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FIELD NOTES

Tourism, Globalization, and a Multi-Sited Approach to Fieldwork in Nepal

WILLIAM R. VAN DE BERG¹

Abstract

Social researchers must recognize that their field sites are not isolated entities that can be understood by way of an in-depth, single-site approach, but rather that field sites are nodes in a continuum of social, economic, and environmental relationships that are interdependent. An example of multi-sited research is provided using the river tourism industry in the Himalayan region of Nepal. The multi-sited approach enabled a more thorough analysis of this global industry, including an understanding of how rafting companies ran their operations and the ability to situate environmental and social impacts within issues that occur at multiple levels of analysis, such as global monetary policy, national energy development and tourism de-centralization, and the political economics of local communities.

Introduction

Social researchers must recognize that their field sites are not isolated entities that can be understood by way of an in-depth, single site approach, but rather that they are nodes in a continuum of social, economic and environmental relationships that are interdependent (Brosius 1999, Kearney 1995, Marcus 1995). As such, new approaches toward understanding how these nodes are connected must be developed and incorporated into the anthropologist's methods. One potential alternative is what has been called the "multi-sited" approach towards data collection in the "field" (Marcus 1995), which involves the anthropologist working in several areas with multiple scales of analysis in the attempt to connect global, national and local events into a coherent body of social analysis.

This paper will address the ways in which anthropologists must alter their traditional, single, rural field site focus in light of the changing circumstances that ethnographers find themselves confronting at the global, national and local levels. Two primary questions are proposed: how do global industries such as tourism relate to local community dynamics and how does the study of this process relate to change in the traditional anthropological conception of the "field site?" An example of a multi-sited research project is provided using the river tourism industry in the Himalayan region of Nepal. Attention will be focused on both the ways in which the multi-sited approach enabled a more thorough analysis of this global industry and the manner in which further work should be conducted in accordance with this research strategy.

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Globalization

In the attempt to understand the causes of rapid social and environmental change at the local level, social scientists have increasingly turned toward theories of globalization and transnationalism as an analytical framework. These theoretical positions, whether based on Wallerstein's world systems model (Chase-Dunn 1998, Wallerstein 1974) or the post-structural global ethno-scape of Arjun Appadurai (1996), all have as their central tenet the perpetual pushes and pulls experienced by those increasingly becoming engaged in the global world economy. Traditionally, globalization theories have addressed the impact of large-scale transfers of capital, labor and resources between members of the global North and South and the corresponding patterns of economic domination and subordination that have resulted. Owing to their long-standing interests in the welfare of local communities in the face of forced acculturation and assimilation, anthropologists have naturally, albeit somewhat lately, entered the contemporary discourse on the relevance of globalization to local level development (Hackenberg 1999).

Although globalization has been identified by some to be an elusive and somewhat indeterminate concept (Hamelink 1999), it has nonetheless been a useful analytical tool that can be applied to a variety of situations. The term 'globalization' has been identified by Burns and Holden (1995:75) to refer to "the ways in which at one level (that is, at the level of trade and consumption) economic and political relations between nations are increasingly framed by a sort of 'cultural convergence', where a set of values emerges across a range of countries with a tendency towards 'cultural homogeneity.'" However, the paradox of globalization, as they recognize it, is that in the face of this 'cultural convergence,' what the world has seen is increasing fragmentation and polarization between the constituents of the global community. This factionalism in the face of homogenization has been manifested in a variety of ways ranging from an increase in nationalist and religious movements to the di-

versity of personal identities an individual must possess when interacting in a post-modern and trans-national world (Appadurai 1998). In all of these arenas, the forces of globalization exert a variety of pressures that have created existential eddies in the river of daily reality for the members of the global community, within which individuals must constantly re-create and re-delineate their personal identities to effectively interact with the members of their constantly shifting reference groups (Shibutani 1955).

