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Residents' Perception of Tourism Impacts in A'Dhakhiliyah Region of Sultanate of Oman

Abstract

This study aims to examine residents' perceptions of tourism impacts and their willingness to support its development in the A'dakhiliyah region of Sultanate of Oman. The study uses data collected from local residents through a self-administered questionnaire survey. Data obtained tested using mean scores in SPSS. Results show that the residents' perceptions of tourism impacts were largely positive and they were highly supportive of its development. The findings also revealed that the lack of tourism infrastructure; lack of financial support; lack of tourism awareness among residents; and lack of specialized education and training in the field were some of the factors of concern for the residents. The results of the study will provide insights to tourism policy makers in Oman, through planning and development of tourism in the study area.

Keywords: *Tourism development, resident perceptions, Economic impact, Sociocultural impact*

JEL Classifications: L83; Z320; Z380

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1. Introduction

Over the last decade and a half, the government of Oman has been investing into developing tourism as one of the country's priority economic sectors. This is no-doubt part of the country's efforts towards diversifying its economy, as the country has set to reduce its dependence on oil revenues to 9% of GDP by 2020 (WTO, 2014). The *'Vision for Oman's Economy: Oman 2020'* (Oman's long term Socio-economic Development Plan) recognizes that tourism industry has more potential than any other non-oil sectors to contribute to the long term objectives of this vision. The document has set the target of raising the contribution of Tourism to Oman's GDP from less than 1% in 1995 to 5% in 2020 with an average annual growth rate of 6.5%. These figures are well substantiated by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) projections that estimate direct contribution of tourism to Oman's GDP at 3.3% by 2025 with an average annual growth rate of 6.1 % and total contribution (including indirect and induced effects) at 7.3% of GDP by 2025 with an annual average growth rate of 6.2 % (WTTC , 2015).

Though tourism is widely acknowledged as a significant contributor to the growth and prosperity of destination regions, yet it has widely been criticized for bringing with it various social, cultural, and environmental dis-benefits to the host population. Today, tourism promoting destinations and economies are faced with the challenge of sustaining its growth rather than simply attaining it. Research, such as, conducted by Key & Vijayan(2006), Lee (2013), and Styliadis et. al. (2014) concluded that one of the important indicators of destination sustainability is the extent to which the local residents show their support and intent of involvement in tourism development, which in turn depends on the residents' perceived realization of benefits from tourism development. As such communities encourage tourism development if they envisage it as a means towards improved quality of life and economic prosperity (Andereck et. al., 2005; Gursoy & Rutherford, 2004; Pizam, 1978). These studies concluded that the residents' positive attitudes, support, and involvement in tourism development are essential for the long-term viability of tourism at a destination. For example, Gursoy et al. (2010) argue that the participation and support of local residents is imperative for sustainability of tourism industry at any destination. However, Dogan (1989) & Doxey (1975) argued that while the residents' attitudes tend to be more homogenous and positive in the early stages of tourism development, these become increasingly negative as a destination evolves over time and its adverse impacts become more visible. Lee (2013) shares similar opinion as he argued that growth of tourism activities at a destination brings along various economic, socio-cultural and environmental changes and some of these changes will be more beneficial than others.

Therefore, the basic motivation for studying residents' perception of tourism is driven from the fact that there is a relationship between the residents' attitudes towards tourism development and its long-term prospects. Though, internationally, a good amount of research has been carried out to investigate this relationship (e.g., Gursoy et al., 2002; Gursoy et al., 2010; Key & Vijayan, 2006; Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2012; Okazaki, 2008). But it has also been widely recommended that such studies are carried out in authentic local destination settings since residents across regions, differ greatly while weighing benefits of tourism development over its costs. This variation in residents' perceptions across regions and cultures necessitates that such studies are carried out locally within the authentic settings.

