

Community Based Ecotourism: What can the people of East Africa learn from success stories elsewhere? ¹

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Abstract

This paper focuses on identifying ways in which ecotourism could be used to meet the demands for species conservation locally while economically benefiting those practicing it. It looks at how Community Based Ecotourism Enterprises could deliver local people from dependence to independence, and how threatened species could be spared through involvement of villagers in nature related businesses.

Introduction

Ecotourism has been defined as environmentally responsible travel and visitation to natural areas to enjoy and appreciate nature that promotes conservation of the environment and sustains the well being of a local people. Community-based Ecotourism is where local people have substantial control and involvement in an ecotourism project and majority if not all benefits remain in the community. Community-based ecotourism has characteristics such as; providing alternative income and employment for local communities, increasing local and visitor awareness to conservation, containing education and interpretation as part of the tourist offer, and as well minimizing negative impacts on the natural and socio-cultural environment. It should also support the protection of natural areas by generating economic benefits for the community, be organized for small groups and involve not only nature but also indigenous cultures. Community-based ecotourism should also promote local species conservation.

For CBE to be successful, it must promote sustainable development by establishing a durable productive base that allows local inhabitants to enjoy in cash or kind. The social dimensions of environmental conservation and development should be highly considered. Research has shown that if rural communities are given a chance to access of resources, they are more likely than other groups to engage in direct actions to protect or improve the environment. Environmental conservation among the rural folks is however impossible if the virtue of job creation or benefits to them is not considered. This could be inform of improved incomes, improved facilities (communal or personal), better nutrition and more reasonably better living standards. Further research has also shown that a community that gets most of their resources from the environment near them tend to be more responsive to the source of the resource. Its on this scope that CBE is going a long way in species conservation and economic empowerment in various parts of the world, that need to be embraced in East Africa to check the high rate of environmental degradation and promote sustainable development.

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CBE, family finance and community projects; the case of indigenous Maya and Garifuna people in Belize

The Maya and Garifuna communities of Toledo district in Belize, Central America, through the Toledo Ecotourism Association (TEA) have a big story on how a community can be organized. In 1990, TEA constructed a guesthouse in each of the 11 villages it operates. Every Village Guest House had two rooms, one for men and another for women, with separate bathrooms and toilets. Each house had a capacity of around 10 people. To ensure many of the villagers participated in the project, they devised the food providers, where families agreed to provide meals to guests staying in the houses. A rotating list for breakfast, lunch and dinner was made so that no family could provide a meal more than another. During meal time a young girl or boy goes to the village guesthouse to take the visitors to their home for a hot meal. Rotation enables many of the community members have the opportunity to provide meals. Each family is paid directly by the visiting guest. The family keeps 80% and 20% deposited to the Community Fund. Villagers who choose not to participate benefit from the community fund, whose money has been used for projects allied to healthcare and schools. In the process the entire community has benefited and in turn assist in environmental conservation.

CBE and ecology among the Batu Putih community in Malaysia

The village of Batu Putih in Sabah, Malaysia, had for long experienced tremendous loss of biodiversity due to logging and expansion of oil plantations. Through support from WWF-Malaysia and WWF-Norway, the Model Ecologically Sustainable Community Tourism Project (MESCOT) was established. The model involved villagers in ecotourism therefore spreading benefits and awareness of conservation issues. The project expanded through separate associations affiliated to it, boat services and village handicrafts. The concept of home stay accommodation was introduced, where visitors could stay in villager's homes at a fee. MESCOT developed interpretive trails within the villages, raising interest and awareness among the community. Participation in tourism by the villagers has enabled clearance of rubbish local landscape improvements and a forest rehabilitation programme, which has born tremendous fruits.

CBE, endangered species and habitats among the Bagmara people around Royal Chitwan National Park, Nepal

The Bagmara people live around the world known Royal Chitwan National Park in Nepal. Through assistance from the Biodiversity Conservation Network, King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, and World Wildlife Fund-US a project was launched in 1994 to enable communities be involved in protection of the endangered species within the park. The Chitwan riverline forests also contains the worlds largest concentration of the of Bengal tigers (*Panthera tigris*) in Asia, the second largest greater one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*). It also has the tallest grass in the world.

