



The Supply Chain of Trail-Based Hiking Tourism in the West Bank

Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim: Economic Development Across Fragile Communities

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Research Note 2

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Introduction

For a hiking trail to be sustainable as an avenue for tourism, a critical mass of travelers is necessary. “The path is made by walking,” says an old proverb, and it is true in many ways. Footpaths initially form as a result of the impact of footsteps upon the ground. Without sustained use, paths eventually fade. Even the most beautiful and well-planned trails can disappear through lack of use if their existence is not known to the wider public, or if no infrastructure exists to make hiking tourism possible.

Popular and long-lasting hiking trails around the world share certain characteristics in common. These elements constitute key links in the trekking tourism supply chain, and come together to make a hiking trail sustainable as a tourism project. While the relative strength and exact shape of each link may differ from trail to trail, all of the links need to be in place in order for a long-distance walking route to last and grow, and for it to do so without outside assistance.

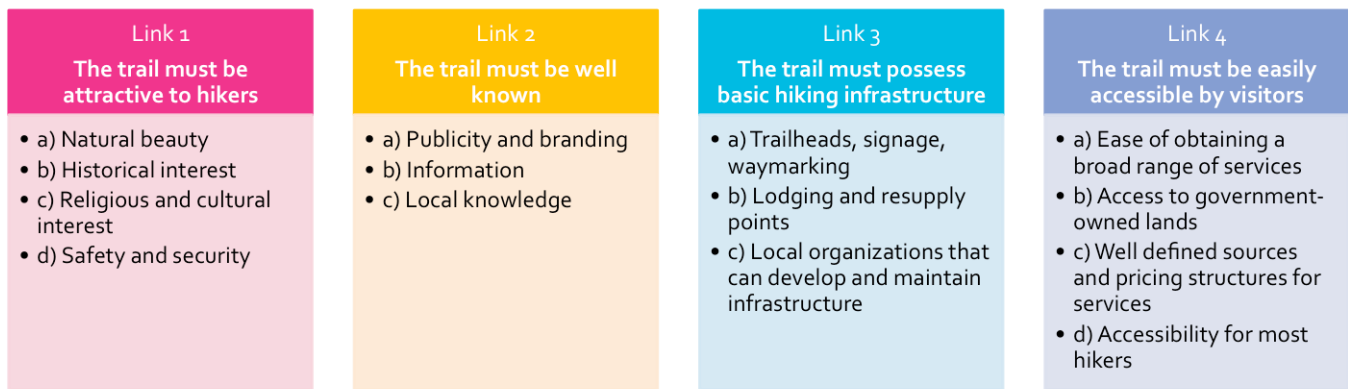
This Research Note is based on a larger study undertaken by the authors that breaks new ground in tourism research by examining hiking trails around the world, identifying common denominators among them, and defining the major links in the trail-based hiking tourism supply chain.¹ In the light of that study, this Research Note examines the condition of the supply chain specifically along the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim in the West Bank.² Which links are already in place, and which links are missing? Which links are well-developed, and which require further work? Finally, this Research Note makes recommendations for completing and strengthening the supply chain in the short

term, with the goal of making the Abraham Path/Masar Ibrahim a successful community-based tourism project in the long term.

Links in the trail-based hiking tourism supply chain

We identify the type of tourism under development along the Abraham Path as “trail-based hiking tourism.” First, this means that the Abraham Path aims to concentrate visitors along a specific corridor of travel, which may have some parallel routes, but which overall constitutes a single hiking trail. This is different from some other forms of hiking tourism, in which visitors to a geographic region stay in a single place and take individual day hikes along a number of disconnected trails. Second, this means that walking is the primary mode of movement along the Abraham Path, and that hiking is the specific form of walking undertaken by most tourists who visit the trail.

