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Thriving Private-Community Partnerships: Perspectives from Fiji's Upper Navua Conservation Area

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Introduction

The linkages between conservation and quality of life have clearly produced numerous benefits including environmental protection, disease reduction, and improved community vitality. Such connections also provide multiple sources of local medicines and that allow for the provision of direct health benefits from healthy ecosystems while providing services that benefit human well-being (Epler Wood, 2004). There is also increasing global recognition of the critical impacts of these complex linkages within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their relevance to tourism management and development. The SDGs are a set of seventeen goals comprising 169 targets and indicators for reducing poverty and improving environmental sustainability (United Nations, 2015). The SDGs are based on six themes including ‘dignity, people, prosperity, our planet, justice, and partnership’ (Ki-Moon, 2015).

This research focuses on the benefits of a private-community partnership within the rural highlands of Fiji. Expanding the capacity of community partnerships that frequently support private ecotourism operations help provide a holistic and progressive understanding of current and future sustainability goals. The community scale and focus is of keen interest, as it is where ‘tourism occurs’ and where the ‘action is’ – and the place where ‘people interact to get things done’ (McCool, 2016, p. 31). To better understand the linkages between successful ecotourism partnerships, this study explored a partnership between Rivers Fiji (ecotourism enterprise located in the rural highlands of Fiji) and two rural communities affiliated with the operation, discussing the multitude of benefits in the process. The purpose of this study was to investigate community members’ perspectives and narratives of ecotourism development relative to their partnership with Rivers Fiji, a project that was purposefully designed to support rural highlanders’ efforts in conservation and livelihoods.

Ecotourism & Partnerships

Ecotourism projects often seek to achieve direct and indirect livelihood goals (Walpole & Wilder, 2008). Direct goals may be inclusive of income, food security, and health, while indirect goals include capacity building, reduced vulnerability, governance, and empowerment (Walpole & Wilder, 2008). Ecotourism research has contextualized these goals through concepts such as poverty alleviation (Van de Mosselaer & Van der Duim, 2013), pro-poor tourism (Ashley, Goodwin, & Roe, 2001), and wildlife management (DeMotts & Hoon, 2012). Direct and indirect livelihood goals are congruent with the United Nation’s SDGs, such as poverty reduction, environmental conservation, and partnerships (Bricker, Black, & Cottrell, 2013). Snyman (2014) summarized the following as critical elements for tourism development in a locale or destination for successful community partnerships. These include:

- 1) creating stakeholder engagement to develop ownership in the community tourism strategy;
- 2) ensuring an enabling supportive regulatory environment for tourism investment, development, and growth;
- 3) ensuring needed capacities and skills for servicing tourism/tourists; and
- 4) developing and sustaining a competitive advantage. (Snyman, 2014, pp. 70-75)

Private-community partnerships have the potential of lending to sustainable development frameworks as outlined by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2015). Sustainable development frameworks require “the informed participation of all relevant stakeholders, as well as strong political leadership to ensure wide participation and consensus building” (UNWTO, 2015, p. 1). Further, they suggest sustainable development in tourism should not be left unmonitored and recommend that establishing a constant mechanism for review of the relationship be implemented with preventative and/or corrective measures to be taken when needed (UNWTO, 2015). Without this level of detail and monitoring, private-community partnerships are capable of producing damage to communities and their inclusive environment (Coria & Calfucura, 2012). When community input is disregarded or annulled, entire cultures and/or ecosystems can be damaged or even lost (Rihoy & Maguranyanga, 2010). Yet due to the intricacies of these relationships, understanding how to manage within the context of each destination and partnership is critical (Snyman, 2014).

As recognized by Fletcher and Neves (2012), the tourism industry has historically been described as “a major internationalized component of Western capitalist economies” (Britton, 1991, p. 451). As such, tourism can be inherently problematic for conservation and cultural heritage areas due to profit driven motivations (Kirkpatrick, 2001). A classic representation of this idea is when communities obtain financial stability that enables outward mobility and capitalistic tendencies potentially surface, often times encouraging individuals to leave their homes in search of “Western” lifestyles commonly found in urban settings. Such movement can have drastic effects on rural areas that depend heavily on family members for such things as farming and subsistence living.

