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The social impact of tourism research: Analysis of the National Science Foundation

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Abstract

Introduction

The social impact of research occurs when scientific knowledge causes benefits in society (Flecha, 2018). Its evaluation has become a key element in the last decade (Viana-Lora and Nello-Andreu, 2021). This evaluation is seen as a tool for understanding the societal consequences of a project's development (Ahmadvand and Karami, 2017), while at the same time increasing a country's scientific competitiveness and excellence (Lauronen, 2020). It is necessary because there is no direct link between the scientific quality of research and its social value (Bornmann, 2012). The use of social impact assessment (SIA) allows knowledge and values from outside the field of science to be integrated into the research process, while at the same time opening up the research process to stakeholders, with the aim of a mutual learning process (Walter, Helgenberger, Wiek & Scholz, 2007). Scientific impact assessment has widely accepted indicators such as citations or the H-index, but in the case of SIA there is no data set comparable to Web of Science or Scopus to identify social production. Furthermore, there are no established guidelines on the information to be collected and no monitoring of the data (Spaapen & Van Drooge, 2011). It is becoming increasingly common in calls for research projects to include a section that includes an assessment of the potential social impact. This section can be key when awarding funding, as organisations will select research that has clearly identified potential societal benefits (Holbrook and Frodeman, 2011; Molas-Gallart, 2015; Muhonen, Benneworth, and Olmos-Peñuela, 2020). This study aims to highlight key societal aspects of tourism for funding within the National Science Foundation (NSF).

Method

The method used in this study consists, firstly, of conducting a content analysis of the NSF calls for proposals to extract the social criteria, and secondly, to develop a proposal on the social issues and lines of impact that tourism researchers should take into account.

Results

NSF proposals should reflect three basic principles: high quality, contribution to social objectives and appropriate metrics. NSF conducts a peer review process in which intellectual merit and impacts are assessed. Intellectual merit looks for research of scientific quality that advances knowledge. Impact assessment seeks to benefit society and contribute to the achievement of specific and desired societal outcomes (NSF, 2020). For tourism research to generate societal benefits, there must be a prior process in which research is planned and coordinated (Bornmann, 2013). This planning requires connection with stakeholders in the field (Eschenbach, 2017). Interaction and observation will identify social problems that need to be investigated for possible solutions (Spaapen and Van Drooge, 2011).

The content analysis carried out has allowed us to develop five key lines of social impact that must be addressed in the research project proposal in order to obtain funding; 1. Advancing tourism policies and regulations that introduce improvements in management; 2. Increasing the economic benefit of the local population; 3. The creation of new technological resources; 4. Actions to combat the environmental impact of tourism; 5. Increasing the quality of life of the resident, trying to solve problems such as overtourism. The transfer of the knowledge generated to stakeholders and its subsequent application will bring about the benefits in society described in the proposal.

Conclusion

This study concludes, on the one hand, by highlighting the need to make tourism scientists aware of the importance of involving stakeholders in the research process, and, on the other hand, by highlighting the relevance of the five lines of social impact proposed to generate benefits in society with their research.

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