Recently, anthropologists have become increasingly interested in the role that global market forces play in reshaping local community dynamics. Anthropologists such as Michael Kearney (1995) and George Marcus (1995) were some of the first anthropologists to recognize the impact globalism and trans-nationalism have had on issues such as personal and/or community identity, de-territorialization, and migration. Additionally, Marcus (1995) claims that globalization and transnationalism are changing the face of not only local communities, but also of the entire discipline of anthropology. Marcus (1995) argues that the ever-increasing complexity of social relations encountered by anthropologists in their field sites, which had once been perceived of as remote and isolated, are due to the dynamic interplay of global pressures exerted at the local level (and vice versa). This newfound recognition of globally induced societal complexity necessitates change in research techniques for anthropologists who must now contend with the role external forces have on their local field sites. To address this problem Marcus (1995) contends that anthropologists need to resort to what he refers to as a multi-sited approach to ethnographic fieldwork. By following the tendrils of the global network by way of tracing the connections, associations and putative relationships involved in an issue or event, anthropologists can more effectively gain an understanding of what is actually occurring in their research area. This perspective has been echoed by other anthropologists

such as Gupta and Ferguson (1997), Appadurai (1996), Kearney (1995) and to a limited extent, Brosius (1999), who all share a common vision of the need to re-orient anthropological field practices to adapt to globally influenced changes in the 'field.' In short, these anthropologists argue that the most effective strategy for researchers interested in cultural formations produced by the world system is to understand that they are actually attempting to conduct an ethnography of the global system and as such, cannot do so under the traditional rubric of the single-sited conventional field 'site.' Rather, anthropologists studying cultural formations of the global realm must understand that the cultural formation is actually produced in several different locales and thus plan their research accordingly.

Anthropology of Tourism

One area of research particularly suited for the application of this concept is the anthropology of tourism, which is, by its very nature, often transnational or global in orientation and multi-sited in character. With the use of the multi-sited approach, anthropologists might benefit by physically following the connections in the touristic experience, analyzing the effects that decisions made at the national level by politicians and tourism ministers have on both the urban based tour operators and the rural communities with whom they interact on their excursions. This would allow for a much needed, multi-leveled understanding of the dimensions of tourism development. Additionally, by maintaining a relative amount of mobility in their fieldwork, anthropologists can traverse the geographical landscape along with their tourism-employed research informants who are by the nature of their work, spatially mobile individuals.

International tourism is one of the world's largest industries. According to the World Tourism Organization (1992), international tourism grew faster than trade in goods and services in the 1980's and is now ranked third (after crude/petroleum products and motor vehicles/parts) in the list of global export categories. Furthermore, accord-

ing to the World Travel and Tourism Council (1994), tourism is the world's largest industry and the world's largest employer and creator of jobs. Additionally, tourism accounts for one in nine global jobs (direct and indirect employment), represents 10% of global wages and is responsible for 10% of the world GDP (WTTC 1994). As such, international tourism can be considered a primary force of globalization.

Tourism has been a driving force in the development of the Third World since the 1960's, a period in which the World Bank and other international lending institutions began to persuade non-western countries to invest in tourism infrastructure (Lanfant and Graburn 1992). Once a minor player internationally in regard to economic development and production of foreign exchange, tourism has now become a primary source of revenue for countries across the globe. This has been particularly true for Nepal, an economically impoverished country that is highly dependent upon tourism revenue. In order to maintain a tourism development strategy, tourism dependent countries must be keenly aware of factors that may negatively affect the inflow of tourists and revenue. Since many forms of tourism rely upon the scenic beauty and availability of a variety of natural resources, such as beaches, rainforests and rivers, it is in the best interest of tourism dependent countries to safeguard their environmental "cash cows." The country of Nepal provides an excellent case study from which to learn about both the positive and negative effects of the tourism industry.

Multi-Sited Fieldwork Example: River Tourism in Nepal

Fieldwork Location and Methods

The research for this paper consisted of three months of multi-sited fieldwork with the river tourism industry in Nepal, during which time I engaged in five trips down four different rivers (Bhote Kosi, Sun Kosi, Seti Khola, and Trisuli Khola), covering a considerable portion of the central and

eastern portion of the country (Figure 1). I also conducted research in the urban center of Kathmandu with clients, employees, owners and officials of the river tourism industry, as well as government tourism ministers and tourism specialists with an international development organization. I conducted informal semi-structured interviews, client socio-economic surveys, and participant observation with the aforementioned groups. However, owing to the short time period over which the data was collected and the exploratory nature of the fieldwork, this paper is not meant to be a definitive case study of the costs and benefits of the river ecotourism industry in Nepal. Rather, this paper's focus is to provide an understanding of how the multi-sited fieldwork approach provided an enhanced understanding of the river tourism industry in Nepal and how this approach opened up avenues of awareness that would have been closed to a researcher remaining in a single field site. As such, I will discuss the issues uncovered during the three months of data collection that took place in several different locations and spanned four different river systems. The paper will conclude

by discussing the advantages and disadvantages of using the multi-sited approach during this period in the field and will offer suggestions as to how the shortcomings of this approach can be dealt with.

