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Ecotourism in The Gambia

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“Tourism should contribute to, rather than exploit... It should be active rather than passive, emphasizing cultural exchange rather than mere sightseeing”
Michael Kaye 1980

Tourism is one of the world’s largest industries. It constitutes 10 percent of the global gross national product and employs approximately 10 percent of the world’s workforce (DFID 2). In search of pristine holiday settings, people from developed countries are traveling to the Third World in increasing numbers, offering significant economic benefits to those countries that can meet the demands of vacationers. Ideally, tourism could channel “leisure money” from wealthy countries into the growing economies of countries such as The Gambia. Therein lies a potential symbiosis between the tourist, who seeks an enjoyable and memorable visit, and the people whose livelihoods are built around the demands of the tourist. However, the tourism industry has introduced a number of threats to its own success and moreover, to the well being of host countries.

The problems that are introduced by the tourism industry often outweigh the benefits. The Manila Declaration on World Tourism states that “tourism does more harm than good to people and societies in Third World countries” (Honey 1999: 9). Through my research in The Gambia, I learned about some of the major problems inherent in the tourism industry, and recognized ecotourism as a solution to many of these problems.

What I saw and experienced during my first few weeks in The Gambia left me with little doubt about my own need to look closely at the implications of my trip to West Africa. The tourism industry was inextricably tied to my presence in The Gambia and I wanted a better understanding of it. Being a tourist in Africa was a mixed blessing. Africa stunned me—it is a beautiful place, warm in many ways, and full of unique opportunities. However, as a white American tourist, I could not blend in at all. Being a tourist was isolating and very awkward. The tourist groups, where I would fit in readily, did not appeal to me. They spent time on the beaches mingling with one another, forming an enclave of wealthy outsiders. There was a minimal effort among most tourists to stray outside the hotel area and learn about The Gambia.

The startling amounts of attention directed toward the tourists was sometimes unwanted, but clearly encouraged by both Gambians and tourists. Gambian women and men spent all day strolling up and down the beaches, selling peanuts, mangoes, and jewelry to tourists who were laid out across the beaches. How rewarding could this be? The situation was clearly imbalanced and degrading. As I began to look into the motivations of the vendors, I learned about the effects of the tourism industry in The Gambia. There is a complex culture growing around tourism that should make it a priority consideration among leaders as well as tourists and local people.

What is Ecotourism?

Ecotourism is generally understood as “environmentally and socially responsible travel to natural areas that promotes conservation, has



Africa’s cultural and natural assets hold an enormous appeal to tourists from around the world.

low visitor impact and provides for beneficially active socioeconomic involvement of local people” (Gorman 2000: 5). Constant changes in the tourism industry have made ecotourism difficult to define, as it gradually emerged from conventional tourism. However, ecotourism can be differentiated from other types of tourism by two major factors: the objectives of the tourist, and their impact on the host country. People who are traveling to expose themselves to local ecology and/or culture are often categorized as ecotourists. They are true ecotourists only when their travel promotes conservation and benefits the social conditions and economy of the host country. It will become clear how these factors fit together as we examine ecotourism and traditional tourism in The Gambia.

There are a few traditional forms of tourism that are included in ecotourism. People visiting a foreign country to see indigenous wildlife are known as nature tourists. Their business is directed toward rural areas, and they often make sacrifices in accommodations and include physical activity in their vacation. Adventure tourism is more physically demanding and less wildlife-oriented, but certainly involves travel “off the beaten path.” Less conventional tours involve language studies, music lessons, art training, and other cultural studies and exchanges. These are the objectives of an ecotourist – a set of goals that set them apart from tourists who seek little more than luxury in their vacation.

The objectives of the tourist are only part of ecotourism, as it also requires a very high level of responsibility and awareness. The UK’s Department for International Development has outlined a “triple bottom line” challenge to tourists and tour operators, declaring that economic, environmental, and social factors must be attended to simultaneously (DFID 3). The very nature of ecotourism is dependent on



Abuko Nature Reserve is a beautiful example of successful nature tourism in The Gambia.

such responsibility. It only makes sense that nature tour sites should promote conservation, else risk the demise of their business. Other types of ecotourism are reliant on cultural and economic conditions, therefore should be especially considerate of local people and the economic implications of their tours.

