

Livelihood Enhancement through Ecotourism; A case of Mognori Ecovillage near Mole National Park, Damongo, Ghana

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Abstract

Poor access and remoteness of some communities often limit their access to the services of development partners/agencies. These communities are at times left with no other options than to depend on their natural resource base for food, income and general survival. Inadequate options often times 'force' rural people to exploit resources in ways which are unsustainable. Realizing this, the Ghana Wildlife Division of the Forestry Commission developed a policy aimed at establishing collaborative community based wildlife management schemes with the aim of bringing benefits to a fringing community (Mognori) of Mole National Park as a way to reducing poverty through community based ecotourism programmes. This paper therefore seeks to explore the impact amelioration measures on the environment through the evolution of the ecovillage model instituted by the Ghana Wildlife Division. Both purposive and simple random sampling methods were employed to collect data from key stakeholders within the community. The study revealed that since the inception of the eco village project, the community's knowledge on conservation has improved considerably; economically, some residents earned extra income which enhanced their livelihood. The community's sense of unity by way of cultural identity had also improved tremendously and there were no noticeable negative effects of host-guest interactions. The paper therefore identified and recommended that the services of MASLOC and LEAP which offered "soft loans" be availed the community to 'cushion' small scale handicraft workers in the realization of their dreams. It again recommended some basic facilities be provided the community since it will foster a decrease in their impact on the park and the environment at large hence enhancing sustainability.

Keywords: Mole National Park, ecotourism, Mognoriecovillage, livelihood, sustainability, wildlife

Introduction

Over the years ecotourism has been identified as an important "niche" in the tourism literature with the capability to empower rural communities to ensure development. This has brought about the term 'community-based ecotourism' ventures to distinguish those initiatives which are environmentally sensitive but which also aim to ensure that members of local communities have a high degree of control over activities taking place and a significant proportion of the benefits accruing to them (Liu, 1996; Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). This however is in contrast to those ecotourism ventures that are completely controlled by outside operators in some destinations. Making ecotourism benefit local people wasn't a 'norm' in times past but of late, it is preached by both development practitioners the academic community (Brent & Zhao, 2000; Christie, 2002; cited in Hall, 2007).

In New Zealand for instance, Maori communities are using ecotourism as a means of sustainably utilizing physical resources at their disposal in a way which can provide employment options. The tourism/ecotourism industry has also in recent times become increasingly important to the economies of many African countries. The reason being that, many of these projects are located in poorer rural parts of the continent and may be the main economic activity or livelihood strategy existing therein. In most parts of Africa, it is now a basic phenomenon that, local people should be compensated for the loss of access to their resources when wildlife sanctuaries or parks are created. A case in point is the Narok Council which has jurisdiction over the Masai Mara Park in Kenya. As a result of the creation of the park, the local council has found it expedient to put money into a trust fund which is used to fund school projects, cattle dips and health services which benefit the entire community directly. This brings to the fore the fact that, a 'community based approach' to the ecotourism parlance highly recognizes the need to promote both the quality of life of people and the conservation of resources (Sindiga, 1995).

The rainfall pattern the world over is drastically dwindling due to the impact of climate change and the effect is seriously felt in developing countries and as observed by some development experts; rural communities and other peripheral areas face challenge of continuous economic development and most especially in recent times when primary traditional industries such as fishing and farming are in decline and tourism oftentimes become another tool to help create jobs and to raise standards of living (Hill, 1993; Sharpley, Sharpley and Page, 1997; Fleisher and Felsentein, 2000).

Aside from the Mognoricovillage project, other notable ecovillage projects in Ghana include the Xofaecovillageproject in Volta Region which serves as a unique hideout for holiday seekers wanting an experience of typical Ewe home touch situated between the shores of Lake Volta and the mountains of the region. Another example is the Meet Africa Rural Village Experience and Lodging (MARVEL) project which also offers rural accommodation modes to the visitor to lodge and experience rich Dagomba culture and traditions whilst also further offering other opportunities for the visitor to contribute to the development of the village(Songnaayilli), a suburb of Tamale.

With specific reference to Mognori, realizing the less productive nature of farming and its consequential impacts-poaching, the Ghana Wildlife Division of the Forestry Commission has developed a policy to establish collaborative community-based wildlife management structures. The dual purpose of this policy is to reduce unsustainable use of resources in and around the park and to increase benefits to the fringe communities as a way of reducing poverty. As posited, it is high time developers formed equal partnership with local communities, and helped provided the much needed funding for community ventures to empower community residents to control their own destiny (Brandon, 1993).Mognori, which in the local dialect (Gonja) means "river bank" is a village fifteen (15) km from the Park headquarters in the West Gonja District of the Northern Region. The main occupation is subsistence farming. However returns on farming are low due to poor soils, rudimentary farming methods and long dry season. Locales therefore tend to idle during the long dry season, creating fertile grounds for poaching in the Park. Ecotourism was identified as a livelihood strategy through the creation of the ecovillage model. The enterprise seeks to improve the livelihood of the Mognori community while simultaneously helping to conserve the biodiversity in and around Mole National Park (MNP), through increase conservation awareness, better natural resource management practices and the creation of sustainable incentives for community members. Recently, a community-based ecotourism enterprise was developed in Mognori with livelihood activities such as cultural troupe performance, tour guiding, income from home stay operations, sale of honey and foodstuff from farms to visitors including sale of handicraft to enhance the souvenir trade. This was done with support from the Park Management and other stakeholders like SNV (Netherlands Development Organization) and this is attracting an ever increasing numbers of visitors/tourists to the village.