Ecotourism has demonstrated potential to enhance and provide an incentive to protect cultural and ecological assets, where communities are transitioning to capitalistic economic systems (Honey, 2008). As discussed by Fletcher and Neves (2012) ecotourism is capable of using capitalism to address the inherent contradictions found within it as an economic system. Their endorsement recognizes ecotourism’s potential for conservation, community well-being, and empowerment.

Social Exchange Theory

To provide commentary about the partnership between ecotourism and the communities in this study, social exchange theory was employed. Social exchange theory dates back to Emerson (1976) and Ekeh (1974) who first explored negotiated exchanges between various entities. These exchanges are capable of developing partnerships where each entity may benefit, or contrarily, be disadvantaged. If the exchange is considered favorable, the entities commonly look to return the favor or renew and continue the exchange (Flynn, 2003).

Dissonance within social exchange theory, however, can complicate the relationship when inequities between parties are perceived. If such inequities exist, strain may be placed on the relationship/partnership, causing conflict (Sulthana, 1987) or emotional distress (Bakker, Schaufeli, Sixma, Bosveld, & van Dierendonck, 2000). To explore the favorable and unfavorable exchanges between ecotourism and community, this study explored an ecotourism enterprise, which operates whitewater rafting and kayaking programs in cooperation with communities in the rural highlands of Viti Levu, Republic of Fiji.

Background and Context

In February of 1998, an ecotourism enterprise was established called Rivers Fiji Ltd. (RF) in partnership with several communities in the rural highlands of Fiji's largest island, Viti Levu (Bricker, 2001).¹ The formation of RF involved a cooperative business relationship comprised of: A well-established adventure travel company with over 40 years in the business; an academic team who studied and taught eco and sustainable tourism; and two manufacturers, one U.S. citizen and one Fijian citizen, who designed and distributed boats and associated gear in Fiji and abroad. The primary investor, the whitewater company from the U.S. and the partners involved all expressed that first and foremost, "they had a deep commitment to protecting the river corridor" (Author's notes). This was evident through a history of highs and lows economically and politically (several coups and political turmoil, see Bricker, 2003), whereby the founders continued to support RF, through very difficult financial times. The following provides a brief background of the company and key events since 1998.

Rivers Fiji, Ltd. (RF)

From the onset, RF had interest in an ecotourism model, which supported conservation of a unique river corridor, located outside of the typical tourist itinerary. RF established a mission at the start to support ecotourism, it states:

To enhance guests' and indigenous peoples' awareness of and appreciation for the culture and environment. Rivers Fiji provides activities that promote conservation and preservation through environmentally sensitive and socially responsible interaction with people, landscapes, and ecosystems

which make the Fijian Highlands distinctive and unique. (Rivers Fiji, 1998, p.1)

RF had three primary objectives:

- a) establish an ecotourism operation which directly and comprehensively contributes to the conservation of Fiji's natural resources;
- b) bring socio-economic benefits directly to the people through employment and supporting existing locally owned and operated businesses in areas where the business operates (i.e., the Navua River); and
- c) maintain the highest of standards of operation through internationally recognized training and state-of-the art equipment. (Rivers Fiji, 1998, pp. 2- 3)

A Lease for Conservation

To support RF mission and objectives, the company developed Fiji's first lease for conservation. After three years of building a vision with the full support of local communities, inclusive of nine mataqali and two villages; and, following years of negotiations with government to develop a new type of lease in Fiji, RF established Fiji's first lease for conservation in 2000. The lease laid the groundwork for the Upper Navua Conservation Area (UNCA), which is 24 kilometers long and 200 meters wide on lands adjacent to the river's edge. The Upper Navua River is Fiji's third largest freshwater drainage, and home to unique species of parrot, finches, groves of endangered sago palms, iguana, and a unique species of gobi (RSIS, n.d.; Bricker, 2001).