In order to understand the development of the global river tourism industry in Nepal, one must consider the history of the industry. Accordingly, the following section will discuss how the river tourism industry in Nepal arose, who started it and what is currently taking place at both the local and national level.

Nepal's River Tourism Industry

Nepal's river tourism began in the late 1960's when a few French, German and American teams began to explore the lower reaches of several of the Himalayan fed rivers. However, it was not until 1976 that the first commercial rafting company in Asia was launched. This company, owned by an American mountaineer, was based out of Kathmandu, the urban center of Nepal, and staffed by both American and Nepali employees. Since the first operator began running commercial trips in 1976, Nepal's river tourism industry has ex-

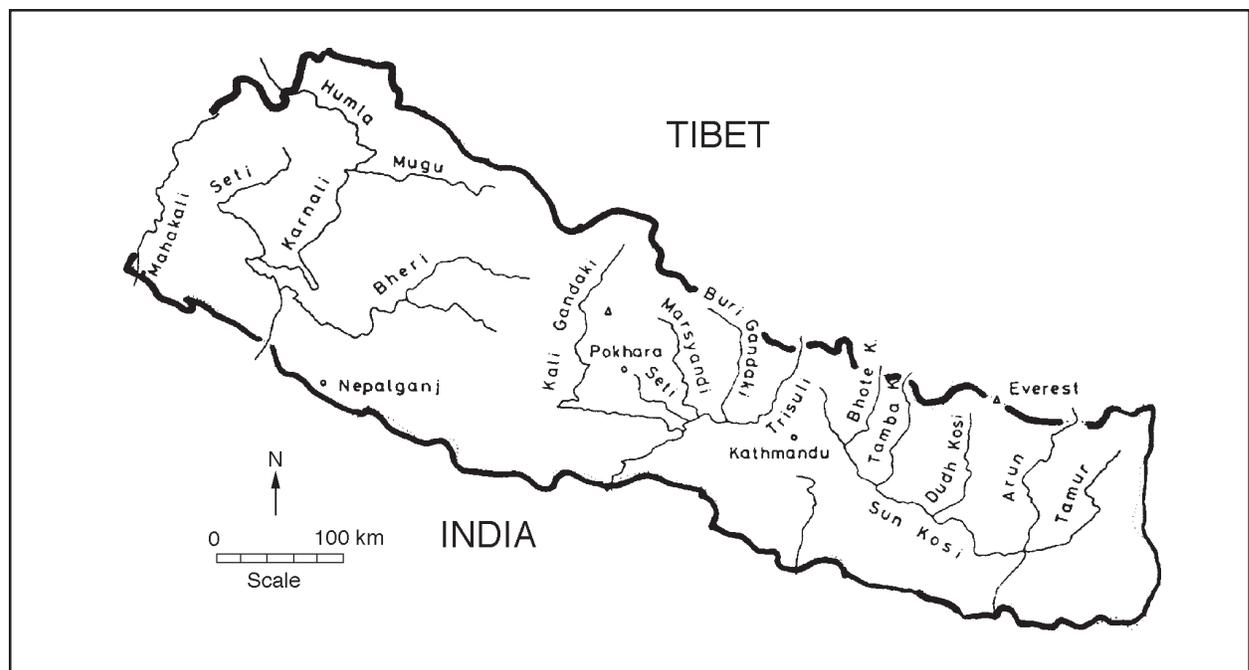


FIGURE 1. MAJOR RIVERS OF NEPAL.

panded considerably. The government of Nepal officially recognizes only sixty-nine river operators. However, the industry actually consists of at least 80 companies and possibly as many as 140. This has led to intense competition within the industry for the international tourist's vacation dollars, resulting in a price war that has not only hurt the tourism operators economically, but has also posed significant dangers in terms of trip safety and quality.