Poaching and unabated habitat loss due to fragmentation, degradation, and conversion of parks land to farming have intensified long-term threats to biodiversity conservation in and around the area. The extensive loss of habitat each year outside the park stems from an exorbitant growth in population (population doubling time is estimated to be 24.2 years) and the associated high demand for firewood and fodder. To address this BCN funded a program to promote local guardianship of endangered species and habitats in the RCNP buffer zone. A community-based Ecotourism project was

developed to strengthen linkages between microenterprise activities and biodiversity conservation.

In recognition of local efforts to restore this degraded habitat, the local District Forestry Officer awarded the Bagmara User Committee land management and on getting this entitlement, the User Group Committee began a community-based Ecotourism program in the regenerating forest. Nature trails and a machan (wildlife viewing tower) were constructed to support two primary microenterprise activities in the locally managed forest: elephant-back safaris and overnight stays in the wildlife-viewing tower. The community forestry plantations help meet the fuel wood and fodder demands of the local villagers, and the regeneration activities have led to extension of riverine forest and alluvial grasslands.

Prior to conservation investments in Bagmara, the area was largely deforested and wildlife populations were reduced. Now the Bagmara Wildlife Viewing Area is a prime location for CBE, with 17 resident or transient rhinoceros, one resident tiger, another transient tiger, two leopards, and a prey base of wild boar and four deer species. Within the first six months of operation (November 1995 to April 1996), 7,687 tourists visited the Bagmara Wildlife Viewing Area, generating over \$199,056.

The community has wholly embraced the CBE and monitoring reports for the Tiger and Rhinoceros indicate a three-fold reduction in poaching. Revenue has also assisted local people improve their standards of living.

Discussion

The three cases of Belize, Nepal and Malaysia provide living examples of how East Africans could also benefit local people while conserving biodiversity. In East Africa, most areas with reasonable nature and cultural resources are located in rural locality. Only a handful of touristic destinations are near towns or cities. Developing CBE in such areas can have reasonable impact to the local people. CBE creates jobs for local people since most of the projects are sensitive to local peoples concerns for them to obtain community support. Examples include the Grampians National Park in Victoria where attitudes by the community changed from negative to positive after economic impacts for the local community developed over a period of time. This has enabled success in conservation efforts by the national parks service.

In East Africa, people and tourism have not been compatible. In the Ngorongoro Conservation Area in Tanzania, the policy of encouraging local involvement and cooperation in conservation has not been effective. In Kenya the Mau Forest Complex, long under management of the Ogiek, an indigenous community has been undergoing many problems of degradation. This forest has a big ecotourism potential yet not utilized. Many such natural resources exist in East Africa, most of which have not been utilized by communities, but many of which are now under management of private enterprises without regard for local benefits from these resources. This has resulted to the locals viewing such investments as suspect; therefore the local people have refused to be involved in resource conservation. The locals feel they do not benefit in any way, yet in some cases denial of use of such resources has been evident. People feel cheated by not being able to utilize their own resource. As a result CBE and conservation has not been able to grow in East Africa and communities living around the resources still remain impoverished. Use of protected resources by local people has therefore become

a first-hand affair, mainly illegally and without control, causing degradation of resources, sometimes to un-rehabilitable levels.

How can we involve communities in ecotourism and conservation?

Involving the community in ecotourism development is a very important aspect of ensuring success of CBE. An avenue that many could take advantage of is utilizing existing social and community structures. Use of local opinion leaders, potential leaders and people with drive. Gender should also be considered when designing any CBE enterprise.

It is also important that an understanding and strengthening of legal rights and responsibilities of the community over land, resources and development. Management and decision making of CBE enterprises by the community also ought to be seriously considered. Sustainability of the enterprise is also an issue that should not be forgotten.

Conclusion

CBE if well established can play a reasonable role in community development and bringing people closer to conservation. If all the virtues of CBE are utilized, and local people participate effectively in its development, species will be saved from extinction for some of the rare and endangered organisms exist within local reserves and communal lands. Local sustainable development due to benefits from CBE would ensure all people supported conservation of resources. CBE could be one of the ways in which the people of East Africa could utilize to check the rapid disappearance of important flora and fauna.

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