AUTHENTICITY IS IN THE EYE OF THE STAKEHOLDER:

USING LOCAL PERCEPTIONS TO PLAN FOR NATURAL HERITAGE TOURISM IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

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Authenticity in Tourism Research

“Sightseers are motivated by a desire to see life as it is really lived, even to get in with the natives.” ...

“The motive behind a pilgrimage is similar to that behind a tour: both are quests for authentic experiences.” ...

“This type of experience is produced through the use of a new kind of social space ... for outsiders who are permitted to view details of the inner operation of a commercial, domestic, industrial or public institution.” ...

“What is being shown to tourists is not the institutional ‘backstage,’ as Goffman defined this term. Rather, it is a staged back region, a kind of living museum for which we have no analytical terms.”

~Dean MacCannell (1973)

An Objective Version of Authenticity

Authenticity = Genuine (i.e. a claim is a fact)
  e.g. a museum artifact is authentic if it is truly what it is represented to be, according to experts

Authenticity = Unspoiled (i.e. unmarred by society)
  e.g. a forest is authentic if it has not been harvested or altered by human activities

Authenticity = Traditional (i.e. belonging to locals/natives)
  e.g. tourism souvenirs are authentic if they are crafted by local people using customary techniques

~Ning Wang (1999)

Source: Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience.
“In different and unknown contexts tourists need clear and reliable information. ... Such information is provided by an ever-increasing number of guidebooks, television broadcasts, travel magazines or tour operators ... [which] create a certain anticipation for the kind of places they later choose to visit. As a consequence, they know what to look for, or how to gaze at or read landscapes, landmarks and cultural features.”

~Norman Backhaus (2003)

"Tourism operators play a pivotal role in shaping motivations for travel because tourists usually lack access to information that can provide them with insight about the places they seek to visit. Thus, most people turn to advertisements and brochures to help them plan vacations.

“Like most marketing strategies, the images that the tourism industry promotes are geared toward selling the product that is being advertised. Tour operators are chiefly concerned with marketing images of authentic culture, and they tend to be motivated more by profit than by any genuine sensitivity toward representing indigenous people in a fair and accurate manner.”

~Ira Silver (1993)

“For ethnographers, tourists and indigenous peoples the question to ask is not if authenticity is inherent in an object, as if it were a thing out there to be discovered or unearthed, but rather the question becomes, how is authenticity constructed?”

~Edward Bruner (1989)
Finding Authenticity in Local Perceptions

Authenticity is a negotiated construct, and the discourse generally occurs between tourists and providers in the tourism industry.

Yet authenticity is a characteristic inherent in local people, who inhabit the tourism destination.

Locals should also be involved in the dialogue of what is authentic.
Research Questions

How do residents of the Mississippi Delta perceive of the natural resources in their area?

What is “authentic” about nature in the Delta, and how do residents construct this sense of authenticity?

How do the perceptions of those involved in the management of natural resources (i.e. “experts”) differ from those of the general public (i.e. “locals”)?
Study Site: The Mississippi Delta

19 County region in Northwestern Mississippi; encompasses the Yazoo-Mississippi floodplain
Tourism in the Delta

Historically, tourism in the Delta has been characterized by decentralized efforts as well as fragmentation with each Delta community competing for tourists, money and prestige.

~Stephen A. King (2005)

Source: Race and Blues Tourism.  
(1) Telephone Survey
   Conducted in Feb./Mar. 2005
   Simple random sample of 1,009 respondents
   (random digit dialing)

(2) Key Informant Interviews
   11 interviews with 16 natural resource & tourism
   experts from federal & state agencies, private
   conservation organizations, and tourism boards

(3) Focus Groups
   3 focus groups with 13 citizens in one Delta
   county
Findings

Local residents believe that heritage tourism, including to natural areas, has tremendous potential in the Mississippi Delta, and that currently this potential is unfulfilled.

Local residents have a more holistic view of natural resources than experts, and readily connect nature to other heritage stories.

Authenticity is a fluid, living concept to locals.
A Holistic View

When asked to name various natural history sites in the Mississippi Delta, focus group respondents named:

- Blues & Blues Clubs
- Railroads
- Historic Buildings
- Churches
- Cemeteries
- Restaurants
- Moonshiners
- Local Celebrities
- Families & Reunions
- Research Facilities
- Highways/Corridors (e.g. Bicycle trails)
- Indian Mounds
- Mississippi River
- Parks & Refuges
- Lakes & Fishing
- Hunting Clubs
- Soil
- Agriculture (Plantations, Cotton, Mechanization)
“The Mississippi River is the most authentic and undisputed concept of the Mississippi Delta, because when we talk about the river it’s just not a physical place, it takes on the personification of a man, takes on the personification of being a provider, takes on the personification of being our means of livelihood. So it’s an employer, our transportation. ... It truly is a man who does not like to be disrespected. Lots of lives have been lost in the river. It gets angry, it floods. ... And he’s a man in the sense that we who live here respectfully learn most of our life’s lessons from our observations and dealings with the River. The River can take a boy and make him into a man because the life of the Mississippi Delta rests on the River so he is the man who has given birth to all we have learned to appreciate.”

~Focus Group Informant
Recommendations

Residents should have a say in how tourism is carried out in their area, to truly capture an authentic sense of local heritage.

Planning for heritage preservation and tourism should use a landscape approach.

Heritage Areas link various tourist stories, and create a version of authenticity that better represents local knowledge.

Challenge: Superseding the fragmented nature of tourism in the Delta; a heritage area has the potential to unite Delta communities and create a regional approach to marketing heritage.