

Research on the Development Patterns of Rural Tourism in Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture, China

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Abstract: Tourism, one of the pillar industries in Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture, plays a significant role in the region's economic development and cultural exchange. Amongst all types of tourism, rural tourism is especially important for the further economic prosperity of the region after it having been lifted out of poverty and for narrowing the regional income gap. In the course of the gradual development of rural tourism, related problems are revealed. A qualitative analysis is used to analyse the development patterns of rural tourism in the Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture; suggestions and countermeasures are put forward for new patterns of further development.

Keywords: Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture, Rural tourism, Rural revitalization, Sustainable development, Ethnic culture.

1. Introduction

Xiangxi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, located at the junction of Hunan, Hubei and Chongqing provinces, has a total area of 15 462 square kilometres and a resident population of 2 488 105 in 2020, with an ethnic minority population of 1 927 561, accounting for 77.47%. The population of Tujia is 1 078 151, accounting for 43.33%; the population of Miao is 830 948, accounting for 33.40%.[1]Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture is mostly surrounded by mountainous areas, with rugged terrain, remote geographical location and thus inconvenient transportation. As one of the key targets of the national poverty eradication policy, the Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture region has now successfully been lifted out of poverty under the national policy of precise poverty alleviation. Meanwhile, rural tourism has also developed in recent years and is becoming an increasingly vital industry for the development of rural areas. In the process of development, however, there are some problems with rural tourism in Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture. Improvements to the existing development model and the exploration of new development patterns will be beneficial to the sustainable development of rural tourism in the region.

Today's rural tourism generally refers to that the natural landscape, cultural atmosphere and customs, and architectural styles of rural areas work together to form the driving force that attracts tourists. Tourists come to rural tourism out of a desire for a human environment in which the natural environment and human activities are harmoniously integrated. The villagers are the main operators of rural tourism, while the tourists are mostly from urban areas. Rural tourism is closely linked to the natural environment, which is one of its core elements.

2. Current Conditions of Rural Tourism in Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture

2.1. Rich Natural and Human Landscapes

Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture is located in a subtropical monsoon climate zone, with a predominantly mountainous

terrain, high annual precipitation and crisscrossed rivers. Being surrounded by mountains and water is one of the characteristics of the local natural landscape. The local population is dominated by the Tujia and Miao ethnic minority groups, whose unique habits and customs form a distinct human landscape. Benefited by the rich and unique natural and human resources, rural tourism in Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture is in a prosperous stage of development. Famous rural tourist attractions such as Wang Village and Mangdong River in Yongshun County; Bamian Mountain Grassland, Jabala and Luota Stone Forest in Longshan County; Guzhang Red Stone Forest, Mojon Miao Village and Zuolong Gorge attract a large number of tourists every year and the annual income from these attractions is on the rise.

2.2. Policy Support and Positive Change

The 12th Party Congress of Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture distinctly put forward the goal of constructing Xiangxi into a well-known tourist destination at home and abroad, placing the development of tourism in Xiangxi in an important position.

In February 2016, Xiangxi was included in the National Area Tourism Demonstration Zone[2], which has led to the effective integration of tourism resources and have prevented further negative impacts on the healthy development of the industry due to vicious competition within the rural tourism industry. Paying due attention to the theme of "Mysterious Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture", the characteristic brand of rural tourism in Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture is gradually formed.

In December 2021, the operation of Zhanghuaiji high-speed railway symbolized the start of the "high-speed railway era" in Xiangxi. The opening of this high-speed railway has strengthened the links between the Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture region and the central economic circle of Hunan; the spillover effect of the cities in the central economic circle on the Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture region has strengthened, further promoting the development of tourism in the Xiangxi.

