

From Tiger Conflict to Tourism

Social Transformation, Poverty Alleviation
and Conservation Initiative in the Sunderbans (India)



Presented at the Conference

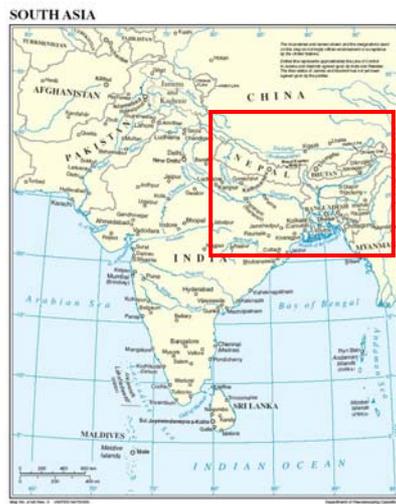
”Developments in Pro-Poor Tourism: Identifying Best Practice”

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Marcus Bauer
Oudenarder Str. 28
13347 Berlin
Germany
BauerMW@web.de
cell: +49.172.4826222

I. Location



Maps: www.un.org



The Sunderbans are located in **Eastern India** on the shore of the **Bay of Bengal**, in the extreme south of the state of West Bengal. 40% of the Sunderban area belong to India, the other 60% to Bangladesh. My presentation is concentrating on the Indian part.

Ecology (1)



The Sunderbans, consisting of some 102 islands, are a **unique and very fragile ecosystem**. They are the world's biggest river delta formed by some of the major rivers of South Asia. Moreover they are the largest mangrove forest of the world, covering 60% of the total mangrove area of India. Roughly 90% of all Indian mangrove varieties are located here. They play a **very important role as buffer zone**, as they protect the wildlife, villages and the mudflats from the rising sea level and the torrential rains and cyclones.



Ecology (2)



The Sunderbans are home to a **broad variety of species**, of which the Royal Bengal **tiger** (*panthera tigris*) is considered as the most important flagship species. Only in the Sunderbans it shows distinct **amphibian behavioural patterns**. The tigers stray around the whole area, sometimes crossing distances of several kilometres swimming. Other than the tiger there are many amphibian and reptile species, fish, mammals and over 180 different species of birds here are registered.

All these have fetched many credentials and special recognitions to the Sunderbans. They are not only a Wildlife Sanctuary and a Tiger Reserve but also Nationalpark, Biosphere Reserve and **World Heritage Site**.

III. Economy - Infrastructure



The Sunderbans are a **very remote and under-developed area**. The people use the natural resources like paddy straw, mud and wood to build their houses. Electricity, sanitation and communication are hardly existing, but slowly the **situation is improving**. For example the footpaths, which are very muddy during the rainy season, have now been paved. But still important infrastructure is lacking in many places, medical treatment for example still mostly is provided only by herbal doctors.

III. Economy – Traditional livelihood



The traditional livelihood of the local people is mainly fishing or prawn catching. The Sunderbans are the **main source of fishery products** for Eastern India. Agriculture yields only one crop per year due to saline conditions. Thus people are depending directly on the forest or forest based resources, what means **severe threats for the fragile ecosystem**.



IV. Challenges and solutions (local level)

From this forest and water based livelihood several problems arise. The Sunderbans are perhaps the last true wild frontier of the Indian Subcontinent and conflict between man and animal is quite common, for example **tiger or crocodile attacks** on honey collectors and prawn catchers. Tigers occasionally even come to villages, sometimes attacking humans. It is quite understandable that for local people this is a **very difficult situation** to cope with.



Traditionally, the villagers try to cope up with such challenges by many rituals, religious and superstitious practices. Worshipping Bonobibi, the goddess of forests, is obligatory before leaving on a fishing or honey collection expedition. And when going into the forests, sometimes people wore masks on the back of their heads, believing that tigers never attack from the back. Until recent past, villagers used to believe that **killing a straying tiger** was the safest way to save human life and also to earn some easy extra money.

IV. Challenges and solutions (supra level)

India is developing rapidly but the **challenge** lies in the domain of the **development of very remote rural areas**, especially if conditions are as difficult as in the Sunderbans. The other issue which deserves immediate attention is the sustainable use of the fishing grounds, a major food stock for the whole of East India and an important breeding ground of the various fish species. To **reduce threats to the ecosystem** due to human pressure, in the worst case even the extinction of species, and to safeguard the regulations of the Nationalpark, people have to find **alternatives and economic security**. Some proposals are directly linked with the ecosystem and its conservation, for example forest management, honey and wax culture, aquaculture or the popularisation of alternative energy. Additionally education, crafts and agriculture have to be developed.