To establish the lease, RF worked with a New Zealand logging company (who held a logging lease along the river, within 30 meters of the river's edge); the iTaukei Land Trust Board (TLTB) (government lease managers) and indigenous landowners. Inclusive of the lease, was the UNCA Management Plan, approved by the mataqali and TLTB, which included topics such as: a) training for guides (e.g, technical skills, "leave no trace," interpretation); b) visitor activities and numbers; c) meetings and decision-making protocols; and d) employment structures (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2016). RF also implemented a unique lease agreement payment system, whereby, aside from the required lease payments, landowners receive a user fee for each passenger, from every trip. RF believed it was important to ensure benefits to local communities long-term, and value for the lease, which prohibited commercial use. As the business grows, everyone involved in the UNCA benefits from every river trip and, hence, theoretically maintains continuous interest in and support for the UNCA (see Bricker, 2001; Bricker & Kerstetter, 2016).

The land and waters within the UNCA are under the direct daily management of RF as per the terms and conditions of the lease with TLTB. There are also Government and non-governmental entities involved with the potential

long-term conservation issues and include the Department of Forestry/Commissioner of Forests, Department for the Environment, and Department of Lands and Mineral Resources (see Bricker, 2001; Bricker & Kerstetter, 2016).

Wetland of International Importance

The UNCA is home to endemic species of freshwater fish (recently discovered), the globally endangered pink-billed Parrot Finch, and a banded iguana now considered rare in Fiji's forests. In addition to the unique animal life, a surprisingly healthy population of *metroxylon vitiense*, or sago palm, has been noted. The sago palm has been significantly reduced or eliminated on many of Fiji's freshwater river drainages (Macedru, 2013).

Due to these significant unique ecological attributes, RF worked with the mataqali and a team of scientists and governmental agencies to explore establishing the UNCA as a Wetland of International Importance, or Ramsar Site. With the assistance of a dedicated group of educators and scientists from the University of the South Pacific and specialists from various government and non-governmental entities (Fiji's Ramsar Committee), the UNCA became Fiji's first officially designated RAMSAR site on April 11, 2006 through the Convention on Wetlands (RSIS, n.d.).

Despite the overall success of the UNCA, the area continually faces internal and external stressors. Commercial logging enterprises have, on occasion, overstepped the boundaries of the UNCA, which generate the need for increased monitoring and conservation management. Logging threatens the trees and plants of the UNCA as well as the entire ecosystem due to erosion, run-off, and pollution. Logging and other extractive practices also pose long-term danger to the vitality of the UNCA and its people who live and depend on natural resources for their well-being, subsistence, and livelihoods.

In response, RF introduced a sustainable alternative to logging—whitewater tourism—that can support present and future generations of mataqali. With the cooperation of a local NGO, Nature Fiji-Mareqeti, it has developed conservation awareness programs to educate residents about the importance of the natural and cultural resources within the UNCA (Rivers Fiji, 1998).

The goal of the conservation awareness programs is to educate and inform schoolchildren and their parents about the ecological importance, cultural significance, and economic viability of the UNCA (Schultz & Bricker, 2012; Bricker & Kerstetter, 2016). In summary, RF and their associated mataqali have had a long-standing (nearly 20 years) partnership to protect the Upper Navua River corridor from unsustainable extractive activities, and to preserve the quality ecotourism experience for its visitors.

This study sought to explore how community members within the rural highlands of Fiji perceived the on-going partnership with RF, tourism, and the establishment of the Upper Navua Conservation Area.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate community members' perspectives and narratives of ecotourism development relative to their partnership with the RF project, designed to support environmental conservation, economic longevity, and cultural well-being. To do so, social exchange theory was used to help us understand the community's perceptions about their existing ecotourism partnerships. Social exchange theory has shown that when groups view an organizational mission (i.e., RF) as being supportive, they will in turn feel obliged to behave in ways that will enrich the organization and are favorably reciprocal (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). For example, if an individual believes that a business is driven by a set of values similar to their own, they will support the relationship in a way that fosters the values for both parties. To explore the resident perspectives of ecotourism in this study, it was necessary to have research questions addressing tourism and the private-community partnership. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed:

- What are community members' perceptions of ecotourism development in their area/village?
- How do community members feel about future growth in their area?
- What are community members' attitudes with respect to tourists and tourist visits?
- What are community members' perspectives relative to the private-community partnership model of ecotourism development of the UNCA?

