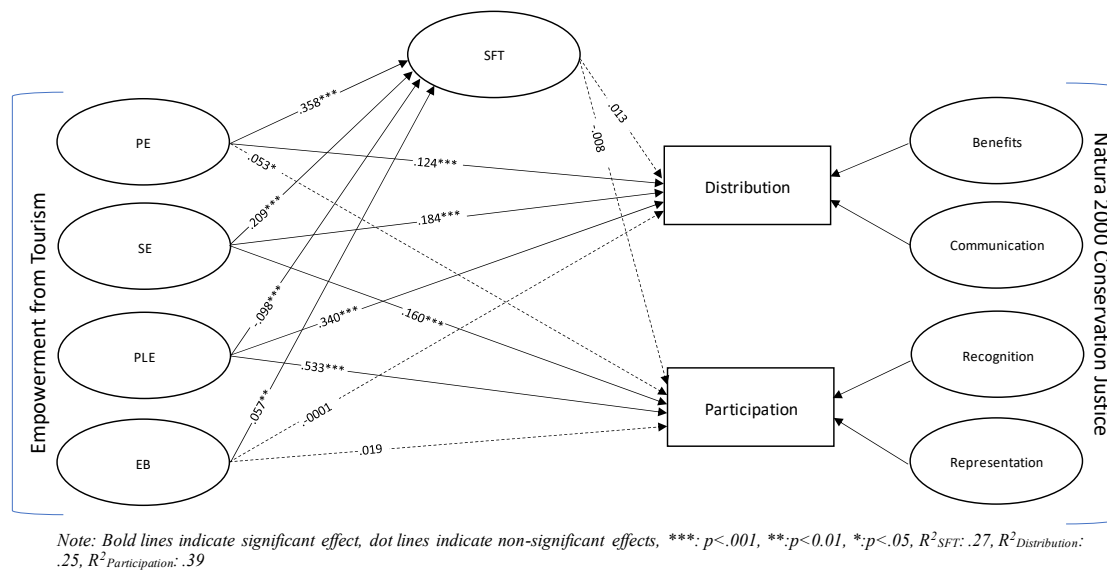


Figure 1, Structural Model; PE-Psychological Empowerment, SE-Social Empowerment, PLE-Political Empowerment; EB- Economic Benefits

The theory of empowerment in tourism helps explain how tourism benefits rural communities beyond economic ways by contributing to their self-identity and community pride, and political involvement. Whereas the critical justice approach (Fraser, 2008) enables looking at conservation issues from the standpoint of local communities to understand the role empowerment plays within the psychological, cultural, political, and economic domains (Strzelecka et al., 2021). Furthermore, Fraser’s (2008) critical perspective on conservation justice enables us to identify justice issues simultaneously within distribution, recognition, and representation domains.

Literature Review

Empowerment and support for tourism

Empowerment from tourism is a multi-dimensional construct with psychological, social, political, and economic domains (Boley et al., 2014; Strzelecka et al., 2017; Joo et al., 2020). Psychological empowerment (PE) occurs when tourism enhances residents' pride and self-esteem, such as when tourists recognize the value of natural areas surrounding the community they visit (Strzelecka et al., 2017). Studies have consistently found a strong relationship between residents' PE and their attitudes toward tourism (e.g., Boley et al. 2014, Strzelecka et al. 2017).

Social empowerment (SE) happens when tourism contributes to community development (Cline et al., 2019) by strengthening social relationships and community cohesion. SE has also been shown to influence resident support for tourism (Boley et al., 2014; Maruyama et al., 2017; Strzelecka et al., 2017; Yeager et al., 2020). Politically empowered (PLE) residents exhibit the motivation to employ social and political resources to steer local tourism development to their advantage (Strzelecka et al., 2017). However, the relationship between this form of empowerment from tourism and tourism attitudes is unclear (Boley et al., 2014; Strzelecka et al., 2017; Yeager et al., 2020). Finally, economic empowerment (EB) concerns business opportunities and equity in the distribution of economic benefits (Scheyvens, 1999). The positive link between support for tourism and tourism economic impacts has been the most

reliable finding over the years (Boley et al., 2018). Based on these past findings, we put forward the following hypotheses to be tested:

H1a: PE is a significant predictor of residents' support for tourism

H1b: SE is a significant predictor of residents' support for tourism

H1c: PLE is a significant predictor of residents' support for tourism

H1d: EB is a significant predictor of residents' support for tourism

Conservation justice

Concerns about equity and justice have become prominent in conservation debates. Improving a sense of justice in conservation policy and practice is instrumental to effective conservation because it reduces the likelihood of conflict (Martin, 2016). However, determining ‘what makes conservation be seen as just’ is not easy.

