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Making Ecotourism more Supportive of Rural Development in Ghana

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Abstract

The paper explores the potential role of community-based ecotourism in the development of rural areas of Ghana. A review of past and current experiences in rural development and an assessment of the status of ecotourism in Ghana were undertaken. Potential challenges that are likely to confront the sector in the future were isolated and discussed, and measures to overcome them proposed. Some of these measures include improvements in the planning and management of ecotourism destinations and the provision of a more diversified and enhanced ecotourism product. The study showed that the community-based empowerment framework proposed initially by Friedman (1992) provides an appropriate mechanism for assessing the extent of community participation in ecotourism ventures, a factor that is very critical not only for the future survival of these projects but also for the general development of rural areas.

Introduction

Tourism has been cited variously as offering the potential for addressing spatio-temporal inequities in development. Foremost in this regard have been the seminal contributions of Christaller (1964) and Friedmann (1980) (cited in Pearce, 1989). Christaller, for example, has alluded to the fact that tourism provides the economically disadvantaged regions the chance to develop themselves as these are places that attract the tourists most. Friedmann was more emphatic when he recommended tourism "as a development option for particularly problematic regions that have otherwise little developmental potential".

However, it was not until the post second world war era, when rapid growth of recreation and tourism was experienced on the global scale, that tourist visitations to rural areas assumed significance. Because rural areas offer unusual opportunity for the organization of nature-based tourism that is particularly sought after by the affluent

and modern, urban-based individuals, they became magnets for attracting streams of these "short term" migrants. According to Bramwell (1994), this trend has continued and even intensified because the very discerning contemporary tourist wants to find something different and learn about the character of place, its people and traditions, and can do this in destinations where tourism draws on and reflects their distinctive local sense of place, a description that aptly fits rural settings.

Tourism has developed to become the mainstay of many rural economies, bringing in its wake drastic changes in rural settings. The effects of tourism upon the social-cultural and economic patterns of destinations have been very profound. Butler (1998) has attributed the growing importance of recreation and tourism in rural areas, especially in the developed world, to a number of interrelated factors. These include the spectacular rise in leisure activities, major changes in agriculture,

significant shifts in public tastes, and preferences and the effects of a variety of technological changes.

Without doubt, however, one of the most significant and popular activities in rural recreation and tourism is ecotourism. Increasing appreciation of rural values and pristine environments that are embodied in ecotourism have become closely related to the increasing dissatisfaction with urban environments which are seen as dirty, crowded, stressful and unsafe. According to Brandon (1996), ecotourism has been embraced by industry practitioners as a more credible alternative (to the conventional mass tourism) form of tourism, with less damaging effects on local people on the basis of three main assumptions. These are; first, its scale is less, therefore, its impact on local environments is also less; second, the type of tourists are also different so the interactions on destinations are less disruptive; finally, the range of opportunities for local involvement and benefits are greater. In addition, evidence abounds in existing tourism literature to show that ecotourism has the capacity to minimize and, in certain cases, offset some of the well-highlighted problems that have been associated with the traditional, conventional mass tourism types such as enclavic development and leakages of financial resources from less developed to more developed areas (Bryden, 1973), and excessive commodification and the general lack of authenticity in traditional tourism arts and crafts (Cohen, 1988).

Significantly, however, the most serious criticism of traditional mass tourism has been the perceived inefficient utilization of resources, both natural and man-made. This has contributed to the increasing popularity

of ecotourism, which thrives on the concept of sustainable use of resources for the planning and development of tourism and also the use of rural areas as the main destination of the ecotourists. It is believed that the increasing sophistication and interest shown in rural and environmental values by the contemporary tourist is likely to have a significant impact on future tourist visitation patterns to various destinations. This backdrop has contributed to the desire to examine the potential of ecotourism in Ghana, especially as it relates to the development of rural areas.

Rural ecotourism development can help sustain viable rural communities and at the same time meet the desires of this new breed of tourist. Although the images of rural areas of Ghana as bases for recreational pursuits seems to be that of monotony, remoteness and the general lack of basic and allied tourism infrastructure for receiving tourists, they nevertheless have immense potential for ecotourism development. This potential is in terms of numerous quaint resource endowments, untapped markets and favourable national tourism policy direction. In terms of resource endowments, for example, it is pertinent to note that most of Ghana's tourism resources and assets are rural-based. Developing these attractions, therefore, has dual effects; the enhancement of the entire tourism industry of the country and the development of rural areas. Additionally, the limited nature of development options that is usually available in rural areas of Ghana make ecotourism a worthwhile development option.