Methods

The results presented in this manuscript were culled from a larger study, which included an assessment of a conservation education program for local communities along the Upper Navua River corridor located within Serua and Namosi provinces, on the island of Viti Levu, Fiji.

A two-stage approach to data collection methods was used, which took approximately 3 weeks to complete. During the first stage, one of the authors and a translator met with the Chief and residents of two village communities, Nabukelevu and Wainadiro to explain the purpose of the study and the dates of the study. Respecting tradition, each village and Chief was presented with a *sevu sevua* and asked permission to speak with residents of each respective village. It was advised by the spokesmen in each village to allow the Chief to select study participants relevant to the criteria sought (i.e., mix of gender, age, and leadership/non-leadership roles). As in previous studies (Kerstetter & Bricker,

2009; Bricker, 2001), this protocol respects tradition; it was important for the leadership of each village to understand the purpose of the study and the reasons for the diverse study participant selection process.

During the second stage, focus groups were conducted in each village, which comprise the put-in area for the start of the river trips operated by RF and the take-out at the close of each trip. Participants were separated by gender and age into groups (18-25, 26-45, and 46+), as recommended by village elders. Participation in the study was voluntary. Individuals agreeing to participate formally granted permission via signed forms, including their acknowledgement that audio recording equipment was to be used during the focus groups.

The focus groups were organized around 18 guiding questions pertaining to perceptions of ecotourism development in the village and on the Upper Navua river corridor. Each of the participants also completed a demographic questionnaire at the conclusion of each focus group meeting. Each focus group had a spokesperson who could translate English to Fijian and Fijian to English for participants as necessary. However, the majority of participants spoke English as well as Fijian, and translation was used to clarify questions etc. Translators were vital to assisting researchers with translating certain concepts, as well as with reading the questions to the focus group participants for clarity. The researcher recorded responses through note taking and digital audio recording equipment.

Journal observations were also made throughout the timeframe of the focus groups. As journaling has been utilized in various contexts (Ortlipp, 2008) it was primarily used in this study to record conversations and observations from outside and around the focus groups such as during transportation to and from villages and during meal times.

Data Analysis

Analytical procedures for this study followed Marshall and Rossman's (2006) seven phases: 1) organizing the data; 2) immersion in the data; 3) generating categories and themes; 4) coding the data; 5) offering interpretations through analytic memos; 6) searching for alternative understandings, and; 7) writing the report for presenting the study (p. 156). The data were first organized by gender, age, and village. The researchers then read through and listened to all of the data, to become familiar with responses. Categories were developed based on what Marshall and Rossman (2006) refer to as "salient themes, recurring ideas and language, and patterns of belief" (p. 158). The categories were also coded to ensure the thematic approach held consistent throughout the respective categories. Analytical memos in the form of continual note taking remained a constant technique utilized throughout the data analysis. The sixth phase, 'searching for alternative understandings,' was directly sought out throughout the study, challenging the notion of singular understandings. Finally, this manuscript

represents the seventh phase of the process as the results of the study are discussed in the following section.

Results

Demographics

A total of 101 community members participated in the focus groups, 33 from Wainadiro Village and 68 from Nabukelevu Village. Age dispersion was fairly equal across age groups: 24% were 18-25, 40% were 26-45 years old, and 36% were over 45 years old. Men and women were also split fairly evenly with women at 54% and men at 46% of the participants. Level of education varied somewhat with 32% completing primary school (comparable to grades 1 through 8 in the United States), 10% Form 3, 24% Form 4, and 16% completing Form 5 to Form 7, with 18% completing some college and higher beyond high school. Forms 3-7 are equivalent to examinations given during high school that grant eventual access to higher education. Participants were also asked about their income level (the currency in Fiji is the Fijian dollar). During data collection, \$1US was about equal to \$2 Fijian. About 67% of the respondents indicated making less than \$2000 annually. Ten percent of participants made between \$2000 - \$3000 annually, with the remaining 23% earning above \$3000 a year. The majority of participants had jobs and responsibilities in their village, with approximately 18% of the respondents working outside the village. The majority of the participants were also married (79%) and had children (77%). The majority of the respondents also indicated they lived in households ranging between 1-5 occupants.