Past studies suggest that nature-based forms of tourism and, in particular, ecotourism, with the associated incentives, can significantly affect conservation outcomes (Ziegler et al., 2021). Moreover, residents that support tourism also tend to support local nature conservation (Walpole & Goodwin, 2001). Consequently, when nature-based tourism benefits rural residents, participation in tourism positively changes how residents perceive conservation efforts. Arguably this happens because tourism empowers residents of local communities. Below we discuss the justice domains of distribution and participation (recognition + representation) and propose how tourism can influence residents' perceptions within those domains.

Distribution

A just distribution occurs “to everyone’s advantage and at the same time position of authority and responsibility must be accessible to all” (Rawls, 1999, p.53). In reference to conservation, the most common usage of just distribution pertains to equitable distribution of environmental risks or pollution (Figueroa, 2006). Other issues include the perception of access to information, knowledge, or economic limitations seen as a result of the new conservation policy (Paloniemi et al., 2015). Thus, we propose that the more empowered residents are through tourism, the greater their sense of just distribution will be from Natura 2000.

H2a: PE is a significant predictor of the sense of just distribution in Natura 2000

H2b: SE is a significant predictor of the sense of just distribution in Natura 2000

H2c: PLE is a significant predictor of the sense of just distribution in Natura 2000

H2d: EB is a significant predictor of the sense of just distribution in Natura 2000

H2e: Support for tourism (SFT) is a significant predictor of the sense of just distribution in Natura 2000

Criticism of the sole focus on just distribution targets the narrow conception of justice as outcomes (Figueroa, 2006, Fraser, 2008, Schlosberg, 2007), neglecting dynamics between social structures, institutions, and policies that contribute to poor distribution (Young, 1990). Actions targeting distribution fail to consider 'who' gets to be represented in decision-making or who is gets to define what ‘justice’ means (Fraser, 2000). Therefore, there has been growing emphasis on participation and who get recognized and who gets represented.

Participation: Recognition & Representation

Recognition tends to be seen as a remedy to distribution issues (Schlosberg, 2007). Fraser (2008) considers recognition a precondition to membership in a political community, whereas Young (1990) urges that once existing group differences (politics of difference) are identified,

the recognition “requires explicitly acknowledging and attending to those group differences” (p.3), thus empowering them. Empowerment is an essential part of the sense of recognition among rural residents. Participatory procedures that emerge in tourism decision-making are one way to reinforce recognition (Martin et al., 2016, Figueroa and Mills, 2001) as they create opportunities for different actors to come together to recognize each other’s interests and perspectives in tourism development. Arguably though, because of various forms of empowerment from tourism, residents feel more recognized in the context of people, tourism, and conservation policy.

However, it is still unclear who gets recognized as a relevant stakeholder or whose views shape local development discourses. Recognition should not be conflated with representation. While beneficial and therapeutic to recognize vulnerable residents in the local development path, it does not guarantee just representation of their cause because the recognition may be mere lip service or people-pleasing if the marginalized group does progress on to being represented at the table (Arnstein, 1969; Fraser, 2008).

The representation domain of conservation justice will highlight struggles over being represented in local decision-making (Mels, 2016; Fraser, 2008). Representation is seen as an essential step to mitigate locally emerging conflicts as it draws attention to the idea that the outcome decision-making must equally represent what residents want (Fraser, 2008). Residents must feel included in the framing of conservation policy.

Procedural arrangements may provide a formal structure to facilitate different forms of participation that correspond to a different degree of recognition and representation of value positions (Arnstein, 1969). However, the sole policy focus on participatory procedures overlooks local power struggles and structural inequalities (Fraser, 2008). For example, Solitare (2005) proposed that residents participate in decision-making when they: 1- see all stakeholders are committed to their involvement, 2- see opportunities to participate, 3- have time to participate, 4- trust that all stakeholders are fair and honest, 5- agree that the issue at stake is a problem. Arguably, these constraints to participation can be linked to residents lacking a sense of empowerment. In this context, we propose that nature tourism that empowers residents fosters residents' sense of representation in local conservation efforts.