The main concepts employed in the study are rural development and ecotourism. Rural development can be defined in different ways and viewed from several perspectives.

Essentially, however, it is a hybrid term, embodying two basic concepts, rural and development. Rural is usually used in the context of geographical space to represent a non-urban, non-industrial, but largely agricultural setting. Ohene Konadu (1996) has defined a rural area as being characterized by non-urban way of life; essentially agricultural, with its settlement consisting of villages or homesteads and occupationally dependent on tree and crop farming, animal rearing and related activities. For the purpose of this study, rural areas in Ghana are viewed as those embodying the above features and having less than 5000 inhabitants (GOG, 1984).

The term development has been used and interpreted in so many ways that it becomes extremely difficult to provide a single all-purpose definition. As a dynamic activity, its scope has broadened over the years, from income per capita indicators to more contemporary issues of sustainable development, gender roles and poverty alleviation. Reflecting on some of the current notions on the paradigm, Pearce *et al.* (1990) described the concept as representing broader concerns for the quality of life such as life expectancy, infant mortality, educational attainment, access to basic freedoms, nutritional status and spiritual welfare. But the standpoint of Bartelmus (1986), which indicates in general and simple terms that development implies a process that makes an effort to improve the living conditions of people, appears to be more encompassing and broad-based, and, therefore, relevant for this discourse.

From the above, it can be realized that adopting a single definition for rural development cannot be an easy task. Past attempts have generally focused on the

improvement in the quality of rural life through agricultural development and reduction in poverty and inequalities, especially among the poorest (Hariss, 1982). Clearly, however, Lele's (1975) definition that rural development involves the improvement of the living standards of the low income population residing in rural areas and making the process of development sustainable, looks more appropriate for this study. This definition seems to have two very relevant ingredients that satisfy the study's basic philosophy – empowering the poor through improved lifestyles and pursuing development along sustainable lines.

Like the preceding concept, ecotourism too has also been subjected to numerous definitions and interpretations. According to Hector Ceballos-Lascurain who is credited with coining the term in Mexico in 1983, ecotourism involves “traveling to relatively undisturbed natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural aspects found in these areas”. The Ecotourism Society (TES) in 1991 defined it as “purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the cultural and natural history of the environment, taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem nor the local culture while providing economic opportunities that make the conservation of the natural resources beneficial to local people”. This definition seems to be in agreement with the following widely recognized three ecotourism imperatives; first, ecotourism must be based on the conservation of the environment to facilitate its sustainable use; second, it must also be economically valuable, especially to host communities; third, it must be integrated

into the way of life of the local communities. Richardson (1993) has observed that the incorporation of the prefix, "eco" (from a Greek word oikos, meaning house, or more broadly, habitat), suggests that ecotourism should be an ecologically responsible form of tourism as well as economical.

Rural development policies and programmes in Ghana

In the pre-independence era, the main strategy employed was the community development approach that was geared towards stimulating the local people to undertake self-help projects for their own self-improvement. This approach encouraged the development of local initiatives and voluntary efforts with governments support. Following from this initial effort, Kudiabor (1974) (quoted in Brown, 1986) has identified three basic rural development approaches for the period spanning the 1960's and the 1980's. They comprise the social amenity approach, the increased agricultural production approach and the accelerated project implementation approach. Specific activities pursued under these approaches ranged from the provision of social services and other amenities under the social amenity approach to the establishment of regional planning committees for the implementation of public projects under the accelerated project implementation approach.

In addition to the above approaches, the regional development (growth pole) strategy was adopted in the mid-1970's to facilitate the coordination of the various development activities in the regions. Each administrative region had its own Regional Development Corporation that operated as normal business entities with powers to borrow money and

also to initiate viable projects. By the late 1970's, most of these institutions had gone bankrupt and folded up due to poor management practices, especially misappropriation of funds.

In the early 1980's, the implementation of structural adjustment and economic recovery programmes to promote economic growth and social development resulted in improvements in agricultural and mineral production as well as the promotion of non-traditional exports. However, the benefits of these programmes were not evenly distributed, leaving segments of the society still very poor. According to Wayo (1996), "the structural adjustment programmes (SAP) that were implemented by the PNDC Government for over a decade, pursued policies that have generally impoverished the rural people. The removal of subsidies on agricultural inputs and the abolition of minimum guaranteed price for agricultural products have interacted to escalate agricultural input prices while output prices have woefully lagged behind in real terms". This constituted a major setback to improved rural livelihood as the performance of the agricultural sector was badly affected by these measures.

