

**COMMUNITY BASED ECOTOURISM
CONCEPT, CHARACTERISTICS, AND RESTRICTIONS
GHARB-SEHEL VILLAGE, ASWAN, PILOT PROJECT**

Ossama A.W. Abdel Meguid

INTRODUCTION

Tourism has now become the world's most important civil industry, representing annually a US\$ 3.5 trillion activity. The travel and tourism industry employs 127 million workers (one in 15 workers world wide). Overall, the tourism industry is expected to double by the year 2006.

The segment of tourism undergoing the fastest growth is community-based tourism, which includes ecotourism. Community-based ecotourism has been estimated to account for between 10 and 15 percent of all international travel expenditures, and that figure seems to be increasing rapidly. It is quite clear that unless this growth receives careful and professional guidance, serious negative consequences - some of which may have terminal effects -could occur.

Community based ecotourism, as defined by WCN -The World Conservation Union, is "environmentally, responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas and local communities in order to enjoy, study, and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features- tangible and intangible heritage -both past and present), that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio- economic involvement of local populations"

Community based ecotourism can bring numerous socioeconomic benefits to a country or a locality, in terms of generating foreign exchange, creating local employment,

stimulating national and local economies, and fostering international peace and increased environmental awareness and education. But appropriate management structures, as well as adequate planning, design, and building guidelines for tourism facilities are required to ensure that tourism enhances rather than detracts from the natural setting. Further, carrying capacity needs to be assessed relative to the management objectives of each area, and appropriate management and physical structures must be designed to keep the number of visitors and the visitation mode within the carrying capacity. .

If uncontrolled mass tourism is allowed to continue over mining many areas of natural and cultural significance, irreversible damage will occur in these areas, which are the repositories of biological and cultural diversity in the planet as well as important sources of income and well-being for all countries. It is then, a matter of global interest to foster the symbiotic relationship between tourism and natural and conserving cultural heritage.

Community based ecotourism, as a logical component of community development, requires a multidisciplinary approach, careful planning -both physical and managerial - and strict guidelines and regulations that will guarantee sustainable operation. Only through intersectoral involvement will ecotourism truly achieve its goals. Governments, the private enterprise, local communities, and NGOs all have vital roles to play. I firmly believe that every country (especially the less developed ones) should set up regional tourism plans, which should include clear ecotourism strategies and guidelines. Regional ecotourism councils, with representatives from all sectors involved in the ecotourism process, have recently been created in several countries with promising results.

Before ecotourism can be expected to fully achieve its potential and avoid the pitfalls, well- founded principles and clear guidelines for the appropriate active involvement of local communities, park managers, NGOs and private entrepreneurs in the process, in depth regional and site-specific research on the socioeconomic and environmental impacts of ecotourism, the development of national and regional strategies, and the establishment, monitoring, and assessment of selected pilot projects, are all needed.

Apart from the environmental features discussed in the preceding Guideline, it is equally important to perform an analysis of the local cultural elements (both of the past and the present -i.e., including archeology), as well as the available infrastructure and local services in the site and its vicinity. This analysis will also provide important input for the subsequent design and construction stages.

1- Cultural features

Analyze cultural elements, both past and present:

- a) Specific ethnic groups.
- b) Traditional settlements.
- c) Local traditions and folklore: language, architecture, clothing, handicrafts, dance, music, ceremonies, magic, and religion.
- d) Archeological features.
- e) Potentiality for integrating design with cultural environment.
- f) Ways of avoiding negative impacts on local culture.

2- Available infrastructure and public services

Analyze the local availability of the following infrastructural elements and public services:

- a) Conventional systems for providing electricity, drinking water, sewage, telephone line, public lighting, etc.
- b) Communication means: highways, roads, harbors, trail (tracks), airport, landing fields, railway, docks, etc.
- c) Postal service, garbage collection and disposal, medical services, schools, commercial facilities, etc.
- d) Local means of transport: land motor vehicles (bus, taxi, rent-a-car, etc.) regular commercial charter, or private flights, motor boats, cruise ships, yachts, ferries; railway (schedules of nearest railway station), etc.

It is important to mention that frequently, and due to obvious reasons, in those sites which are more appropriate for environmental development there are limited or no infrastructural elements or public services, because of typical isolation and remoteness.

ECOTOURISM DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FOR GHARB SEHEL VILLAGE

The Nubian village and home, as well as Nubian women, are the most idealized symbols of Nubian identity in Egypt today.