This places the Abraham Path in a league with other long-distance hiking trails around the world, and offers a context within which API and its local partner organization in the West Bank, Masar Ibrahim al-Khalil (MIK), can market the trail and attract visitors. It also leaves room for the Abraham Path to articulate its own identity. As is shown in the larger study, trails like the Camino de Santiago, the Appalachian Trail, and the Great Himalaya Trail Low Route vary greatly in terms of the terrain they traverse, the experiences visitors can expect when hiking, the degree to which local communities are connected to the trails’ tourism economies, and so on. What all trail-based hiking tourism projects share in common, though, is a certain supply chain: a list of hikers’ needs and expectations that must be met in order for any trail to be sustainable.



First, the trail must be attractive to hikers — that is, it must possess features that make a large clientele of hikers interested in coming to visit. Second, the trail must be well-known — information on the trail should be easily available so that hikers around the world know about it, and so that they can plan trips along it. Third, hiking infrastructure must exist along the trail — signs or markings that enable hikers to find their way, and lodging and resupply points that meet their day-to-day needs. Fourth, the trail must be easily accessible by visitors — arranging hikes should not be so complicated or expensive that it turns away prospective hikers. In the section below, each of these links and their components are described in detail, first in relation to worldwide hiking trails generally, and then in relation to the Abraham Path in the West Bank specifically.

Link 1: The trail must be attractive to hikers

A number of trails created by governments and non-profit organizations have failed to work as tourism initiatives primarily because they have failed to take into account the needs of hikers. Meanwhile, hiker-led trail development projects have often resulted in the creation of popular and long-lasting trekking routes. It is difficult to find examples of well-known or frequently-visited long-distance hiking trails that are based primarily on a political agenda or the general need for economic development across a certain area. However, when hiking trails are based primarily on addressing the needs of hikers, political awareness and economic benefits can result. This link can be forged from any one of the following four components, or from combinations thereof:

a) *Natural beauty*: Recent surveys have shown that natural beauty is the first criterion of adventure travelers when choosing destinations for their trips.³ Natural beauty is a necessary component of the hiking experience, but some trails are regarded as less beautiful than

others. Where natural beauty is lacking, other elements can strengthen this link in the supply chain.

- b) *Historical interest*: Some of the most popular walking routes in the world are short trails that offer access to well-known historical sites. By connecting these sites and incorporating short trails that already access them, long-distance trails can build upon the existing interests and demands of hikers, and thus connect larger numbers of people to the larger tourism project.
- c) *Religious and cultural interest*: Before the advent of modern hiking, footpaths existed mainly as routes for transportation and commerce, and secondarily as routes for religious pilgrimage. Today, on hiking trails that retain those original purposes, the slow pace of walking allows hikers to look closely at traditional life and local culture, and even to take part in them in ways that vehicle-based tourists cannot.
- d) *Safety and security*: Political instability, military conflict, civil unrest, and natural disasters are all detrimental to the tourist economies of regions in which they occur. Even if the actual security situation in a region is acceptable for foreign and local travel, the perceived security situation of the wider region at hand affects the attractiveness of that trail for foreign tourists.

The condition of Link 1 along the Abraham Path

Visitors to the Abraham Path consistently cite the beauty surrounding the trail as a key reason for hiking. The trail’s historical, religious, and cultural assets, however, are stronger incentives for hikers.⁴ A number of well-known ancient sites lie on or near the route, and other interesting sites can be easily visited before or after hiking the trail. Cities like Bethlehem and Hebron serve as pilgrimage destinations for religious travelers. Contemporary history and

politics attract visitors interested in learning more about the modern Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Local culture is also a draw for many hikers who appreciate the potential of a long-distance trail to offer a view of everyday life in small towns and rural villages. In short, the Abraham Path is an attractive destination for many hikers, and has been recognized as such in international media outlets.⁵

However, the perceived security situation in the Middle East presents serious challenges for trail-based hiking tourism. Even though large areas of the Middle East are usually safe for foreign travelers, international news reports depicting conflict and instability in the region heighten potential visitors' perceptions of danger. At the time of this writing, the tourism sector across the region is still recovering from the summer 2014 conflict between Israel and Gaza, even though the actual dangers related to the fighting have long subsided. In addition, the West Bank itself can be a complex area to navigate, especially for independent travelers who have to sort out logistical details themselves. The boundaries of Areas A, B, and C, for example, are largely unmarked, and their respective security arrangements can be confusing.⁶ All of these factors contribute to a sense of danger for potential visitors to the Abraham Path and to the West Bank as a whole.

