Case study

Community impact of the camel safari industry in Jaisalmar, Rajasthan

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The isolated desert city of Jaisalmar (Rajasthan, north-west India) now receives over 200,000 visitors per year, mainly as the result of the promotion of camel safaris to the Thar desert. Jaisalmar has a camel surplus because of mechanized farming, with animals redeployed into the safari business. Considerable profits are generated for camel owners and safari operators but these are directly returned to the local community either to finance a larger family or to buy more camels. This industry now controls the Jaisalmar economy but poor regulation threatens its sustainability with worrying implications for employment and environmental management. Copyright © 1996 Elsevier Science Ltd

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The 'Golden City' of Jaisalmar came to prosperity in the 12th century as a staging post on the caravan route across the Thar (Great Indian) desert of Rajasthan. Today, this extraordinary medieval town, almost exclusively built of honey-coloured sandstone (hence the nickname), is experiencing a renaissance owing to the uncontrolled expansion of tourism based round the camel safari industry. Jaisalmar, the westernmost city in India, has a population base of only 39,000 but is currently receiving nearly 190,000 visitors per year (growing at 25%), nearly 75% of whom are domestic tourists. In theory the camel safari business should absorb a local surfeit of camels which exists since many of their traditional agricultural functions (such as drawing water carts) have been replaced by tractors. At least 300–400 camels are available for hire in Jaisalmar and a camel owner entering the safari business can earn up to Rs300 (c.£12) per month in season, a vast sum in an area where a rural family can live for a week on Rs120 (c.£0.50). Tourism, especially camel safaris, now sustains the economy of Jaisalmar but its survival is imperilled by the lack of economic or environmental regulations. This study suggests various methods to generate revenue for financing impact control measures, thus maximizing sustainable community benefits.

Tourism in Rajasthan
Rajasthan is one of India's major tourism destinations, with international visitors generally making a circuit of its spectacular Rajput and Mughal cities, forts and palaces such as Jodhpur, Jaipur and the Lake Palace at Udaipur. In addition to organized culture tours many European operators are now offering 'rural Rajasthan' experiences which offer visitors the opportunity to sample village life, now including the Pushkar Camel Fair, held annually in November and currently attracting nearly a quarter of a million visitors. The province also includes major wildlife sanctuaries at the Ranthambore and Keoladeo National Parks. Western Rajasthan comprises the forbidding Great Indian (Thar) desert which receives less than 150mm of rain per year. Here diurnal temperatures range from 50°C to −4°C and the landscape alternates be-
between flat rocky areas dominated by sparse khair (*Acacia catech*) and khejri (*Prosopsis cineraria*) vegetation with large areas of sand dunes. Some 3000 km² has been designated as the Thar Desert National Park where the local Bishkois people protect the chinkara, black buck, desert fox and Great Indian bustard found in the area. The population of Rajasthan contains twice the Indian average of tribal people (12%) such as the Bishkois, many of whom are being slowly absorbed into mainstream Indian life. The effects of this acculturation, in-
increasing western influence and the changes caused by the rising tide of tourism are being studied at the Institute of Tribal Research (Udaipur) and the Central Arid Zone Research Institute at Jaisalmar. A location map is given in Figure 1.

Tourism in Jaisalmar

After its founding by Prince Jaisal in 1156, the city of Jaisalmar grew to be a prosperous staging post in the southern branch of the Silk Road crossing the Thar desert. Wealthy merchants built themselves magnificent houses (havelis) and temples which are popular visitor attractions today. Jaisalmar declined with the fall of the Mughal Empire at the same time as the growth in maritime trade between India and the West made the old camel caravan routes redundant. This decline was confirmed by the Partition of India in 1947. However, subsequent wars with Pakistan (1965 and 1971) necessitated the building of a road and improved rail links between Jodhpur and Jaisalmar, providing the necessary infrastructure for today’s developing tourism industry. Tourism to Jaisalmar became established after this period and has grown from less than 2000 visitors in 1974 to nearly 200,000 20 years later. This rapid growth is the result of two factors: the development and promotion of a very specific product (camel safari) for the international market and the attractions of the city for rapidly increasing volumes of domestic tourism after 1980. The growth has not been smooth: Indian tourism felt the effects of global political events such as the Gulf War. During the early 1990s international arrivals were affected by the European recession and in 1994 tourism is predicted to have slumped by more than 30% as a result of health worries generated by outbreaks of plague and cerebral malaria.1,2

Visitors are also attracted to Jaisalmar by the Desert Festival, held in February, which is a recent Tourism Department promotion featuring camel polo and camel acrobatics. Local accommodation is fully booked at this time and price surcharges are substantial, a phenomenon already well established at the Pushkar Camel Fair where prices for all tourism services multiply by 10 on the day on which the fair starts.