Since, no extensive research related to the topic in question has been witnessed to have been carried out in Oman specific factors; there is a need to conduct such studies under Oman specific factors that explores locals' attitudes towards tourism development in the country. However, this study is spatially limited to specific tourist attractions namely Jabal Al Akhdar, Nizwa, Bahla, Al Hamra and Jabal Al Shams localities of A'Dakhiliyah region. The study bears significance due to the fact that the country is in its initial stages of tourism

development, and it is important for the policy makers to understand the residents' perspective, which can facilitate the policies those are oriented towards minimizing the potential negative impacts and maximizing the benefits, leading to higher level of community participation and support for tourism development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Tourism Impacts on Destination and its Residents

Tourism has been advocated as a potential sector to help promote economic prosperity; positive social-exchange; and international goodwill and understanding among the countries (UNWTO, 2013). Its development has been associated with various economic, socio-cultural and environmental benefits (Kuvan & Akan, 2005) such as financial gains (Allen et al., 1993); employment opportunities (Crompton & Anderson, 1992; Sharpley, 1994); new opportunities instigating social change (Harrison, 1992) etc. These benefits could directly lead to enhancement of residents' quality of life (Andereck & Vogt, 2000). Nevertheless like any other form of development tourism activities also cause problems at the destination places and 'imposes costs' (Jafari, 2001). These costs may be social-cultural (UNESCO, undated); environmental (Elliott, 1987; Malik, 2015; Pearce, 1989); socio-economic (Coomansingh, 2004; Green et. al., 1990; Jafari, 1974; Kadt, & Mundial, 1979; Mathieson & Wall, 1982; Loumou et.al 2000).

Local residents of tourist destination areas are primary victims of any adverse effects associated with tourism development. These potential negative impacts are often due to locals having no control over tourism development (Petra, 2010), as they are often left outside the planning; decision-making; and managing of tourism development (Mowforth & Munt, 1998). It has been widely argued that the participation of local population in tourism related activities is essential for the development and sustainability of this industry (Boyd & Singh, 2003; Murphy, 1985; Poon, 1994; Scheyvens, 2002; Woodley 1999). Though local participation may be easy to promote, its practice is far more complex (Mowforth & Munt, 1998), as in reality the local residents often lack experience, resources and hence even interest needed to establish successful tourism ventures (Scheyvens, 2002). Nevertheless, Murphy (1985), through his book '*Tourism – A Community Approach*' tried to get across the message that in order to rectify tourism planning weaknesses, focus and emphasis need to first and foremost be put on the residents of the destination area. Hence over the years tourism literature, through social and cultural impact studies has been widely debated over residents' relationships with tourists; their attitudes towards tourism development; level and readiness of their participation and involvement in tourism planning and development; and most importantly their support for the tourism industry (e.g., Ashley 2000; Dogan 1989; Hernandez et al., 1996; Macleod 2004; Mitchell & Muckosy, 2008; Ratz, et. al., 2002; Scheyvens 2002; and Simpson 2008).

2.2 Residents' Attitudes towards Tourism Development

Several theories have been used to understand the residents' perceptions (hence their attitudes) towards tourism, such as attribution theory (Pearce, 1989); the social representation theory (Andriotis & Vaughn, 2003); the dependency theory (Preister, 1989), and the social exchange theory (SET) (Ap, 1992). SET is the one widely used by scholars (Harill, 2004; Nunkoo & Ramkinsson, 2010). As stated by Ap, (1992), the SET is "a general sociological theory concerned with understanding the exchange of resources between individuals and groups in an interaction situation". In general, SET is based on the idea that each human behavior or social interaction is made because people want to exchange goods or activities with others. Within this exchange, individuals or group that perceives more benefits than costs from an exchange are more likely to consider it positively, while those perceiving more

costs than benefits are likely to evaluate it negatively. Thus in a social exchange interaction, people's satisfaction is evaluated by the evaluation of outcomes of such an interaction. In tourism perspective, SET would mean that the residents' 'opinions' (Williams & Lawson, 2001), or 'reactions' (Fredline & Faulkner, 2000), primarily with regard to the costs and benefits of tourism, reflect their perception of tourism development. These perceptions (positive or negative) form residents' attitudes (positive or negative) towards the tourism development.