Actual security issues affect the supply chain as well, and are discussed in more detail in the conclusion of this paper. For now, API and its local partners are doing everything they can to address actual safety and security concerns on the ground by training guides in wilderness first aid, paying attention to parts of the route that could potentially be problematic, and publishing information that keeps hikers safe. Most of the time, the actual danger of hiking the trail is low, and history has shown that false perceptions can be addressed. Since 2008, dozens of groups have walked the Masar Ibrahim and the Nativity Trail, even during times when relatively few outsiders were visiting the West Bank.

Going forward, this link may be strengthened through disseminating information that addresses inaccurate perceptions of danger, and enables foreign hikers to envision enjoying the trail in safety and security. This link may also be strengthened by increasing awareness of the trail among local hikers, who can help provide the human presence necessary for making the Abraham Path resilient even when few foreign tourists are willing to visit the region. These activities fall within the framework of Link 2 below.

Link 2: The trail must be well-known

Once a hiking trail is created, knowledge must be disseminated regarding the trail, both locally and internationally, in order for visitors to come and hike. Three different components come together to make this link complete:

- a) *Publicity and branding*: Generating sufficient interest in a new trail to sustain hiking tourism can occur through publicity, advertising, and networking. The best-known trails are those whose names conjure up clear images in hikers' imaginations. The Camino de Santiago and the Appalachian Trail are examples of trails that have become iconic on a global level.
- b) *Information (maps, guidebooks, and websites)*: Practical information, available internationally, that enables hikers to plan and organize their trips, is the next component in this link of the supply chain, and contributes further to the known-ness of trails. Print guidebooks and detailed online information, available in multiple languages, are crucial in marketing trails for international audiences. High-quality maps should be available in different languages for purchase or printing before hikers set out on a trail.
- c) *Local knowledge*: Knowledge of a trail among local hikers and adventure tourists is important in terms of populating the trail with hikers and ensuring sustainability during times when few visitors come from outside. This knowledge also fosters local participation in the development and maintenance of a trail, which is crucial for long-term sustainability (see Link 3c).

The condition of Link 2 along the Abraham Path

The publicity and branding elements of this link are relatively strong. The Abraham Path is young, and has not yet attained an iconic worldwide status, but it has succeeded in branding itself and developing a reputation as a world-class hiking trail. It has been mentioned in a number of major media outlets, and was designated as the world's number-one new hiking trail by *National Geographic Traveller* in 2014. Its presence on social media has grown exponentially over the past two years, and API recently unveiled a new edition of the trail's website and online guidebook, complete with maps and section descriptions. The Abraham Path has mass international appeal, and is poised to thrive if actual and perceived security conditions improve.

Knowledge of the Abraham Path among local hikers in the West Bank is growing, but is limited by the fact that the local hiking community is still relatively small. Palestinian hiking clubs now have a significant presence on social media, where they organize and advertise weekend day hikes. Some of these hikes follow the Abraham Path. However, since local hikers are less likely to spend money on transportation, guiding services, meals, and homestays than outside visitors are, API and MIAK have only made limited efforts to engage the local Palestinian hiking community.

At the time of this writing, the majority of hikers hiking the trail in the West Bank are foreign residents of Jerusalem and Ramallah, who spend more money on services than local hikers.⁷ Local hikers offer fewer economic benefits to local communities on the front end than foreign hikers do, but they strengthen the trail's infrastructure through sustained use. They also heighten nearby communities' awareness of the trail and create a sense of local ownership.

