

The Tourism Sector of the Baikal Region from the Perspective of Russian-Chinese Cooperation: Opportunities and Threats to the Sustainable Development of the Region

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Abstract. The tourism sector development has a multidirectional effect on the sustainable development of the region. Analysis of the tourism sector developments in the Baikal region demonstrates the positive dynamics of indicators characterizing the functioning of this field in the region. However, emerging opportunities trigger a number of threats, too. The present paper was aimed at selecting and evaluating the most significant threats caused by the tourism sector development in the Baikal region from the perspective of Russian-Chinese cooperation and at selecting appropriate strategies for managing them in the aspect of the sustainable development of the region.

Based on the methods of expert estimations as well as on using international standards of risk management, the authors verify the threats resulting from the development of Russian-Chinese cooperation in the tourism sector. According to the analysis, there is a high risk level on a number of environmental, economic and infrastructural threats. Therefore, both the state and the business community are to develop preventive measures to mitigate the negative consequences. The authors establish the priorities for threat management in the aspect of sustainable regional development and determine the directions for their reduction. The results obtained can be advantageous in building up a tourism development strategy in the Baikal region and in working out measures for the sustainable development of the region.

1. Introduction

Over the past six years, the tourist flow in the Baikal region (Irkutsk Oblast) has shown stable and high growth. The region is among the leaders of Siberia and the Far East in the number of foreign tourists received. The majority of them are Chinese (64%). In 2017, 1598 thousand tourists (including 211 thousand foreign tourists) visited the Irkutsk Oblast. The growing tourist flow from China increases incomes of many economic sectors, improves the employment situation, helps develop small and medium-sized businesses, and evens out territorial imbalances. However, together with the emerging economic opportunities, Russian-Chinese cooperation in the tourism sector may lead to some threats impeding the sustainable development of the region in the future. Thus, the increase in tourist flows from China to Russia and the development of Russian-Chinese cooperation in the tourism sector actualize the necessity to study both the emerging opportunities for the region and the difficulties for its sustainable development.

2. Literature review

The impact of tourism development on the socio-economic condition of the region has long been the subject matter of many domestic and foreign researchers. This issue is reflected in the works of B. Archer [3], D. Frechtling [7], J. Fletcher [6], J. Mak [10] and other foreign authors [9, 18]. In Russia, such researchers as S. Anisimova [1, 2], S. Chuprov [4], N. Danilenko [5], M. Morozov [11], T. Golovchenko [8], N. Rubtsova [12, 13, 14], V. Samaruha [15, 16, 17], A. Suhodolov [19], Svetnis T.V. [20], S.E. Varavin [21] studied the consequences of the tourism sector development through the example of different regions. In general, the above-mentioned authors note the favorable impact of the tourism sector on the socio-economic development of the region. It should be noted however that the studies mentioned reflect only the positive side of this phenomenon, as a rule.

At the same time, together with the positive impact of the tourism sector expansion on the socio-economic situation of the regions, the researchers note its negative effect. In particular, some authors point to the emergence of significant risks in the socio-cultural, economic and environmental aspects. However, in the empirical perspective, a comprehensive study of threats associated with the increase in tourist flow and the rapid tourism development in the Baikal region has not yet been carried out. That actualizes the importance and necessity of its in-depth study.

3. Problem statement

The purpose of the study was to select and evaluate the most significant threats caused by the tourism sector development in the Baikal region from the perspective of Russian-Chinese cooperation and to select appropriate strategies for their managing in the aspect of the sustainable development of the region.

4. Theory

Threat assessment was carried out using the method of expert estimations resulting from the increase in the number of Chinese tourists in the Baikal region. The experts (11 people) were representatives of the authorities and the business community of the tourism sector of the Baikal region, including 6 heads of travel agencies, 2 heads of large accommodation facilities, the head and members of the specialized departments of the Irkutsk city administration. The expert questionnaire included 15 types of threats grouped in three occurrence sectors: eco-economic, infrastructural, and socio-psychological. The list of threats under discussion was formed through a brainstorming session.

5. Results

Based on 15 threats considered, the high risk level and the necessity to develop preventive measures to mitigate the negative consequences by both the state and the business community were identified in all the three groups of threats: eco-economic, infrastructural, and socio-psychological (Table 1, Fig. 1).

The analysis made it possible to determine the following threats as the “most dangerous” (Fig. 1): environmental degradation and pollution of Lake Baikal; local budgets' revenue losses due to shadow businesses of Chinese partners; underdeveloped tourism infrastructure, including the transport one; lack of training and low qualification of personnel for the tourism sector; substitution of Russian tour guide-interpreters and hotel personnel by Chinese specialists.

Table 1. Classification and ranking of threats (expert estimation)*.