While residents' positive attitudes are associated with their willingness to support and participate in tourism development and hence imperative for the sustainability of tourism industry at the destination (Gursoy et al., 2010), their negative attitudes are counter-productive to its development. Therefore, if the perceived positive impacts outweigh the potential negative consequences; residents are likely to support tourism development (Gursoy et al., 2010; Lee, 2013). Turner (1986) argued that the residents, who perceive current or potential value of tourism, not only support the tourism development efforts but also engage in the change process.

Nevertheless, perceptions of benefits and costs undergo changes overtime as a tourist destination moves through different stages in its life cycle. Butler (1980) argued that a resort (tourist destination) cycle moves through different stages of development and over these stages various noteworthy changes can be witnessed including changes in local residents' perceptions of tourism impacts as well as their attitudes towards its development. However to mitigate such negative impacts of tourism industry and to increase the destination sustainability, the destination policy makers and planners need to view tourism as a 'community industry' (Murphy, 1985) and understand their perspectives. Understanding residents' perspectives can facilitate policies which maximize its benefits (Prayag et al. 2013) and minimize friction between residents and tourists (Zhang et al., 2006). Such policies will make residents to own the tourism activities in their area by involving into them and hence support its development. Much of the prior research have identified residents' attitudes towards tourism development as being critical towards achieving successful and sustainable tourism development (Diedrich & Garcia-Buades 2009; Lepp 2007; Vargas-Sanchez, et. al. 2009; Wang & Pfister, 2008). Therefore, even before the policy makers think of developing an area as a tourist destination, understanding residents' opinions is critical for gaining their support for its future development (McGehee & Andereck, 2004).

2.3 The Study Area

A'Dakhiliyah is administratively one of the nine governorates of the Sultanate of Oman, located along the western slopes of Al Hajar Mountains (the slopes of Jabal Al Akhdhar) towards the deserts in the south of the country, as shown in the Figure 1 below. The region is sparsely populated with majority population concentrated to few townships such as *Smail, Izki, Nizwa, Bahla, Adam, Al Hamra and Bidbid*. Over the past few years the region has seen considerable advances in health, education and urban infrastructure such as roads, industries and telecommunications as well as infrastructure related to tourism sector.

Historically the region has played a significant role with regard to spread of Islam, and intellectual, scientific and cultural activities. Lonelyplanet (2016) describes the region as one of the best tourist destinations of Oman having spectacular mountains, scenery and the country's best forts. The region hosts two of the four UNESCO World Heritage sites of the country namely Bahla Fort (declared as world heritage site by UNESCO in 1987) and *Aflaj* Irrigation Systems (declared as world heritage site in 2006) (UNESCO, 2016).

Presently the region is being promoted and developed by the government, as one of the important tourist destination areas in the country for many good reasons such as: a) the ancient capital of the country, *Nizwa*, is located in the region (*it was also declared as 'Capital*

of Islamic Culture by the Islamic Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISECO), for the year 2015, (Y-Oman, 2015); b) the region is known for authentic Omani traditions and culture; c) the region has rich architectural and heritage sites; d) the region is home to two important mountain resorts, *Jabal Al Shams* and *Jabal Al Akhdar*; e) the region is a showcase of *Aflaj* systems (Oman's traditional irrigation system); and f) the region is having a rich and diverse geological terrain.

Figure 1: Geographic location of A'Dhakhiliyah region, Sultanate of Oman.
Source: Ministry of Tourism, Government of Oman (2016).

3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling and Data Collection

As mentioned in the literature review, the residents' attitude survey has been one of the common methods used by the researchers to assess the residents' perception of tourism impacts, their readiness to involve into this sector, and their support for its development. For the present study an exploratory household questionnaire survey was used to identify local residents' perception towards impacts from tourism development within A'dakhiliyah region of Sultanate of Oman. Four locations *Nizwa*, *Bahla*, *Jabal Al Akhdar*, and *Jabal Al Shams* were chosen for the survey as these are four prominent tourism sites in the region.