Gharb Sehel village located on the west bank of the Nile but to the south near the Aswan Dam on the road to the airport, is easily accessible by boats, closer in distance to the city, is reached most quickly by boat. The village visit is often combined with a

number of activities via either sailboat (called *falluca*) or motorboat (*lanch*): a visit to west bank antiquities including Pharaonic tombs, a Coptic monastery, the Agha Khan's mausoleum if open, the Botanical Island, and Elephantine Island. Tourists may arrive in Gharb Sehel by camel after a short ride from the monastery. A trip to one of the villages accessible by bus and car can also be combined with any of the numerous sites of Aswan: the dams, other temples and Pharaonic sites, and the tourist markets in the city itself.

A walk around a Nubian village plus a visit to a local home is a very common item on the Aswan tourism itinerary, perhaps more so than the Nubia Museum, a relative newcomer. Tourists arrive in Aswan on Nile cruisers and by bus from Luxor, and by airplane and by train from Cairo.

Nubian women's work in tourism may both reinforce this discourse of authenticity yet also subvert what authenticity consists of in defying gender norms in Aswan of appropriate women's work and the domestic "Tourism" as domestic labor of "hospitality" to guests, involves bringing not only strangers but foreigners into the home. However, many families have built up a clientele of Egyptian tour guides who may bring up to ten groups per day to their family home in the winter high season.

How is this Nubian community represented in and by its women, in an authentic, "original" space of the Nubian village home? How do women within the community represent Nubianness to outsiders, both Egyptian and foreign? How do they claim the authority of authenticity for themselves? Do they care about the preservation of "traditional" practices, objects, and customs? In the space of the allegedly authentic village home, how do these women challenge stereotypes of what is authentically Nubian? How do they manipulate this authenticity into income through working in the home? How do

women upset the dichotomy between primitive and modern which posits authentic women carry an ancient, unchanging culture which they perpetuate in the domestic sphere?

Nubian villages surrounding the Aswan City urban area such as Gharb Sehel are a regular stop for foreign tour groups, on half- or full-day boat and bus tours of the Pharaonic, Christian, Islamic, and modern landmarks of Aswan. From their perspective, foreign tourists are necessarily visiting a “Nubian” village in particular, rather any home in any village in Egypt.

Among Nubians, Gharb Sehel village represents the look and feel of a village of Old Nubia when compared to the government-built concrete homes in New Nubia. West Aswan villages are about a half dozen villages that remain in their original locations below the Aswan and High Dams on the Nile opposite Aswan city. Because they were downstream from the dams, they had never been flooded and relocated. The mud-brick architecture and way of life is understood today to represent the survival of the appearance of Old Nubia. In this sense, they are "genuine" Nubian villages, in comparison to New Nubia with its concrete block government-built homes that Gharb Sehel or the even more isolated Sehel Island represented what Old Nubia really used to look like.

Aswan Nubian villages were accessible and therefore often photographed, filmed, and observed both by national and international audiences. Not only foreign tourists come to the Nubian villages of Aswan looking for an authentic experience. Egypt’s most famous architect, Hassan Fathy (1900-1989), had heard about the use of mud-brick barrel-vault architecture in homes in West Aswan. On a visit in 1941 seeking out techniques for mud-brick roofing techniques which he later used in his quest to use local materials for “architecture for the poor,” in Aswan:

I realize I that I was looking at the living survivor of traditional Egyptian architecture, at a way of building that was a natural growth in the landscape, as much a part of it as the dom-palm tree of the district. It was like a vision of architecture before the Fall: before money, industry, greed, and snobbery had severed architecture from its true roots in nature (Fathy 1973: 7).

Women's work in tourism

Nubian women working in tourism in their homes in the villages around Aswan are considered in their communities to be working in the domestic sphere of the home, in contrast to working in tourism in public in hotels, agencies, restaurants, or sites as men do. Women's work outside the home could include agricultural labor, selling goods like dates and fruits in markets in Aswan. Women may also engage in various kinds of income-producing labor inside the home: raising poultry, baking, sewing, beauty preparations (for brides such as henna).

In presenting a Nubian tradition interpreted through tour guides' perceptions of them, women make concessions to any essentializing authenticity designed to recreate Old Nubia, like that expressed in producing local crafts. The majority of their home is not maintained like a museum exhibit. The rooms where she hosts the tourists retain the feel of a regular, slightly shabby living room today. A tourist used to ask to buy what turned out to be home owner's products souvenirs: baskets, necklaces and bracelets of beads, Nubian hats of needle work and henna tattoo... etc. The souvenirs do sell are unlike the rare "Genuine Nubian Products" advertised in Nubian souvenir shops in Aswan and the artifacts on display in the Nubia Museum from the pre-Dam era.