Research Questions

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- 2) How do community members feel about future growth in their area?
- 3) What are community members' attitudes with respect to tourists and tourist visits?
- 4) What are community members' perspectives relative to the private-community partnership model of ecotourism development of the UNCA?

In general, the results showed overwhelming favor and acceptance to the partnership and RF operations overall. Community and resident perceptions of RF were almost entirely positive, displaying much appreciation for the partnership and its benefits to both the villages and the residents. The respondents were excited at the prospect for more business growth from RF with many hoping for more expanded ecotourism options. Community members appreciated tourists, but they

did show apprehension over acculturation, disrespectful tourists (e.g., alcohol, scant clothing, vulgar language), and loss of community residents due to urban migration. Overall, more development of the partnership was desired with numerous suggestions offered for expanded ecotourism operations in and around the UNCA.

General Themes from the Data

The data were first organized by gender, age, and village. This resulted in six groups (male/female groups and age groups broken out 18-25, 26-45, & 46+) from each village for a total of twelve focus groups overall. There were 7 major themes determined from the review of the data across all groups and in both villages: new business opportunities, fears, cultural impacts, benefits, financial security, improvements, and future pressures. To better understand the results, the themes were then coded by gender and age to show similarities and differences between groups.

Themes by Gender

Men and women in both villages were overwhelmingly in support of expanding a range of tourism activities in their respective villages. As responses were being recorded, questions about benefits of tourism received the most vigorous and thorough input from participants across all ages and genders. Participants were visually excited about future ecotourism possibilities and their responses were very indicative of their enthusiasm. All participants sought some level of tourism expansion and development with minimal discussion of the negative impacts of doing so. Both females and males expressed a willingness to open their villages to numerous outdoor recreational pursuits such as bird watching, horseback tours, bilibili (traditional Fijian rafts) tours, geological tours, nature hikes, pig hunting, photography, and even helicopter tours.

Expanding hospitality offerings also appeared to be a consistent theme for both men and women. The vast majority of the respondents believed additional income could be made through homestays, food service, markets (e.g., arts, crafts, clothing, food, kava), mekes (traditional Fijian dance), and musical performances.

Men and women recognized and valued the unique natural environment and geography in which they lived. At numerous points during all of the focus groups, the conversation embraced a respect and fondness for the flora, fauna, and beauty of the pristine state of the UNCA. Though it was seen at times as a means of economic prosperity, there was an underlying sensitivity and affection for the natural resources that supported the community's livelihoods, from rafting to farming to a level of spiritual reflection. Both groups were concerned over younger generations losing their native language. Older men also expressed displeasure in losing young, male villagers in the farm fields on the days that river trips were offered, affecting the labor force.

Men and women saw numerous benefits from ecotourism in their village and the surrounding area. By far, the most important and salient theme during all of the conversations stressed the economic benefits directly related to RF and ecotourism. No matter what gender (or age), all groups consistently and emphatically stressed how the economic impacts were the most important and resounding benefit to ecotourism.

The chance to practice English was the most common benefit discussed after the economic benefits of ecotourism. Both groups also mentioned transportation, learning about cultures from around the world, medical clinics, socialization, environmental awareness/education, and environmental conservation/preservation as benefits to their partnership with RF.

There were also a few distinctive differences by gender. Males were much more complacent in their responses when discussing fears and dislikes. They showed very little concern for drugs, weapons, or violence and they did not appear to be apprehensive on matters of tourist clothing. Alternatively, women, showed high anxiety for the “dangers” brought about by tourists and inherent cultural predispositions of tourists such as drinking and partying. Additionally, women were fond of the schools/education, service groups, and computer training that was associated with RF.