In an effort to minimize some of the disadvantages of SAP, the Government instituted the programme of actions to mitigate the social costs of adjustment (PAMSCAD) in 1987. Some of the specific policies implemented under PAMSCAD included rehabilitation and construction of roads, schools, health and other related infrastructural facilities and services within rural and poverty stricken urban neighbourhoods. Several shortcomings have, however, been associated with PAMSCAD. It was identified as having

too many projects that were beyond the capacity of both the Government and the donor community to implement. In addition, Asenso (1991) argued that the programme has not been successful in targeting the poorest poor and other vulnerable groups, and conceded that "poverty in Ghana is overwhelmingly a rural phenomenon". He further elaborated that poverty afflicts about two-thirds of Ghanaians, who are predominantly rural dwellers.

In the most recent times, various poverty alleviation schemes, such as Emergency Social Relief Programme (ESRP), National Poverty Reduction Programme (NPRP) and others have been instituted to target resources at the poorest of the poor in the society. In addition, the institution of the district assembly common fund, alongside the decentralization programme of government, has helped to minimize considerably a number of local level development problems and challenges. Self-initiated development schemes are on the ascendency and the spread of development activities has been far reaching at the district level.

Despite these advances in rural development efforts, it is pertinent to indicate that not much has changed from the over-reliance on agriculture and, therefore, the poor living standards of rural people. Very little results have been achieved from past attempts at diversifying the rural economic base and the generation of more wealth for rural communities. Decisions affecting rural areas have generally been made with little or no involvement of the local people. In view of the above, it should be considered appropriate to argue for the introduction of more ingenious strategies that would help create avenues for increased local

participation in the planning and management of their own development. It is anticipated that this increased involvement, coupled with better knowledge of the environments, are likely to lead to more effective use of existing finite resources that would lead to the realization of more result-oriented development that can help minimize existing levels of poverty. Against this background, it appears that ecotourism is a logical strategy for exploiting the abundant natural resources in rural Ghana and, thereby, helping to diversify the rural economy from its traditional reliance on agriculture.

Ecotourism, is particularly better suited for more effective and expanded utilization of local resources in a more sustainable manner for building and construction, food and drinks, and the manufacture of handicrafts and souvenirs. In the process, ecotourism promotes biodiversity conservation through preservation and sustainable harvesting of these tourism dependent resources. Buying from local sources and dependence on local manpower to manage ventures reduce leakages of financial resources out of the community and generates multiplier effects in the local economy due to increased internal exchanges between firms and producers. In this respect, ecotourism is most often touted as a veritable "engine" for the growth and development of rural or local areas. This view is corroborated by Richard (1983) who discovered empirically that rural tourism businesses in England have played a very important role in diversifying incomes on farms thus strengthening and stabilizing the rural economic base, especially where occupation in agriculture is declining.

Status of ecotourism in Ghana

Ghana's outstanding performance in the



tourism sector has been well highlighted. Official statistics indicate that with an annual growth rate of over 10% per annum, it is the fastest growing sector in the national economy. Tourism contributes more than 300 million US dollars annually to the national economy, representing about 3.7% of the GDP and offers direct and indirect employment to about 300,000 persons, according to 1997 Presidential Sessional Address (*Daily Graphic*, 21st January 1997). The national strategy (1996-2020) also targets international tourist arrivals to increase from the 1995 level of 385,000 to 1,062,000 by the end of the planned period. The realization of these set targets is likely to make tourism the leading economic sector in Ghana.

The overall growth in the sector has occurred as a result of government policy initiatives. In the mid-1980's, tourism was identified as one of the five areas warranting investments and development, and, in accordance with this, the sector was accorded priority status in Ghana's investment code (PNDC Law 116). Subsequent articulation of the sector's potential and the demonstration of special affinity for tourism in the long term framework for national development planning, commonly referred to as 'Vision 2020', culminated in the formulation of a 15-year national tourism development plan 1996-2010. This tourism plan is based on the concept of sustainability which seems to suggest that the benefits of tourism be equitably distributed among the people of the country, especially people in rural areas. The plan explicitly identifies the potential for the development of ecotourism and community-based ecotourism throughout the country as a way of ensuring that local

resources are used more sustainably and benefits accruing from tourism become more evenly spread throughout the country.