V. Initiation of the Camp

On the initiative both of the Field Director of the Tiger Reserve and WWF India West Bengal State Office several **local youth**, who before mostly had been **poachers**, were motivated to support the Forest Department in different conservation initiatives. Most of the youth were unemployed and to ensure, that they don't fall back in their former profession, the **idea of a tourism initiative** was born. Help Tourism, an Indian tour operator and consultant, which before had already successfully implemented several community tourism initiatives, was invited to develop a **community tourism demonstration project involving the transformed conservators** of Bali. Thus in 2002 Help Tourism and the related NGO ACT-Association for Conservation and Tourism came in.



tour operator
tourism consulting
- commercial -



registered NGO
social development
- non profit -

V. Initial touristic situation and conclusions

The prerequisites for a tourism project were quite good in the Sunderbans. Additionally to the **rich natural attractions**, the proximity to Kolkata, the **main source market for tourism in India**, was an advantage. Already many day trippers come to the area, but to generate adequate income, it is necessary to **attract overnight guests**. Help Tourism followed the strategy to offer **exclusive accomodation in ethnic style and good local food and service**. Local staff was trained accordingly and a concept for an eight bungalow resort was developed. Initially the land for the demonstration project was given by Bali Nature and Wildlife Conservation Society, who is also a partner of the project. The money for the establishment of the ecotourism infrastructure was provided by Help Tourism. The company invested more than 50,000 USD, a part of this amount was support, soft loans or donations from patrons, friends and well-wishers. So far six of the eight cottages have been finished, the camp started operating in 2002. Additionally to the camp a boat had to be purchased to provide transfer and excursions to the Nationalpark for the guests.



VI. Benefits resulting from the camp

A tourism project is embedded in a social environment. In the Sunderbans outsiders and especially foreigners are very seldom and earlier encounters with them have not always been positive. Thus it was obligatory to **raise maximum acceptance of the local people** for the camp. The benefits of the camp had not only to be given to the employees but to a maximum number of people. Already for the construction local staff was engaged to the largest possible extend. So far more than 3,000 man days have been created for construction. Due to the family structure roughly some 2,000 people from 7 villages have been benefiting. 70 % of all materials used for the camp have been purchased locally. Regarding that many furnishings like for example sanitation systems are not available in this remote area, this number is equal to maximum extend. **Direct beneficiaries** of the camp are the local staff, receiving regular payroll for their activity in **service, housekeeping, gardening or maintainance**. Food is largely purchased locally. However beverages mostly have to be bought from outside.



The camp is a **socio-cultural meeting point**, unfortunately as yet only during the absence of paying guests. Discussions and community development procedures take place here as well as spare time activities like card playing.





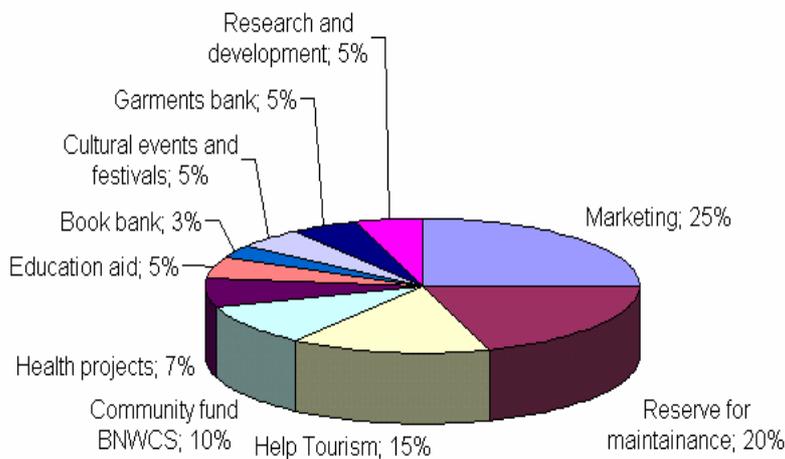
The **local goods** produced by the self-help groups are partly sold in the camp. The landphone and the boat ensure **safety** in cases of emergency. Additionally they allow **networking** in conservation initiatives and on time preparation for the arrival and transfer of new guests.



By engaging guides for village walks, wildlife and mangrove tours **additional income** is given to local people after they have been trained accordingly. Young fishermen are hired for rowing tourists on country boats into the mangrove creeks. To create entertainment facilities for tourists the **age old culture of Bono Bibi Yatra** has been brought back. A big number of local theater actors are earning additional income with every booked performance. A **tube well** has been erected to provide clean and sweet water to guests; this is also benefiting the surrounding villagers as they need not to walk to the public well anymore.



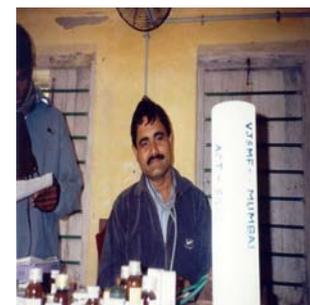
VII. Spreading the benefits



'Not that we always can follow this religiously. But this is of course a standard procedure we have always tried to follow and have followed in most of the cases.'

