Tourism development at the Baptism Site of Jesus Christ, Jordan: Residents’ Perspectives

Abstract
Several studies have discussed the impacts of mass tourism on destinations and how local residents perceive such impacts. However, only a few studies have looked specifically at how sacred destinations and their residents are affected by religious tourism. This research note explores tourism’s impacts on the Baptismal Site of Jesus on the eastern side of the Jordan River in Jordan. The study also examines the perceptions of residents about these impacts. Interviews were conducted with staff at the site, including the manager, the conservationist and locals working in conservation and tour guiding. Findings revealed that religious tourism helped create a source of income in the area and enhanced the local infrastructure. Tourism was also perceived to help restore and protect archaeological remains. There is a general positive perception of tourism development; no negative sociocultural impacts were perceived. As well, it appears that residents have little concern for negative social impacts because their economic benefits outweigh any concerns, and there is minimal contact between tourists and residents.

Keywords:
impacts, resident perceptions, sustainable development, religious tourism, Baptismal Site of Jesus, Jordan, Christianity

Introduction
Sacred sites attract large numbers of tourists who seek cultural and/or religious experiences. There has been a sharp increase in the number of visitors, both religious and secular, to sacred destinations in recent years (Peaty, 2011; Stausberg, 2011; Timothy & Olsen, 2006), which has given rise to questions regarding the impacts of religious tourism on the communities where it occurs. There is a vast and growing literature on destination communities’ views and perceptions of the positive and negative economic, social and ecological impacts of tourism (e.g. Ambro, 2008; Besculides et al., 2002; Dyera et al., 2007; Jurowski & Gursoy, 2004; Liu & Var, 1986; Teye et al., 2002). Fewer in number, however, are studies that examine residents’ perceptions of tourism at religious heritage sites (Terzidou et al., 2008; Timothy, 2011).
The economic impacts of religious tourism, or pilgrimage, are similar to those of other types of tourism, although research has focused on income and employment generation, especially from facilities and services used by pilgrims and other tourists (Baedcharoen, 2000; Terzidou et al., 2008; Simone-Charteris & Boyd, 2010; Karar, 2010; Vukonic, 2002). Other impacts have been identified as improving facilities and services in sacred sites and their surroundings (Brayley, 2010; Tirca et al., 2010) and environmental and cultural conservation of scared spaces (Deil et al., 2005). Generally these impacts are perceived positively by local residents (Terzidou et al., 2008; Karar, 2010). In Baedcharoen’s (2000) study of religious tourism in Thailand, residents were largely unconcerned about negative outcomes (e.g. crowding, pressure on facilities and services). Instead, they were more concerned with their employment needs and saw this as a benefit of religious tourism.

This research note describes some of the perceptions of resident workers about the impacts of tourism development at a religious site in Jordan. It presents the case of the Baptism Site of Jesus Christ in the area of esh-Shuneh South, on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Since its 2000 designation by the Jordanian government as the Baptism Site of Jesus Christ, thousands of tourists have come to visit as pilgrims, heritage tourists and ecotourists. This has so far generated significant levels of income to the immediate area, as well as improvements in infrastructure and municipal services. This paper explores these changes and other impacts of tourism development, and if they are perceived by residents from surrounding villages who work at the site.

Background of The Baptismal Site and the Community
Christians have undertaken pilgrimages to locations linked to the ministry of Jesus since the fourth century (Ron, 2009). After visiting Jerusalem (the place of Jesus’ death and resurrection) and Bethlehem (the place of Jesus’ birth), some pilgrims continued their journey by crossing the Jordan River to the eastern side. There they visited important sites from the Old and New Testaments, including Bethany on the River, where tradition places the location of Jesus’ baptism. Today, Bethany, or al-Maghtas in Arabic, is a destination for hundreds of thousands of Christian pilgrims each year, particularly during Epiphany (a Christian holiday on January 06 celebrating the visit of the Magi to the infant Jesus), and Theophany (commemoration of Christ’s baptism by John the Baptist) (Sayegh, 2004).