As the volume of local hikers grows, a culture of multi-day hiking and thru-hiking may develop, creating a local tourism market that brings economic benefits to rural communities, and which uses the trail even when few foreign visitors come to the West Bank. Investing in local knowledge of the Abraham Path, not just in the rural communities traversed by the trail, but among local hiking clubs, will strengthen this and the other links of the supply chain.

Link 3: The trail must possess the basic infrastructure that makes hiking possible

First and foremost, a known and walkable route must exist. There have been instances of loose, ad-hoc travel routes that became popular through word of mouth or shared information, and became defined over time by repeated, overlapping travel itineraries. For the most part, though, for a hiking trail to persist on the ground, it must be visible as a trail, possess basic supplies for hikers, and operate within a framework that enables it to last and grow.

a) *Trailheads, signage, and waymarking:* Trailheads are the physical access points for trails. Signs can make people aware of a trail's existence, and direct potential visitors toward trailheads. Waymarks, or blazes, signify the presence of the trail on the ground, delineate the trail's route, prevent hikers from getting lost, and convey the trail's permanence to visitors and locals.⁸

b) *Lodging and resupply points that suit the needs of travelers:* Without overnight lodging options, water sources, and resupply points, a multi-day hiking trail cannot exist. Budget food and lodging options are integral to the development of long-distance trails because these cater to the independent travelers who bring larger waves of tourists in their wake.⁹ Free or low-cost outdoor camping, inexpensive hostels, and so on should lead to a spectrum of available lodging options that widens as tourist numbers grow.

c) *Local organizations that can manage and maintain infrastructure:* Once a trail is established, maintaining its infrastructure can be costly. Local leadership and volunteer involvement are the best ways of efficiently managing a long-distance trail in the long term, and can help ensure that other links of the supply chain continue to be strengthened and further developed.

The condition of Link 3 along the Abraham Path

The trailheads, signage, and waymarking element of the Abraham Path supply chain is particularly weak compared to other long-distance trails around the world. The trail's physical presence and visibility in the West Bank is minimal. Trailheads exist in a virtual sense; stage descriptions and GPS data on the website give starting and ending points for different sections, and enable hikers to find their way between them. Signage is minimal along the main trail. None of the route is waymarked, which means independent hikers have difficulty following the trail, and even people who live near the trail may not know that it exists.

Lodging and resupply points are available primarily in the framework of tour packages offered by API local partners. Multi-day hikes on the Abraham Path are characterized by meals and overnight lodging in local communities. A guide leads the way, and handles resupplying and transportation. Some hostels and inns exist along the route. In a few places, outdoor camping is possible. To date, however, few options exist for independent travelers, who constitute the lifeblood of many long-distance hiking trails.

The current guide- and homestay-based approach to leading travelers along the Abraham Path works well with API and MIAK's focus on community-based tourism, because this approach spreads trail-related work and income among a number of people. Well-trained local guides can make foreign visitors feel less like strangers, and can also help ensure hiker safety on the trail. However, the limited op-

tions available for travelers imposes limits on the volume of visitors to the Abraham Path, and may in turn limit economic benefits to local communities.

Trail infrastructure and grassroots community involvement are closely connected. Making trails visible on the ground increases their permanence and sends a message that they are worthy investments for nearby entrepreneurs. It would open the Abraham Path for use by the local hiking clubs that could take a future leadership role in maintaining and developing the trail. In short, building infrastructure that makes the trail visible and enables independent travel will strengthen this link of the supply chain, and could even be key to the long-term survival of the Abraham Path.¹⁰

Link 4: The trail must be easily accessible by visitors

This link is closely related to Link 1 and Link 3, because information and infrastructure are both important in enabling people to visit the trail. It is not enough, however, to simply make it *possible* for people to visit, as the previously-described links do; rather, it must be *as easy as possible* for people to visit. The following conditions all constitute parts of the easy-access link of the supply chain, and the strength of the link will depend on how many conditions can be addressed.