To facilitate the process, the Ghana Wildlife Department, which has the statutory responsibility for managing protected areas in ways that meet the needs of the local people in the surrounding communities, has formulated a strategic ecotourism plan for the 1996-2020 period (GWD, 1997). One major development goal in this plan is to increase visitor arrivals to protected areas to 150,000 per year and a revenue generation goal of a minimum of 1.5 million dollars within 5 years. At present, it manages 15 gazetted wildlife protected areas including national parks, resource reserves, wildlife sanctuaries and a strict nature reserve. Regional tourism development plans for all the 10 regions have been evolved. In addition, some district assemblies have initiated plans towards harnessing their ecotourism resources along sustainable lines. The Yilo Krobo, Twifo-Hemang, Lower Denkyira, Mpohor-Wassaw East, Nzima West and Bosumtwi-Kwanwoma districts are at present either implementing ecotourism projects or are drawing up development plans to harness their ecotourism potentials.

Ghana abounds in numerous ecotourism resources and, therefore, offers a wide range of visiting experiences. Hoff and Overgaard tourism consultants of Denmark described the relative importance of Ghana's ecotourism resource endowments in the West African region in 1974 as follows:

"The second main element in the tourist development (after the coastal belt) is the national parks... . Ghana seems to have more and better possibilities than other West African countries for developing a number

or game reserves".

The Wildlife Department has designated the major nature-based tourism resources in Ghana as follows: tropical rainforest, savanna woodland, coastal wetlands, outlier forests, sub-montane forests, wetlands, ancient groves and other cultural links to conservation, waterfalls, bird watching, monkey and butterfly sanctuaries. These rural based resources are very well distributed over the entire national space and their development is likely to lead to better spatial spread of benefits accruing from such visitations (Fig. 1).

Some of the major ecotourism destinations that are legally protected by the Wildlife Department include the Mole, Kakum, Bia and Bui national parks, Shai hills, Kogyae and Bobiri resource reserves, the Aburi Botanical Garden, the Owabi and Agumatsa wildlife sanctuaries, Paga and Agyambra crocodile ponds, Tafi Atome and Buabeng Fiema monkey sanctuaries, Lake Bosumtwi, the Volta River estuary and the numerous coastal wetlands. However, several others remain legally unprotected, but have significant potential for ecotourism. They include the Digya and Kyabobo range national parks, Kalakpa and Gbele resource reserves and the

Bomfobiri wildlife sanctuary. In addition, other allied activities and services such as second homes, which are usually sited in rural areas due to factors such as low land values, traditional festivals and customary practices and funerals, contribute significantly towards the enhancement of the rural ecotourism product.

Quite a number of problems hinder the development of this very promising sector in the country. In one of the most elaborate studies on ecotourism development in Ghana, Bediako (2000) cited the low priority accorded the sector especially by the Wildlife

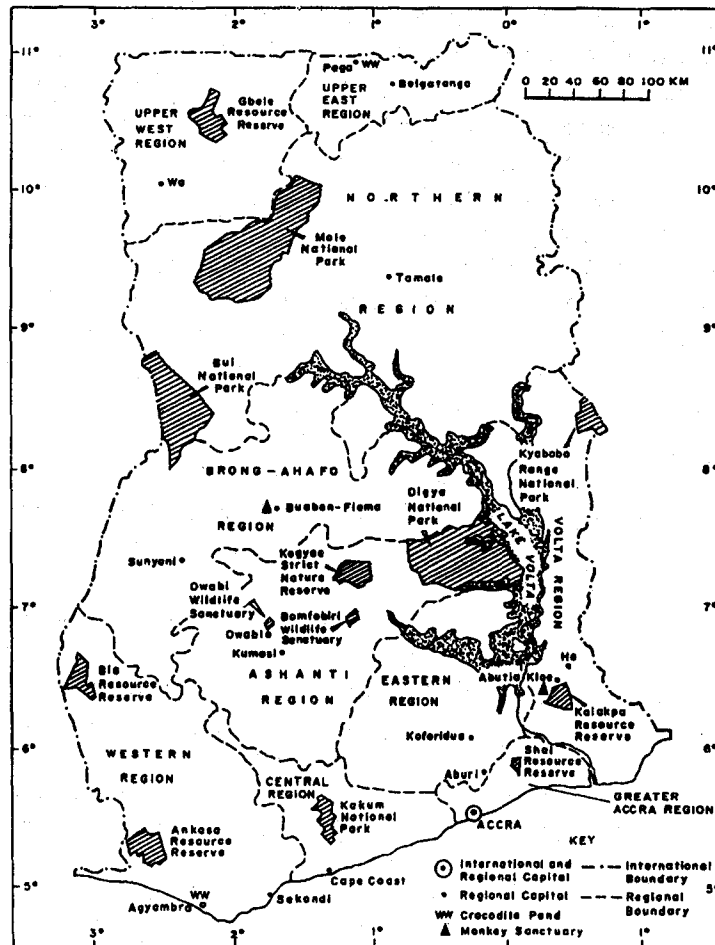


Fig. 1. Major ecotourism sites in Ghana.