In perception surveys, usually a random sampling method is used to ensure reliability. This study used a stratified random sample. Since the authors were not able to get the complete list of households, streets rather than households were randomly chosen based on the street map coordinates at all four selected locations. Resident households, on the randomly chosen streets, were knocked at the doors and requested for participation in the survey. In the event where a household head or a senior family member was not present or where an individual refused to participate in the survey, the next house on the street was approached. (*Omani society being traditional, most of the family decisions and choices are influenced by the heads of families or senior members in the family. Therefore, only heads of the households or a senior member of the family (male or female) where involved as respondents*). The respondents, who agreed to participate in the survey, were explained the purpose of the visit and a questionnaire was given out to them. Most of the respondents filled the questionnaires immediately. In the

instances where the respondents showed inability to fill the questionnaire immediately, they were handed over the questionnaire only to be collected next day. From 127 questionnaires distributed, 115 completed and usable questionnaires were received which indicates a response rate of 90%.

3.2 Measures and Analysis

The survey was structured to explore the residents' understanding of tourism impacts from economic, socio-cultural and environmental perspectives and was divided into three sections: a) respondents' demographic profile; b) statements related to tourism impacts perceptions on a five-point; c) statements related to residents' perception of obstacles in tourism development in the region; and d) statements related to overall willingness of respondents to support and involve in tourism. To evaluate tourism impact perception, the respondents were asked to evaluate the positive and negative impacts of tourism development in their area on three major impact dimensions – a) Economic impacts, b) Socio-cultural impacts, and c) Environmental impacts, on a five point Likert Scale ranging from Strongly Agree=5 to Strongly Disagree=1. A bilingual (English and Arabic) questionnaire was used for the easy understanding of the respondents.

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to explore the data. As for statistical techniques, firstly, reliability (Cronbach's alpha) and validity tests were conducted. Next, mean score was employed to observe average responses.

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

A univariate analysis was performed on the demographic profile of residents' based on their age, gender, marital status, education, monthly household income and occupation. Since the survey included the head of the family or a senior member in the family as respondent, 100% respondents were married. As can be seen in the table 1 below, 97.4% respondents aged above 30 years. The respondents comprised of 4.3% graduates (masters and above), 54.8% under-graduates, 24.3% secondary school pass outs, 7% Primary educated, and 9.6% with formal education.

The income distribution showed that 20% of respondents' monthly household income was less than OMR500, 33% ranged between OMR501 to OMR1000, 27% ranged between OMR1001 to OMR1500 and another 20% had the monthly household income above OMR1500 [1 OMR=USD2.6. In Oman average monthly household income for the year 2011 stood at OMR 1,172; as reported in *Expenditure and Income Survey of 2012*, by Oman National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI)]. 65% of the respondents were employed in government sector, 10.4% were self-employed, 7.8% worked in private establishments, 11.3% worked in other sectors and a just 0.9% engaged in farming. A total of just 7.8% respondents were working in tourism or tourism related sectors. Although locals' preferred sector for employment is the government, the trend of seeking self-employment, venturing into businesses, and private sector employment is on rise. This is mostly due to decrease in availability of government jobs and also partly due to increased incentives for establishing business, and much rewarding private sector jobs.

Table 1: Respondents' demographic profile.

Demographic variables	Sample composition	Frequency	% age
Age	Less than 30 years	3	2.6%
	31- 40 years	47	40.9%
	41-50 years	49	42.6%

	Above 50 years	16	13.9%
Gender	Male	66	57.4 %
	Female	49	42.6 %
Educational Qualification	Primary	8	7.0 %
	Secondary	28	24.3 %
	Bachelor's	63	54.8 %
	Masters and above	5	4.3 %
	No formal schooling	11	9.6 %
Household income (monthly)	Less than OMR 500	23	20.0 %
	OMR 501-1000	38	33.0 %
	OMR1001- 1500	31	27.0 %
	More than OMR1500	23	20.0 %
Major Occupations	Farming	1	0.9 %
	Business	5	4.3 %
	Government Employment	75	65.2 %
	Private Sector Employment	9	7.8 %
	Self Employed	12	10.4 %
	Others	13	11.3 %
Total		115	100%

Source: survey data.