The Jordan River forms the border between Jordan and Israeli-controlled West Bank. There is disagreement between Jordan and Israel on the precise location of the baptismal site on the river. Since 1994, each country has claimed the authentic site was on its side of the border, even though at present they lie only a few meters apart. From Israel’s perspective, Qasr Al-Yahud, which was closed in 1967-68 owing to its location beyond the security fence and within a restricted military zone, is the true baptismal place. Nevertheless, each year some 600,000 Christian pilgrims visit Yardenit located on the Jordan River where it meets the Sea of Galilee (Stourton, 2009). Because Qasr Al-Yahud was inaccessible to tourists, Yardenit was developed as an alternative baptismal site. It includes a baptismal complex (dressing rooms, stairway down into the river, a restaurant and a shop) and was built in 1981 by Kibbutz Kinneret (which still runs the site) with the assistance of the Israeli Ministry of Tourism (Kibbutz Kinneret Group, 2012).

In May 2011, Israel officially reopened Qasr Al-Yahud on the west bank of the Jordan, near Jericho. The Jordanian government protested the opening of the
Israeli side, claiming that the parallel Jordanian site is the authentic one and that it had been recognized as such by the Vatican and Pope John Paul II, who attended its inauguration in 2000. This binational disagreement has two elements. The first is cultural and historical, and concerns a significant event in the history of Christianity. The second element is economic; Jordan is concerned that opening the Israeli site will result in fewer Christian visitors to the Jordanian side of the border (Worldwide Religious News, 2011).

Archaeological remains on the eastern side of the river, passages in the New Testament, and accounts of early pilgrims, are seen as evidence by the Jordanian government that Bethany is the baptismal site of Jesus Christ (Mkhijian & Kanellopoulos, 2003; Waheeb, 2001). The evidence has also convinced many church leaders of various sects that al-Maghtas/Bethany, Jordan, is the authentic site of the holy event. Regardless of this bi-national dissonance, the Jordanian side of the border has experienced healthy levels of visitation since the site’s 2000 inauguration.

After Jordan’s 2000 declaration of al-Maghtas/Bethany as the formal baptismal site, thousands of tourists and pilgrims visited the location and its surroundings. The Jordanian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MOTA) provides data on increased visitation between 2001 and 2010 (Table 1). Visits to the baptismal site reached 160,673 in 2010, of which 10,743 were domestic and 149,930 were international. According to the director of the Baptism Site Commission (Jordan Press Foundation, 2009), most tourists include different Christian denominations. Visitors also include non-Christians who visit the site to see the Jordan River and the area’s archaeology. Pilgrim-tourists visiting in January to celebrate Epiphany can enter the site without paying and are therefore not included in the statistical records of MOTA. In 2009, European tourists accounted for the majority of site visitors (60%), followed
by Americans (15%), and individuals from Jordan, the broader Middle East and Asia (25%).

The director noted that in 2009, approximately 60,000 Jordanian dinars (JD) were earned from entrance fees (3 JD for Jordanians, 5 JD for Arab tourists, and 12 JD for other tourists--1 JD equals US $1.40). This amount was adequate to cover the site’s operational costs (Jordan Press Foundation, 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>International</th>
<th>Jordanians</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Relative Change %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>54,737</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>55,261</td>
<td>01/02 0.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>42,092</td>
<td>02/03 -23.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>43,337</td>
<td>8,274</td>
<td>51,611</td>
<td>03/04 22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>64,155</td>
<td>9,314</td>
<td>73,469</td>
<td>04/05 42.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>57,360</td>
<td>8,394</td>
<td>65,754</td>
<td>05/06 -10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>83,096</td>
<td>9,551</td>
<td>92,647</td>
<td>06/07 40.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>132,587</td>
<td>9,832</td>
<td>142,419</td>
<td>07/08 53.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>122,860</td>
<td>11,312</td>
<td>134,172</td>
<td>08/09 -5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>149,930</td>
<td>10,743</td>
<td>160,673</td>
<td>09/10 19.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (2011)