H3a: PE is a significant predictor of a sense of just participation in Natura 2000

H3b: SE is a significant predictor of a sense of just participation in Natura 2000

H3c: PE is a significant predictor of a sense of just participation in Natura 2000

H3d: PLE is a significant predictor of a sense of just participation in Natura 2000

H3e: SFT is a significant predictor of a sense of just participation in Natura 2000

Methodology

Case selection

In selecting our cases, we used the European Network of Protected Areas (Natura 2000) – the flagship program of the European Union (EU) biodiversity policy implemented in all EU member states – as a proxy to determine the 'naturalness' of Polish areas. Natura 2000 (N2000) is the largest growing network of protected areas in the world – Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) – designated under the Birds and Habitats Directives. It urges many local communities within the EU to consider N2000 sites in their regional development ambitions (Cieslak et al., 2015). Conflicting interests and perspectives among the affected stakeholders have challenged this flagship EU biodiversity program (e.g., Apostolopoulou and Pantis 2009; Grodzińska-Jurczak and Cent 2011; Paloniemi et al. 2015). We conducted the study in three municipalities of Poland based on the criteria to (a) cover more than half of Natura 2000 lands, (b) have enough residents for sampling, and (c) are in rural

areas. During July and August 2018, surveys were distributed within 12 (out of 18) rural towns and villages in Lipnica municipality, 11 out of 13 rural towns and villages in Karsin municipality, and 14 out of 37 rural towns and villages in Chojnice municipality. We used a census-guided systematic random sampling scheme that follows the earlier successful study of the Pomerania region utilizing this approach (Strzelecka et al., 2017)

Measurement scales

Conservation justice was measured with the Perceived Environmental Justice Scale- PEJS that, reflects Fraser's justice domains in the context of Natura 2000 (Strzelecka et al., 2021).

Support for tourism (SFT) instrument was adopted from Bynum and Strzelecka (2016). The scale has been widely tested for construct validity internationally and validated in Poland (Strzelecka et al., 2017).

The Resident Empowerment through Tourism Scale (RETS), developed by Boley and McGehee (2014), is the most popular measure of empowerment from tourism. RETS has been validated in different cultural contexts, including Poland (see: Strzelecka et al., 2017)

Out of 1934 distributed questionnaires, 1312 were deemed usable (i.e., missing values <5%) and relevant for further data analysis. The mean replacement technique was used to overcome missing values in usable questionnaires, and the application of this approach did not significantly affect the mean of items or constructs (Hair et al., 1998).

Data Analysis Process

The data analysis consisted of validating of the psychometric properties and measurement model and evaluation of the structural model of the study (Figure 1). As such, we employed outer (measurement) and inner (structural) model evaluation using Partial Least Square Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to assess the complex model consisting of formative constructs (Hair et al., 2019).

Results

Psychometric properties and measurement model

The normality of the data was assessed by values of Skewness and Kurtosis that have been in the acceptable range of ± 1 and ± 3 , respectively, with a slight deviation in some items (Brown, 2011). The slight deviation in those items has been dealt using Bias-corrected and accelerated (BCa) Bootstrap technique in the partial least square structural equation model; therefore may not represent a significant violation of assumptions for further interpretation (Henseler, 2018).

Unlike model fit assumptions of Covariance based SEM, the measurement model in PLS-SEM is judged based on the outer model criteria (Roldán & SánchezFranco, 2012). We followed the guidelines of Hair et al. (2017) to further validate our measurement and structural model. Referring to the recommended cut-off level (Hair et al, 2017), Table 1 presents evidence of indicators reliability (loadings > 0.71), internal consistency (composite reliability (CR) > 0.86 ; Cronbach's alpha (α) > 0.75 ; and rho_A (ρ_A) > 0.76), convergent validity (average variance extracted (AVE) > 0.62), and discriminant validity (Fornell-Larcker Criterion and Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio of Correlations (HTMT) < 0.80) for reflective constructs.

Table 1. Reliability, Convergent, and Discriminant Validity of Reflective Constructs.