Visitor origins

Today’s visitors have three distinct areas of origin. Although no detailed statistics are kept it appears that international visitors are predominantly Western European in origin (particularly French, German and Dutch) although there is a trend towards increased visitation from Asia, particularly Japan, partly as a result of successful Indian policies of language training and international tour guides. Such international visitors are almost exclusively motivated by the opportunity to take a camel safari, although while in the city they visit notable buildings such as the Rajput fort, seven-storey palace and the merchant houses. Indian domestic tourists originate in either the neighbouring province of Gujurat or in Bengal. Gujurat is a state where alcohol is not sold whereas Rajasthan has no such restrictions, with the result that Jaisalmar attracts Gujuratis making social visits. Such tourists seldom take a full safari but generally make an evening visit to the nearest accessible sand dunes for a party accompanied by Rajasthani music and cultural entertainment. They may, occasionally, take a short camel ride in the course of such a visit. Bengali visitors are attracted because Jaisalmar featured in a 1992 film ‘The Golden City’ made by the popular Indian film director Satajit Ray, with a Bengali soundtrack. Many visitors come to see the locations used in the film and, like Gujaratis, they seldom take a camel safari.

Tourist accommodation

The accommodation base in Jaisalmar is increasing very rapidly although in a totally uncontrolled manner. An estimated 700 bedspaces are now available with the most rapid increases at the extreme ends of the market. At the height of the 1993 season Jaisalmar accommodation was booked to 100% capacity (Singh, personal communication) and hotels put up tents in their gardens to avoid turning business away. The year 1993 saw the building of a new 50-room luxury hotel with family-run budget hotels being established on an almost daily basis. A relatively small proportion of hotels are recognized by the Ministry of Tourism and standards in smaller establishments are often very poor. Two major international hotel chains, Oberoi and Taj hotels, have bought land in Jaisalmar for hotel construction but building has not yet started.

At present all Jaisalmar hotels are privately owned, and with one exception the owners are in-migrants from elsewhere in India rather than Jaisalmaris. Despite the prosperity derived from the tourism industry Rajasthan remains a poor province and local people are unable to accumulate the necessary capital to start a hotel, although government assistance with 75% of the cost is available. This results in substantial economic leakages to neighbouring provinces. Moreover, non-Jaisalmaris owned hotels are generally staffed by family members, meaning that local people have few employment opportunities within the accommodation sector.

The camel safari business

The tourist wishing to take a camel safari from Jaisalmar is faced with a plethora of options. These include the length of the trip, which may be anything from a single day to several weeks, and the standard of service, from very basic to ultra luxurious. A typical safari would not cover more than 20km per day, and many would do considerably less. Progress is stated, though uncomfortable. Some operators offer a package (to include the cost of the camel, driver, guide, tent-based accommodation and food) whereas others offer a low price based simply on the hire of camel and guide with everything else being optional. Generally, each tourist on a camel safari employs two or three camels, one for personal use, one for the use of the guide and one as a pack animal, although this number is reduced for very short trips, larger parties or where supplies are ferried to evening.
Jaisalmar has a surfeit of camels as many of their traditional agricultural functions have been replaced by tractors. The central delivery of water supplies to rural villages by tankers has largely replaced the need for camel-drawn water carts and motorized transport has replaced camel caravans. Many camels remained idle outside the four-month agricultural season, costing families considerable sums in fodder. This camel surplus is being utilized in the safari industry which is seasonal, peaking in November–March, releasing the camels to work on farms for the rest of the year, if they are required.

Although the profit margin of a safari operator may be quite small there are additional factors such as profit on alcoholic drinks sold and high levels of gratuities. These are usually ploughed back into the business but virtually no operations are sufficiently profitable to finance any effective marketing. The best survive on their reputations and tried-and-tested associations with international tour operators. Many of the better operators work in association with good quality hotels. The owners of individual camels leased to tour operators can also make substantial sums, most of which is profit. This money returns directly to the local community where it is immediately used either to buy more camels or to enable the owner to afford a larger family (average family size in rural Rajasthan is seven children). Any surplus is converted to jewellery which is worn by the women of the family and exchanged as part of dowries. Virtually none of the profit from the camel safari business enters the banking system, representing something of an economic dead end. Moreover, since the accommodation providers are generally not Jaisalmari, employment opportunities within the safari business for non camel owners are very limited.

