

# Local communities and ecotourism

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THE community is a group of population which interact with each other and live within a definable area. The community is an assemblage of interacting species of populations that occur together in same place at the same time. It is the biological part of an ecosystem, as distinct from its physical environment. So, it is also called a biological community. The community has interesting and complex properties arising from the interactions between species. Competition, predation, parasitism, and mutualism occurring among individuals appear to lie behind many patterns in community organisation. At the other extreme, the community can be viewed from the wider perspective in terms of species diversity and distribution, food-webs, energy flow and the interactions among guilds of similar species. Early of the twentieth century the community was perceived as a 'superorganism' whose member species were somehow bound together such that the community was born, lived, died and evolved as a whole. This view has been largely rejected in favour of the 'individualistic' concept which focuses on the community as a collection of individual species where community patterns can be explained by processes at the level of the individual.

The above brief description is applied in the field of ecology, but for human society the term community is used in a different way rather than in ecology. Here also the interacting population is the community but that interaction takes place in between or among the populations of different castes, tribes, professions and classes in the society. The people of different classes can interact or rather share with one another with their own tradition or style. If we can use the traditions and styles for making them beneficial to each other through management of tourism in a forest area, then the local people with their own tradition and style could be made economically viable; and this type of strategic involvement of the local people into ecotourism may be designated as "ecotourism and local communities". Let us see how The World Travel and Tourism Council deals with the subject of "ecotourism and local communities" and its application in the society.

The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) has identified six major reasons for ecotourism investment in local communities. The reasons of ecotourism investment in local communities are:

First, according to the WTTC, tourism is the largest industry in the world. "The travel and tourism industry employs 127 million workers (one in fifteen workers worldwide). Ecotourism is the largest growing sector of the tourism industry, with (1994 surveys showing) 40-60% of all international tourists (528.4 million) are nature tourists (211-317 million, contributing an international direct economic impact of US\$166-250 billion), and that 20-40% are wildlife-related tourists (106-211 million, contributing an international direct economic impact of US\$83-166 billion)". Tour operators, developers and govern-

to support the maintenance of these reserves.

Fourth, in many countries these reserves are created from lands belonging to the government. The government has the right to sell that land to foreign producers, to logging companies, or to create a reserve with it. Local people living in these areas may have no right to ownership of the land. Even when indigenous communities have been living there for generations, many times the land is not titled to them and therefore belongs to the government. However, in order to sustain a reserve and its ecotourism, government, developers, and scientists must invest in these communities and recognise the rights of local people, who have for so long protected these natural resources.

Fifth, local communities must be involved from the very beginning in

terms that ecotourism seeks to protect. Ecotourism is not only a means for visitors, governments and scientists to conserve protected areas, but also recognises that local communities are stakeholders in the ecotourism process and its success or failure. The main point to this argument is the debate over whether humans are part of ecosystems or not, and whether their inherent rights to the land should be considered. If governments of developing countries are aiming to lower population growth and improve standards of living, they will invest in local communities through ecotourism. If governments are aiming to maximise profits with foreign dollars, then human rights are not a priority, and they will not invest in local communities. Much of this depends on the stability of governments, and whether they are in for the long-term or the short-

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ments obviously see future money to be made.

Second, increasing human populations and their demand on natural resources make it almost impossible for developing countries to leave large areas undeveloped. It is this necessity for development of natural areas to produce economic benefits that makes ecotourism so attractive. "(Environmentalists and ...officials in Madagascar) are counting on the burgeoning worldwide interest in 'ecotourism' to help to save what's left of the country's natural resources. They are hoping better roads and hotels will increase tourism enough to produce profits to save the island's remaining rain-forests" (Hale, 1989).

Third, the world's biodiversity is being lost at an estimated 140 species per day. It is imperative that biosphere reserves are established in many tropical countries -- the "hot spots" of biodiversity -- in order to protect what is left. Ecotourism is an attractive use of these reserves, as it aims to protect natural resources, not destroy them. Ecotourism also brings in foreign exchange that helps

planning a reserve, and be able to give their opinions and to be heard. Ecotourism can bring many changes to a society, and these communities must have a say in what they are willing to accept. Some of these changes can be very culturally detrimental. Without the whole-hearted support of these local communities, ecotourism and the reserve can fail -- locals may actually start killing wildlife and destroying forests in retribution (Hughes 1996; Stonich 1996; Tchamie 1994).

Sixth, with money from ecotourism, jobs for local people become available (including ownership and management jobs) and health and education of local people can be improved. With education of women, and decreased mortality rates for infants, women have less number of babies, and start birthing later in life. These health and education improvements can go a long way in alleviating poverty, population growth and land-distribution problems, which are the main causes of natural resource degradation and biodiversity loss (Murdoch 1980).

Humans are part of the ecosys-

term.(after: Pleumarom, 1997).