Ecotourism needs to be promoted because it develops sustainability. Many global industries today are on a destructive path, exploiting their own resources and turning their back on the repercussions. From air pollution to child labor, the developed world is notorious for building upon its own demise. Long-term effects are forgotten in the face of instant gratification. Global industries, especially, need to closely examine the impact of their business and make themselves a positive part of the world economy.

Tourist sites are notorious for wastefulness, pollution, and an overall disregard for the surrounding community. However, a tourist who has a genuine interest in the environment and culture of the country he is visiting will stimulate an entire network of positive development and interaction. Not only will tourists increase their own awareness, the tour operator and community will recognize the importance of conservation and sustainability. *People will protect what they benefit from.* If birdwatching is profitable, people will value and protect the local bird population in an effort to attract tourists. As the value of local resources increases, it becomes immediately beneficial for tourism businesses and local communities to increase social and environmental awareness. Hence, all parties are compelled by profit rather than by protest to adopt sustainable practices.

Ecotourism is being adopted by many Third World nations as a central component of their development strategies. Countries such as Belize and Madagascar were quick to adopt nature tourism as a source of income. A 1994 study revealed that 70 percent of travelers from the United States took vacations that involve nature, adventure, or cultural exchanges. The Ecotourism Society has projected a strong growth in ecotourism trends in the 21st century, estimating annual growth rates varying between 10 and 30 percent (Honey 1999: 7). As ecotourism continues to grow in popularity, its global impact will also increase. However, the price paid for sustainability is speed of growth. Because ecotourism is designed to be small, it will not have a sweeping effect on the global economy. Its steady growth does need to be recognized and promoted.

Tourism in The Gambia: Its Growth and Effects

Like many Third World countries, The Gambia has recognized and pursued the enormous economic potential in the tourism industry. The tourism sector in The Gambia increased by 30 percent between 1994 and 1999, a higher growth rate than any other sector in the national economy, bringing in 18 percent of The Gambia's Gross Domestic Product (Sallah 1999: 2). The importance of tourism in The Gambia is a trend reflected in the economies of many other developing nations.

However, as countries such as The Gambia embrace tourism, they become dependent on other countries and subject to economic crises beyond their control. This dependence is not on something like grain exports or energy sources, which are in constant demand. Countries that have integrated tourism into their development strategies are dependent on the leisure demand. Vacations are an extra asset, a bonus – no nation of people *needs* to travel on holiday. The tourism industry is based on a reliable supply and a very unstable demand.

Slight shifts in politics and global economy can, and do, cause major setbacks in the development of tourist sites such as The Gambia. The Gambia has become wary of its own reliance on tourism for a number of reasons. In 1994, a coup d'état discouraged tourists from visiting The Gambia, which hurt its tourism industry, especially the informal sector. Britain and Scandinavia released travel advisories, causing The Gambia to lose at least 60% of its tourists. This should serve as an example and as a warning of the dangers faced by developing countries reliant on the tourism industry.

In addition, the investments made by developing countries are often unreturned. In The Gambia, the government has funded the construction of beachside infrastructure, hoping to increase revenues by attracting more tourists. However, most of the hotels and many restaurants and clubs are owned and operated by Europeans. Consequently, the direct money flow that The Gambia was hoping to tap into is moving out of the country. The money that does reach the Gambian economy often does so indirectly, through some form of "trickle-down." This leaves Gambians further dependent on the whim of the tourist. If tourists do not buy groceries, souvenirs, and pay for services in The Gambia, their money will not contribute to the development of The Gambia. It is often the case that hotel owners or tour operators import foods and other goods to cater to the tourists' needs, rather than using

local resources. If The Gambia is to benefit in full from the influx of tourists, it must establish its own tourist sites, encouraging government or community owned and operated establishments. Ecotourist sites are ideal for this type of entrepreneurship because local people would logically be the best hosts. Unfortunately, this is not always the case with ecotourism. The sites are frequently run by foreigners. However, a foreign operator at an ecotourist site is bound to take more care in directing money flow into the host country than would a conventional tour operator.