The Nepali tourism industry has had a tremendous economic impact on both the local and national level. Annually, Nepal has experienced a rise in the foreign exchange earning from the tourism industry over the past several years, growing from over \$61 million US in 1992, to almost \$117 million US in 1996 (Nepal Department of Tourism 1998). There has been a corresponding increase in the number of tourists that enter Nepal every year, with over 100,000 more tourists entering the country in 1996 than in 1993 (Nepal Department of Tourism 1998). Although the majority of these incoming tourists do not come to Nepal primarily to raft, many tourists do include a rafting trip or two in their itinerary once they have finished their treks or climbs. According to the data collected by the Nepal Association of Rafting Agents, which only includes the figures offered by the members of NARA (and these are oftentimes under-represented), there has been a rise from 3300 rafting clients in 1983 to 6700 clients in 1996. Based on responses to a client expenditure survey that I administered to participants on several river trips, tourists who entered Nepal specifically to raft the rivers spent an average of over \$1100 US in-country during their excursion (excluding airfare). Although this may not sound like a tremendous sum of money to a western vacationer, considering the fact that the Nepalese per capita income in 1998 was approximately \$210 US, this is a large amount of money spent locally.

While several of the largest rafting companies are owned by westerners, particularly British and New Zealanders, the majority appear to be Nepali owned and operated. Additionally, those



FIGURE 2. RIVER RAFTING IN NEPAL

businesses not owned by Nepalese still overwhelmingly employ Nepali citizens. In fact, The government of Nepal has implemented legislative safeguards to protect Nepali raft guides and offer them a modicum of job security by way of excluding foreigners from serving as raft guides on any river in Nepal. Westerners can only gain employment in the Nepali rafting industry by acting as safety (rescue) kayakers and video boaters (people who film the rafting company customers from their kayaks), positions that require more technical skill and high priced equipment. However, there is a growing number of Nepalese who are becoming technically proficient at both kayaking and client rescue and are beginning to fill these previously western occupied employment niches as well (Figure 3).

Ethnically, the ownership and employment in river tourism is rather diverse compared to the mountaineering industry. Among the owners and employees of the rafting companies that I met, nine ethnic groups were represented. At least five ethnic groups participated in the decision-making leadership of the Nepal Association of Rafting Agents. Thus the river tourism industry appears to be relatively egalitarian in regard to the people who are employed within it. As such, it bears a similarity to the leveling of caste boundary induced by tourism as noted by Norman (1999) in her analysis of tourism in Pokhara, Nepal. This has the potential to contribute to the social equality between castes and eth-



FIGURE 3. FIRST-AID COURSE BEING OFFERED FOR NEPALI RAFT GUIDES ON BHOTE KOSI RIVER, SOUTH-CENTRAL NEPAL.

nic groups that the government of Nepal was trying to create when it officially removed the caste system with the 1963 New Civil Code introduced by King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev.

River Tourism Induced Change: Social Structural

The river tourism industry appears to be an attractive draw to young rural adolescent males who have grown up in riverine locales and are looking for steady wage-earning employment outside of the local context. Among the Nepali employees that I interviewed and conversed with, the majority said that they had been raised in small riverine villages and became interested in rafting by seeing the boats float by their villages. These individuals, as they became more involved in the rafting industry, ultimately became conduits whereby more young males from their village were able to gain employment with the same companies. Although this tourism-induced outmigration of males has been criticized by some as injurious to local social structure, the loss of males from the local workforce may be somewhat counter-acted by the wages that are sent home to the raft guides' families. This was a common strategy among the informants that I inter-

viewed, especially if the individuals' families lived near frequently run rivers. Ortner (1999) mentions that the mountaineering industry had several impacts on the local social structure, from re-arranging the traditional sexual mores and gender relations to reducing the wealth polarization in high mountain villages by providing poor indebted Sherpas with the chance to pay off their debt with the cash generated from tourism wage labor. This may be the case with river tourism as well, although currently the data to support this case are not available.

Although the river tourism industry appears to be beneficial to the Nepalese who participate in it in a variety of ways, there are several resource management policy issues that are currently having pronounced impacts on its ability to remain economically viable. The first issue is the way in which the rafting industry has historically gained river rafting permits and how this relates to Nepal's political machinations. The requirements for mountaineering, trekking or paddling Nepal's rivers has historically involved the basic centralized permitting system, whereby the individual or commercial agency purchases a permit from the tourism ministry to traverse a particular geographical

area (or river in the rafter's case). The permits would cover the person's travel through the proscribed area for a delineated period of time, thus regulating the spatial and temporal passage of tourists throughout the country. All fees for these permits were paid to the central government in Kathmandu by way of the visa and trekking permits office. This system enabled the government to tax all travelers as they traversed the landscape. However, it did not benefit the local communities that were actually being impacted. This issue proved to be one of the points of contention that led to a large-scale effort by the local village development committees (VDCs) to force the Government of Nepal to de-centralize the regulation of the country's natural resources.