4.2 Reliability Analysis

Reliability is a measure of internal consistency that shows how closely related are a set of items in a group and the extent to which a measure will produce consistent results. This is commonly assessed by Cronbach alpha. A Cronbach alpha of 0.70 or higher indicates that the measurement scale that is used to measure a construct is reliable (Nunnally, 1967). As can be observed from the table 2 below, the Cronbach alpha for all the constructs is more than 0.70, and as such, the instrument may be considered as reliable.

Table 2. Cronbach alpha.

Variables	No of items	Cronbach Alpha
Place affiliation	4	0.712
Economic impacts perceptions	5	0.782
Soci-cultural impacts perceptions	5	0.821
Environmental impacts perceptions	4	0.715
Perception of obstacles	9	0.732

4.3 Mean Scores

Respondents place affiliation – The respondents place affiliation is one of the important determinants in analyzing the residents' attitudes towards tourism development. Its nature and strength may also influence their perceptions of potential impacts of tourism, as well as their attitude towards it. Works of many scholars have argued that place affiliation has most of times proven to be an important determinant of better co-existence among residents and the tourism industry (e.g., McCool & Martin, 1994; Sheldon & Var, 1984; Um & Crompton, 1987).

Table 3: Respondents' place affiliation.

Demographic variables	Sample composition	Frequency	% age	Mean Score
How long have you been living in this area?	Less than 5 years	18	15.7 %	

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	5 to 10 years	23	20.0 %	
	More than 10 years	74	64.3 %	
	Total	115	100%	
How would you rate your place to live in?	Very good	68	59.1 %	
	Good	29	25.2 %	
	Undecided	16	14.9 %	
	Bad	2	1.8 %	
	Very bad	0	0 %	
	Total	115	100%	4.4
How would you rate the future of your house hold in this area	Very good	60	52.2 %	
	Good	39	33.9 %	
	Undecided	10	8.7 %	
	Bad	5	4.3 %	
	Very bad	1	0.9 %	
	Total	115	100%	4.3
Would you leave this area to settle elsewhere if you get an opportunity to do so?	Yes	37	32.2 %	
	No	78	67.8 %	
	Total	115	100%	

Source: Survey data.

The responses show that 64.3% of the respondents lived in the study areas for more than 10 years, 20% were living in the area for 5 to 10 years and only 15.7% were living in the area for less than 5 years. More than 84% (Mean Score=4.4) rated their area good to live in (59.1% as very good and 25.2% as good). Though 14.9% were undecided about rating their place, less than 2% felt that the area was not good to live in. While trying to understand how the respondents would see their future in the area they live in, 86% (52.2% as very good and 33.9% as good, Mean Score=4.3) felt that the future of their household in the area is very good. While 8.7% were undecided, just about 5% of the total respondents see their future in the area as not good. When asked 'if they would leave the area if they get an opportunity' (to settle elsewhere), majority of the respondents, 67.8%, showed their unwillingness to do so as compared to 32.2% who would like to leave their areas if they find a better opportunity elsewhere. This showed that the majority of the respondents share a stronger bond with their places of residence.

Perceptions of economic impacts – As can be seen in the table 4 below, the study showed that the economic impacts of tourism are perceived favorably by local residents on two major components – its *potential to generate employment in the area* (62%, Mean Score=3.6) and *increase in the business opportunities for local residents* (84%, Mean Score=4.1). However the residents were pessimistic, if not very negative, with regard to *improvement in public services and infrastructure due to tourism* (59% showing disagreement, Mean Score=2.5). The respondents' opinions were divided almost equally with regard to *increase in standard of living* (40% agreed, 30% disagreed and about 26% were un-decided, Mean Score=3.3). The respondents were also negative about the income benefits of tourism coming to the local residents. 60% (Mean Score = 3.5) of the respondents said that the income generated through tourism in their area goes to outside business or individuals and the local people do not see the income benefits of tourism penetrating to the local population.

