View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk

brought to you by CORE

provided by ResearchOnline at James Cook University

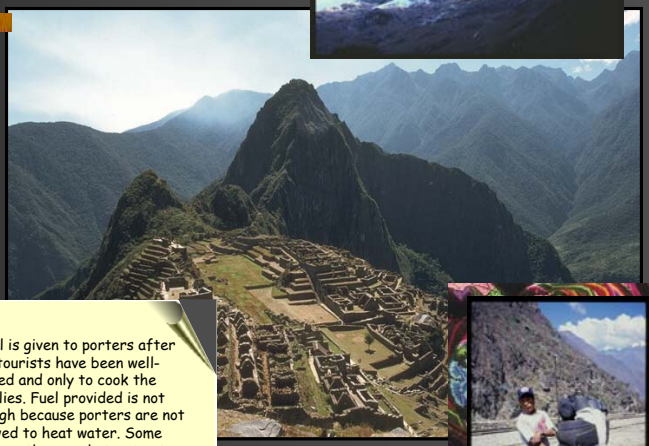
The Health of Local Tourism Employees: A Challenge for Travel Medicine

The Case of the Inca Trail Porters

Irmgard Bauer
PhD, MTourism, MPH&TM, MN, RN
James Cook University, Australia







The Problem

- The popularity of altitude trekking is increasing (eg. Himalayas, Andes)
- Porters carry the necessary equipment
- Working conditions are poor and health problems considerable
- Himalayan porters
  - –anecdotal evidence
  - –research (eg. Basnyat 2002) on health, physiology, weight of loads …
- Andean porters
- African porters

Purpose of the Study

To describe demographics, working conditions and work related health issues of porters working on the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu, Cuzco, Peru

Methodology

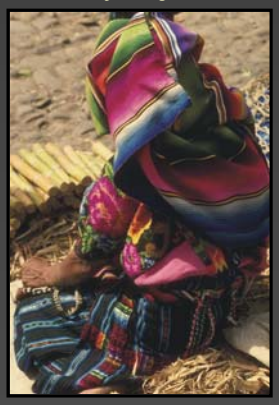
- Descriptive design
- Structured interviews with 101 Inca Trail porters in August/September 2001

'Fuel is given to porters after the tourists have been well-served and only to cook the supplies. Fuel provided is not enough because porters are not allowed to heat water. Some cooks rather use hot water to wash up than to give it to the freezing porters. Sugar is used with cold water for drinks…'



Results- Demographics

- Gender: 100% are male
- Age: 17-68 years (☒ = 30 years)
- Body weight: 50-76 kg (☒ = 62.5 kg)
- 63.4% married with 1-8 children (☒ = 2)
- 92.1% have additional other dependents
- Work as porter: 1-25 years (☒ = 6.5 years, median 5 years)
- 73.3% worked solely their own fields before portering



Results- Working Conditions

- 50.5% are employed by the cook
- No porter has a long-term position with a company
- For 94.9%, the usual length of job is 4 days
- Hours of carrying/day: 6-12 hours (☒ = 9 hours)
- Regular work day exceeds 18 hours
- The load is decided by the cook (60.4%), the guide and the cook (22.8%), the head porter and the cook (9.9%)
- Weight carried: range 20 - 45 kg
  - •minimum (☒ = 26 kg)
  - •maximum (☒ = 31 kg)
- Payment/day: ≈ US$ 5.00
- Tips (if any): ≈ US$ 3.00 for total trip of 4 days
- NO clothes, shoes, equipment, designated shelter
- Food
  - –68.3% usually receive food but it is insufficient and unpalatable (1kg rice, 1kg pasta, 1kg sugar)
  - –sometimes food left over by tourists can be had
- Fuel: 63.4% often receive fuel but it is insufficient to cook



Results – Health Issues

- 34.7% described their health as poor to very poor and attributed it to work
- The main health problems (n = 36, multiple responses)
  - –Respiratory infections (38.9%)
  - –Kidney problems (36.9%)
  - –Rheumatism (30.6%)
  - –Back pain (25%)
  - –Others: foot and leg problems, cold, muscle pain, stomach pain, 'majurki'
- 92.1% fell ill on the job (n = 93, multiple responses)
- Cold: 80.6%
- Majurki: 40.9%
- Stomach pain: 28%
- Respiratory problems: 18.3%
- Foot problems: 18.3%
- Others: kidney problems, altitude sickness, fever, rheumatism, back pain, hernia, ...
- 38 porters had been injured while on the trail with
  - –bruises
  - –dislocations
  - –scratches
  - –fractures
- In case of illness or injury
  - –nobody takes care of porters
  - –days ill are not paid
  - –no supervision of safe return from trail
  - –medication or medical care has to be paid by the porter
  - –no compensation for inability to work due to work-related illness/injury

Results - Future

Improvements demanded in the following areas (n = 100, multiple responses)

- –Salary (99%)
- –Food (91%)
- –Medical care (81%)
- –Shelter (75%)
- –Clothes (25%)
- –Insurance (14%)

Results – Other Issues

- New regulations are in place from January 2001 but are not applied in practice
- Gifts received from clients must be handed over to the cook or guide
- Tips given to the guide for the porters are not forwarded
- Damaged or lost equipment has to be paid by porters at grossly inflated prices
- If porters complain they will not be hired again

'Stomach problems occur because of the general lack of food, cold meals due to lack of fuel and the need to drink cold water with and after the meals…'

Discussion

No identified responsibility by stakeholders

- –overseas tour operators
- –local tour companies
- –guides, cooks, head porters
- –tourists
- –guidebook authors

Frameworks

- International Year of the Mountain (2002)
- International Year of Ecotourism (2002)
- Campaigns (IPPG, Tourism Concern)
- Travel Medicine (ISTM)

Future Research

- Medical examination survey, larger sample
- Effect of portering on families' economic situation
- Economic, political and socio-cultural framework of porters' health problems

Recommendations

- Create awareness among stakeholders
- Create awareness among health professionals
- Create awareness among porters
- Design acceptable strategies that assist porters in
  - –improving their working conditions
  - –improving their health care
  - –improving their health status

Acknowledgment

- Porters
- Research assistants
- Cartography Centre, James Cook University