- a) *Ease and flexibility in obtaining a broad range of services:* On long-distance trails, independent travelers' plans are subject to unexpected route changes, opportunities to meet with local people, bad weather, gear malfunctions, and so on. Camping, lodging, resupply, guidance, and trailhead transportation options must be as readily-accessible as possible, so as to provide the flexibility that will render them useful to thru-hikers.
- b) *Access to government-owned lands:* Areas traversed by the trail, including nature reserves, national parks, and other government-owned lands, should be as accessible and inexpensive for hikers as possible. Streamlined processes render thru-hiking an optimal way of visiting limited-access areas, and create incentives for using long-distance trails. In such areas, open visiting seasons and entry times should be clear and easy to understand.
- c) *Well-defined sources and pricing structures for booking tours and other services:* Travelers visiting foreign countries should be able to procure services such as guiding, lodging, and transportation to trailheads (if necessary) ahead of time, in a safe, streamlined, and

clearly-defined manner. Local and foreign private-sector tour operators play important roles in providing service and logistics at affordable prices for hikers.

- d) *Accessibility for most hikers:* Physical challenges are a part of any long-distance hike, and often are part of the appeal of walking a trail. Nevertheless, a trail should not be too challenging for an average, fit hiker, and should require as little specialized training or gear as possible. If seasonal challenges render part of a trail especially difficult, other sections may be available for use by less experienced hikers.

The condition of Link 4 along the Abraham Path

Until recently, the services available to hikers, especially in the areas that relate to independent travel, have been somewhat limited, and service providers have been few. Those that have been available have been easy to access through the Abraham Path website and through local partners in the West Bank. At the time of this writing, however, this link has begun to improve considerably. 2015 is the first year tour operators outside the West Bank have been featured in Abraham Path tour brochures.

Once on the trail, hikers generally must travel with local guides, but movement within that framework is unhindered by government restrictions. Private-sector investment in the Abraham Path is limited, but sources and pricing structures for services are clear. The whole of the Abraham Path lies within reach for most reasonably-fit hikers.

As the Abraham Path becomes better-known locally, the trail's physical infrastructure becomes better established, private-sector investment in the trail grows, and more diverse budgetary options for lodging become available, this link in the supply chain will become stronger.

Conclusions

In the past several years, the Abraham Path has grown in terms of its overall viability as a long-distance walking trail. A complete route has been mapped, a website and online guidebook have been created, tour packages have been developed, and the trail has become increasingly well-known around the world. Whereas three years ago, the supply chain of trail-based hiking tourism hardly existed along the Abraham Path, all of the links are now in place up to a certain degree, and are ready to be strengthened. When we step back and look at the chain in its entirety, two

main factors are currently creating weaknesses across all of the links.

The first is the security situation in the Middle East in general and in the West Bank specifically. The tourism economy across the region has long faced this challenge, and has waxed and waned along with the region's stability as perceived from abroad. Ultimately, trail-based hiking tourism in the Middle East must find its own ways to be resilient in the face of political instability and military conflict, and a strong supply chain can help provide that resilience. The information and infrastructure links are particularly important in this respect. Good information adds to hiker confidence by offering a clear vision of what the trail is like and what visitors can expect along the way. Upon arrival, good infrastructure adds to hikers' sense that they are traversing a known and safe space, even as they travel away from the beaten tourist track. The information link is well-developed on the Abraham Path in the West Bank; the infrastructure link is less developed.

The second factor that creates weaknesses in the supply chain is the relative novelty of trail-based hiking tourism in the West Bank, which causes problems in developing and diversifying the hiking tourism infrastructure mentioned above. Western hikers take outdoor camping, independent walking, and waymarked routes for granted as crucial elements of the hiking experience, but communities that lie along the Abraham Path in the West Bank may see these elements differently. Outdoor camping and independent walking can be perceived as detracting from the economic benefits communities would otherwise gain from offering homestays and guiding services. Waymarking can be perceived as the placement of ugly marks upon the landscape, and in the shadow of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, even as a claim on territory. Where hiker demand does not match what local communities want to supply, gaps in the supply chain can occur. The question is how to develop the trail in a way that attracts foreign hikers, respects the desires of local communities, and still manages to create a strong and complete supply chain.