The town also benefits from tourist money spent on handicrafts, together with ancillary spent on taxis, tips, drinks etc and at restaurants. However, very little of the profits from the handicrafts industry is returned to the villages where the goods are made. Most local handicrafts, such as embroidered work on fabrics, are made by village women commissioned by wholesalers operating out of Jaisalmar. These wholesalers will supply the raw materials and buy the finished product for a minimal sum. They then re-sell the product to local shops at a considerable profit or deal directly with exporters. The difference between the price paid to the individual craftsperson and the price charged to a customer in a Jaisalmar shop may be as much as 500%. It is hoped that in the future (Barara, personal communication) some progress can be made towards rectifying this inequitable situation by instituting a form of handicraft cooperative supplying village women with raw materials and buying the products for a realistic price. 3, 4

Although no figures are available it seems probable that tourism now completely dominates the fragile economy of Jaisalmar. 5 Other revenue for the town comes from the considerable military presence consequent upon its frontier position with Pakistan, and from agricultural activities. Jaisalmar currently has little competition in the camel safari market although it is possible to take a safari from other locations (e.g. Bikaner). Jaisalmar remains the clear market leader. In addition to tourism some local people derive illegal income from smuggling precious metals, alcohol, tobacco and drugs across the border utilizing the old caravan trade routes. Many local people routinely take opium and it is sometimes offered to tourists by less reputable safari operators. There is, as yet, no evidence to suggest the development of drug-related tourism and the utilization of the old caravan routes adds to the generally romantic appeal of the safari experience. 5

**Socioeconomic impact**

Camels are bred by a particular caste (the Raika) who specialize in this activity. They are generally sold to new owners at the age of about four years with a market price of around Rs7–800 (approximately £200) and an anticipated working life of 10 to 15 years, depending on treatment. Currently, Jaisalmar has a surfeit of camels as many of their traditional agricultural functions have been replaced by tractors. The central delivery of water supplies to rural villages by tankers has largely replaced the need for camel-drawn water carts and motorized transport has replaced camel caravans. Many camels remained idle outside the four-month agricultural season, costing families considerable sums in fodder. This camel surplus is being utilized in the safari industry which is seasonal, peaking in November–March, releasing the camels to work on farms for the rest of the year, if they are required.

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**Environmental and sociocultural impact**

Most international visitors opt to take a short camel safari of three or four days in length, with few going for the longer options which can involve up to 11 days' desert travel between Bikaner and Jaisalmar. Larger operators in-
sustain their staff and provide back-up services such as camel-cart or jeep transport in the case of problems. No such guarantees of employment or insurance are available from small operators, some of which are merely shell organizations which operate only when a customer appears. Local employment opportunities include acting as a tour guide, either in an official capacity attached to a hotel or tour operator, or else unofficially by touring for business. Other beneficiaries from tourism are handicraft sellers, stallholders in the bazaar, taxi drivers and food providers.

Proximity to the border with Pakistan has had some interesting implications for the camel safari business. There are restrictions on areas where safari groups may travel. The fact that no safari operator is allowed to carry a radio so near to the border but all wish to remain relatively accessible in case of difficulties has resulted in the establishment of a well-worn circular safari route approximately 40km in length between Jaisalmar and the Sam sand dunes. No toilet facilities are available on any of the routes with the result that they are littered with toilet paper like some of the over-frequented trekking routes of Nepal. The safari route intersects a good quality road at various points where the safari can be met by a tour operator’s jeep. This gives visitors the opportunity to take treks of varying lengths and to see different landscapes, with the option of visiting the inhabited and deserted villages and the myriad temples and monuments in the area. Many visitors welcome the opportunity to gain direct experience of rural Rajasthani village life, a type of ethnic tourism becoming increasingly popular in India.

The Sam sand dunes have developed as a focal point for camel safaris and almost all treks will visit them at some point. A visitor with insufficient time to take a full safari can visit the dunes by jeep and take a camel ride on arrival, an excursion normally timed to coincide with the spectacular sunrise and sunset over the dunes. Rajasthan’s Department of Tourism has established some bungalow accommodation here, although it is seldom used. and private enterprise has resulted in a rash of ugly and unhygienic small stalls selling drinks and/or camel rides.

Tourists on camel safaris are largely self-sufficient and do not purchase food supplies from local villages, although they do take certain amounts of firewood from the desert and water from local wells. There is no evidence to suggest that this has any adverse effects on villages. Local villagers within the circuit are accustomed to seeing tourists and are both friendly and curious. Few adverse sociocultural impacts can be seen although some Muslim villages complain of visitors’ immodest dress. Safari operators seem quite unaware of any potentially adverse environmental or sociocultural impacts and make no attempt to brief their clients on appropriate modes of behaviour. Unlike central Jaisalmar, which also has considerable problems with touts, beggars and children pestering visitors, the idea of charging for photographs has not yet spread to outlying villages. The unacceptable levels of hassle suffered by visitors to Jaisalmar are on a par with certain areas of North Africa, and this may in the future deter potential clients. The rising tide of tourism is also having a direct environmental impact on local architecture. Within the fort area of Jaisalmar building restrictions are in place which supposedly limit construction and ensure architectural harmony. These are being ignored and new hotels are being illegally constructed, some made of concrete in non-traditional styles.

