Commentary: geographical research on tourism in Mexico

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The level of geographical research on tourism in Mexico is high and has been for many years. In a recent synopsis of tourism geography research in Latin America and the Caribbean, Mexico was identified as the leading country in the region in terms of the volume of tourism geography publications produced, as well as theses and dissertations (Meyer-Arendt 2002). At least two major reasons account for this: (1) Mexico is close and easily accessible for North American researchers, and (2) geography as a discipline is quite healthy in Mexico, and a small contingent of tourism geographers has developed considerable research attention on the major tourist destinations there.

Proximity has been a large factor in the popularity of Mexico as a destination for field research by American and Canadian geographers, especially since the early years of Carl Sauer’s ‘Berkeley school’. While the Berkeley cultural geographers studiously avoided areas impacted by tourism, geographers today are increasingly receptive to understanding the role of tourism – at traditional tourist destinations, at newly created touristic growth poles, and in isolated regions that may have ethnic or wilderness appeal to alternative tourists. Some North American geographers have investigated tourism topics along the US–Mexico border, whereas others venture further and deeper into the interior for their tourism research. Mexico has been a popular venue for thesis and dissertation research for students at American and Canadian universities, and tourism geography has been well represented among these (Meyer-Arendt 2000; Meyer-Arendt & Justice 2002). On average, one thesis or dissertation on tourism geography is written every year in a North American or Mexican university.
Geography has been, and continues to be, a strong field of study in Mexico. There are perhaps 700 professional geographers in Mexico, and many belong to various organizations such as the Academia de Geografía, under the umbrella of the Sociedad Mexicana de Geografía y Estadística. A national congress of geographers, held in Mérida, Yucatán in June 2001, attracted nearly 500 registrants (including students). A Latin America-wide geography convention (the 9th Encuentro de Geógrafos de América Latina), to be held in Mérida in April 2003, is anticipating 600 registrants. And while tourism geographers comprise but a small percentage of Mexican geographers, they none the less produce a significant volume of research – primarily on domestic topics. The Institute of Geography at the National Autonomus University of Mexico (UNAM) is an especially important generator of tourism research. Unfortunately not much of the Mexican tourism research makes its way into international journals but is instead published in a variety of domestic (Mexican) or Spanish and other Latin American outlets.

To investigate geographical research on tourism in Mexico, many bibliographical sources were consulted. Requests were also made via email distribution lists, including CLAGNET (Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers) and TOURISM GEOGRAPHY (International Geographical Union’s Tourism Study Group). Many responses were received, with the most valuable from Dr Álvaro Sánchez Crispín of the Academia de Geografía (a member of the International Geographical Union’s Tourism Study Group) and Prof. M. René Bareteje of the Centre International de Recherches et d’Etudes Touristiques (CIRET) in Aix en Provence, France, both of whom provided many hard-to-find references.

The literature search yielded a total of 37 publications on tourism research by geographers, including 11 theses and dissertations but excluding the two articles in this issue of Tourism Geographies. (One article – Barkin (1999) – was technically authored by an economist, but it was a chapter in a geographical book and is therefore included herein.) In terms of types of research, six categories were identified: descriptive/general, spatial aspects, historical evolution, impact analyses, alternative tourism, and planning/management.

- Descriptive/general studies comprised overviews of tourism at various scales. National-scale studies included an overview of scientific/cultural tourism (Bassols 1990) and a typology of touristic counties (municipios) (Propín & Sánchez-Crispín 1998). Regional-scale descriptive study focused upon the Los Cabos corridor in Baja California Sur (López 2001) and attractions along the US–Mexico border (Arreola & Madsen 1999).
- The spatial theme encompassed studies of regional distributions of tourism, such as Mexico’s Caribbean region (Marchena Gomez &
Velasco Martin 1993), touristic municipios of Mexico (De Sicilia & López 1998), Los Cabos (Sánchez-Crispín et al. 1999), and the Mexican Riviera (Sánchez-Crispín & Propín 1996; 2001).

- A research focus on historical evolution characterized various regional articles, including those of Gulf Coast resorts (Meyer-Arendt 1990a; 1990b; 1993b), highland mining towns (Sánchez-Crispín et al. 1994), and the archaeological site of Chichen-Itza, Yucatán (David 1996).

- Research into the impacts of tourism included studies of economic impacts, social/cultural/political impacts, and environmental/physical impacts. Economic development studies were mostly regional in scope, focusing upon Baja California (Propín et al. 1998), Cozumel (Sánchez-Crispín & Luna 2000), ecotourism in highland Mexico (Barkin 1999), Ixtapa-Zihuatenejo (Bravo 1994), and the Mexican Riviera (Sánchez-Crispín & Propín 2000). Social/cultural impact studies included research on population and migration in Yucatán, Mexico (Machaj de Vargas 1993), prostitution in Mexican border towns (Curtis & Arreola 1991), agriculture and tourism in Quintana Roo (Torres 2000), language in Los Cabos (Hoffman 1992), and tourism and local populations in Baja California (Young 2000). One study of political impacts addressed tourism, urbanization and political power in Manzanillo (Bianchi 1990). Environmental/physical impact studies concentrated upon coastal environments, especially the Mexican Gulf Coast (Meyer-Arendt 1993a) and Yucatán (Meyer-Arendt 1991, 2001; Savage 1993). One environmental degradation case study addressed touristic urban growth in Acapulco (Carrascal & Perez 1998).

- Alternative tourism research in Mexico may be divided into ecotourism, sustainable tourism and national parks research. The only ecotourism studies by geographers were conducted in Baja California (Pearson 1999; Young 1999). Research on sustainable tourism included one study of Ixtapa-Zihuatenejo, Mexico (Brenner 1999). National parks research focused upon archaeological tourism at Palenque National Park (Lujan 1994) and human impacts in Ixtaccihuatl-Popocatepetl National Park (Marzen 1997).

- Although publications on tourism planning and management in Mexico may be found in the older literature, only one was found for the post-1990 period: a geological inventory for tourism planning in Cancún, Mexico (Cervantes Borja & Meza Sanchez 1993).

The two articles in this issue of *Tourism Geographies*, by Rebecca Torres and David Truly respectively, are examples of the type of geographical research on tourism conducted in Mexico in recent years. In her article, ‘Toward a better understanding of tourism and agriculture linkages in the Yucatan: tourist food consumption and preferences’, Rebecca Torres examines food preferences of international and domestic tourism in the Yucatan
Peninsula to help assess the potential for local agricultural production. She finds that tourists are, in fact, open to trying more of the local cuisine than demanding only the diets of their homelands. David Truly, in his article, ‘International retirement migration and tourism along the Lake Chapala Riviera: developing a matrix of retirement migration behaviour’, examines the changing touristic landscape of the American retirement destination of Lake Chapala, near Guadalajara, and interweaves several models of tourism development to explain such changes. His conceptual matrix of retirement migration is one that warrants testing at other retirement destinations.

Mexican tourism researchers have been increasingly productive in recent years, and are more and more in attendance at international conferences. Their contributions and perspectives are a most welcome addition to the body of academic and applied literature on tourism development. As tourism research in Mexico further matures, we are sure to see more of their work in the pages of *Tourism Geographies* and other international journals.

References


Biographical note

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