When discussing future trends for the villages, men and women found commonality in continued development for the area. This development was emphasized from numerous perspectives including better medical facilities, more tourism (and related retail activities), improved infrastructure (electricity and roads), and more jobs/profits overall. All of this resulting in what was commonly referred to as a higher standard of living. Overall, though, most participants predicted very little change to occur at all. However, some negative implications were noted. For example, males referred to the development of dams/hydroelectricity as a potential future threat to the UNCA. They also discussed the emergence of some jealousy among families and RF employees. Women foresaw a slight increase in the number of disrespectful tourists, none of which the respondents spoke of highly.

Thematic Summaries by Age

When interpreting the data by age group, there were obvious similarities compared to the gender classifications. For example, older men were more inclined to have responses similar to female themes whereas younger men showed very stereotypically masculine perspectives of tourism. Younger age male groups (ages 18- 25) wanted to make more money and see more female tourists on the river, while older male groups were more reserved, carefully considering the cultural repercussions of their responses. There was significant “giggling” among young male respondents when asked about the clothing of tourists on river trips. In

general, younger respondents were also more interested in offering adventure tourism opportunities such as zip line tours and helicopter tours. The younger age groups (ages 18-25) also didn't express any fears, whereas the other age groups were showed concern for drugs, weapons, disease, and offensive behavior from tourists. Similarly, these younger age groups didn't express any dislikes with ecotourism while the other age groups were not fond of tourist clothing, tourist use of profanity, public displays of affection, and a delay in village responsibilities being accomplished by RF employees.

Overall, all age groups wanted to see more rafting trips and *sevu sevu* ceremonies for tourists. Everyone also appreciated how tourism gave them the chance to practice their English skills while talking with the tourists. This also led to an increased awareness to other cultures from around the world.

No doubt, all age groups appreciated the significant economic impact of the RF project had in their village. Everyone was very enthusiastic about increased tourism in the region. They believed it would lead to more community development, higher wages, more jobs, improved transportation, and an overall higher standard of living. Even though many of the respondents didn't think anything was ever going to change in regard to tourism, there was a constant embedded fear of losing their partnership with RF. No one could account for the basis of this fear, but the financial stability that RF had provided to the villages had become a way of life that everyone valued and did not want to lose.

Journal and Observations

Journaling provided increased context and richness beyond the questions within each focus group. Additional themes were garnered from the journal entries. For example, many of the younger village residents were excited about the possibility of tourism providing outward and upward mobility for them to leave their home villages. They were excited to see the larger cities of Fiji and to work in urban areas. Older (46+) residents in the villages, were very aware of these ambitions and were concerned about losing cultural traditions and their ability to continue farming as a community. In essence, the excitement of youth simultaneously manifested as anxiety in the elder members.

Another theme was how technology and American representations of "success" (such as posters of movie stars commonly found in American mass media) were prevalent in both villages. Cell phones, satellite dishes, Hollywood DVDs, and flat screen televisions were widespread in village homes. As a result, following the conclusion of the research, continued communication between the researcher and some of the respondents was made possible through social media accounts.

In summary, the most significant theme throughout all forms of data collection revolved around a fear of losing Rivers Fiji as a partner and economic

stimulus for rural communities. While this was implied during the focus groups, conversations outside of the focus groups were much more passionate, almost dire, as residents often noted an unfounded nervousness of losing the programs Rivers Fiji provides. It was evident that Rivers Fiji was an appreciated partner in both villages that brought numerous work opportunities and valuable environmental and to some extent cultural conservation initiatives.

Voices from the Village

Synman (2014) offers six factors (p. 124) for ecotourism operators to consider regarding partnerships to “ensure a greater chance of sustainability and success” (p. 123). In the case of Rivers Fiji and the UNCA, these factors are prevalent throughout their business model. In particular, data from this study offers perspectives of villagers who referenced these ideas. To extend these connections, direct quotes (via translator) have been used to illustrate how Rivers Fiji exemplifies Synman’s relevant factors.