Table 4: Perception of economic impacts.

Scale items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Dis-Agree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Mean Score
Increased employment opportunities	16 13.9%	57 49.6%	24 20.9%	16 13.9%	2 1.7%	115 100%	3.6
New business opportunities for local residents	42 36.5%	56 48.7%	7 6.1%	8 7.0%	2 1.7%	115 100%	4.1
Improved standard of living	20 17.4%	30 26.1%	30 26.1%	33 28.7%	2 1.7%	115 100%	3.3
Improvement in public services and infrastructure	6 5.2%	28 24.3%	12 10.4%	42 36.5%	27 23.5%	115 100%	2.5
Tourism income goes to outside businesses or individuals	23 20.0%	37 32.2%	30 26.1%	21 18.3%	4 3.5%	115 100%	3.5

Source: Survey data.

Perceptions of socio-cultural impacts – the figures presented in the Table 5 below show that the residents perceive tourism favorably with regard to its impacts on their socio-cultural beliefs. Though Omani society is much protective of its socio-cultural settings; it has always been welcoming to other cultures. Therefore, it is no surprise that the population views tourism favorably as it plays an important role in facilitating social exchange and creating opportunities to learn other people and cultures. The findings revealed that about 73% (*Mean Score*=3.84) of the respondents believe that tourism increases the residents' pride in their local culture, 63% (*Mean Score*=3.50) believed that it promotes local crafts, art and music, 50% (*Mean Score*=3.20) agreed that tourism leads to the increase in quality of life of the residents. When asked whether they feel that tourism would damage local culture in the long run, only 32% (*Mean Score* = 2.66) showed their agreement whereas 57% showed their disagreement with the statement.

Table 5: Perceptions of socio-cultural impacts.

Scale items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Dis-Agree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Mean Score
Residents' pride in local culture has increased	29 25.2%	55 47.8%	17 14.8%	12 10.4%	2 1.7%	115 100%	3.84
Encouragement in local craft, art and music etc.	15 13.0%	57 49.6%	18 15.7%	20 17.4%	5 4.3%	115 100%	3.50
Local youth imitate tourists (demonstration effect)	13 11.3%	37 32.2%	16 13.9%	39 33.9%	10 8.7%	115 100%	3.03
Improved quality of life	7 6.1%	51 44.3%	23 20.0%	25 21.7%	9 7.8%	115 100%	3.20
Damages the local culture in the long-run	4 3.5%	33 28.7%	13 11.3%	50 43.5%	15 13%	115 100%	2.66

Source: Survey data.

Perceptions of environmental impacts – Most of the respondents seem to be in agreement while weighing the impacts of tourism development on the physical environment of their area. From the table 6 below, it can be observed that 55% (*Mean Score* = 3.30) of the respondents believed that *tourism leads to the improvement in the appearance* (visual and aesthetic) of the area, 68% (*Mean Score* = 3.62) believed that tourism development in the area has led to the

public efforts to restore and beautify the historical buildings and monuments. Nevertheless a considerable number of respondents were skeptical about the tourism impacts on the natural environment, with 34% (*Mean Score = 2.79*) of the respondents saying that *tourism activities damage the natural environment in the long run*, still a most of the respondents (53%, *Mean Score = 3.02*) were optimistic about *tourism's inherent capacity to preserve natural environment*.

Table 6: Perceptions of environmental impacts.

Scale items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Dis-Agree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Mean Score
Improved appearance of the area (visual and aesthetic)	17 14.8%	48 41.7%	11 9.6%	29 25.2%	10 8.7%	115 100%	3.30
Incentive for restoration of historical building and monuments	33 28.7%	45 39.1%	7 6.1%	21 18.3%	9 7.8%	115 100%	3.62
Helps preserve natural environment	13 11.3%	40 34.8%	13 11.3%	34 29.6%	15 13.0%	115 100%	3.02
Tourism overall damages the natural and built environment	14 12.2%	24 20.9%	13 11.3%	51 44.3%	13 11.3%	115 100%	2.79

Source: Survey data.