Constructs	Loadings /Range	Mean	CR	α	AVE	ρ_A
EB	0.849, 0.862	2.22	0.917	0.880	0.733	0.897
EB1.Tourism in this municipality helps me pay my bills.	0.862	2.197				
EB2.A portion of my income is tied to tourism in this municipality.	0.860	1.885				
EB3.I would economically benefit from further development of the tourism sector.	0.849	2.348				
EB4My family’s economic future depends upon tourism in this municipality.	0.854	2.130				
PE – Psychological Empowerment	0.859, 0.893	4.00	0.943	0.924	0.767	0.925
PE1 Tourism makes me proud to be a resident of this municipality.	0.862	4.043				
PE2.Tourism makes me feel special because people travel to see my municipality's unique features.	0.893	3.969				
PE3 Tourism makes me want to tell others about what we have to offer in this municipality	0.893	3.921				
PE4.Tourism reminds me that I have a unique culture to share with visitors	0.871	3.949				
PE5.Tourism makes me want to work to keep this municipality special.	0.859	4.083				
Social Empowerment SE	0.818, 0.921	3.64	0.915	0.859	0.782	0.867
SE1.Tourism makes me connected to my community	0.910	3.713				
SE2.Tourism Fosters a sense of ‘community spirit’ within me	0.921	3.592				
SE4.Tourism provides ways for me to get involved in my community	0.818	3.564				
PLE- Political Empowerment	0.818, 0.892	2.26	0.937	0.916	0.748	0.918
PLE1My opinion counts in planning for tourism in this municipality	0.868	2.228				
PLE2.Local leaders take into account my ideas about developing tourism in this municipality	0.879	2.280				
PLE3 I have access to the decision-making process when it comes to tourism in this municipality.	0.892	2.206				
PLE4 I have an outlet to share my concerns about tourism development in this municipality	0.818	2.457				
PLE5 My vote makes a difference in how tourism is developed in this municipality.	0.865	2.197				
SFT – Support for Tourism	0.863, 0.936	4.41	0.951	0.932	0.830	0.939
SFT1 I believe tourism should be actively encouraged in my municipality	0.863	4.310				
SFT2 I support tourism and want to see it remain important to this municipality.	0.936	4.368				
SFT3 My municipality should remain a tourist destination	0.923	4.325				
SFT4 My municipality should support the promotion of tourism	0.921	4.385				
DJ- Benefit	0.814, 0.853	2.96	0.897	0.848	0.686	0.856
DJ1 N2000 benefits an average resident.	0.820	2.981				
DJ2 Benefits from N2000 are equally distributed among residents of this region	0.814	2.669				
DJ3 Benefits from N2000 are distributed according to residents’ needs.	0.853	2.726				
DJ4 On average N2000 program leaves residents better off.	0.825	3.017				
DJ-Communication	0.789, 0.849	2.68	0.861	0.758	0.673	0.766
DJ11 Residents are well informed about N2000.	0.789	2.253				
DJ12 Information about N2000 is accessible	0.822	2.917				

DJ13 Issues concerning N2000 are solved in a proper manner	0.849	2.851							
Recognition	0.718,	2.51	0.935	0.923	0.590	0.925			
RJ1 The way N2000 is managed aligns with my perspective	0.718	2.621							
RJ10.My opinion counts in decision-making for N2000 sites.	0.798	2.264							
RJ2 My concerns about N2000 have been recognized in N2000 decision-making in this municipality	0.769	2.476							
RJ3.My views, as a resident, are considered in managing N2000 sites.	0.805	2.460							
RJ4.My economic needs are recognized in the N2000 regulations	0.775	2.452							
RJ5.Residents' knowledge about local nature was used to designate N2000 sites in this municipality.	0.736	2.651							
RJ6.As a resident of this municipality, I am an equal partner in the implementation of N2000.	0.737	2.261							
RJ7.Potential differences are promptly acknowledged in managing N2000 sites	0.736	2.624							
RJ8.Residents are recognized as equal partners in managing N2000.	0.805	2.489							
RJ9.Residents' interests are considered when managing N2000 sites.	0.796	2.599							
Representation	0.736,	2.72	0.908	0.878	0.622	0.880			
R2J10 N2000 procedures enable me to engage in the decision-making process.	0.783	2.399							
R2J11 N2000 procedures are clear to me.	0.736	2.578							
R2J12 N2000 procedures are applied consistently across situations in this municipality.	0.819	2.715							
R2J13 N2000 procedures ensure that decisions are made based on facts.	0.810	2.792							
R2J8 N2000 procedures empower residents.	0.762	2.652							
R2J9.N2000 decision-making procedures are fair	0.819	2.766							

Constructs	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Benefit (1)	0.828								
Communication (2)	0.425	0.820							
EB (3)	0.157	0.228	0.856						
PE (4)	0.314	0.202	0.121	0.876					
PLE (5)	0.359	0.341	0.472	0.167	0.865				
Recognition (6)	0.567	0.532	0.300	0.208	0.556	0.768			
Representation (7)	0.564	0.485	0.273	0.263	0.538	0.694	0.789		
SE (8)	0.345	0.271	0.225	0.710	0.274	0.321	0.314	0.884	
SFT (9)	0.197	0.074	0.102	0.494	0.048	0.093	0.125	0.447	0.911

Note: Bolded values (diagonal) are the square root of the AVEs, CR: Composite Reliability, α : Cronbach's alpha, AVE: Average Variance Extracted, ρ_A : Dijkstra-Henseler's rho

Table 2 represents the measurement model for formative constructs (Hair et al., 2017). As such, one item was designed in the questionnaire to validate the redundancy analysis with a significant and robust relationship with the formative construct. Further, there has been no issue with multicollinearity ($VIF < 0.3$). Also, the weights were relevant, and the t-values were significant for both of the constructs (> 0.51).