In May 2010, the Commission decided to allocate 350 acres of the site to private investment with the intention of building hotels and pilgrim stations. There is potential to host different types of tourists in the future besides pilgrims. The site has been equipped with necessary facilities for conferences and incentives tourism, and is also endowed with over 500 species of flora and fauna, which managers feel could be used to extend the product to nature-based tourism. As well, managers plan to sign contracts with several companies that will pump water from the river, purify it, and fill bottles for commercial purposes (Jordan Press Foundation, 2010).
Since its opening, the baptismal site has witnessed the establishment of several churches devoted to ceremonies and rituals of different Christian denominations. These include a Russian pilgrimage house, a Roman Catholic church, a Roman Orthodox monastery and a Coptic church. When Pope Benedict XVI visited in May 2009, he blessed the foundation stones of the new Latin and Greek Melkite churches (Jordan Press Foundation, 2009).

Near the site are several small settlements. A number of members of the communities are employed at the site as maintenance workers, preservationists, guides and shopkeepers. Most of the significant tourist services are provided further away near the Dead Sea or gateway cities.

**Managing and Developing the Site**

According to Olsen (2006, 2009) and Shackley (2001), the primary mandate of religious site staff is to preserve the emotive qualities of the place as a way of creating and maintaining an atmosphere conducive to worship. Grimwade and Carter (2000) suggest that achieving this is possible through a well-planned preservation and conservation process, and an effective interpretive program. These requirements exist at the Baptism Site of Jesus Christ. In terms of preservation, a specialized team of local residents is trained to conserve archaeological remains and to construct amenities such as trails and rest areas. Both are done in ways that preserve the site’s environment. Moreover, different interpretive methods are available at the site, including signs, brochures and audio presentations.

In 2001, the Jordanian government legislated the Baptism Site Commission, which allocated seven square kilometers as the total area of the site. The Commission’s role is to preserve the archaeological remains, protect the ecosystem
and watershed from agricultural and urban activities in adjacent villages, provide the site with necessary amenities to serve tourists, and distribute different interpretive materials.

According to the site manager, infrastructure development began in 1999. Roads were paved to the site, connected it to nearby villages. Electricity, water and telecommunications were also provided at that time. Multi-use trails for wheelchair-bound visitors and pedestrians are plentiful, and a visitor center was built and includes souvenir shops, two restaurants, a presentation room, a museum, a clinic, a VIP lounge, and staff offices. There are car parks, drinking fountains, and several palm-fronded rest areas. There are two newly-built baptism pools, which are filled with running water from the Jordan River. After being used for baptisms, the water is pumped back into the river to sustain the scarce resource. These pools have chambers where pilgrims can change into white clothing, which is required for baptism rituals. A wooden platform with stairs was constructed on the bank of the river to help people descend into the water.

The manager noted that most workers at the site are from surrounding villages, including esh-Shuneh South, al-Karameh, er-Ramah, al-Kafrin, Sweimeh, Nimreen West, Nimreen North and a few others. Most residents of the villages work in agriculture or operate small shops. When archaeological explorations started in 1994, local workers numbered more than 100 individuals, but when the excavations ended in 2000, only a few individuals were hired for restoration works and guiding services.

Methods
As part of an ongoing research project, a few data-collection methods were used. Field visits and observations of physical changes at the site after tourism development
were undertaken. As well, in-depth interviews with villagers who work at the site were done to find out their perceptions of tourism’s economic, environmental, and sociocultural impacts. Economic impacts included employment for the community, establishment of tourist facilities, and prices of goods and real estate. Environmental impacts include archaeological preservation, pollution and community awareness of environmental issues. The social impacts of concern included community cohesiveness, self-esteem, protecting traditional handicrafts, relations between tourist and locals, learning new skills, meeting people from other cultures, and the potential for the community to adopt negative values from the tourists.

