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Authors	Usher, Lindsay E.;Chick, Gary;Kerstetter, Deborah;Euzinde, Christine
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Is Surf Tourism a Factor In Community Well-Being? : A Case Study of Las Salinas, Nicaragua

Lindsay E. Usher  
Doctoral Candidate  
Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management  
Penn State University  
801C Ford Building  
University Park, PA 16802  
252-573-9670 leu105@psu.edu

Garry Chick  
Professor  
Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management  
Penn State University  
801 Ford Building  
University Park, PA 16801  
814-863-1941 gchick@psu.edu

Deborah Kerstetter  
Professor  
Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management  
Penn State University  
801 Ford Building  
University Park, PA 16802  
814-863-8988 debk@psu.edu

Christine Buzinde  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management  
Penn State University  
801 Ford Building  
University Park, PA 16802  
814-863-9773 cbuzinde@psu.edu

Duarte B. Morais  
Associate Professor  
Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management  
North Carolina State University  
Box 8004, 4008E Biltmore Hall  
Raleigh, NC 27695  
[duarte\\_morais@ncsu.edu](mailto:duarte_morais@ncsu.edu)

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## Introduction

Tourism is often couched as a tool for achieving greater economic well-being in developing countries, as well as a means to improve the quality of life for members of host communities (Jamieson 2003). As one of the poorest countries in the Americas, Nicaragua is turning to tourism as a means of economic development (Croes and Vanegas Sr 2008). Hosting an abundance of natural resources, it competes with neighbors like Costa Rica as a popular nature-based tourism destination (Babb 2004). A distinct advantage Nicaragua has, however, is well known surf breaks, which appeal to American tourists. As a result, over the past 15 years foreign-owned lodges have sprung up in places such as Las Salinas, a small indigenous community on the southwest coast of Nicaragua. Since these establishments are foreign-owned, it is not clear how many local people are employed by these businesses, and if they are, whether they are receiving any significant benefit from them that would improve their well-being. We sought to identify factors residents of Las Salinas regard as important to well-being in their community and if tourism is one of those factors.

## Literature

Subjective well-being is referenced as the way people perceive their quality of life individually and in their community (Diener, Oishi, and Lucas 2003). In contrast to objective measures of well-being such as *per capita* income, adult literacy rates, and life expectancy, subjective measures are the cognitive and emotional evaluations people make about their lives (Diener, Oishi, and Lucas 2003). While comparisons of rich and poor countries indicate that income is positively related to well-being, other research suggests that high social psychological prosperity (autonomy, competence, social support) correlates with positive feelings, indicating money may not mean happiness (Diener et al. 2010). In addition, feelings about well-being may differ by gender. Women's well-being, especially in poor countries, often is influenced by different factors from those of men (Hill and King 1995).

Initiatives such as ecotourism and sustainable tourism have overall goals of improving the well-being of local host communities (Mowforth and Munt 2009). For rural areas in the U.S., tourism has been associated with improved health conditions, reduced poverty, and higher rates of employment (Reeder and Brown 2005). In developing countries, tourism offers increased foreign exchange earnings and economic development (Jamieson 2003); however, due to problems such as unsupportive political structures, uneven distribution of benefits, and lack of education, host communities do not always receive the maximum benefits from tourism income (Tosun 2000). When addressing the impact of tourism in coastal communities in developing countries, the issue of benefits and costs is more vexing.

Coastal tourism often brings immense changes to communities. Waste disposal, mangrove clearance, chemical contamination, and erosion are examples of problems associated with large and small coastal resorts, some of which may cater to surf tourists (Hall 2001). Prostitution and violence brought on by localism (feelings of host community ownership of the waves) also have been identified as problems in places like Indonesia (Barilotti 2002). These problems may be especially problematic for community residents that are not involved in planning and organizing for the surf tourism industry; they feel alienated and unable to get involved (Ponting, McDonald, and Wearing 2005).

## Methods

This study is based on three weeks of field work conducted from December 2009 to January 2010 in the community of Las Salinas, Nicaragua. During the field work the primary researcher, who is fluent in Spanish and familiar with Central American culture through her experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guatemala, lived with a family in the community and participated in celebrations and holidays with them, as well as other social activities such as surfing and attending community baseball games.

