Tourism and Local Development Cooperation

Assignment 4

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Developing Local Resources for Tourism: The Sacred Valley of the Incas, Peru

Introduction

The Sacred Valley (Valle Sagrado) runs through the Andes of the Cusco region in southern Peru, between the towns of Pisac and Ollantaytambo. Most visitors know it as the gateway to Machu Picchu, and many pass through in a day or two without really stopping. That is a missed opportunity, both for travellers and for the people who live there. The valley has far more to offer than a transit route, and its resources could support a broader, longer-stay and more locally beneficial form of tourism.

This assignment identifies the main natural, cultural, heritage, human and social resources of the Sacred Valley, explains how local products, traditions and knowledge can be built into the tourism offer, and proposes some products and activities that make use of what is already there.

Main Resources of the Sacred Valley

Natural resources

The Sacred Valley sits at roughly 2,800 metres above sea level, and the Urubamba River has carved a fertile valley floor surrounded by high peaks, some of them snow-capped. The landscape changes quickly with altitude. Maize grows on the lower terraces, potatoes and other tubers grow higher up, and above them lie high-altitude grasslands and glacial lakes. This variety creates good conditions for trekking, mountain biking, rafting, birdwatching and photography. The climate has a clear dry season (roughly May to September) and a wetter season, which affects how the destination can be marketed through the year.

Natural features are also tied to livelihoods. The Maras salt pans, where mineral-rich spring water is channelled into thousands of small, terraced pools to evaporate, are both a striking

landscape and a working system managed by local families. The valley's microclimates and its range of altitudes also support a very high diversity of native crops, especially potatoes, maize and quinoa.

Cultural resources

The valley is home to Quechua-speaking communities who maintain a living culture, not just a historical one. Quechua is still widely spoken in daily life. Traditional dress, music, festivals, agricultural rituals and Andean beliefs about Pachamama (Mother Earth) and the apus (mountain spirits) continue to shape community life. Textile weaving is one of the most visible cultural practices, with distinct patterns and techniques that carry meaning and identify particular communities. Local food culture is another strong asset, built on native ingredients such as many varieties of corn and potato, along with traditional dishes and fermented maize beer (chicha).

Festivals add to this. Religious and agricultural celebrations, such as those connected to Corpus Christi, the feast of the Virgin of Carmen in Paucartambo (nearby) and Inti Raymi in Cusco, blend Catholic and Andean traditions and attract both domestic and international visitors.

Heritage resources

The valley was central to the Inca Empire, and the physical evidence is everywhere. The archaeological sites of Pisac, Ollantaytambo, Moray and Chinchero are the best known. Moray, with its circular agricultural terraces, is widely understood as an experimental farming site, and the agricultural terracing across the valley still functions in many places. Ollantaytambo is unusual because it is both an archaeological site and a continuously inhabited Inca-era town, with original street layouts and water channels still in use.

Heritage here is not limited to monuments. Inca engineering, such as stonework, irrigation and the road network (the Qhapaq Ñan, now a UNESCO World Heritage property), is an important part of the story, and it can be interpreted for visitors in ways that go beyond ticket-and-photo visits. Timothy and Boyd (2003) point out that heritage tourism works best when sites are interpreted as part of a wider cultural landscape and connected to present-day communities, not presented as isolated relics. The Sacred Valley fits this approach particularly well.

Human and social resources

The most important resource is the population itself. Many families in the valley have deep practical knowledge of farming at altitude, textile production, cooking, herbal medicine, stone building and guiding. A number of men from local communities already work as trekking guides, porters and cooks, and many women are skilled weavers and market traders. The valley also has a growing group of younger people with language skills, hospitality training and experience in tourism.

Social structures are a resource as well. Community-based organisations, weaving cooperatives and traditional systems of collective labour (such as *ayni*, reciprocal work exchange between families) give the destination a base of cooperation that could be used to organise tourism fairly. Tourism development that ignores these structures risks weakening them, while development that builds on them can strengthen community control.

Incorporating Local Products, Traditions and Knowledge into Tourism

The central idea is to move from showing visitors the destination to involving them in it, in ways that the community controls and benefits from. Richards (2011) describes this shift as creative tourism, where visitors develop their skills and take part in the culture through active learning, not passive observation. For the Sacred Valley this is a natural fit.

Textiles and crafts. Weaving cooperatives such as those around Chinchero already offer demonstrations where visitors see wool being washed, spun, dyed with natural materials (such as cochineal and local plants) and woven. This can be expanded into hands-on workshops, longer courses, and carefully designed shopping experiences in which visitors understand the labour and meaning behind the pieces. Clear labelling of authentic, locally made goods helps protect artisans from cheap imports and mass-produced imitations.

Food and agriculture. The valley's crop diversity is a strong tourism asset. Farm visits, cooking classes using native ingredients, market tours in Pisac, and meals in family homes (often called *pachamanca*, food cooked underground with heated stones) connect visitors to both landscape and tradition. Restaurants and hotels can commit to sourcing from local producers, which keeps more income in the valley and gives farmers a reason to continue growing traditional varieties.