2.3. Development Issues

2.3.1. Unclear Positioning in The Development Process; Homogenisation Still Exists

Although rural tourism in Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture has gradually had a distinctive brand, some areas are still unclear about their own positioning and are unable to fully exploit local cultural characteristics and integrate tourism development with their cultural core. The result of this lack of clarity is that rural tourism in the region often takes the form of “agritainment”, [3] with a single marketing model that fails to meet the expectations of tourists. The large number of similarly shaped rural tourism projects has also led to homogenisation. According to surveys conducted in previous years, first-time visitors to Xiangxi accounted for close to 70% [4] of the total number of tourists. If this group of tourists were to limit their experience of rural tourism in Xiangxi to homogenised projects, the main impression would be that “rural tourism in Xiangxi is nothing special”, which would not be conducive to the sustainable development of rural tourism in Xiangxi.

2.3.2. Inadequate Infrastructure Development

A well-developed infrastructure is favorable to the brand image construction and sustainable development of the local tourism industry. At present, the infrastructure of rural tourism in Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture is still not perfect: the road design of scenic spots is unreasonable and the guidance of road signs is weak; the lack of parking spaces and the low efficiency of ticket offices cause congestion in scenic spots and affect the overall image; the construction of other facilities also has a great impact on the evaluation of tourists of the scenic spots. In the context of the tourism development pattern of the six towns in Jiangnan (regions south of the Yangtze River), the quality of hotels and inns is one of the factors that tourists focus on. In Wuzhen [5], one of the six towns, for example, the beautiful landscape around the hotel, the graceful Jiangnan atmosphere, the overall design of the room in line with the cultural atmosphere of the scenic spot, and the quality of the internal hardware facilities such as beds, toilets and showers are factors that are taken into account in the positive evaluation of Wuzhen by tourists. Therefore, the obvious imperfections of hotels have a negative impact on the return rate of tourist, while there are many other problems with the construction of scenic spots in Xiangxi.

2.3.3. Relative Isolation of Famous Tourist Attractions

At present, the famous attractions of rural tourism in Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture are in relative isolation, and the degree of integration of various brands is not high. For example, Furong Town, Fenghuang Ancient City and Mangdong River have not formed a unified industrial chain. In the context of “all-for-one tourism”, there are problems of responsibilities not being well distributed in the process of integrating the various brands, and the lack of efficiency in coordination and management, which are disadvantageous to the deep integration of the various entities and could not significantly improve the economic benefits of the industry.

2.3.4. Local Cultural Preservation Issue

The issue of cultural preservation [6] is not only about the preservation and transmission of traditional ethnic culture, but also about the preservation and restoration of traditional buildings that carry ethnic culture. The results of the cultural preservation survey show that more than 50% of the respondents believe that only a small part of the ethnic culture in Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture has been preserved, which

to some extent shows the situation of the preservation and transmission of ethnic culture; as traditional buildings are mostly made of wood, they are vulnerable to the local climatic and environmental factors such as rain, humid air and insects. At the same time, because of the impact of industrialisation and modernisation, houses made of steel and concrete have gradually become mainstream. Traditional buildings that have been left vacant are often not properly utilised and repaired in a timely manner, resulting in serious damage.

An excessive commercial atmosphere is also one of the cultural conservation problems. Numerous shops and undue marketing are affecting the experience of the tour; the “bar atmosphere” on the riverbank has a strong impact on traditional culture, and the original traditional ethnic culture of the area is lost.

2.3.5. Stakeholders Conflict & Lack of Expertise

The development of rural tourism affects the interests of many parties, including local governments, tourism exploitation companies, community organisations, local residents and tourists. The timely resolution of stakeholder conflicts is a requirement for the further integrated development of local rural tourism and the enhancement of the business model.

As there are many types of products in current rural tourism in Xiangxi and many departments are involved, the industry is characterised by a lack of highly qualified specialists and inefficient management, leading to slow and poor quality of development. At the same time, policies such as the introduction of relevant management personnel lack enough attraction and do not effectively play a role in filling the serious talent gap.