Cultural heritage sites, such as the stone circle megaliths at Wassu, are among Gambia's many tourist attractions.

The tourism industry has made a notable comeback in The Gambia since 1994. Currently, one out of every ten people living in The Gambia each year can be classified as a tourist, making tourism a central social, economic, and environmental issue. Although I was in The Gambia during the off-season, it was immediately evident that tourism is an important part of the growth of this country, and that its effects are often detrimental. As I was introduced to tourist areas in The Gambia, I saw obvious incongruencies; swimming pools, air conditioning, and a variety of personal services made available in a country where most people do not have electricity. There were Gambian maids and waiters whose incomes were dependent on tourists. Children reliably tugged at my clothes, asking for pens and candy. Taxi drivers and vendors vied for my attention. Tourism is not a petty business to Gambians – it is a national concern that needs international recognition.

According to the secretary of state for tourism in The Gambia, 70 percent of The Gambia's tourists arrive between November and April. This presents a

number of problems. People who work in the tourism industry are frequently left unemployed during the summer months. The fact that The Gambia is a popular destination during the European winter indicates that tourists are seeking the infamous “four S’s” (sun, sea, sand, and sex). The high demand for beachside resorts and holiday provisions has caused overpopulation and pollution problems along The Gambia’s coastline. The crowding in tourist areas poses a serious environmental threat. Overpopulation in urban areas causes the erosion, litter, and pollution that we are too familiar with. Despite the damage that haphazard development has caused, it is needed upcountry. Overconcentration of infrastructure along the coast has also impeded inland development. As our group traveled inland, it was quite obvious that national development was uneven. Further from the coast the hotels, restaurants, clubs, and vendors practically disappeared. As they did, the relationship between the tourist and local people lost some of its obvious material incentives.

Tourists are generally people with leisure money and time - not exactly a representative cross-section of any society. However, they represent entire continents through the eyes of local communities. Laden with camera equipment, exotic apparel, and foreign standards, the average tourist leaves quite an impression. Citizens of The Gambia and other third world countries use these impressions to form an image of a Westerner or European. Likewise, tourists take their own half-formed impressions home. Because tourists are veritable money bags, they attract people seeking money. Interactions with vendors, beggars, and opportunists of all shapes and sizes leave the tourist with a lopsided experience. Two cultures meet each other face to face with uninformed expectations, reinforcing negative stereotypes.

This phenomenon manifests itself in a number of inappropriate practices. As tourists settle along the beaches and create a seasonal influx of money, people in rural areas are deprived of the benefits offered by the tourism industry. Rural urban drift occurs, and a population of mostly young men travels to urban areas, seeking access to the profits made available by tourists. They leave their farms and families with fewer hands and more work. All too often, they end up roaming the streets and beaches, unemployed and surrounded by wealthy vacationers. From this population come bumsters. Any European or American who has set foot on a well-known beach or club scene in The Gambia is familiar with bumsters. These people, again mostly young men, will offer to act as a guide, teacher or driver, hoping to tap the tourist’s effusion of money.

Most tourists find that bumsters will do just about anything for a tip. This has led to prostitution and sex tourism, in addition to simple dishonesty between the two parties.

The many problems with tourism are often overlooked because of its incredible potential as an economic and social benefit. There are at least two major benefits offered by the tourism industry. First of all, tourism can serve as a way to redistribute wealth. Tourism is becoming a known source of poverty alleviation, when it is sustainable and established in a way that channels money into the government and communities. This is a difficult undertaking for countries such as The Gambia, where foreign countries have already laid a foundation that is neither sustainable nor economically beneficial to them. Local entrepreneurs and government organizations face stiff competition among these foreign establishments. However, there is great promise and good will in the implementation of tourism as a poverty alleviation strategy. The need for cash flow in developing nations cannot be satiated by tourist dollars, but it can be quenched to some extent. The business is one of leisure money, which could be put to use in communities where it is most needed. Imagine knowing that the money paid for a week in a hotel will be used to help build a hospital or a school.