To clarify the potential benefits of a touristic engagement and to **create a strong backing** inside the local communities the benefits of the camp have to be spread as wide as possible. The diagramme shows how the revenue of the camp after the deduction of the costs is spent for **community development activities**. Here the differing business economical understanding has to be regarded. For example marketing and reserves for maintainance are included in this amount, in Europe this would be considered costs. I don't want to go into details about the percentages but instead focus on concrete examples. The quotation is given by one of the managing directors of Help Tourism.

Every fortnight a **medical camp** is held for the local people. A doctor, originating from the Sunderbans, but now working in a Kolkata hospital is voluntarily providing examinations against a very reasonable price of 10 Rupees per patient. **Medicine is distributed free**, till now summing up to a volume of more than 10,000 US-Dollar. Additionally to the general medical camps, **special camps** are held to ensure professional care for specific forms of diseases. These camps bring benefits in two ways. The patients benefit from the medical supply, and supporting staff by additional income for their work. So far more than **10,000 people from 15 local villages** have been treated.



An **education project** named 'adopt a poor student' is financing the higher education of meritorious pupils, who otherwise could not participate in the higher education system. As adequate schools do not exist on the island, the students have to lodge in the place of their education. Four students already have passed their exams, six more are now struggling for laurels. A **book bank and donation programme** is supporting some 60 students with necessary literature, which for many locals is unaffordable. A **non-formal school** is under construction where the drop outs and poor village children will get free education. The school will have a music and art section also.



As not all the inhabitants of the Sunderbans can afford proper or sometimes any clothes, a **garment project** has been established. So far some 400 people have benefited from this. The initial idea of the Sunderbans camp was **nature protection** and nowadays the former poachers are passionate conservationists. Wounded animals are nursed and released to the forests, prawn seed catching has decreased significantly. Additionally the locals are contributing to various research and monitoring activities. One important step of tourism development is on the way. The cook of the camp is just constructing a new guesthouse for offering **homestay facilities** to tourists. With the installation of solar panels **public lighting** is provided in the surroundings of the camp.



VIII. Planned self-help groups and initiatives

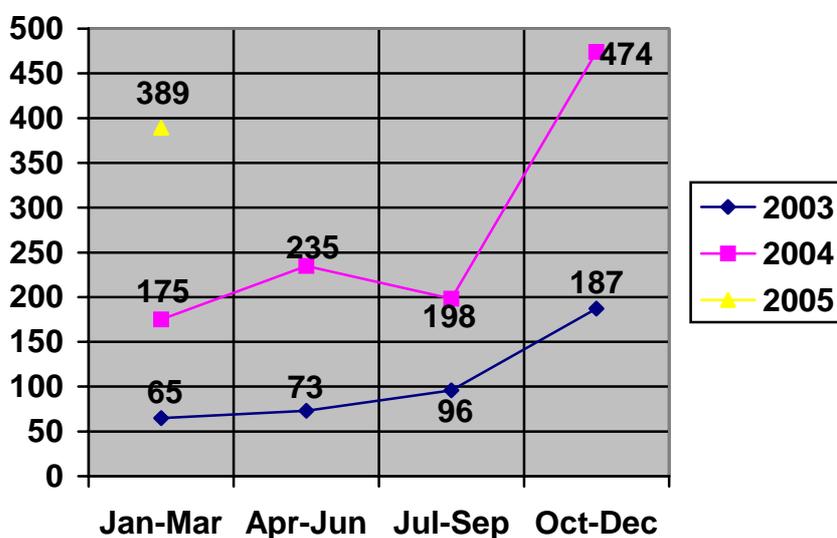
Sustainable development is a permanent process. Help Tourism and ACT are working on the realisation of new projects and self-help groups. For an alternative livelihood development the implementation of **organic farming, medical plant or mushroom cultivation, local crafts and repairing shops** for small plants and machineries are planned. Additionally various **health service enterprise models** are suggested for self-help groups.

To improve the **sanitation facilities** of the community currently different development agencies are requested for funding. The maintainance of these facilities could be organised by self-help groups against the collection of nominal fees.

Another challenge is the creation of a **health insurance system**. Here different approaches are discussed with the community.

A great contribution to an improved livelihood would be the existence of a **mobile swimming hospital**. By enlarging the area of operation resident doctors and nurses could be justified and attracted. The technical equipment would allow for example the cold storage of anti-venom for snake bites.

IX. Performance of tourist numbers



Extrapolating the trends in the number of visitors since the opening of the camp makes me confident, that all the plans and intentions can be realized and that the complex ecosystem of the **Sunderbans can be preserved for future generations**, who will be able to lead a dignified life.