Nubian houses that regularly host tourists groups have begun to exhibit more of a *museumifying* trend. The interior of home, which used to be much like any other in the

village, had acquired a more exhibit-like décor which drew on new visual themes, including ethnographic exhibits from the Nubia Museum and images of sites in Nubia. Recent additions included murals painted on the walls by local artist hired to reproduce some typically “Nubian” scenes like a basket-making woman and the portraits of Nubian woman and man, and the name of home owner was written in English capital letters both inside and outside the front door.

Since Gharb Sehel is a unique village, it is of utmost importance that the main cultural and natural ecosystems found in Garb Sehel be conserved for posterity. The conservation efforts will have to be carried out in harmony with a sustainable development framework, which should provide improvement in the living standards of the local populations.

Due to the high vulnerability of Nubian villages, both natural and cultural, any tourism development to take place should be on an ecotouristic nature. No massive tourism activities should be allowed Garb Sehel, since they would irreversibly damage the fragile natural and human environment. If managed correctly, community based ecotourism activities should bring many benefits, not only on behalf of the conservation of the village's' culture but also in favour of the local inhabitants. Community based ecotourism should also provide important political benefits to Egypt, improving the national image abroad and also generating a constant flux of foreign exchange to the country. It should also provide many opportunities for carrying out good business for the tourism industry and generating many new jobs. It must not be forgotten that any tourism activity, including ecotourism, is a business, and successful operation leading to profit should be sought. A tourism venture associated to a protected area that loses money and fails to

produce enduring socio-economic benefits for the locality and the tourism industry will simply cause more problems for the protected area than already exist.

Since community based ecotourism is a new phenomenon of complex and interdisciplinary nature, it is very important to develop a strategy for its sound development in the Nubian villages in Aswan.

The goals of this strategy are:

- Conserving the natural and cultural environment,
- Enhancing the quality of life of the resident community,
- Providing a high-quality ecotourism product, this will achieve a world class reputation.
- Producing cultural benefits to the country of Egypt, as regards generating foreign exchange, good business for tourism-related activities and generating new jobs.

Following are the main elements that constitute the community based ecotourism strategy for the Gharb Sehel village. Each one of these elements identifies an issue, a specific recommended action, and a "how-to" approach.

1) Promotion of ecotourism culture

Issue: In general, and because of the high ecotourism potential of Egypt, it is now recognized that community based ecotourism development can become an important factor in the sustainable development of the country, providing additional foreign exchange and new jobs, as well as a vital instrument for conservation and rural

development. However, since ecotourism is a relatively recent phenomenon, it is still not widely known or understood in Egypt and in Nubia.

Action recommended: A true ecotourism culture has to spread out amongst the different sectors of Egypt society, including Nubian villages, so that all key players are properly involved and benefited from the process. An intensive and extensive training and capacity building programme is required. Community based ecotourism must be positioned so as to play a key role in the future development of Gharb Sehel and if carried out appropriately, will contribute in attracting considerable foreign exchange to Egypt, sustainable development options for the local population, profitable business for the tourism industry, as well as a very attractive and positive international image to the country.

How: By carrying out an intensive ecotourism promotional and training programme, including workshops, courses, and seminars at different levels and among the different sectors (locally and nationally), as well as developing advertisements, publications, TV programmes. The Ministry of Tourism, Aswan Governorate and, together with the private tourism sector, all have an important role to play in this field. Also, the local tourism bureau in Aswan for information and promotion must be strengthened, so as to actively participate in future ecotourism training activities, raising ecotourism and environmental awareness amongst the local populations, and a practical knowledge of ecotourism operation. Local guides must be trained and licensed. Already a number of community based ecotourism training courses have been carried out both in the Aswan mainland and in Gharb Sehel village by Nubia Museum (within the framework of this Aswan Governorate Pilot Project and also within the work carried out for the World Tourism

Organization Committee on Sustainable Development of Tourism and Egypt Tourism Development Authority TDA). This training programme should continue uninterruptedly at least over the next three or four years, addressed to the different stakeholders in the ecotourism process.

2) Averting threats of mass tourism

Issue: Due to the vulnerability and uniqueness of the landscape, Nile view, and cultural traditions of Gharb Sehel, it is quite clear that if the model of tourism to be followed is not based on a sustainable model (mainly ecotourism), it will be difficult to avoid the temptation of mass tourism practices which would undoubtedly destroy the rich and singular natural and cultural heritage, which is very fragile.