The result of the VDC effort has been a gradual de-centralization in several areas. One area was the disbanding of the trekking and rafting permit system in July of 1999. This removed the need for permits when traveling in the Annapurna, Langtang and Everest regions of the country and shifted the locus of permitting control to the local community level. The shift in control was greeted with mixed reviews by the members of the rafting and trekking community. Foreign tourists could now traverse a good deal of Nepal unencumbered with permits that required extra money and often created complex logistics. So in general, it has benefited the average tourist. However, owners of rafting companies now have to deal with not only a menagerie of local permits that are springing up around the country, but also fraud and extortion by people who claim to be local village representatives. Several informants have claimed that this problem is getting worse. The very nature of rafting forces operators to pass through many villages and communities, all of whom may now attempt to implement some form of local permit levy upon the rafting trips. While at first glance this might seem to be an effective mechanism to control the rafting industry's impact on the local level, in reality, the rafting trips stop at very few of the villages and make every effort to stop away from large population centers. This is done because of the

desire to provide their clients with a remote and relaxing atmosphere, to minimize their impact on the local cultural groups, and to reduce, in their words, the potential for establishing a begging and thieving relationship with the local riverine communities. Additionally, with the dissolution of the centralized permit system, there is no longer any form of regulation regarding the levels and coordination of river traffic. This is a concern among the rafting agents who fear that there will be traffic jams and increased environmental and social impact at camping areas on the most heavily frequented rivers.

Another point of contention between the rafting companies and the Nepali tourism ministry that surfaced over the course of my fieldwork was the manner in which the companies obtained their initial permit to operate a rafting company in Nepal. My informants claimed that although this system was established to maintain quality control over the emergent river operators, it is now dominated by corruption and graft, resulting in a decline in its efficacy as a regulatory approach to the industry. Thus, it appears that there is substantial room for improvement in regard to the ability of the government of Nepal to both educate and regulate the impact the rafting industry may have socially and environmentally.

Environmental Conservation and Sustainability

The river tourism industry is, first and foremost, dependent upon the river systems of Nepal remaining in a free-flowing and aesthetically appealing state. This places the river tourism industry in a rather tenuous predicament, one it shares with other forms of nature tourism (Boo 1991, Ryel and Grasse 1991, Whelan 1991, Wood 1991), in that in order for it to succeed, the natural scenery must be maintained.

In Nepal, the primary issue which affects the natural resource used by the river tourism industry is the government of Nepal's plans for hydro-power development on its river systems. Currently, the government of Nepal has extensive plans for the development of its riverine resources. While

recognizing the existence of the rafting industry, the Nepali government is nonetheless primarily interested in generating large amounts of power to be both used domestically and sold to international consumers throughout South Asia.

Currently, the Kingdom of Nepal cannot produce enough electricity to provide continuous power to its urban centers (Chatterjee 1995). The shortage in power causes occasional power cuts (known as brown outs), which place sections of Nepal's towns and cities without power for short periods of time. It is Nepal's need for energy and its abundance of riverine resources that led to attempts by the Nepali government to solicit funds for hydropower infrastructure projects. Currently, the government of Nepal has approximately eighteen large dams planned for its river systems, several of which are already under construction.

While it is critical for Nepal to develop its own power production capabilities, there are several criticisms to be levied against Nepal's desire to construct an array of large, ecologically and socially destructive hydropower projects on the rivers that feed its human and non-human populations. Several of the dams planned on the Nepal's rivers will severely impact not only the local inhabitants of those riverine valleys, but will also terminate the ability of commercial rafters to use them for ecotourism purposes. Rivers such as the Bhoté Kosi, Karnali, Marsyangdi, Sun Kosi and the Kali Gandaki are the major rivers used by the Nepali rafting agents and are also the rivers considered by the government of Nepal as prime locations for hydropower development. This has caused considerable alarm among many of those in the industry, as they are afraid that they will lose the resource upon which their livelihood rests if all of these dams are built.

In addition to the rafting employees' concerns over the impact that the hydropower projects will have on the rivers they work on, many are also worried about their home villages, some of which lie in the areas that will be directly impacted by the dams' construction. Thus, even though these individuals have left their village for a source of external employment, their fates are still entwined with both the rivers of their childhood and those

of their families who remain in the villages. As these rivers are changed by national and multi-national development plans, impacts are felt by both the river guides and their agriculturally based families who reside in numerous riverine villages.