During the interviews, gender, marital status, age, education, the nature of their work in tourism, and if they have other jobs were also recorded. The author filled in responses of participants on forms previously prepared for this purpose. Interviews occurred onsite in October 2007 with thirteen individuals comprised of guides, drivers and restoration workers. Their ages ranged from 20 to 40. Two had undergraduate university degrees; three graduated high school, while the rest had only an elementary education. Most interviewees had no other employment besides their work at the baptismal site. It was not possible to interview all local workers, as some of them were working at less-accessible parts of the site. The small sample size precluded quantitative analysis. As well, all interviewees were men, which may also create a gender bias in the assessment. However, this research note does highlight some foundational patterns apparent at this relatively new, albeit ancient, religious tourist attraction.

**Observed Environmental Changes**
Tourism has made an important contribution to archaeological preservation at the site. In addition to restoration works, the implementation of different visitor management tools helped avoid physical damage; access to sensitive areas (e.g. mosaic floors and caves) was eliminated by wood bridges and rope fencing. Trails were laid over the area to regulate visitor mobility. A wooden floor was overlaid at the Church of the Arch (on Elijah’s Hill) except for a small section where a piece of mosaic floor is uncovered, making it possible to view this portion without damaging it. The Commission erected wood bridges and paths around the features of Elijah’s Hill to prevent random climbing on the archaeological foundations.

In an interview with the head conservationist, the author acquired additional information about conservation procedures on-site. According to him, “the site is unique in many aspects, not only for its religious and archaeological significance; the uniqueness is even seen in the natural threats facing it, such as earthquakes and river flooding. The site's architectural features are built of sandstone, a very sensitive material to both weathering and visitors’ behavior; consequently it requires special treatment”. He also noted how high temperatures and humidity increase the destruction of plaster walls and mosaic floors. Special treatments are implemented to cure and prevent such damage. Having local residents working in restoration had a positive impact; it increased their awareness about how to manage site features. They recognize sensitive areas and are therefore able to avoid negative behaviors such as accidental stepping and climbing, and they learn to sport special shoes that reduce wear and tear.

**Resident Perceptions of tourism development**

*Economic impacts*
Most participants perceived the economic impacts of tourism positively. There was a general agreement that tourism improves their income levels. One interviewee noted, “There was an increase in our salaries by several times. For me, I now have the ability better than before to support my family”. However, one respondent said “Not really. Only those of us who work at the site get such benefits”.

All respondents agreed that tourism contributes to infrastructure and service improvements in the region. According to one person, “Water and electricity reached the villages surrounding the site since its discovery”. Another participant said “Roads were laid down between the site and nearby villages; transportation and lighting in the area were also supplied”. Additional perspectives were noted by one of the workers: “After opening the site for visitors, the pesticide used to kill yellow flies was a great advantage” and “a cleaning staff member was employed to keep the area clean”. Most participants agreed that tourism helped establish hotels and tourism facilities in the Dead Sea area, 8 km away. However, one person said “Having those hotels near the Dead Sea made some small businesses [closer to the baptismal site] go out of business; one of them was a restaurant. Since hotels are providing tourists with services, no one will come to shops and restaurants close to the site.”

As for inflated merchandise costs, none of the workers connected this with tourism. However, they did note the relationship between inflated real estate costs and tourism, suggesting they had taken notice of increased land prices as tourism began to develop in the area.

Environmental impacts

All interviewees agreed that tourism contributed to the preservation of the archaeological site. Some of them expressed the skills benefits of being involved in
archaeological work. One in particular noted, “We learned how to restore the site, also how to uncover mosaic floors and to conserve them.” Another man stated that “I have now the ability to date some pottery pieces and coins.” None of the participants perceived any environmental pollution or deterioration of the site. In fact, one stated that “the staff keeps the site clean. There are also signs that prohibit smoking and littering.” Also, “the management of the site does not allow cars and vehicles to enter the site, so there is no noise pollution”. Only three of them observed that tourism really contributes to enhancing their awareness about environmental issues.