It would be regrettable that through thoughtless, greed-oriented mass tourism, the unique character of Gharb Sehel be ruined forever. Also, it has been seen around the world that mass tourism normally does not benefit the local populations (on the contrary, they have frequently had to migrate elsewhere, since they find few job options and the cost of living usually rises dramatically). Mass tourism usually sees local populations as a hindrance and finds ways of displacing them. Also, mass tourism would provoke a clash with traditional religious values.

Action recommended: The model of community based ecotourism has to be urgently implemented in the other Nubian villages in Aswan, as a viable tool for conservation of cultural heritage and sustainable development, to counter any initiatives towards mass tourism. The economic viability aspects are a key consideration and should be diligently analysed. Ecotourism should not be seen as a means for stopping development. People

have the right to develop, and ecotourism gives them the opportunity to advance in a sustainable and participatory manner. The involvement of key private firms will also be vital. Raising the awareness and knowledge regarding community based ecotourism among the key stakeholders: government representatives, private sector, and local populations, and applying concrete guidelines and mechanisms is vital

How: Leverage must be applied to obtain full support from the highest political and economic forces of Egypt towards low-impact sustainable tourism in Gharb Sehel, vs. mass tourism. The role of WTO is vital in this respect after the adoption of:

EGYPT'S ASWAN NATIONAL DECLARATION FOR LIVELIHOOD AND INCOME FROM SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM.

In the case of this project, an important contribution is the Ecotourism Master Plan for the Gharb Sehel, and its implementation. The Community Based Ecotourism Master Plan includes the identification and classification of ecotourism attractions, zoning aspects, development of ecotourism itineraries, physical planning aspects, and a promotional and marketing strategy.

The Community Based Ecotourism Master Plan

DESIRING to further increase Egypt's tourism contribution to economic growth and diversify tourism products as the country's leading export sector,

Working to intensify the industry's importance to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage,

Supporting the principles of sustainable development, and providing for the growing role of local communities in tourism development and services;

APPRECIATING the importance of sustainable tourism and ecotourism as a catalyst for influencing policies in favor of increased community participation and integration in economic development,

RECOGNIZING the necessity of meeting the needs and aspirations of local populations in high-growth tourism regions and nature conservation areas; and the need for greater public awareness of environmental and cultural preservation;

AWARE that ecology, culture, and people constitute the greatest asset of Egypt's different regions as international tourism destinations;

TAKING account of the multiple roles of local communities in development and in conservation and the need to give full support and provide facilities and opportunities to enable them to undertake their roles effectively; and

BUILDING ON past policies and commitments issued to support sustainable tourism principles and practices in the different regions of Egypt including the South Red Sea and the Marsa Allam Ecotourism Declaration of 2004;

In the context of redefining tourism development policies and conservation management regimes adopted in tourism development regions and nature-based destinations, in the spirit of strengthening national and regional cooperation, collaboration and coordination for the purpose of advancing the role and contribution of local populations in the progress of the various regions, economically and sustainably, Tourism Authority shall, either individually or collectively, endeavor to:

First,

Promote and implement the equitable and effective participation of local communities whenever possible in tourism development and nature conservation at various levels: political, economic, social, cultural, national, regional and international, especially their role as a productive force to attain the full development of the country's potential.

Second,

Enable local communities to undertake their important role as active agents and beneficiaries of national and regional tourism growth, particularly in promoting sustainable tourism development, either through increased economic and social benefits or contribution to the conservation of natural and cultural resources.

Third,

Ensure that sustainable tourism and ecotourism is integrated into land use policies, conservation plans, community support programs, and socio-economic development to improve the key environments that may be affected by development and reduce the socio-economic disproportion and the unbalanced provision of tourist facilities in remote regions, nature-based destinations and protected areas.

Four,

Implement livelihood improvement programs that involve the participation of local communities and nongovernmental organizations in the planning, development and operation of tourist establishments and natural areas towards strengthening regional coherence and sectoral harmonization of objectives and of implementation.

Finally,

Emphasize that direct government funding and subsidization for the management of biodiversity is not sustainable and that ecotourism, 'ecolodges', and nature reserves managed for both conservation and tourism should be the leading source of revenue for managing culturally rich and environmentally sensitive areas, while meeting social objectives, involving the local people in the regional economy, and empowering them to act as key partners in the development process and in the management of resources and the environment.