

# Developing Community Based Ecotourism

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**ABSTRACT:** *With so little of the world in protected status, and so much of the world's biodiversity outside of those reserves, new tools need to be found if we are to save the natural world that poor populations depend on. "Eco" tourism, as is currently practiced, concentrates profits in cities. We need to meet the economic needs of communities living in biologically rich regions, if we are to preserve the biodiversity found there. Community-owned ecotourism businesses concentrate the profits in the communities, giving those communities an economic reason to preserve their natural resources. We need to create a network of community-based ecotourism businesses to capture international travelers..*

*This paper presents the strategy CECD uses to develop successful community-based ecotourism. Included are how to identify a region where a project will succeed, what meetings are necessary and what to keep in mind with discussing plans with a community, the need for a Work Plan and comments on seeking funding, profit distribution and transparency. It also outlines the steps necessary to start the project on the ground, including guide training. Also covered is a marketing strategy and follow up.*

*Ideas are based on the successful CECD project at the Jaguar Ecological Reserve in Brazil's Pantanal wetlands, together with a community-based ecotourism project underway in Mexico, including a military macaw breeding and reintroduction program. The paper ends with a brief discussion of success factors, obstacles and lessons learned, followed by a suggestion for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century African Agenda on Peace through Tourism.*

In January 2005 the BBC reported that Jeffery Sachs - director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University – is publishing a report for United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan. According to Sachs, Africa is at the centre of the UN's Millennium Development Goals of reducing extreme global poverty by half by 2015, but five years have gone with not much done; and we have seen no increase in aid to bring this change into reality.

Nor are we winning the struggle to protect the natural world. While just less than 10% of the world enjoys some form of protected status, many of those parks continue to suffer from poaching, illegal logging, and corporate takeover. Worse, over 90% of the world's biodiversity lives outside of these parks. Political will and economic realities will prevent the creation of parks to double, and even if they did, the vast majority of species would still be threatened.

The loss of natural resources can leave the people in a destitute situation, angry, and with little to lose. Forests provide water, medicine and food for many people, and well as a spiritual base.

Millions of people live in poverty throughout the tropics. If their economic needs remain unmet, we cannot expect that they would have an interest in preserving the natural world. This is where tourism, *ecotourism*, was supposed to come in, helping communities economically with the resulting in protecting biodiversity. Unfortunately, with few exceptions, communities have been left out of the equation and the hoped for biodiversity preservation has not fulfilled expectations.

Most of the tour and hotel profits worldwide end up outside of the poor communities. The people living in or near the natural areas that tours visit and hotels are located receive minimal employment if any. These people don't have the skills to own tourism businesses, and are usually unable to successfully compete with the city based tour businesses. Until they do, and become organized, "ecotourism" will continue to have little to do with "eco". A potential tool in the fight to save the natural world, provide economic security and in fact, peace, continues to languish. This is where CECD – Community Ecotourism Consulting & Development, and the nonprofit Focus Conservation Fund (FCF) are working to make a change.

Community-based ecotourism and conservation projects in Brazil (Jaguar Ecological Reserve – <JER>, Pantanal ) and Mexico (Ejido Santa Cruz de Quilitan, near Puerto Vallarta <ARA project>) reveal two different ways to develop communities so they can earn profits from their own ecotourism businesses. Let's look at the steps taken to develop these regions, and what one needs to do to start new community ecotourism projects.

**1) The first step is to identify the region for its outstanding nature and a small community in need.**

- a. The natural resource of the region needs to be rich enough, or with a number of rare and spectacular species, so that tourists will want to visit the region. If cultural or historical resources exist, these should be taken into consideration. JER has incredible wildlife including jaguars which are regularly seen. ARA has nice forest, and will feature a military macaw (*Ara militaris*) reintroduction program. There are also archeological remains from the pre-Columbian era.
- b. The destination has to be either close enough to an airport, or have attractions outstanding enough for clients to either be willing to pay the cost of an air taxi or travel for hours often on bad roads. If the same attractions can be seen more easily in a more accessible location, the chance of a successful project drops.

- c. A community must be small enough to have the financial benefits of a tourism business improve the lives of all the people.

**2) The second step is to identify and meet with community leaders to discuss a community-based ecotourism project.**

- a. These can include local politicians, local non-profits, religious leaders, local schools and universities. Potential corporate supporters and foreign embassies can also be useful.
- b. Secure the support of these people before going further with a project. Without their support the project will likely fail.
- c. It is essential to agree on five issues during the meeting:
  - 1) This is a partnership between CECD, FCF and the community;
  - 2) The community will own the project. This cannot be stressed enough. Ownership must be established early if the community will be responsible for its success;
  - 3) The community agrees to be actively involved and outspoken in preserving the natural world;
  - 4) The community agrees to help other nearby communities after their project has achieved economic success.
  - 5) If funding is not available, stress that you can make no promises other than that together with the community, you will seek funding.

**3) The third step is to hold community meetings to introduce the project.**

- a. At these meetings have the community leaders introduce the project and the project leaders/developers;
- b. Explain the concepts, including the 5 points raised in 2) c. above. Have as many meetings as necessary to have the community support the project;
- c. Discuss management of the tourism program. Explain that outside management can be hired by the community, as management is so important to the successful operation of the tour program. The manager will work for the community, as an employee..
- d. If the community does not want the project, leave gracefully and close the project at this site.