Perceived obstacles in tourism development – Respondents were asked to rate various factors, that might be potential obstacles or hindrances in the development of tourism in their area, on a Likert Scale of five ranging from *Very Serious Obstacle = 5* to *Not an obstacle at all = 1*. About 69% (34.8% *very serious* and 34.8% *serious*, *Mean Score=3.59*) of the respondents found *lack of tourism awareness among locals* as the major obstacle for its development. Almost same number, 68% (32.2% *very serious* and 35.7% *Serious*, *Mean Score = 3.54*) believed the *lack of necessary education and training among youth to take up jobs in this sector* as a potential hindrance in tourism development. Since employment in tourism sector is the most valued benefit for any tourist destination, the required skills and qualifications among the population are essential. In absence of required skills and qualifications the respondents does not see much scope of tourism in terms of engaging local population in employment through tourism. Other factors that were seen as the obstacle in the development of tourism were a) *lack of interest among local population to do business in this sector* (52%, *Mean Score = 3.06*), b) *Language barriers* (68%, *Mean Score = 3.23*), c) *Lack of financing or development funds* (81%, *Mean Score = 3.78*), d) *Lack of proper tourist infrastructure* (80%, *Mean Score = 3.80*), e) *Lack of job opportunities available to local people in tourism sector* (62%, *Mean Score = 3.14*). Informal interactions with the respondents during the survey indicated that a, b, c and d are potential contributors to e.

Table 7: Perceived obstacles in tourism development.

Scale items	Very serious obstacle	Serious obstacle	Can't say	Not so serious obstacle	Not an obstacle at all	Total	Mean Score
Lack of tourism awareness among local people	40 34.8%	40 34.8%	6 5.2%	5 4.3%	24 20.9%	115 100%	3.59
Lack of necessary education and qualifications among youth to be able to work in this sector	37 32.2%	41 35.7%	9 7.8%	4 3.5%	24 20.9%	115 100%	3.54
Lack of interest in the people to do business in tourism	35 30.4%	26 22.6%	8 7.0%	3 2.6%	43 37.4%	115 100%	3.06
Language barriers	35	33	8	2	37	115	

	30.4%	28.7%	7.0%	1.7%	32.2%	100%	3.23
Cultural factors	15	33	6	6	55	115	
	13.0%	28.7%	5.2%	5.2%	47.8%	100%	2.54
Religious factors	23	19	6	2	65	115	
	20.0%	16.5%	5.2%	1.7%	56.5%	100%	2.42
Lack of financing or development funds	53	28	9	5	20	115	
	46.1%	24.3%	7.8%	4.3%	17.4%	100%	3.78
Lack of proper tourist infrastructure	61	19	7	6	22	115	
	53.0%	16.5%	6.1%	5.2%	19.1%	100%	3.80
Lack of job opportunities available to local people in tourism sector	39	23	9	3	41	115	
	33.0%	20.0%	7.8%	2.6%	35.7%	100%	3.14

Source: Survey Data.

Many scholars such as Mathieson & Wall (1982), Baum & Collins (1997), and Yasin (2016) have argued that the conservative Islamic societies tend to be not much supportive of tourism development due to their belief that tourism negatively impacts on their religious and religious-cultural traditions, and therefore tourism development has not been a priority of many Islamic societies. Oman is a Muslim country whose socio-cultural milieu is driven by Islamic principles and traditions. However, the present research findings showed that most of the respondents did not see the culture or religion as an obstacle to tourism development. More than 61% of the respondents did not see culture as an obstacle to tourism development; whereas, 67% respondents did not see their religious beliefs posing any hindrance to the tourism development in their area. This indicates that the Omani society, culturally and religiously, is very welcoming towards the tourism development.