In looking at the Nepali rafting industry as a form of sustainable development, it is important to understand that, first and foremost, sustainability is not about the past or the present, but rather it is about the ability of future populations to benefit from the actions of today. The Nepali rafting industry holds such a promise. The employees are all Nepali national citizens as are the majority of the company owners. Although the majority of the technical rafting gear has to be purchased from companies abroad, other aspects of the industry are genuinely Nepali in origin, from the foodstuffs that are purchased at small local stores to stock the trips (Figure 4) to the transportation that is rented from local Nepali bus drivers. Some anthropologists may criticize the usage of tourism by Nepali citizens as a form of development and employment, and claim that they are just participating in another form of "neo-imperialism" (Nash 1989) that results in the creation of "de-authenticated virtual" social actors (Adams 1996). However, I feel that it is important to understand that these are humans who are attempting to negotiate the constantly shifting playing field of the global economy as best they can. Other anthropologists, such as myself and Sherry Ortner (1999: 251), consider that what we are seeing in the incorporation of locals in the tourism industry is not a corruption of a traditional lifestyle, but rather a remaking and reconfiguration of the lifestyles of a select group of Nepalese who have chosen to embrace the tourism industry as a career choice. This point can be well illustrated in a statement made by one of my informants, in response to my asking him why he chose to become a raft guide.

"I like to raft and I like to go rafting. In rafting I can have a good future. It is not bad work because in Nepal it is hard to get a good job and rafting is a good job. I like rafting, this is my life."



FIGURE 4. NEPALI RAFTING EMPLOYEE STANDING WITH LOCALLY BOUGHT SUPPLIES FOR A TWO DAY RAFTING TRIP ON THE TRISULI KHOLA, CENTRAL NEPAL.

Conclusion

This case study on Nepalese riverine tourism was provided to illustrate the manner in which a multi-sited approach can be used to gather data on an appropriate globally-oriented research topic, namely the world tourism industry. The investigation of such a multi-leveled entity requires that anthropologists be prepared to depart from a single field site approach and to adopt a more flexible, context specific research program. In the aforementioned case study, I conducted data collection in the urban center of Kathmandu, where the majority of the tourism operators and government ministers are located. However, I also made constant trips out of the city to accompany the tourism operators as they traversed the social and geographical landscape. During these trips, I was able to observe firsthand the types and frequency of

interactions that the clients and employees had with both one another and the local riverine populations that they encountered along the way. This allowed me to gain an understanding of how the companies ran their operations, where I took special notice of the types of environmental and social impacts that occurred, and the salient issues regarding to the tourism de-centralization movement. By following the tourism operators around the country, I was able to assess a variety of components of the industry that would have been inaccessible had I remained in one primary field site. Examples of these mobility-dependent forms of data range from the relationships that develop between the guides and the clients to the observations that were made of the human and non-burnable waste disposal practices of each company that I worked with.

However, this study is still deficient in that it had no component that was explicitly focused on the local riverine communities and the way in which they relate to the river tourism industry. For an adequate understanding of what the implications of river tourism development are, firsthand data collection needs also to be done with local riverine communities to assess both their level of involvement in the industry and what their perspectives on its costs and benefits are. I was unable to attend to this component of the research during my exploratory trip. Although the multi-sited approach allowed me to gain a broad understanding of many facets of the industry, particularly those related to the employees, owners and clients, it did not allow me to gain in-depth insights into any one area as I was constantly shifting location. This has been one point of criticism of the multi-sited approach in anthropological fieldwork addressed by Marcus (1995); namely the loss of ethnographic power due to the inability to remain in one local field site for an extended period of time.

Marcus (1995: 100) addresses this conundrum by pointing out the importance of being able to both "link up the sites with both a common frame of study and to posit their relationships on the basis of firsthand ethnographic research." Thus, the contribution of multi-sited ethnography is in its ability to bring a disparate set of locales, social actors, institutions and worldviews into one large network of interaction that has been analyzed by way of the ethnographic experience. Future research, which will be multi-sited by nature, will not only focus on the river tourism industry and the individuals involved in its day to day operations, but will also include a phase that will involve exploring the riverine community's perspective on the tourism industry. This will be done by spending several months in a remote, riverine village that has frequent contact with river tourism companies. By linking the local community, the tourism operators, clients, government tourism ministers and participants in

the wide array of environmental NGOs and international development organizations into one network of social interaction, it is hoped that a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the role global processes have on local and national levels can be developed.

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