In some cases, API and MIAK can work to manage the expectations of foreign hikers by disseminating information on how Middle Eastern hiking differs from hiking in Europe or the United States. Given the security situation, the guided hikes that currently prevail along the Abraham Path probably offer the safest mode of foot travel for visitors to the West Bank. Trained guides can make sure hikers stay in safe areas and provide help in case of emergencies. They

can also enrich the hiking experience with their local cultural and geographic knowledge. By clearly describing the benefits of local guides, and presenting those guides as an integral part of the Abraham Path experience, API and MIAK can bring supply and demand closer together.

In other cases, API and MIAK can explore and address the reservations that arise from local communities' unfamiliarity with trails and their infrastructure. Outdoor campsites may appear threatening to the established homestay system, but by bringing the Abraham Path into closer alignment with other trail-based tourism frameworks, they may have a dramatic effect on the overall volume of visitors, and thus benefit homestays and other local businesses. Similarly, waymarking the Abraham Path would make the trail appear better known and established, and would heighten visitors' sense of security. Moreover, local hikers, who do not procure the services of guides anyway, could begin walking the Abraham Path independently, and thus strengthen the culture of local Palestinian hiking.

If API and MIAK can address the infrastructure question, and create hiking tourism frameworks that are familiar and comfortable for outside visitors to the trail, then the Abraham Path can build upon its recent gains in the realm of information, and perhaps surmount regional security-related challenges as other tourism projects have in the Middle East. The strong supply chain of the Abraham Path could then be managed completely by local communities, and serve as a model for other similar endeavors.

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Notes

¹ This paper emerges from a larger study that examines long-distance hiking trails around the world, isolates the common elements that comprise the supply chain of trail-based hiking tourism, and assesses the condition each link for each trail including the Abraham Path in the West Bank. Upon completion, the larger paper will be available on the World Bank website under the title “The Supply Chain of Trail-Based Hiking Tourism: The Case of the Abraham Path in the West Bank.”

² For the purposes of this paper, and pursuant to World Bank guidelines, the term “West Bank” is a geographic designation that describes the portion of Palestinian territory traversed by the Masar Ibrahim/Abraham Path.

³ United Nations World Tourism Organization, “Global Report on Adventure Tourism,” *AM Reports*, Volume 9 (2014), 15.

⁴ This is based on unpublished exit surveys of Abraham Path weekly walk hikers gathered by MIAK, 2009-2014.

⁵ Ben Lerwill, “10 of the Best New Walking Trails,” *National Geographic Traveller* (April 2014), 70-84.

⁶ Under the 1993 Oslo Accords, the West Bank is divided into three areas: Area A, which covers major population centers and is under Palestinian security and civilian control; Area B, which covers mostly rural communities and is under Palestinian civil authority and some security control, with overall security remaining under Israeli control; and Area C, which covers most rural areas and is under Israeli control for both civil and security affairs, including land administration and planning.

⁷ This is based on unpublished exit surveys of Abraham Path weekly walk hikers gathered by MIAK, 2009-2014.

⁸ Appalachian Mountain Club, *AMC's Complete Guide to Trail Building and Maintenance*, 4th ed. (Appalachian Mountain Club Books, 2008).

⁹ Erik Cohen, “Backpacking: Diversity and Change,” in *The Global Nomad: Backpacker Travel in Theory and Practice*, eds. G. Richards and J. Wilson (Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2004), 43-59.

¹⁰ Waymarking and visible trail infrastructure will be examined in greater detail in the forthcoming Research Note, “Blazing the Future: The Waymarking of Sustainable Trails in the West Bank,” by Shay Rabineau.