Department, the result of which are inadequate infrastructure and receptive facilities, poor quality of service given to tourists notably in rural areas where most of the sites are located, inadequate training of ecotour guides, absence of interpretative aids and absence of marketing, as the major challenges confronting the industry in Ghana. These difficulties seem to hinder the realization of the sector's immense potential as a facilitator of rural development, even though it is conceded that growth in visitation levels to these sites has been encouraging, relative to the other tourism destinations.

Notwithstanding the relevance of the above listed limiting factors, it appears that certain other vital problem areas have been overlooked and this calls for further sectoral introspection. The factors that are to be considered include first, the vulnerability of these remote, less developed rural destinations in terms of socio-cultural disruptions and environmental degradation needs to be accorded due consideration (Carter, 1993). Second, ecotourism has often been used as a marketing tool (Thomlinson & Getz, 1996) with profit motivations of the investor being the overriding consideration behind these ventures. In this regard, local community interests may be relegated to the background and this can hamper the sustainability of the venture. Third, as Scheyvens (1999) has pointed out, in spite of the immense support given to community-based ecotourism as a way of overcoming some of the above listed problems, especially as it relates to the promotion of both the quality of life and the conservation of resources, it is still difficult to find successful cases of this in practice.

Woodward (1997) has discovered in South Africa that the involvement of local

communities in such ventures are "meant primarily to enhance the public relations value of ecotourism operators and not the interest of the host community". Bediako's (2000) study on Kakum National Park in Ghana further demonstrates some of the disillusionment on the part of the local people due to their limited involvement in the site's management, leading to the perceived leakage out of the area of the economic benefits accruing to the project. Such tendencies, if not curtailed, could endanger the very principles upon which ecotourism is founded and lead to local disinterest in it. This may ultimately result in the demise of projects and unsustainability of the sector.

A synthesis of the above discussion seems to suggest that the community empowerment framework proposed initially by Friedman (1992) and suggested for the entire tourism sector by Akama (1996) and further elaborated by Scheyvens (1999) appears to be a very promising tool for assessing improved community participation in ecotourism and other development initiatives. From the standpoint of this study, this empowerment framework offers effective and significant possibilities for promoting effective planning, conservation and sustainable development of ecotourism in rural areas in Ghana, a goal which is deemed critical for attaining sustained improvements in the rural development efforts.

Ecotourism and local empowerment

According to Murphy (1983), residents of ecotourism destinations, whether directly involved with the industry or not, are on show and their hospitality has become a major determinant in the success of the

industry. The established viewpoint on the socio-cultural dynamics of destination areas is that as development increases and destinations become popular, residents often pass from a state of euphoria over tourism to one of antagonism (Doxey, 1975). It needs to be appreciated, therefore, that tourism is better served if it is viewed as a "community industry", a corporate enterprise that represents the interest of the whole community (Murphy, 1983). Murphy expatiates further that "the term community industry acknowledges that tourism is an industry which must attract visitors and remain competitive if it is to succeed in the international market but, at the same time, must extend decision making beyond the narrow confines of the business sector to consider interest of the host community on which the industry is so dependent".

Another viewpoint which is closely related to the above was expounded by Goldbard (1989). According to his treatise, most ecotourism takes place within state-owned parks or reserves, where the government is heavily involved not only as an owner but also as an enforcer. Because of this, the state has greater influence than the local destination community over how development should proceed. New state regulations for preserving the environment may prevent the local population from continuing their old patterns of subsistence which underpin the maintenance of ecotourism resources.

To be able to minimize the impact of these problems, Goldbard suggests that the focus should be on the encouragement of greater local participation in ecotourism than it had hitherto been. His contention is that the locals bear the brunt of problems associated with ecotourism development

while, at the same time, most of the benefits are siphoned to the state and those closely allied directly or indirectly to it, and not for the development and benefit of the local people. This is untenable, according to him, as it does not augur well for the future survival of the industry. In support of this view, Ross & Wall (1999) have pointed out that "ecotourism should be regarded as being more than tourism to natural areas and should be viewed as a means of combining the goals of resource conservation and local development".