**4) The fourth step, assuming the community wants the project, is to design the work plan and seek funding.**

- a. A professional and complete Work Plan is necessary to secure funding unless the project starts with funding;
- b. Include community development programs to bring in artist, local restaurants and other project that will spread the tour profits throughout the community;
- c. It is often necessary to include a salary for the community members that are in the training program. They can not stop their subsistence activities to start this project unless their needs are met.
- d. Seek funding from a variety of sources, including corporations, international funding institutions and nonprofit organizations.
- e. Develop other partnerships, which can include universities, city, state and national tourism departments, prominent politicians and people in the legal profession.

**5) Establish a profit distribution and transparency system.**

- a. In a community-based ecotourism project, everyone who works should receive a fair salary, with the profits going to a representative council made up from the community;
- b. If a trusted governmental structure for receiving the profits and handling funds does not exist, consider creating a local nonprofit organization with controlling board members elected by the community members;
- c. Strongly suggest that all income and expenses are publicly posted. This transparency increases trust in the community, and reduces the chance of funds disappearing. Suggest that two or more board members must sign all checks.
- d. As a protection against disillusion, recognize that corruption exists where money accumulates. This is where step 4) b. above becomes especially important, allowing most people to benefit even if the profits disappear.

**6) Start the project on the ground.**

- a. Establish both male and female participants, stressing gender equality.
- b. Bring in English or other language teachers, if needed. Most tour programs can be successful if the guides and staff speak English, but some areas require other languages as well. It is often possible to get volunteer English teachers from university language departments.
- c. Start environmental and conservation education, together with other education programs.
- d. Choose the people to be guides once you see who the most energetic, motivated, etc. people are.
- e. If a hotel/lodge or other physical structures are part of the project, start building at this time.

- f. The Project Director/s live at the project site, and are responsible for its success.

**7) Start guide training.**

- a. These are the people that will have the most contact with the clients. They need near fluent English speaking abilities, and need to know nature at the species level. This includes all the birds, being able to recognize them by their vocalizations alone.
- b. Teach how to use equipment such as binoculars, spotting telescopes and recording/playback equipment;
- c. Teach how to handle client problems. There are a limited number of problems that occasionally come up on tours, and guides need to know how to handle these effectively;
- d. Teach conservation public speaking skills, as these people will be the ones most likely to carry the conservation message forward.
- e. Teach emergency medical procedures.

**8) As the tour program develops, start the marketing strategy.**

- a. This strategy would be outlined in the Work Plan;
- b. It includes a website, contacting country guidebooks, FAM tours, writing articles for magazines, etc. Website should be resubmitted to the major search engines monthly, and there are commercial companies that perform this service.
- c. At the JER, we formed a partnership with a tour company for marketing. At the ARA project we are near a large tourism destination, with North Americans in the winter, and the Mexican market in the summer. Marketing here will be most successful by giving a commission to the hotel desk people that send clients on a day trip.

**9) Follow up.**

- a. .Hold weekly meetings at the beginning of the first tourist season, to correct errors and be sure that all is going to plan.
- b. Set up the transparency system with the governing organization, nonprofit, etc.;
- c. Return six months and one year later to be sure all is going as planned.

The JER project in Brazil's Pantanal includes most of what is noted above, however it started on private land. It includes a program to pay local landowners to put their land into a permanent conservation status that allows them to continue to own the land. The plan is currently being expanded to include other locally owned lodges, train many more local guides, train hotel staff and management, and establish an association of locally owned lodges in the Pantanal. We have also established the nonprofit Focus Conservation Fund Brazil, as the nonprofit to work with this program.

The ARA project in Mexico is well underway. As the population of the endangered military macaw is low and dropping, a draw for tourists as well as a plus for conservation is to breed and reintroduce the species in the region. This shows that at times, even if an important species is missing, if other requirements for a successful community-based ecotourism project are in place. The community has had tours from Puerto Vallarta come to their village, and they have received nothing. They were more than ready for their own tour business when we proposed the project, and have signed a petition stating that they want us to work with them. This will greatly assist the fund raising efforts. The plan includes working with the University of Guadalajara and partnering with a university in the USA. We will also bring in commercial macaw breeders, and expect to get support from the Mexican government as well.

The key success factors for both of these projects include location, wealth of species that can be seen or include a reintroduction program, and the tremendous motivation of the communities to step up to the programs.

Obstacles were few. They include a lack of funding, and a lack of motivation by some community members. While the lack of funding has not held us back, if it were not for the FCF and its ability to get tax-deductible donations in the USA, we would have a fraction of the funds we have been able to gather to get as far as we have. Some people are motivated, others are not. We find that when English teaching is part of the program, it quickly becomes obvious who is motivated. These are the people you train.

The greatest lessons we have learned from our work is that it is not nearly as difficult as people would like to believe. Most projects can be financially successful one year after the start, providing the steps noted above are followed, and the project director/s are qualified. Another important thing to watch for is the interests that are threatened by community-own ecotourism businesses. Depending on the region, these people can be a significant threat. By including a wide variety of partners this threat is reduced.

With government commitment and well directed foreign aid, it is possible to create a great number of community-based ecotourism businesses. We can easily connect these in a worldwide association which would facilitate getting international travelers to visit these in each country where they are offered. Travelers often return to a tour company that has provide them with a good tour. Community owned tour business can only enjoy "return business" through such an association.

There is also an opportunity for an enlightened country to develop much of its tourism in a community owned strategy, and gain valuable free marketing through this move. There is no country wide community-based ecotourism program, and this would be news.

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century African Agenda on Peace through Tourism would do well to establish community-owned tourism, whether nature or culture based, as the tourism tool that will go the furthest to establish peace. Poverty is the machine that breeds violence, and community-owned tourism goes further than any other tourism product to bring equality to the masses.

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