Sociocultural impacts

Some of the respondents observed that religious tourism at Bethany does help in sustaining Jordanian handicraft traditions. They mentioned that craft pieces are sold in the souvenir shops in the visitor center, and most of these pieces are made in Jordan. Although some respondents suggested that their village handicrafts are not sold. For example, “There are people in the surrounding villages who are really skillful. They have the ability to make traditional crafted pieces, but they do not have any financial support. As well, “There was a distinguished pottery-making tradition in these villages, but it has almost vanished now”.

Some interviewees said they learned a lot by working at the site, becoming more aware of archaeological periods, and more aware of new concepts such as Christianity and the notion of baptism. This outcome is significant since all of the locals are Muslims. All workers demonstrated tolerance and respect toward Christian pilgrims who visit the site.

Most respondents agreed that tourism instilled civic pride in their community, especially that a unique site like this one was discovered in their area. All agreed that
tourism gave them opportunities to meet new people of different cultural backgrounds (i.e. religions, languages, and habits). Although, it was pointed out that only local tour guides had the chance to interact directly with foreigners, since it is part of their work. There is a general respect held for religious tourists by local residents, but they did point out that their contact does not develop into friendships.

A few respondents claimed that tourism contributes to strengthening local social bonds. One man stated, “We have the chance to get to know each other (other workers). We are from different villages”. Another person said “In the past, I could not have taken trips to nearby villages where my relatives live. My financial status at that time was not that good, but after working here and having income, I take frequent trips to see my relatives”. Participants were unanimous in suggesting that tourism does not contribute to spreading negative values within their communities.

**Conclusion**

In general there is a positive local perception about tourism development at the Baptism Site of Jesus Christ, supporting the findings of other studies that discuss the impacts of religious tourism (e.g. Terzidou et al 2008; Baedcharoen 2000; Karar 2010). Dyera et al (2007) stated that perceived positive economic impacts among destination residents have a strong influence on their perceptions. In the case of the baptism site, several benefits were agreed upon by interviewees. These include having an added source of income and providing the community with better physical infrastructure. Moreover, residents working at the site learned new skills in archaeology and restoration; they also gained more knowledge about the history of the area and became proud of having such a significant site nearby. All of these benefits increased the level of solidarity and place attachment among locals, and their
appreciation of area resources. This finding is consistent with the findings of Williams et al (1995) and Gursoy and Rutherford (2004), where place attachment had a strong influence on residents’ positive perceptions of tourism.

However, because most direct economic benefits are realized by relatively few residents, there is an urgent need to enable other community members to benefit from tourism development. Site managers can provide greater support for the production of local handicrafts (e.g. pottery and hand-made carpets), which is possible by funding micro-enterprises and creating outlets for direct sales of local products at shops in the visitor center and in surrounding villages. As well, nearby communities still need improved infrastructure, landscaping, and tourism facilities (e.g. shops, rest houses and restaurants), which will benefit communities directly (e.g. roads and sewer lines) and indirectly (e.g. employment).

The perceived impacts of tourism have been a focus of empirical research since the 1970s. It is understood that directing tourism growth toward local needs can significantly enhance its value to the community. Often, this makes the community perceive tourism more positively and helps create a more sustainable industry with a significant economic value. The attitudes and behaviors of destination residents can influence the satisfaction and overall experience of tourists. Such cognitions are strongly influenced by how locals perceive tourism development.

This descriptive case study confirms what many others have said about the perceived effects of tourism at heritage sites (cf Timothy, 2011). It also illustrates that the economic, social and physical impacts of tourism on a religious site, according to community members who work at the site, are little different than those impacts at other kinds of cultural attractions. There is, however, potential for increased
community participation in providing services for pilgrims and other tourists, including handicraft production and souvenir sales.

References