Conclusions

The economy of Jaisalmar has now become inextricably linked with the rapid expansion of tourism. Its people are now accustomed to accommodating nearly five times as many visitors as local residents during each tourist season. Such a large volume of visitors will inevitably have significant socioeconomic impacts, particularly where the industry is subject to minimal regulation. It is probable that although Indian domestic tourists comprise nearly 75% of all visitors, they have less overall adverse negative impact. They also spend considerably less and stay for a much shorter time. The best economic opportunities for local people are provided by the camel safari business, which is primarily geared towards international tourists who are charged higher rates for both accommodation and safaris. The future of the camel safari business in Jaisalmar depends on the continued growth in special-interest activity travel and the ability of the city to sustain a reputation for providing a high-quality visitor experience. This is currently imperilled by the proliferation of small unregulated accommodation and camel safari enterprises. Parallels may be seen here with the rapid expansion of small trekking-related enterprises in Nepal, which experienced similar difficulties with competition for market share. Local people are only able to establish new businesses at the cheaper end of the market and such operations have fragile profit margins and provide dubious service quality. Many stay in business only a short time and would profit from networking, the formation of cooperatives and improved industrial organization. It would, however, be possible to set the industry on a firmer footing by developing and policing a set of government regulations licensing operators who conform to predetermined standards. However, it would still be difficult to forecast the future of the safari business with any certainty, as tourism in the area is still subject to unpredictable factors such as the 1994 outbreak of cerebral malaria or possible future border disputes.

It is difficult to estimate the social costs of the camel safari business as dependency upon tourism replaces trading as a source of income for Jaisalmaris. At present the benefits are disseminated quite widely. As theoretically anyone owning a camel has an equal chance of entering the safari business, Employment opportunities for non camel owners are restricted and the employment is gender specific. Women derive few direct benefits from tourism except those that can be earned from the production of handicrafts. It is to be hoped that
plans for the establishment of a cooperative will increase their earnings potential. Host–guest contact in Jaisalmar is limited and during the course of a safari the visitor’s experiences of village life are highly transient, minimizing impact. Only those villages located near the main trekking route see tourists and within those villages only certain households are visited. These generally belong to friends or relatives of the safari guide and become regular stopping places. Since visitors occasionally donate money or goods to such households considerable resentment and social inequality results.

The concentration of so many visitors into a restricted number of tracks is having discernibly adverse environmental impacts and operators have started to put pressure on the governments for permission to open new trails. Operators feel that they will shortly be unable to satisfy the customers’ requirement to trek without seeing other visitors. More routes would enable more visitors to be accommodated and the tourism portfolio could be further diversified by increased specialization. There is demand for treks catering for one particular interest, such as birdwatching, which would be facilitated by easier access to the Thar Desert National Park: at the moment it is quite difficult to obtain a permit. There are clear parallels here with the Himalayas and the camel safari industry, like trekking in the Himalayas, needs to spread its visitors thinly over the environment in order to combat environmental pressure. If the image of the camel safari is to be a high-value specialist tourism activity, greater regulation is required. At present unrestricted entry to the safari or accommodation business has made the industry fragile. Limiting visitor numbers is impossible to enforce since the area is open but it would be possible to increase revenue by imposing a permit fee for the National Park or for the use of certain trails. This could then be used to finance quality control measures and ensure the sustainability of the industry. Without increased regulation the upward trend of the last few years will certainly be reversed and Jaisalmar will eventually lose market share to another destination which is better able to maintain a quality image. However, the failure of the authorities to enforce regulations relating to hotel construction or safari enterprises suggests that more market-driven government-instigated incentives and disincentives might be preferable.

The sudden removal of the economic benefits of camel safari tourism would have a serious effect on local communities. People living in the Jaisalmar region have few economic opportunities and a camel owner can generate seven or eight times his potential annual earnings from agriculture just by leasing his camel to a tour operator. Moreover, he saves on the cost of maintaining camels during the rainy season and has other areas of potential gain, such as employment for family members or the sale of produce or handicrafts. Such activities have considerable potential for wealth creation although at present none of this wealth is being returned to improving education or health services. Successful Jaisalmaris invest their new wealth in camels or jewellery where, ironically, it may act as insurance against potential failure of the industry. It remains to be seen whether this new and interesting tourism development will be sustainable in the long term and, if so, what the sociocultural costs and benefits will turn out to be.

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