I. Raising awareness

“Rivers Fiji is why many of us have jobs. They’re also why we have so many groups come through. We love having people in visit us.”

“Rivers Fiji cares about the environment. The conservation area is thanks to them. Other people just want to cut down the trees.”

“The only reason more people haven’t left our village is because they have a job with RF that allows them to make money.”

II. Benefit distribution plans

“The money from Rivers Fiji is paid among many people. It’s important that many people benefit from tourists, not just certain individuals, otherwise they start fighting. We need to be equal in money.”

III. Open, honest channels of communication

“I have never worried about Rivers Fiji ripping us off. We love Rivers Fiji.”

“We trust the owners. They have always been good in talking to us.”

IV. Mitigation of human-wildlife conflict

“The environment is very important to us. We all depend on it every day. The tourists are usually very respectful of it. They love seeing the animals here too, even the snakes.”

V. Education

"I got to go on one of the river trips (Rivers Fiji environmental awareness program). The kids really loved it and kept talking about it. We should do more trips so that everyone gets to go. Can we have more trips?"

VI. Formal employment

"I want to work for Rivers Fiji. My friends who work there love it and they get to meet people from all over."

"Rivers Fiji provides jobs for lots of people. If we do more trips, we can have more jobs."

"I love working for Rivers Fiji. They are wonderful. It's fun working there."

Discussion & Implications

This research supported the notion that respectful and emboldening partnerships between communities and private enterprise are vital to the composition of successful ecotourism operations that support sustainable development protocol (UNWTO, 2015). Understanding these partnerships can assist in shaping future ecotourism development and re-molding existing businesses (Rihoy & Maguranyanga, 2010). This study has offered an example of a thriving partnership through community input and critical researcher analysis.

The social exchange theory assertion that when communities respect and share similar missions to that of partnering private organizations, they are more likely to reciprocate with favorable business practices (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), was supported throughout this study. The data showed consistent agreement between community/resident environmental philosophy and cultural traditions to that of the RF business vision and values. The majority of the respondents went as far as to call for extended business operations with RF, aligning again with the social exchange theoretical framework.

Snyman (2014) identified six contributing factors to successful ecotourism partnerships and this study provides additional support to the framework suggested. In fact, all of Synman's six factors were found within the seven themes identified. In particular, Synman highlights the need to mitigate human-wildlife conflict. The villages involved in this study were sincerely concerned with preserving the natural environment that provided the resources for their livelihoods. Many of the participants recognized the value of conservation as opposed to extractive industry. Their responses indicated high regard for their partnership with Rivers Fiji largely due to the environmental sensitivity of the business. Another major factor from Synman that frequently surfaced in the data involved formal employment. The villages were quite aware that economic prosperity was needed in order for their

residents to be happy. Multiple individuals from both villages noted the economic incentive of partnering with Rivers Fiji, not only because of the environmental conservation dollars being allocated, but also because of the constant employment that their residents enjoyed. An open, honest channel of communication is a final factor from Synman to be highlighted. The participants in this research were very trusting of Rivers Fiji; they never expressed any doubt in the business ethics or dignity of the business. It could be said they were confident in Rivers Fiji to be transparent and straightforward in all business dealings surrounding the partnership. Furthermore, the data from both villages represents an overall successful partnership between a private ecotourism operator and rural, indigenous communities that supports additional ecotourism development in the region. Such support for expanding ecotourism was reinforced by villager's impressions of improved livelihoods, expanded environmental protection, and continued respectful business relationships experienced through current practices as noted through the correlations to Synman's factors.

One of the major themes resoundingly support additional tourism activities. Men and women alike commonly revealed excitement about the notion of having more tourists. Additionally, they told of numerous opportunities for additional hospitality offerings in the villages. Things such as homestays, markets, food service, and cultural performances were all considered to be untapped revenue sources. However, in doing so, no connection appeared to be made toward the potential increase in negative impacts from increased tourism. Also, no linkage to carrying capacity or visitor thresholds were openly discussed or considered. The majority of participants in each village recognized the rare and fragile ecosystem they lived in, but when asked about it, the conservation efforts provided by Rivers Fiji superseded any possible concern from increased tourism. For Rivers Fiji, there are many potential reasons for this successful partnership. First, RF built in a mechanism to protect the "natural capital" they invested in through a unique lease for conservation. This ensured long-term quality of the river corridor as well as a unique tourism product that is protected (at least for now) from outside disturbances and degradation of ecological resources. The lease is a part of the benefit of the exchange with local communities. In turn, local communities receive economic benefits, education, and a range of employment or livelihood engagements.