The following is a quote from a group of local people representing their own tourism organisation, ATEC, from the Talamanca region of Costa Rica, presenting a talk at an ecotourism conference:

*"ATEC would like to encourage of the ecotourism establishment to reflect on why the opportunity for international ecotourism exists. Is it not because traditional societies in fragile, natural environments throughout the world learned through centuries of experience, how to live within ecological constraints, and passed this knowledge on through centuries and passed this knowledge on through myth and ritual and practice?"*

*"Just as Columbus 'discovered' America 500 years ago, the ecotourism establishment is out 'discovering' ecotourism sites in the underdeveloped countries. We who live in such settings hope that the ecotourism industry will take care to avoid repeating Columbus's crimes against indigenous people who have for centuries been the caretakers of the forests."*

*"We are not waiting for you to come 'develop' us. History has taught us to be cautious about your schemes. We are hoping that when you come to our communities you will come humbly, wanting to learn from us what we can teach you about environmentally responsible living."*

*"We hope you will help us create opportunities to share our knowledge and the richness of our natural resources with you in ways that recognise and reinforce the dignity and autonomy of our people" (Salazaret.al.1991).*

From a recent report it is seen that Malaysia hopes to attract 13 million tourists in 2004. A total of 570,000 Chinese tourists visited Malaysia in 2002, up 24 percent from 460,000 in 2001. But arrival from China fell sharply by 40 percent from January to November in 2003 due to the deadly Severe Acute Respiration Syndrome (SARS) outbreak in the region. China is the fourth largest market for tourists to Malaysia after Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia. Malaysia will launch a year-long cultural programme to woo big-spending visitors. The two countries will sign agreements on cultural exchange activities. Malaysia has set up tourism offices in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangdong to conduct promotional programmes, and plans to set up more outlets in western China because the emerging economic giant is currently its fastest growing market. Malaysia expects total tourist arrivals to surge to 13 million, up from just 10 million in 2003. All cultural programmes will be launched by involving the local people in different tourist spots and areas. The tourist increase programme will be primarily beneficial for the local people and then to the nation as a whole.

In Bangladesh, there are many tourist-areas and spots where the local people involvement could be taken into consideration for improvement of the total tourist increase in the country. There are many such possibilities we have in Bangladesh, but all of them cannot be brought into practice for description, only few could be taken. Modhupur Sal forest is the traditional important tourist area in the country. This is going to be perished very soon for the lack of proper maintenance and involvement of the local and tribal people there. This could be managed as ecotouristic important place with the involvement of local Garo tribe. Forest areas of Chittagong and Cox's Bazar districts (which ranges from Karerhat forest at the north to the Teknaf forest at the south) have several areas that can be treated as the ecotouristic spots. The areas are Karerhat, Mieresarai, Podua, Chunati, Fashiakhali Eidgaon, Eidgar and Teknaf forests. The local people in these areas could be involved and management is possible to uphold the importance of ecotouristic and financial augmentation of the local people.

The tribal people in the Chittagong Hills Tracts (CHT) are of different ethnic, philosophical and cultural origin. They have also different customs and traditions. Ecotouristic approach and practice is necessary there not only for local tribes and castes but also for conservation of their traditions. Biodiversity and natural beauties of the hilly areas could be conserved in the way. Though the management system in the CHT is different and difficult but is not impossible.

Mawalis in the Sundarbans forest areas are allowed to enter the forests in the months of April and May for collecting honey. The Forest Department only permits them with a paper slip. They enter the forest and destroy the honey combs and kill the bees drastically and brutally during collection of honey. This happens because the collection is never scientific and systematic. If this could be managed scientifically and properly the local mawalis will be benefited economically, the forest areas will be rich in biodiversity. Ultimately everything in the honey harvest will be environmentally sound. The natural honey production in the Sundarbans areas by the endemic species of bees is unique in the world. It is necessary to take serious measures in the field not only for economic benefits but also for conservation of unique natural beauties in the forests.

"Nijhum Deep" (Nijhum Island) in Noakhali district is comprised of four small islands -- "chars". These are char Osman, Corner of char Osman, char Muid and char Kamla. The 'Nijhum Deep' is famous for a beautiful forest which is not natural but planted forest. The island area covers about 14,050 acres of land. Of which the forest occupies 12,800 acres and the rest area is for human habitation. Though the island area is of planted forests, the flora and fauna are suitably adapted there as in natural forests. There are about 10 thousand deer in the forest which came from only four pairs released in the forest in 1978. Except that, there are monkeys, mongooses, wild buffaloes, and wild boars also well adapted in the forest. The plants are suitably adapted here with beautiful birds in different seasons of the year. This 'Nijhum deep' is one of the best breeding grounds for Hilsa fish in Bay of Bengal.

Malaysian government this year has undertaken an attempt to increase the tourists in the country. We hope Bangladesh will have courage and sincerity to take an attempt in the field of ecotourism with local communities' involvement.

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