Hotels in the coastal areas, such as the Friendship, help confine the benefits of tourism to the Greater Banjul Area.

Additionally, tourism offers extraordinary educational opportunities. People around the world understand that travel is an increasingly easy and effective way to learn about the world. However, educational opportunities must be offered. There are hordes of tourists whose stay in The Gambia is confined to the beachfront hotels and restaurants. Although this is exactly what some people want from a

vacation, others would jump at the opportunity to study batik, to go fishing in a Gambian pirogue, or to learn to cook benachin. The tourism industry should cater to both demands, offering tourists a “real experience” as well as a relaxing holiday.

Ecotourism as a Solution

As I looked into the problems and potential that lie in tourism, I began to see ecotourism as the ideal form of tourism. It seems to embody the potential benefits of the tourism industry, displacing the problems. A well-developed ecotourism business can realistically expect to form a synergy between the tourist and the host country, rather than the predatory relationship that has begun to characterize tourism in the Third World. Ecotourism is designed to give tourists access to local culture and ecology. This creates a whole new situation - very different from packages designed to isolate and pamper the tourist. As a sustainable tourism industry is built, ecotourists can help alleviate intercultural tensions, poverty, and ecological stress.

One of the central elements of ecotourism's benefits is the customers that ecotourism attracts. They are generally seeking interaction rather than isolation, rural beauty rather than urban bustle, and adventure over luxury. This naturally alleviates some of the aforementioned problems with tourism in The Gambia. In The Gambia, birdwatchers, music students, and artisans are among the people who are seeking a little more from a vacation. Because these tourists want to visit the lesser-developed parts of The Gambia, they visit upcountry camps, encouraging rural development. This reduces further crowding and pollution in the more popular areas. It also reduces urban drift and increases to the bumster population.

In addition, ecotourists are not solely focused on the “four S's.” If their priority is not a winter getaway to a sunny coast, they are more likely to visit The Gambia during the off-season. This offers seasonal stability to the tourism business, which currently suffers serious setbacks because of its fluctuations. Geographic diversification gives rural communities access to the tourism industry, while seasonal diversification stabilizes income. The very nature of the tourist's demands and motivations has already begun to stimulate a snowballing of positive effects. By taking tourism beyond the beachside holiday, ecotourists diversify demand, therefore diversifying and stabilizing the supply.

This handful of tourists is interested in The Gambia and what it has to offer. Boys who might

otherwise be bumsters can become knowledgeable foresters, artists, fishing guides, and the list goes on. They would be given the chance to work with tourists while continuing to bring money back into communities. At the same time, they would interact with tourists who want to learn about their culture instead of tourists who would take them back to the hotel room. The entire mindset changes. Ecotourism is a profitable way to show local communities the value of what is at their feet. If people see that tourists are interested in their culture and ecology, they will place a higher value on it. This appreciation manifests itself in environmental and cultural preservation – the people are given financial and personal motives to protect and cherish their local resources. Sustainability is a built-in attribute of ecotourism.



The beaches along West Africa's coast attract not only masses of European visitors during the winter months, but cattle during the off-season.

Another appeal unique to ecotourism is the fact that it could give a country like The Gambia a chance to benefit from its own underdevelopment. Lack of industrialization has left room for the preservation of culture and ecology. This is a unique resource that should not be left untapped. Ecotourism is a rare example of positive exploitation. Low levels of industrialization could become a hindrance to the development of the country, but ecotourism demonstrates that it can also contribute to its growth. With tourism already comprising eighteen percent of The Gambia's GNP, it seems ideal to harness this burgeoning business through sustainable ecotourism. While there is still rare wildlife, beautiful landscapes, and startlingly unique culture to preserve, why not preserve it by presenting it in such a way that it can be shared and understood by people from all over the world.