Both villages in this study also represent unique cultural settings and tradition. A concern noted in focus groups was the loss of native language. At the same time, a benefit identified by villagers and Rivers Fiji employees was the ability to practice their English skills with tourists. Such dissonance in responses demonstrate tourism as a form of mobility offering new skills, education, jobs, and opportunity. Yet tourism was also seen as a threat to language and cultural vitality, sometimes enabling residents to move to outside urban areas for new opportunities. This type of loss was primarily expressed by older generations, who expressed their

fear of losing young people, a significant labor source for the agrarian lifestyle of the villages. Yet the younger generations were excited about the possibilities urban settings might offer. Again, this demonstrates a discord among the participants about what is “good” for the villages those who reside in them, a common theme in the literature (Sanderson & Redford, 2003). All of the residents showed faith in ecotourism to bring a higher standard of living to their village. Truly understanding what each age group interprets as a “higher” standard requires additional research.

Consensus in the data showed a high level of appreciation for the ecosystems of the Upper Navua Conservation Area. The surrounding environment provided sustenance for the villagers and offered a place of spiritual reflection. It also delivered the rivers and waterfalls, creating an attractive option for tourists to Fiji. Regardless of age or gender, residents embraced the need to conserve their natural resources. Ecotourism, to them, was a way to protect these resources while being a financial stabilizer for the villages.

Now past their twenty-year anniversary, Rivers Fiji is an example of how sustainable ecotourism development can be advantageous for both private organizations and local communities when partnerships are developed that recognize the collective exchange of people, planet, and profit. The people who reside in the Upper Navua Conservation Area were asked to explore ecotourism partnerships compared to extractive industry opportunities. In a letter representing the landowners surround the UNCA and including the villages of Wainadiro and Nabukelevu, the Fijian residents of the province of Namosi called for the immediate discontinuation of mineral exploration on their lands (Word Press, 2015). In support of the results of this study, the indigenous communities of the Namosi Province recognized the negative implications of this extractive industry and have taken a public stance against it. They elaborate in their letter about the “disgrace” shown during negotiations toward the Namosi landowners, once again indicative of the value of respectful partnerships. They also documented the value of future sustainable development and noted tourism as a mechanism in particular.

In this case study, there is evidence to support the ideas surrounding direct and indirect livelihood goals (Walpole & Wilder, 2008). The results also add support to critical elements of stakeholder engagement, a supportive regulatory environment, and ensuring capacities and skills that support the services offered (Snyman, 2014). Indeed, by creating a private conservation area, upon which residents continue to have noncommercial use and access, the river corridor remains unique to the ecotourism products offered in Fiji. As such, it appears the operation continues to have a competitive advantage and reduced competition as a result. To date this partnership appears to be engaging and working. Through the conservation of a river corridor that remains open to traditional uses, as well as provides on-going benefits with the participation of each tourist, a balance or equilibrium to a purely capitalistic approach (Fletcher & Neves, 2012). Lastly, RF

is now 100% Fijian run. All funds remain in Fiji and support ongoing equipment needs, facilities, and staff. One of the founding members has passed on, yet the commitment to RF and the people of the rural highlands remains, with hopes of exploring new venues for an employee owned model in the future (Private correspondence, March 1, 2017). A longitudinal study of RF and other partnerships will continue to assist in understanding complex interactions and the exchanges between private-community partnerships.

This study also provides direct evidence supporting use of ecotourism business models where a commitment to conservation of natural resources and long-term commitment to the people who depend on these resources can provide economic independence and prosperity for local communities.

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