Residents' overall evaluation of tourism and their intentions of supporting its development – Table 8 show that while making an overall evaluation of the tourism development in their area in terms of its impacts, 61% of the respondents indicated that tourism's benefits outweigh its costs and an equal number 61% of the respondents perceived overall impacts as positive. The residents, although majority of them not working in tourism or related sectors, were highly supportive of tourism development in their area. About 95% of the respondents responded in affirmative to all the questions demonstrating support for tourism [encourage tourism in area (*Mean Score* = 4.13), support tourism related activities in the area (*Mean Score* = 4.22)]. When asked whether they *would like the tourism activities to be stopped in the area*, 95.5% (*Mean Score* = 1.21) of the respondents responded in negative as opposed to just 4.5% responded in affirmative. This shows that residents in the study area are highly supportive of tourism development in their area. This is particularly important for the policy makers as the; local residents support and involvement is one of the critical factors in tourism development in any area.

Table 8: Residents' overall evaluation of tourism in their area.

Scale items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Dis-Agree	Strongly Disagree	Total	Mean Score
Benefits of tourism exceeds its cost	31 27.0%	40 34.8%	20 17.4%	17 14.8%	7 6.1%	115 100%	3.61
Tourism produces more negative impacts than positive	5 4.3%	22 19.1%	14 12.2%	50 45.2%	22 19.1%	115 100%	2.40
Encourage and promote tourism	58 50.4%	21 18.3%	31 27.0%	3 2.6%	2 1.7%	115 100%	4.13
Support tourism related activities	61 53.0%	19 16.5%	33 28.7%	2 1.7%	2 1.7%	115 100%	4.22

Stop tourism to the area altogether	4	0	0	8	103	115	
	3.5%	0%	0%	7.0%	89.6%	100%	1.21

Source: Survey data.

5. Conclusion, Implications and Limitations

Tourism impact assessments have been effectively used to investigate residents' perceptions and attitudes towards tourism by many scholars. Most of these studies suggest that their results cannot be generalized, and any such studies need to be carried out in authentic local settings, as the perception and attitudes of local communities vary over their differences in culture, religion, region, and also over their perception of benefit realization from tourism development. This study, therefore, aimed to study the perceptions of tourism and willingness to support its development among the native residents of A'Dhakhiliyah region of Oman.

The current study showed that the residents' attitudes towards tourism development were largely positive. The residents' positive attitudes can be connected with their belief that tourism development creates community development, increase employment and business opportunities, improved standard of living, encouragement to local arts and crafts, improved public services, and improved appearance of the area. The respondents were largely appreciative of ongoing tourism development efforts; and expressed their positive attitude towards its further development and support. They see tourism as an opportunity sector for future economic consolidation in the country in general, and in their local areas in particular. However, the majority of the residents believed that absence of proper awareness, training, skills, and finances not only limit their access to benefits from this sector but also has increased the leakage of tourism income from local areas to outside stakeholders. Although majority of the respondents are aware of the Government's seriousness towards tourism development, but at the same time the results indicate that residents are not satisfied with the pace of infrastructure development which they expected to come with tourism development in their areas.

Since the study area is in its initial stages of tourism development and the residents are yet to experience the actual impacts (positive or negative) of tourism development, the study is limited in its ability to identify residents' future attitudes towards its development, once the tourism development increases and its impacts are much more visible and evident. Nevertheless the study assumes importance due to the fact that its results will give the Country's tourism policy makers insights into the local residents' perceptions of tourism in their areas; help them identify residents' expectations and perceived barriers; and also insights into planning and tourism development activities in the region.

The study has several limitations which may provide opportunities for further research. First, the study is spatially limited to one particular region of Oman; hence its generalizability for the whole country may be limited. The findings may be validated by conducting similar studies in other parts of the country. Second, since the region is in initial stages of tourism development these findings may change over the advanced stages of destination lifecycle, as its costs and benefits become more visible and evident. Therefore, further research over time will help in understanding the changed perceptions of residents and hence the need for policy adjustments.

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