Table 2. Multicollinearity and Weights of formative and reflective constructs

Formative Constructs	Reflective Constructs	Weight	T Value	VIF
Distribution	Benefits	0.707	15.75 ***	1.22
	Communication	0.467	9.03 ***	1.93
Participation	Recognition	0.576	11.39***	2.53
	Representation	0.510	9.68***	2.12

Note: ***: $P < 0.000$, Values are weight partial least squares

Structural Model

Using PLS algorithms, bootstrapping technique with 5000 subsamples, and blindfolding technique, we assessed our proposed structural model (Figure 1) by Coefficient of determination (R^2), size and significance of path coefficients (β , t -value, p -value), effect size (f^2), and Predictive relevance (Q^2) (Cohen, 1988; Hair et al., 2017; Mikalef & Pateli 2017).

Consequently, the R^2 values of the endogenous variables $R^2_{\text{Distribution}} = 0.25$ and $R^2_{\text{Participation}} = 0.39$ suggest a substantial effect of the exogenous variable (Cohen, 1988). The effect size of the relationships ranged from small (0.02) to large (0.35). Consequently, all Stone-Geisser's Q^2 values were larger than zero for each construct, providing predictivity evidence (Hair et al. 2017). The results of the hypothesis testing of the analysis are reported in table 3.

Table 3. Result of Hypothesis testing

Path	β	Standard Deviation	T Values	p Values	Decision
EB -> Distribution	-0.001	0.032	0.022	0.982	Not Supported
EB -> Participation	0.018	0.029	0.643	0.521	Not Supported
EB -> SFT	0.057	0.024	2.372	0.018	Supported
PE -> Distribution	0.129	0.038	3.398	0.001	Supported
PE -> Participation	0.050	0.035	1.433	0.152	Not Supported
PE -> SFT	0.358	0.046	7.828	0.000	Supported
PLE -> Distribution	0.339	0.029	11.855	0.000	Supported
PLE -> Participation	0.534	0.026	20.823	0.000	Supported
PLE -> SFT	-0.098	0.026	3.800	0.000	Supported
SE -> Distribution	0.187	0.038	4.917	0.000	Supported
SE -> Participation	0.158	0.035	4.453	0.000	Supported
SE -> SFT	0.209	0.043	4.806	0.000	Supported
SFT -> Distribution	0.013	0.033	0.407	0.684	Not Supported
SFT -> Participation	-0.008	0.025	0.320	0.749	Not Supported

Discussion/Conclusion

The results support the thesis that non-economic empowering benefits from rural nature tourism (psychological, social, political) as well as economic benefits are linked to attitudes towards tourism (SFT). Interestingly, in our case, the relation between PLE and SFT is negative. This could mean that for the municipalities included in this study, those residents who feel more

politically empowered by tourism are less likely to support it and that political empowerment attracts voices against rural nature tourism. The lack of a relationship or negative relationship between political empowerment and support for tourism has been a prevailing finding in recent empowerment research (Boley et al., 2014; Strzelecka et al., 2017)

Importantly, however, we learned that political and social empowerment in tourism are linked to a greater sense of conservation justice in Natura 2000 within its domains: distribution, recognition, and representation. However, higher psychological empowerment from tourism translates into a higher sense of conservation justice in Natura 2000 only within the distribution domain. This is an important finding as it indicates that political and social empowering residents in rural nature tourism translates into a greater sense of recognition-representation justice in environmental programs like Natura 2000. Thus, it can serve as a way to mitigate conservation conflicts. It is not simply tourism that benefits conservation efforts but precisely the empowering benefits that it brings rural communities that matter.

In this study, we extend the theory of empowerment in tourism by providing a better understanding of the importance of empowering tourism benefits for resident perceptions of conservation justice in nature-based tourism destinations based on Natura 2000 in Poland. Thus, first, we show that tourism that empowers residents can directly contribute to nature conservation by influencing resident perceptions of justice in large-scale conservation programs like the European Ecological Network Natura 2000. Secondly, this is the first study to empirically examine the relationship between empowering benefits from rural nature tourism and a sense of justice in international conservation programs like Natura 2000 and empirically test the effect of empowerment from tourism on nature conservation attitudes.

There are many implications associated with our findings. However, of most importance, are the implications for the future of managing tourism nearby protected areas where conservation conflicts prevail. Namely, when tourism is seen as empowering residents, they are likely to view conservation policies positively.

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