Based on the above realization, the follow up discussion is centred on the empowerment of communities for rural development through ecotourism. The empowerment framework, as applied here, attempts to emphasize the importance of local communities in having some control over and sharing in the benefits of ecotourism initiatives in their localities. Scheyvens (1999) has opined that it is of particular importance in distinguishing responsible forms of ecotourism from the irresponsible ones which are operated by what Lew (1996) refers to as "eco-pirates" who have the tendency of offering lower prices, inferior experiences and detrimental environmental impacts. Three main levels of empowerment – economic, social and psychological, and political, found to be most relevant and appropriate for the Ghanaian setting, are discussed.

Economic empowerment

One significant factor that distinguishes conventional tourism from the alternative types is the magnitude of economic benefits that "trickle down" to people of the host community. Unlike the former type where most of the earnings from tourism are

siphoned out of the destination area towards the more urbanized and developed regions, ecotourism reduces this leakage by ensuring that more resources are retained at the destination for the benefit of the entire community and residents. However, whether these benefits lead to economic empowerment is what needs to be investigated. In a number of cases, such benefits are concentrated in few hands, especially the local power brokers or elites, those with capital to invest and high ranking government officials. A significant section of the community, however, may not benefit directly from these gains. This could lead to friction between these groups of people which is likely to affect the community's cohesion towards receptivity to the incoming visitors. In another breadth, the frequency of receipt of these benefits could result in certain community problems, especially if it is realized that the benefits are irregular, unreliable, short-lived and, therefore, less dependable in supporting local livelihoods (Scheyvens, 1999).

Economic empowerment, or the lack of it, is also linked to the community's access to productive resources that are now being exploited for the development of ecotourism (Lindberg *et al.*, 1996). Families whose resources are being utilized for ecotourism, for example, the establishment of protected areas or those whose crops and other properties have been damaged by rampaging animals from a national park, should be adequately compensated for the income or property lost. This would ensure equity in the distribution of the benefits and also generate support of the community for the sustenance of the project. Communities providing sites for ecotourism in Ghana do not appear to be enjoying any appreciable

level of on-site economic improvements. Studies from some of these sites, particularly Kakum, do not provide indications of economic empowerment accompanying the establishment of the site, even though economic benefits are being generated there. This situation appears to be in sharp contrast to some of the pre-project promises and assurances. Bediako (2000), for example, dilates on some of the pertinent problems associated with economic disempowerment in the communities surrounding the Kakum Park as follows:

"People in the communities can no longer have access to forest resources. The communities have been advised to set up income-generating jobs like snail farming and grasscutter animal farming to replace what they have lost from entering the forest but more than half of the inhabitants lack the capital needed for setting up these ventures" This evidence of economic disempowerment at the Kakum Park has been corroborated further by Agyapong (1998) who stated that on site workers who have been recruited from the local community complained about their poor conditions of service in relation to non-natives. Even though it was not explicitly stated whether the complainants had equivalent qualifications to that of the non-native people they were complaining about, it is clear that such discontentment is rife.

Similar misgivings have also been expressed within other ecotourism sites in the country. For instance, Haligah's (1998) study on the underutilization of tourism resources at the Kalakpa national resource reserve is full of expressions of similar ambivalences towards the site by the local people. So has been the expression of dissatisfaction with site infrastructure by

communities bordering the Mole National Park (Asiedu, 1998), which is Ghana's largest game reserve facility, and also by inhabitants living by the Wli waterfalls in the Hohoe district in the Volta Region of Ghana (Shine, 1993). All these sites represent significant attractions within the nation's ecotourism supply system. The above background calls for the need to initiate more prudent measures towards the upliftment of the economic status of settlers around ecotourism sites as it constitutes the surest way of ensuring the general improvement in quality of life of rural people which is intertwined with the future survival of these sites.

Social and psychological empowerment

Socio-psychological empowerment refers to a situation in which a community's sense of cohesion, integrity, self-reliance and pride has been confirmed or strengthened by an activity such as ecotourism (Sheyvens, 1999). Communities may become socially and psychologically empowered through the existence and the activities of strong and viable social organizations like youth groups, women associations, religious sects and other identifiable sections of the community, and the upholding and preservation of local traditions and culture. In the perspective of ecotourism, this would involve organizing the community towards the effective utilization of the accrued benefits from ecotourism ventures for the provision of community-based projects like schools, health care and feeder roads. It would also involve conscientizing the community on such pertinent issues such as conservation and sustainable use of resources, host-guest relations, environmental cleanliness, maintenance of self-

esteem and values, and respect for local traditions and culture.