Traditional knowledge. Elders and community members hold knowledge about agricultural cycles, medicinal plants, astronomy and ritual. With proper consent and community-led design,

some of this can be shared through storytelling sessions, guided walks and cultural exchanges. It is important that communities decide what is shared and what remains private or sacred. Ceremonies should not be turned into staged performances for the sake of tourism.

Festivals and living traditions. Visitors can be encouraged to attend local festivals respectfully, with guidance on behaviour, photography and participation. Spreading information about the festival calendar also helps distribute tourism across the year and across different villages.

Language. Basic Quechua lessons or phrase sessions are a small addition that makes visitors more respectful and gives local teachers an income.

Throughout, the aim is empowerment and not just income. Scheyvens (1999) argues that tourism should enhance local people's control, economic benefit and social wellbeing, and she warns that communities can end up as passive participants in tourism that others design. The Sacred Valley's community structures give it a good chance of avoiding this if development is planned with local organisations from the start.

Proposed Tourism Products and Activities

Based on the resources above, I propose the following products.

1. Community homestay and living-culture programme

Families in smaller villages such as Huilloc, Patacancha or Willoq (already visited by some tour operators) could host small groups for one to three nights. Guests would join agricultural work, cook family meals, help with animals, and learn about daily life. A standard set of quality and safety guidelines, plus training in hospitality and basic business management, would help families host confidently. Group sizes should be limited to protect privacy and prevent crowding. A community committee could allocate guests fairly between households so income does not concentrate in a few families.

2. "Inca engineering and agriculture" trail

A themed route linking Moray, the Maras salt pans, Ollantaytambo's water systems and sections of the Inca road network would tell the story of how the Incas managed water, altitude and food production. Local guides trained in interpretation would explain the sites through the lens of agriculture and engineering, with visits to working farms along the way. A walking or cycling version suits independent travellers, and a shorter vehicle-supported version suits older

visitors or families. The trail encourages travellers to spend more time in the valley and shifts attention away from the busiest sites at peak hours.

3. Weaving and natural dye experience

A half-day or full-day programme at a cooperative would take visitors through the full process: collecting plants and insects for dye, preparing wool, dyeing, spinning and basic weaving. Participants could finish a small piece to take home. Fees would go directly to the cooperative, with fair pricing for any finished goods sold. A longer residency-style option could appeal to craft-focused travellers and design students.

4. Native crops and food trail

A food-focused route could connect potato and maize farms, a salt-pan visit, a market morning in Pisac and a cooking class. A seasonal calendar would show visitors what is being planted or harvested at different times of year. Partnerships with local restaurants would feature dishes based on native ingredients, and a simple "made in the Sacred Valley" label would help visitors identify products that support local producers.

5. Responsible adventure and nature activities

Existing activities such as trekking, cycling, rafting and birdwatching could be developed more carefully through local guiding cooperatives. Priority should go to hiring and training guides from nearby communities, setting group size limits on sensitive trails, and including a short environmental and cultural briefing as part of every trip. Lesser-known routes, such as high lakes and alternative treks, could reduce pressure on the most popular trails.

6. Festival and storytelling calendar

A shared calendar of community events, developed with local leaders, would allow visitors to plan trips around festivals and agricultural moments. Clear visitor guidelines would explain how to attend respectfully. Evening storytelling sessions in community centres, led by elders or younger community members, could add a regular, low-impact activity that suits visitors staying longer.

Managing Risks and Ensuring Benefits

Developing these products carries risks that should be managed early. Overcrowding at popular sites already strains infrastructure and local life, so spreading visitors across more villages and across the year matters. Cultural commodification is another danger: if traditions are reshaped purely to please tourists, they can lose their meaning. Community consultation, with the right to say no, is the main safeguard. Environmental pressures, including waste and water use, need practical solutions such as waste collection, refill stations and limits on group sizes.

Fair distribution of benefits is essential. Cooperatives, community committees and transparent pricing can help ensure that income reaches households and not just outside operators. Training programmes in hospitality, languages, business skills and heritage interpretation would help local people move into higher-value roles, while partnerships with schools and vocational institutes could support young people who want to work in tourism without leaving the valley.

Conclusion

The Sacred Valley has a rare combination of resources: dramatic landscapes, a living Quechua culture, Inca heritage that is still part of daily life, and communities with deep practical knowledge and strong cooperative traditions. At present, much of the valley's tourism is brief and focused on a few sites. By developing community homestays, themed heritage trails, hands-on craft and food experiences, responsible adventure activities and a respectful festival calendar, the valley can offer visitors richer experiences while keeping more of the benefit in local hands. The key to success is that communities lead the process, so that tourism supports the culture and environment that make the Sacred Valley worth visiting in the first place.

References

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