The data collection methods involved participant observation and in-depth interviews. While there are quantitative measures of subjective well-being, previous experience in Central America with Likert-scale survey questions has indicated that this approach can be confusing to a population with minimal education (many residents in Las Salinas had not completed elementary school). Thus, we adopted a qualitative approach to data collection. Observations of community residents were documented through journaling and photographs. The in-depth interview process began with purposive criterion sampling to identify 27 residents (14 women and 13 men) who ranged in age from 18 to 60. Then, using an interview schedule based on questions employed in a previous study with community-based natural resource management groups in Namibia (Morais and Zinn 2010), residents were asked a series of questions about the positive and negative aspects of health, prosperity/work, relationships, nature and spirituality in their community. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed into Spanish by the primary researcher and two native Spanish speakers. Using NVIVO 8 software, the interviews were then open coded for themes associated with well-being (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Constant comparison was used to establish a list of codes, which were then grouped into categories and then themes (Strauss and Corbin 1990). For instance, in the first interview the participant indicated “tourism” was an important factor in economic prosperity, so the transcripts were reviewed for all other instances where other participants also discussed tourism in response to the prosperity question or others. After the primary researcher arrived at a preliminary list of codes, another researcher who spoke Spanish reviewed approximately 10 of the transcripts and challenged coding, interpretations and assumptions in a process known as peer debriefing (Creswell and Miller 2000). Similar codes were grouped together under the same categories. These categories were further condensed into themes which seemed to be the most important ones identified by the majority of the participants.

## Results and Discussion

Eight themes emerged with regard to the factors residents deemed important to well-being in the community, including: the seasons, caring for nature, foreigners, a poor economic situation, the government, religion, social problems, and a united community. Tourism, embedded within the “foreigners” theme, emerged as a major factor in community well-being. For example, a majority of the participants (20 out of 27) mentioned that tourism was a major contributing factor to employment and prosperity in the community. Tourists and foreigners bring aid or projects to the community and as such are seen as contributing to residents’ quality of life. Many of the study participants also discussed how there was little work to be found. Reasons for this included the study period being the off season for tourists, a bad economic situation in the country, and the government. As for other major themes that arose, since Nicaragua is in a tropical region, there are two seasons—rainy and dry. The seasons affect what type of work can be done, health, as well as other aspects of daily life. Salt cultivation is done in

the dry season and agriculture takes place in the rainy season. Mosquitoes, which bring disease, are much more prevalent in the dry season. As dependent as the community is on natural resources, some residents recognized the need to care for it, but noted that their feelings were not shared by all residents. Planting trees and trash management were two major topics that emerged in the in-depth interviews. Residents also discussed poverty in the context of the community or Nicaragua in general. The government was variously considered a detractor or a contributor to well-being depending on the respondent's perspective. While the government does helpful things like spray for mosquitoes, several participants claimed the government was responsible for the lack of work and land disputes. Religion was a major positive contributor to well-being according to participants. It brought peace to the community and discouraged bad behavior (i.e., partying, drinking, taking drugs). The bad behavior often led to conflict between families and friends, although other conflicts also were brought up, such as land disputes. Overall, however, most residents viewed the families within the community as united and willing to help one another out in times of need. Two major differences emerged between women's and men's responses; women were more likely to discuss problems that affected them in particular as well as education or schools.

This study supports the finding of the Nicaraguan economic study which found that tourism is making a positive economic impact and reducing poverty in the country (Croes and Vanegas Sr 2008). Similar to the results of other community well-being studies, religion was an important factor in community well-being (Christakopoulou, Dawson, and Gari 2001). In addition, residents' economic dependence on natural resources was evident (Morais and Zinn 2010; Stedman, Parkins, and Beckley 2004); social ties emerged as being crucial to well-being in the community (Christakopoulou, Dawson, and Gari 2001); and education emerged as something women regard as important (Hill and King 1995).

## **Conclusion**

As a community experiencing growth from surf tourism, Las Salinas is gaining some economic benefit from the industry, which residents regard as important to their well-being. However, religion and family solidarity also are major factors affecting well-being in this community as are jobs. As a community that survives on the land and the sea (through tourism, salt cultivation, and agriculture), seasons greatly affect how residents of the community are able to support themselves. Natural disasters and drought, the infestation of insects, and foreign aid can influence their very livelihoods and overall health. Overall, residents expressed positive views of their community, including good health and united families.

## **Significance to Industry**

Residents should be included in tourism development planning because foreign-owned establishments may not recognize the complex nature of the communities they are coming into. Tourism may help small communities like Las Salinas to generate more income and provide more job possibilities, but developers need to recognize that if tourism development disrupts things such as social networks, community life might be negatively affected even if more income is being generated. While local residents have been hired as workers in these establishments, they do not seem to have been including in any kind of integrated planning process for the development of surf tourism.

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