Methods

To begin researching ecotourism, I gathered reading materials that would give me a stronger grasp on tourism and ecotourism on a global scale as well as in The Gambia. As the group traveled to different parts of the country, I worked with Bill Roberts to plan trips to ecotourist sites. I also planned meetings with people in The Gambia who would be knowledgeable on the subject. This combination of interviews, case studies, and reading would give me a good amount of information during a short period of time. I was not able to interview ecotourists, as our visit took place during the off-season. Therefore, what I learned was mostly from the side of the suppliers instead of the consumers. I learned about what was available, what was difficult to provide, and how the business worked.

My first meeting was with Jackie Gorman, an Ecotourism Development officer at Abuko Nature Reserve. She sent me on my way with a head full of different ideas to wrestle with and a stack of papers that would later give my research foundation and direction. As I looked closer at tourism and the issues presented by the business, I learned how dependent The Gambia had become on tourism and how unreliable the industry had proven. I began to see the potential role of ecotourism in The Gambia as the problems in package tourism became more obvious. The readings from Jackie emphasized the importance of sustainability and the need for local people to have access to the tourism industry.

Now that I had a grasp on the enormity of the tourism industry and could see the possibility of a win-win situation in a potentially ruinous business, I looked into ecotourism businesses in The Gambia. I identified a few ecotourism sites and planned visits, making a point to include old and new establishments, Gambian owners, European owners, and partnerships, and I looked at sites that had a clear focus on ecotourism and those that did not. I was interested in the opportunities and motivations that caused tour operators to adopt ecotourism. What issues were they most concerned with? What obstacles did ecotourist sites face?

Findings

My first interview was with Sarjo Touray, the general manager of Tendaba Camp, where we had stopped twice in our journey upriver and back. Tendaba Camp was well established, opened by Swiss entrepreneurs in 1972. The camp is a good example

of efforts to bring tourism to the upriver provinces. Tendaba works closely with the neighboring village, sometimes sending visitors to stay in the village for about two nights a week. Birdwatchers are common among the tourists that stay at Tendaba Camp, but outside the tourist season (October-April) Tendaba is an area used for conferences. The camp used to have a variety of caged animals, but in 1990 received orders from Banjul to release them. However, the camp did not lose its focus on local wildlife. The boat rides, bush taxis, and various activities available at Tendaba demonstrate a continuous focus on ecology. Although Tendaba Camp is not strictly an ecotourism site, it could easily provide the experience that an ecotourist seeks. By successfully bringing tourist business upcountry, Tendaba has provided many opportunities that benefit the local people.



Sign that points the way to Tendeba tourist camp, one of the earliest upriver camps in The Gambia. Hunting bushpig used to be a draw, but now people come for birdwatching and other eco-activities.

Next, I arranged to meet with Adama Bah from Tourism Concern for an interview. I probably learned more from him in a morning than I did in all my reading and research. Mr. Bah affirmed the basic ideas I had about tourism and ecotourism, but made very clear the complexities of a situation that is easily oversimplified. He gave me a brief history of tourism and insight into the role of ecotourism in The Gambia. After describing the 1994 coup d'état and the resultant travel advisories from Europe, Adama explained the role of Tourism Concern, which is a local NGO, established to stabilize the tourism industry and maximize local benefits.

After the infamous travel advisories were withdrawn, The Gambia Tourism Concern was established and began working to rebuild the tourism

industry in The Gambia as a self-reliant resource. One of their most serious challenges is repaying the loans that were taken in the 1960s, when tourism became a significant part of the Gambian economy. These loans paid for the infrastructure of the beach strip hotels and restaurants and are now due for payment. Gambians are paying for these loans through taxes. According to Mr. Bah, the beach strip consumes more energy and water than the rest of The Gambia combined, but the whole of Gambia is paying for it. This is a perfect example of what happens when sustainability takes a back seat to quick profits. Lack of foresight on the part of the government as well as tour operators created dangerous imbalances in infrastructure and income.