3. Development Countermeasures

3.1. Enrich The Range of Rural Tourism Products and Highlighting Regional Advantages

Rural tourism should avoid overly repetitive forms of agritainment. The local cultural characteristics should combine ethnic culture with the natural environment and tourism projects; on the basis of adequate market research, tourism products with their own core competitiveness should be developed, such as short-term accommodation for tourists with village residents, so that tourists can fully experience the unique ethnic culture of the Xiangxi region, thereby helping to differentiate Xiangxi from other regions and increase the rate of re-visit. The deep integration of tourism products with cultural cores is one of the most important needs to improve the level of industrial development and enrich the industrial pattern.

3.2. Strengthen Construction of Infrastructure

In the case of scenic spots, increasing parking spaces and strictly limiting the duration of single parking; online ticket promotions should be carried out appropriately to guide visitors to make online ticket purchases; design and build roads around and within the attraction to avoid traffic congestion and improve the consistency of the tour; the interior of the hotels be designed in a style that combines with the local ethnic culture and the surroundings should be quiet for visitors to rest and convenient to go to the tourist spots; ensure the quality of hardware facilities such as beds, toilets and showers to provide visitors with an excellent resting

experience; improve the overall reception capacity and quality of scenic spots, such as increasing the freedom of tour guide services and educate practitioners on systematic practice norms, etc.

3.3. Enhance Tourism Brand Linkages and Integrate Tourism Resources

Local tourism resources can be integrated according to geographical location links, such as the Guzhang Red Stone Forest, Mojon Miao Village and Zuo Long Gorge can be integrated into the Guzhang Rural Tourism Circle to bring a comprehensive tourism experience for tourists. At the same time, promote the region's tourism resources and related goods through the Internet social platforms to establish an organic and integrated tourism image; adjust advertisements and management of tourism projects in time based on online statistics to broaden consumption channels and increase the popularity and economic efficiency of the rural tourism industry as a whole.

3.4. Focus On Scenic Development, Conservation and Cultural Heritage

Make full use of unused traditional buildings and carry out timely repairs while preserving traditional elements; gradually guide residents to move in and develop unused areas into rural tourist attractions with unique ethnic characteristics; focus on ecological and environmental protection and improve laws and regulations. Meanwhile, actively enhance the awareness of environmental protection among stakeholders in scenic spots. At the same time, the proportion of commercialisation in scenic spots should be reasonably controlled, so as to improve the commercial operations while avoiding excessive commercialisation of scenic spots.

The cultural education of ethnic groups in the region should be underlined, for example, by incorporating ethnic languages and traditions into the compulsory curriculum of local schools to enhance the awareness of ethnic culture. As cultural factors play an important role in shaping the image of rural tourism, which is a combination of natural environment and cultural factors. Therefore, the education and transmission of ethnic culture is an indispensable part.

3.5. Government Plays A Leading Role In Interests Reconciliation And Talent Gap Filling

On the basis of the interconnection of various government departments, the industry development standards, development norms and evaluation mechanisms should be improved to provide references for all parties in interest; the

channels for reporting problems should be broadened for all parties in interest, placing issues of conflict of interest in the public domain for discussion and resolution.

Universities in Xiangxi should share educational resources with those in the Changzhutan region (Changsha, Zhuzhou and Xiangtan, a economic circle in eastern Hunan) to jointly train specialised tourism management personnel to fill the talent gap; the welfare and treatment should be further improved to increase the attractiveness of tourism in Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture to relevant talent.

4. Conclusion

Tourism, as one of the pillar industries in Xiangxi Autonomous Prefecture, is of great significance to the economic development of the region. The rural tourism industry also plays an indispensable role in reducing regional economic disparities. In the era of big data, the future of rural tourism in Xiangxi is to integrate the existing tourism resources, to develop them rationally, to protect and inherit the ethnic culture of the region, to combine the uniqueness of the culture with the natural environment, to highlight the core competitiveness of the tourism industry, to enrich the industry, to improve the level of the industry, to keep pace with the times, to build the industry with a long-term vision and to ensure healthy and sustainable development.

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