Conversely, social and psychological disempowerment may occur if tourism activities precipitate in anti-social ills and non-conformist acts within destinations. Such actions may include prostitution, crime begging, drug trafficking, displacement from lands and loss of authenticity in the community's previous way of life, especially in the area of production of tourist arts and stage management of cultural displays for visitors. As already mentioned, the occurrence of such negative symptoms epitomizes an expression of either misgivings or irritation towards tourists and tourism, and it is usually observed at the advanced stage of tourism development (Doxey, 1975). If these developments are left unchecked, there is the strong likelihood that visitor numbers will dwindle because it is no longer attractive to visit the site, and this could lead to the ultimate collapse of the destination.

In Ghana, a litany of both positive and negative forms of social empowerment has been outlined by various researchers from studies undertaken in some ecotourism sites. Some of the positive attributes associated with encounters with the ecotourists include maintenance of cleaner environments, establishment of better human relations, learning of foreign languages, modernization of communities cultural groups, good behaviour and the existence of law and order (Bediako, 2000). Majority of residents in one of the communities surrounding the Kakum National Park (Mosomagor) indicated that these interactions have resulted in changes in their tradition and culture and added that it has brought them "civilization". On the other hand, negative reactions have also been reported, including

the devaluation of local culture and traditions as the ruralites attempt to copy tourists' way of life, excessive drinking and smoking, indecent dressing, rude behaviours and promiscuity. These complaints, however, seem trivial compared to the benefits of these interactions. What seems critical here and which could be the major determinant of the future sustainability of those ventures is the perceived inequities in the distribution of benefits from the sites. It is likely that those who are not directly benefiting from the ecotourism venture may develop attitudes and responses that might not be conducive for the future survival of the venture. The preceding analysis go to support the view that in spite of the numerous positive attributes inherently linked to ecotourism, it is not immune from some of these socio-psychological and other related problems, and absolute care must be taken to minimize these negative tendencies.

Political empowerment

Political empowerment is realized through the representation of community interest groups in all aspects of decision-making affecting their development and well-being. This means that when all identifiable community groups, such as women and youth organizations, religious and chieftaincy institutions have avenues for expressing their views and concerns on issues on ecotourism, then the community can be said to be politically empowered with respect to ecotourism. One way of realizing this is through decentralization of the decision-making machinery on ecotourism from the national or regional level to the district, community or grassroot level. This ensures that local interests are catered for through local participation in the local level planning

and management of these ecotourism projects, as their representatives are available on the relevant bodies such as wildlife, forestry, tourist, public works and services, and other related bodies that manage ecotourism. It can also be achieved through bottom-up decision-making framework where community level representations are made to the national level to participate in deliberations affecting local or national interests.

In the Kakum area, the general view of the resident communities has been that even though consultations took place at the initial stages of the project, the management of the site is presently restricted to very few people – those with jobs at the park. With the exception of one community (Mosomagor), the rest seemed bitter about this seeming political disempowerment (Bediako, 2000). This “strained” relationship obviously does not augur well for the smooth operation of the project and its future survival. Against this background, however, it seems that Dei's (2000) consensual model of planning with communities that is based on the new political structure of Ghana, offers an innovative way for enhancing local political empowerment for ecotourism development and needs to be popularized.

Challenges ahead

The challenges involved in realizing the goal of making ecotourism more supportive of rural development in Ghana seem quite daunting following from the complex nature of the limiting factors involved. It would seem appropriate that in the context of the issues raised above, the following two broad salient issues, planning and management of the sites and quality product development and marketing, be addressed in order to

ensure future improvements in this potentially all-important sector.

Planning and management of ecotourism sites

Ecotourism has largely been viewed as environmentally benign (Wall, 1994), as it is less likely to bring about dramatic changes in the cultural lifestyles of the people within destination communities and also threaten or damage the environment. This stance seems to have dominated most of the thinking about the industry and how it impacts on the physical, economic and socio-cultural landscapes of destination. The result is that most ecotourism worldwide, with very few exceptions, operate within a regulatory and policy vacuum (Butler, 1998).

