

# Tourists' and local residents' **place-attachment** to **mountains places**: A preliminary approach

CARLA SILVA \* [ csilva@estv.ipv.pt ]

ELISABETH KASTENHOLZ \*\* [ elisabethk@ua.pt ]

JOSÉ LUÍS ABRANTES \*\*\* [ jlabrantes@estv.ipv.pt ]

**Keywords** | Tourism, Place-attachment, Mountain places.

**Objectives** | The degree of mobility in modern society is challenging traditional values, including people's attachment to places (Aronsson, 2004). Tourism is an encounter between people and people and spaces (Lew, Hall & Williams, 2004), allowing emotional links between these. People establish different relations with places, depending on their cultural values, interests, individual experiences and living contexts, making them more or less attached to places.

Research shows that people are more attracted to natural environments (e.g., Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989; Knopf, 1983, 1987) and over time they create and strengthen links with these natural spaces (Kyle, Mowen & Tarrant, 2004). On the other hand, some natural places, like mountains, are powerful tourism destinations because of their image, symbols and affective links that establish with people, making them more and more attractive places. In fact, mountain tourism constitutes, nowadays, at least 20% of global tourism flows (Mountain Agenda, 1999; UNEP, 2002), with mountain destinations being the choice of 500 million tourists annually (Singh, 2007; Thomas, Gill & Hartmann, 2006; UNEP, 2002). In this sense, the main goal of this exploratory study is to analyse the tourists' and the local residents' place-attachment to mountain places.

**Methodology** | The variables considered for the survey instrument – the questionnaire – have been developed based on a literature review on place-attachment. Twelve items were used to measure place-attachment, assessed through a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Since place-attachment is a multidimensional construct, the scale incorporates two dimensions (Brown & Raymond, 2007): place-identity and place-dependence, each one with six corresponding variables.

The study was conducted in three European mountain tourist sites – Peaks of Europe (Spain), Alps (France, Austria and Switzerland) and Serra da Estrela (Portugal). The main survey was applied from March through July of 2009, and 630 valid personally administered questionnaires were completed.

\* **PhD in Tourism** from the University of Aveiro. **Adjunct Professor** at the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu, and Researcher at CI&DETS research unit.

\*\* **PhD in Tourism** from the University of Aveiro. **Associate Professor** at the University of Aveiro, and Researcher at GOVCOPP research unit.

\*\*\* **PhD in Economics and Management Sciences** from the University of Salamanca. **Coordinator Professor** at the Polytechnic Institute of Viseu, and Researcher at CI&DETS research unit.

**Main Results and Contributions** | The preliminary results reinforce the idea that different people have distinctive emotional bonds with places. In fact, tourists and residents establish different emotional bonds with mountain sites. Due to their temporary permanence, tourists tend to be less territorially bound, consequently revealing less place-attachment than residents. Tourist attachment is highly related to traditional travel behavior variables, such as destination choice and tourists' satisfaction and loyalty. The evaluation of residents' place-attachment is also an important predictor of community satisfaction (Herting & Guest, 1985). Thus, these results could help mountain destination management to enhance place-attachment and strengthen mountain communities and cultures. It could also be used to develop sustainable tourism in mountain regions, which could be an incentive for the local economy and consequently improve local residents' quality of life.

**Limitations** | One of the study's limitations is regarded to the place-attachment dimensions. The study might have omitted some other important variables, which could influence specific bonds that residents and tourists have with mountain places.

Another limitation is concerned to the methodology applied. A quantitative approach is limitative because it requires that an individual classify subjectively a set of predetermined attributes or characterize stimuli using a standardized classification scale battery (Pike, 2007), which increase the level of risk of omission of important constructs and of using constructs that are not the most important to respondents.

On the other hand, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) should be applied to a deeper understanding of the main differences between residents' and tourists' place-attachment and the respective gaps.

Since place-attachment is a multidimensional construct, it could be interesting to analyze other important constructs that could be associated, such as personal characteristics, involvement and motivations of tourists and residents.

**Conclusions** | Place attachment is conceived as an affective bond or link between people and specific places. One of the features of modern tourism is the fact that tourist trips and tourism itself could disrupt the sense of belonging to that specific place. On the other hand, people feel more and more attracted to natural places feeling an affective connection with them.

The differences on human-place bonding between societal groups, such as tourists and local residents, regarding mountain places, are interesting because they reveal different perspectives and perceptions of mountains, based on the distinct use of the that places: living *versus* visiting.

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