The majority of the tours that come into The Gambia are part of package deals, which involve a tour operator who is paid to lead groups of tourists and organize their accommodations. These tour operators are rarely Gambians, but they work through Gambian ground operators, who receive an average of 25% of the tour operator's profits. These ground operators make more direct arrangements for accommodations, and other logistical needs in the country. One can easily see that The Gambia could profit by establishing independent tourism programs and eliminating the foreign tour operators. The middleman, in this case, has proven harmful by isolating tourists from local communities and directing profits out of the country.

Much of the money that tourism brings into The Gambia is through the informal sector. This includes the taxi drivers, craftsmen, bumsters, and anyone who benefits from the presence of the tourists. This sector has become highly competitive as people realize that they could benefit from contact with a tourist. The Association for Small Scale Entrepreneurs in Tourism (ASSET) is working to find alternatives for the informal sector. If the people that comprise the informal sector were to be organized and securely employed through the tourism industry, profits could be redirected and social problems would be addressed. Bumsters and vendors, taxi drivers and artisans, are a largely untapped work force because of the seasonality of tourism as well as high competition among the informal sector. Because ecotourism offers secure employment and reducing competition in urban areas, it is encouraged by ASSET.

Major hotels and tourist sites can create constructive outlets for the informal sector by making a point to hire Gambians onto their staff. Even if the owners are foreign, some of their income would find its way back to local communities through the informal sector. The more they involve local people and local resources the

more stable and independent the business becomes. Sustainability must be social as well environmental and economic. Bumsters and foreign tour operators can find ways to play off of one another's objectives and create a system of mutual benefit.

My perspective on the relationship between tourists and Gambians was reaffirmed as Adama Bah described his own frustrations with the "Santa Claus" image that had been established by the Scandinavians and other tourists who initiated the tourism industry in The Gambia. The first visitors to the country became famous for giving out small gifts, especially to children. Today, children as well as adults expect things from tourists. This is reinforced as the tourists keep giving away and local people keep asking for more. Adama Bah sees the integrity of his people threatened as begging becomes more acceptable among the younger generations. As a child, Adama had been told that to eat someone else's food would cause you to choke. When tourists give out pens and candy in an effort to be charitable they are also helping to build a tense and materialistic relationship between tourists and Gambians.

People such as Adama are striving to reform the tourism industry in a way that promotes responsibility among tourists and dignity throughout local communities. Sensitization and education are the tools being used to combat the damaging effects of tourism. Most tourists probably have no idea what is wrong with giving a child a piece of candy. Indeed, it is very easy to believe that this is helpful and it is difficult to explain how something that seems so kind can be such a problem. Local people are no more likely to recognize the problems that they are encouraging by accepting a gift. The only solution to this is education.



Bill Roberts at the Soma-Farrafenni ferry crossing. These kids were either selling water, juice, peanuts, or wanted to exchange addresses.

Some tourist camps have effectively educated local people about the detrimental effects of begging. Airlines are being asked to encourage awareness among their travelers. Ecotourism is a form of tourism that incorporates sensitization and education. Changes brought about by ecotourism in the tourism industry would help The Gambia reach the self-reliance that Adama and his co-workers seek.

My next interviews were further upcountry - in Basse. I stayed with Dana Mitchell, a Peace Corps volunteer in Mansajang village. Thanks to the hospitality of Dana and her family, I was able to get two interviews completed and worked with more independence and comfort than I would on any other excursion. After the full day of travel that it took to get into Basse, I slept in Dana's compound and took a bike to meet Anne Slind at Traditions, a restaurant and craft center along the riverside.

Over a cold drink, Anne shared the history of her business and some of her own views on tourism. Her establishment is a good example of the positive impact that tourism can have in The Gambia. Mrs. Slind saw in The Gambia a wonderful opportunity to provide artisans with an outlet for their products. She and her husband opened Traditions in 1995 as a central marketing point for artisans. Hoping to encourage the use of local skills as income generation, Anne hosts Gambian and European artists, who exchange ideas and techniques in such crafts as weaving, batik, and textiles. This is the kind of interaction that ecotourism promotes – a sharing instead of a taking. This is also the reason that most of Anne's clients are returning clients. Tour guides bring their groups back because they recognize a positive exchange and wish to



"Traditions" was once a trade depot, probably run by one of the Lebanese families living in Basse.

encourage visitors not to isolate themselves at tourist sites. People from all over the world can converge here to learn about Gambian culture, regardless of their artistic experience.

