

It's Flooding Everywhere . . .

Photo Feature by A K M Mohsin



Jurain



Kaliganj



Affected people going for shelter



Kamrangirchar

Where Tourism Actually Helps the Environment

by Regina Vasquez

A remarkable hotel in the Brazilian Amazon uses the income from visitors to finance both conservation and sustainable development for local communities — and in return gives the tourists a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

A jungle hotel on the beautiful Silves Island in the Brazilian Amazon is an imaginative way of combining conservation with sustainable development. The income generated by the Aldeia dos Lagos Hotel will go towards the conservation of fishing lakes in the region and will also help to improve the quality of life for local people.

The hotel, which is supported by WWF-Brazil, is 300 kilometres east of Manaus, the capital city of Brazil's Amazonas state. Silves Island, in the great Canacari Lake, is situated at the outflow of five main rivers — Urubu, Itabani, Sanabani, Igarape Acu and Igarape Ponta Grossa — which feed the Amazon. Commercial fishermen come from all over the region and the uncontrolled exploitation of the lake and rivers is destroying natural resources.

Getting to this special hotel is not easy — only the first part of the five-hour journey from Manaus is along the main road to Itacoatiara, in the heart of the newest and fastest growing logging centre in Brazil. But there are hardly any roads other than the aquatic ones in the Amazon region, so the road

soon ends, and the journey is completed by water. As you continue your trip, you will be able to see the best of the scenery from a voadeira, a canoe with a 40-60 horsepower engine.

Various bird species can be seen, such as the intriguing jayin, which imitates other birds' singing and can even reproduce a child's cry, or the maguary, the biggest bird in the region, which can reach the average height of local people — 1.6 metres. There are also various kinds of herons, hawks and crows, as well as flying fish and alligators. In the dry season, fish may even jump into the boat. The aquatic flora is exuberant and the boat will have to stop from time to time so the guide can free the propeller blades.

Finally you reach Silves Island, one of the oldest urban settlements in the Amazonas state. The pleasant town of Silves is paved with irregular stones, and is the main centre for a large rural area.

The Aldeia dos Lagos hotel is the result of a two-year-old project using community-based ecotourism as a sustainable development alternative. The project

is run by the local community organisation, ASPAC (Silves Association for Environmental and Cultural Preservation), with technical and financial support from WWF.

The hotel itself is simple but adequate. Each bedroom has a private bathroom with cold shower and is equipped with two to four beds. Windows are covered with anti-mosquito screens and there are electric fans. Full time personnel consists of six local people, but others are called in to work when required.

There are many excursions to be taken from the hotel, and a boat ride through the Igarapes is one of the highlights. From December to September it is possible to go by boat inside the flooded forest travelling through the trees to see the Amazon flora and fauna, or even swimming.

A visit to the preservation lakes is also a must, because it is here that the greatest variety of flora and fauna species can be observed. These lakes are necessary to maintain the ecosystem and to secure the fish supply all year round. When the flood comes, the preserved species spread over the entire

region, replenishing the rivers and lakes exhausted by commercial fishing.

A walk in the varzea forest is also of interest for visitors, and it begins with a visit to a local family by the river. Following the trail into the forest it is possible to see not only plantation but native forest. From February to September there is also a boat ride across the great Canacari Lake and through the Liberato "hole" to reach the Amazon River.

For those who enjoy it, fishing is not to be missed in Silves: the catch may include 18 different types of fish in a two-hour span. After the fishing, local people will join in to prepare the fish and have a picnic on the beach. Once more the visitor can absorb the traditions of the region, with legends and stories of the Amazon.

The story of the Boto, for example, is about a freshwater dolphin which disguises itself as a smart young man and shows up at parties to seduce local beauties with his fine manners and dancing skill.

WWF Features

The writer is a communications officer with WWF-Brazil.

Rats are Blessing, Say Poison-wary Farmers

Villagers in a Kenyan farming community are refusing to use chemicals to put down a plague of rats because they believe it would be a bad omen, and might also poison their own livestock. As a result, reports Gemini News Service, much of this year's promising harvest may be lost. John Kamau writes from Nairobi

FACED with a straight choice of either poisoning swarms of rats which are destroying a bumper maize harvest or risking a serious food shortage, farmers in Kenya's Ndeiya village have opted to spare the rodents.

The rats, say the farmers, are a blessing from God and killing them would spell doom to their future harvests. The last time Ndeiya farmers had a good harvest was in 1994. Since then they have had to rely on relief aid.

"The 1994 harvest was followed by an invasion by birds which we were asked by agricultural officers to kill — only to face a famine," says farmer Oliver Kagonyi, recalling a three-year drought. "We cannot repeat that mistake again. If we kill the rats, God might punish us and we don't know why they were sent here in the first place. Nahashon Kinyanjui, a Ndeiya resident who operates a maize mill, points out: "We killed the birds and faced the dry spell alone."

Government agricultural

officers have been camping at the village and holding meetings with the farmers in an effort to convince them to mount an anti-rat campaign.

The Ministry of Agriculture's crop-protection unit has donated supplies of zinc phosphide for use as poison.

"We fear the rats might end up destroying what would have been a bumper harvest," says James Wanyeki, an agricultural officer assigned to Ndeiya, 43 kilometres west of Nairobi. But the farmers remain adamant. Some have refused to cooperate out of fear that the chemical might also kill their pets and cattle in their wander into the poison-laced fields.

David Kibe, a local teacher, explains that the farmers' reluctance to use poison is well-founded and not simply a question of superstition. In times of famine, the community's last resort is to kill and eat their pets and cattle. If these animals die of the chemicals, "the farmers will be left helpless."

Even government warnings about the danger of rats spread

plague or the virus that causes the deadly rift Valley Fever have fallen on deaf ears.

The rats were first noticed in April, but were not thought to be a danger to the maize fields. But they can multiply fast, and breeding conditions were near perfect.

"It is only 21 days from conception to birth, and one rat can have up to 20 offspring, with 10 to 15 likely to survive," says Dr Aggrey Omondi, a lecturer at Nairobi University.

It is the first time for many years that rats has threatened output in Kenya, where agriculture accounts for a third of the gross domestic product and 70 per cent of export earnings.

"We have had problems with army worms and locusts but not with rats," says Beatrice Ndegwa, an agricultural officer at the Ministry of Agriculture. Torrential rains which followed the drought have also caused damage.

The problem with these rodents is that they are eating even what has been harvested in the barns. If the farmers do

not cooperate with government officials, they might lose everything within a very short time," says John Wanyeki, an agricultural officer.

Crop losses so far are put at 20 to 30 per cent of the expected maize harvest.

While the area administrator, Peter Gitonga, is urging people to harvest and store their maize, farmers say they cannot do so because it is not yet dry.

"How do you harvest maize if it is not yet dry?" asks Regina Wangui, whose five-acre farm appears to be heading for a poor yield.

"I think relief aid will have to continue in this area," says one local administrator. "It is a pity that farmers have yet to be educated on what their reluctance to poison the rats can mean."

— Gemini News

The writer is a Kenyan freelance journalist and a columnist for The People newspaper in Nairobi.

Garfield®

by Jim Davis