Like all other forms of tourism, however, ecotourism has environmental consequences as it could be environmentally disruptive. Wall (1994) has pointed out that ecotourism is usually directed at very special places which may have limited ability to withstand user pressures and also that some visitations to ecotourism sites may take place at critical times when mating and breeding of some species are taking place. It will, therefore, be most appropriate if ecotourism is constantly subjected to the "litmus test" of proper and sustainable use of these finite resources to ensure that environmental integrity of these destinations are not compromised but protected. Community involvement in the destination planning and decision making processes becomes paramount in any attempt to regulate resource use within these areas. Recent trends from centralization to decentralization have given opportunity to local people to deal with their own problems, and this encourages democratic governance. It also

creates opportunities for harmonious relationship between host and guests within destination communities. With these initiatives, it is expected that destination resources will come under judicious use and, thereby, facilitate their sustainable and long-term utilization.

Increased decentralization and community involvement in ecotourism should also ensure a fairer representation of community interests. Identifiable groups within local communities, especially women groups, who have always played subordinated and marginalized roles in tourism should be accorded proper roles in this emerging dynamics in local power relationships within ecotourism. At the same time, increased local level participation should help minimize leakages of financial and other resources out of destination areas by the intensification of the use of locally produced goods and services. Overcoming some of the previously discussed sectoral challenges through the adoption and implementation of these measures is likely to advance the course of local empowerment and help create a more unified front and partnership for the promotion of the industry.

Improving the quality of the ecotourism product

Simply put, the ecotourism product may be seen as everything that the tourist uses, consumes and acquires on one round trip (Jeffries, 1990) and may include attractions at the destination, facilities available for visitors and support systems like transport, advertising and sales. Service delivery that is available from these sources is expected to match and preferably exceed visitor expectations. Serious difficulties, however, confront service delivery in all aspects of

the Ghanaian tourism and hospitality industry, and ecotourism is no exception. However, ecotourism is expected to be much more environmentally conscious in the broadest sense of the word. To address these problems, therefore, it is suggested that, first, standards and benchmarks for operators should be established by the Ghana Tourist Board in conjunction with local institutions and must be adhered to by all local operators involved in the sector. This is likely to lead to quality improvement, especially through stringent enforcement of these standards. Second, the current state of rural infrastructure, particularly roads, water, health and communications, does not augur well for the successful promotion of ecotourism in rural areas. In addition to limiting the relative competitive edge of rural areas in tourism promotion, it also reduces their general attractiveness for other forms of investment.

Clearly, therefore, the roles of central government and district assemblies become very critical in so far as improvements in existing infrastructure for ecotourism development in rural areas are concerned. Third, there is also the need to improve upon the skills of the industry practitioners within its various facets. Awareness and training programmes should be organized at convenient intervals to keep them abreast with changing conditions within the industry so that they can respond to new demands. There is also the need to expand the mix of ecotourism products that are on offer and also to market them employing more innovative ways. Typically, the ecotourism product mix has largely focused on the combination of traditional activities such as visits to game and nature reserves, monkey sanctuaries and waterfalls. Visits to

farmhouses and villages, game hunting, river fishing and trekking, mountain and hill climbing, for example, could be promoted as niche ecotourism products in rural Ghana. More training in the planning and management of ecotourism destinations needs to be provided to destination residents to make them more useful for the industry.

Conclusion

The study tried to assess the potential role of ecotourism in the development of rural areas of Ghana. This is against a background of dismal performance of the agricultural sector, which is the mainstay of rural economies, in reducing rural poverty levels. An evaluation of past and current efforts at rural development and ecotourism development was carried out to serve as the basis for a more elaborate discourse. The general view from the study is that rural Ghana is endowed with the requisite resources which when systematically developed and marketed could sustain an ecotourism industry and help diversify rural economies from agriculture. This is likely to lead to increased and stabilized earnings.

It could be intimated from the study that the pursuance of rural development in Ghana, as is in most other countries, has been motivated largely by the need to improve upon the living conditions of the rural people. To a very large extent, ecotourism as practiced at the community level could promote development through, but not limited to economic, socio-psychological and political empowerment of local communities. It is also quite clear that the study's two main concepts, rural development and ecotourism, are inexorably linked together in so far as they are both directed at facilitating the promotion and enhancement

of the quality of life of rural dwellers. The reformation of the ecotourism sector, by overcoming the challenges associated with the better planning and management of sites and improvements in the development and marketing of the ecotourism product, is undoubtedly one of the best ways for facilitating effective rural development that could ultimately help alleviate rural poverty and enhance rural livelihoods.

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