Anne's employees are Gambians, the food served at Traditions is local, and the artwork sold at Traditions is local. This is a business that keeps the money flow from tourism properly directed. Mr. Bah mentioned hotels along the beach strip serving imported jams while Gambian mangoes rotted in the streets. Anne has taken a responsible and resourceful approach to this problem and found ways to use the resources of local communities to channel money to the places it is most needed.

Directly across the river is a new tourist camp, which I visited briefly. I met Alieu Jallow, the assistant manager at Fuladu camp, who was kind enough to sit down and tell me about the camp. The proprietor is German and has a Gambian business partner, both of whom understood that tourism needed to be spread into the eastern regions of The Gambia. By building their camp near Basse, the entrepreneurs have already improved the local employment situation. They also encourage people to visit the neighboring village and hope to establish a program like the one at Tendaba, arranging overnight stays and cultural education in the village.



Weaving is among the traditional crafts in The Gambia for which Anne hopes to provide an outlet.

A few days later, I traveled to Tumani Tenda for more interviewing. I had heard from Jackie and Adama Bah that it was an excellent example of community-owned and -operated camp. The process of getting an interview was as eye-opening as the interview itself. There were no other guests at the camp, but I assumed the staff would be there and would direct me to the manager. I was perplexed when everyone said that he or she was the manger. Completely unsure of whom to interview, I almost decided to give up on research at this camp. However, as the afternoon went on, I found that a committee had been called. A group of men, women, elders (including the alkalo) and youths trickled in from the village and joined me under the pavilion to address my questions. It turned out that the camp is run by a committee of representatives from the village and that all important matters are addressed by the entire village.



Sign that shows the road to Tumani Tenda tourist camp.

Tumani Tenda is a village-owned and -operated camp, which is why everyone claimed to be the manager. The village decided in 1996 that a tourist camp would be a good source of income for the village, which needs medical and educational facilities, but is not making sufficient money through agriculture alone. Beginning with fifty bags of cement and support from the National Environment Agency, the village began to build their camp. They received partial funding from the government and advising from Helga Linnae, a more experienced tour handler. As they gathered bed sheets, mosquito netting, and various other commodities for the tourists, the people of Tumani Tenda saw the advantages in ecotourism. A village such as the one at Tumani Tenda has a lot to offer a tourist who wants to learn about The Gambia.

They offer batik lessons, fishing, drum lessons,



Members of the Tumani Tenda management group.

salt making, tie dye, and boat trips in an effort to give visitors a sample of village life. Visitors are encouraged to cook their own food by buying ingredients from the villagers. Guides are available for hikes through the forest that surrounds Tumani Tenda. This camp is an ideal example of an ecotourism site. Because it is village-owned and -operated, it has been built with local materials and by people with an environmental and social awareness that is unrivaled by foreign enterprises.

I was impressed by the motivation and the efforts that these people have put into the camp. They have made the most of minimal materials and limited transportation and communication, building a beautiful camp that can show an interested tourist what The Gambia has to offer. Currently, the committee is struggling to obtain more funding from the government. It is extremely difficult to receive support for such a young business. Investments will come as profits increase, but this will be a slow process. As an ecotourist site, Tumani Tenda holds enormous potential. With the continuation of advising, funding, etc., Tumani Tenda will grow and give the people of the village the income that they have certainly earned and will put to good use.

The committee that operates Tumani Tenda is building a camp that will fund the needs of the village and provide tourists with a true “taste of The Gambia.”

My next two subjects were closer to Bakau, as the trip was coming to a close. I traveled with Bill Roberts to Gunjur, a very active and affluent village where we visited three camps that were situated along the beach. There was a village-owned and operated camp called Rasta Kunda, where the people who were working on the camp are effectively bringing money into the village by offering tourists a beachside stay with available drumming, dancing, and various programs



Balafon player with young boys watching at Tumani Tenda.

initiated by the villagers.