Criterion of classification	Name of threat (threat number)	Rank
Eco-economic	Zero or insufficient investment (1)	7
	Ruble depreciation (2)	13
	Environmental degradation and pollution of Lake Baikal (3)	1-2
	Local budgets' revenue losses due to shadow businesses of Chinese partners (4)	1-2
	Reduced income of individual entrepreneurs due to Chinese partners' businesses with no middlemen involved (5)	6
Infrastructural	Battered property assets of the tourism sector (6)	9
	Underdeveloped tourism infrastructure, including the transport one (7)	4
	Poor quality of tourism services (8)	10
	Lack of training and low qualification of personnel for the tourism sector (9)	5
	Lack of Chinese-speaking tour guide- interpreters and staff (10)	8
Socio-psychological	Decrease in the sector attractiveness for local businessmen due to cornering the market by Chinese partners (11)	12
	Substitution of Russian tour guide- interpreters and hotel personnel by Chinese specialists (12)	3
	Security threat to Chinese tourists due to mutual distrust and cultural insensitivity (13)	14-15
	Threat of interethnic conflicts with the locals, intercultural antipathy (14)	14-15
	Popular discontent with the environmental degradation due to increased tourist flow from China (15)	11

* Based on the results of the authors' study

Risk probability	Low*2 (less than 25%)	Acceptable (25-50%)	High (50-75%)	Very high (over 75%)
Consequences				
Low (less than 25%)	13, 14			
Acceptable (25-50%)		2, 6, 11, 15	1, 5, 10	
Significant (50-75%)		8	7, 9, 12	
Highly significant (over 75%)				3,4

Figure 1. Risk matrix of the threats and their consequences*

*¹ Based on the results of the authors' study

*² Estimate of probability and damage consequences of the threats was considered low at a value of less than 25% (not taken into account), acceptable – from 25 to 50% (qualitative analysis is recommended), high – from 50 to 75% (quantitative analysis is recommended) and very high – over 75% (urgent measures are required).

The listed threats have high or very high risk probabilities and require urgent measures aimed at reducing them.

To determine the consistency degree of the expert estimations, coefficients of variation were calculated (Table 2).

Table 2. Coefficients of variation of the expert estimations (n=11)^{*1}

Threat	Variation, % ^{*2}	
	probability	consequences
Zero or insufficient investment (1)	27,64	27,48
Ruble depreciation (2)	47,27	47,12
Environmental degradation and pollution of Lake Baikal (3)	32,13	23,07
Local budgets' revenue losses due to shadow businesses of Chinese partners (4)	20,32	29,61
Reduced income of individual entrepreneurs due to Chinese partners' businesses with no middlemen involved (5)	33,79	44,49
Battered property assets of the tourism sector (6)	27,04	47,14
Underdeveloped tourism infrastructure, including the transport one (7)	20,04	27,64
Poor quality of tourism services (8)	36,39	29,81
Lack of training and low qualification of personnel for the tourism sector (9)	33,17	31,64
Lack of Chinese-speaking tour guide- interpreters and staff (10)	27,46	36,76
Decrease in the sector attractiveness for local businessmen due to cornering the market by Chinese partners (11)	23,13	18,54
Substitution of Russian tour guide- interpreters and hotel personnel by Chinese specialists (12)	33,90	24,02
Security threat to Chinese tourists due to mutual distrust and cultural insensitivity (13)	48,56	59,23
Threat of interethnic conflicts with the locals, intercultural antipathy (14)	55,75	64,23
Popular discontent with the environmental degradation due to increased tourist flow from China (15)	36,70	29,81

*¹ Based on the results of the authors' study

*² Permissible value of the coefficient of variation of not more than 33% indicates the uniformity of the obtained estimations.

According to data in Table 2, the expert estimations of the probability and consequences of some threats were ambiguous. However, the whole complex of the estimations obtained is quite similar in terms of assessing the impact of the five most significant threats.

6. Conclusions

The necessity to regulate the threats involves the development of strategic and tactical measures both at the level of the federal, regional, municipal authorities and at the level of individual business communities (associations) and individual business structures (hotels, tour operators).

As a result of the study, the threats to the development of Russian-Chinese cooperation in the tourism sector have been identified. According to the data obtained, the greatest impact of threats occurs in the eco-economic and infrastructural aspects.

The authors have determined the important directions of reducing threats and enhancing benefits in the partnership development between the Irkutsk Oblast and China in the tourism sector:

- improvement of the civil and environmental legislation at all levels of governance (federal, regional, municipal);
- infrastructure development of the main routes for different types of tourism;
- working-out and implementation of projects for the development of new territories, preservation of the cultural legacy, and redistribution of tourist flows;
- assistance to the training and retraining of highly qualified personnel, raising the prestige of the occupation in the tourism sector (WorldSkills movement).

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