Tanje Village Museum also provides a good site for ecotourism. Tanje Museum presents Gambian crafts, wildlife, and culture in the museum and through a tour of compound housing. As is the case with most of these younger businesses that have pulled away from the beach strip, advertisement is a problem, and the manager, Mr. Bayo, complained of a particularly slow season. Transportation and communication are serious hindrances to those tourist sites that been formed off the beaten path.

On our last day in The Gambia, I attended an ASSET (Association for Small Scale Entrepreneurs in

Tourism) meeting that Adama Bah had invited me to. At the meeting, I saw many familiar faces. It was a chance for me to see some of the people I had been working with and hear what they were doing to address the challenges faced by tourism enterprises. The businesses represented were either separate from package tours or wanted to work with a group of other tour handlers to improve the social and environmental impacts of their businesses.

At the meeting, I learned of various ways that ASSET is working to spread the word about ecotourism. Brochures are underway and an award program is being established to encourage sustainable tourism. Awards will be given to the businesses who show the most environmental awareness, sociocultural awareness, authenticity in the experiences offered by the site, use of local supplies, and economic awareness, to name a few. The year 2002 has been named by the United Nations as the ecotourism year in hopes of encouraging global support of ecotourism. With the international support that will be provided by the UN in conjunction with community level organizations such as ASSET, ecotourism is sure to see a significant growth.



Rita (right) with Abdoulaye Bayo (center) and Amy Lawson (left) at the Tanje Village Museum. Abdoulaye was the former curator for the National Museum of The Gambia.

Conclusion

Ecotourism maintains a special role in developing nations because it develops the very things that are exploited by other forms of tourism. It offers potential methods of alleviating a number of problems, from pollution to poverty. This is because the very heart of ecotourism is sensitivity and genuine interest in social and ecological situations. Despite the many problems with tourism, there is plenty to be gained through responsible practices. The promise of creating a positive and constructive relationship between tourists and their destinations becomes a reality through ecotourism.

This presentation of ecotourism is certainly ideal. Ecotourism is not a perfect business. Because of its local focus, it is small and slow-growing. These are obstacles that will become more manageable as the business is pursued. Additionally, tourists do have various interests and people are fully entitled to choose an isolated and luxurious holiday in place of a more active one. Conventional tourism is exactly what some people are looking for when they travel, but ecotourism should be offered and advertised as much as package tours. Ecotourism's positive influence is built in through sustainability; its benefits are simply its direct and logical effects.

Ecotourism presents a way for people to enter a country at a comfortable level and adjust their own

standards by choice. If all goes well, these tourists will leave behind perspective and resources comparable to those they gain. And this comes from little things. Serve the tourists mango jam and instant coffee, but teach them to prepare their own domada. Replace the air conditioner with straw fans. The luxuries provided for tourists can be ungainly and unwanted. Sometimes the best way to make someone feel at home is to offer them what is at hand – nothing more, nothing less.

I have found a very admirable effort to establish a strong ecotourism program throughout The Gambia. However, the success of ecotourism requires support and assistance at many levels, varying from international to local. Although few Gambians were able to define ecotourism, they understood the potency of the tourism industry and the importance of social and environmental awareness. They understand the need for independence, the need for conservation and for changes in economic patterns. Actually meeting these needs presents many problems, since low levels of development perpetuate obstacles to sustainable growth. However, lack of development also means the array of opportunities for change and sustainable growth are different in developing countries such as The Gambia. Mutual benefit is key in the development of relations between developing countries and wealthy countries. Tourists and Gambians have only to utilize the potential for an extraordinary relationship.



Rita sketches the beautiful scenery at Katchikally crocodile pond, Bakau old town.

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*One of the many sculptures found on top of the old
French fort on Gorée island.*



*Statue at Juffure village slave museum commemorating
the spirit of resistance.*