Problem statement

Mole National Park in Northern Ghana is the country's largest protected area and covers over 4,500 km. It is important in terms of biodiversity conservation both in a regional and a national context. Recent surveys confirm that the wildlife population is under serious threat from poaching; with most key species decreasing in number. The park is surrounded by about thirty-three local communities with a total estimated population of about 35,000. Most of these communities are poorly accessible and their remoteness has further limited their access to services of development agencies.

They tend to depend almost entirely on their natural resource base for food and income and this overdependence, is largely due to limited alternative forms of livelihood, which may lead to unsustainable utilization of the resource. Most of these communities were ejected from the park when it was created but they still seriously depend on this natural resource base with few alternative livelihood options. This coupled with low knowledge levels on biodiversity conservation tend to derail most sustainable management efforts of these very natural resources which we seek to protect for purposes of tourism and posterity. Based on the concept of ecotourism it was thus identified that the sustainability and conservation of biodiversity in and around Mole National Park could be enhanced through income generation and provision of employment opportunities as well as enterprise development based on the natural resources around the park (example, community-based ecotourism, Non-Traditional Food Processing (NTFP) and marketing). Most foreign (non-local) plans for ecotourism development often also include community involvement, but they view this involvement from a mostly inappropriate 'western mindset'. Not necessarily from the traditional cultural framework and cognition of the local residents which is also certainly important in eco-cultural tourism development (Ferguson, 1994; Escobar, 1995). The only hope therefore for breaking the destructive patterns of resource use is to reduce rural poverty by improving income levels in addition to accessing better education, health care and nutrition. This study therefore seeks to unearth the benefits or otherwise of the ecovillage initiative since its inception in 2005.

Study objectives

The main objective of the study was to ascertain the effects of ecotourism activities on the community whilst seeking specifically to:

- i. Assess the economic effects of ecotourism on livelihoods in Mognori
- ii. Examine the socio-cultural effects of ecotourism on livelihoods in Mognori
- iii. Identify resource conservation measures instituted by the community to minimise negative environmental impacts

The Ecovillage/Ecotourism Paradigm: A Brief Overview

The ecovillage concept is defined as a human-scale, full-featured settlement in which human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world in a way that is supportive of healthy human development and can be successfully continued into the indefinite future (Gilman, 1991).

Every eco-village offers educational initiatives which are further also geared at offering solutions based on cooperation with nature. The Global Ecovillage Network-(GEN) Africa is the African version of the ecovillage association which is charged with the responsibility of promoting social resilience, environmental protection and restoration of nature through the concept of ecovillages as models for sustainable human settlements (www.gen-africa.org). For every ecovillage project to be deemed successful, it must be premised on the Dawson's five principles of ecovillages which are as follows:

- i. Ecovillages are private citizens' initiatives. They're grassroots.
- ii. Ecovillagers value community living.
- iii. They are not overly dependent on government, corporate, or other centralized sources for water, food, shelter, power, and other basic necessities.
- iv. Ecovillagers have a strong sense of shared values, often characterized in spiritual terms.
- v. They often serve as research and demonstration sites. Many offer educational experiences for others (Dawson. 2006)

In 1991, The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) developed the following definition of ecotourism: 'responsible travel to areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people' (Epler-Wood, 1996). Expanding this definition, TIES has developed seven basic principles of ecotourism which is seen to be in line with the very principles underlying the ecovillage concept; these seven basic principles are as follows: Ecotourism seeks to:

- i. Avoid negative impacts that can damage or destroy the integrity or characters of the natural or cultural environments being visited.
- ii. Educates the traveller on the importance of conservation.
- iii. Directs revenues to the conservation of natural areas and the management of protected areas.

- iv. Brings economic benefits to local communities and directs revenues to local people living adjacent to protected areas.
- v. Emphasizes the need for planning and sustainable growth of the tourism industry, and seeks to ensure that tourism development does not exceed the social and environmental 'carrying capacity'.
- vi. Retains a high percentage of revenues in the host country by stressing the use of locally- owned facilities and service.
- vii. Increasingly relies on infrastructure that has been developed sensitively in harmony with the environment-minimizing use of fossil fuels, conserving local plants and wildlife, and blending with the natural environment (Epler-Wood, 1996).

A typical and classic example of a successful ecovillage project is the O.U.R Ecovillage, near Shawnigan Lake in British Columbia, Canada which exemplifies a small scale community with minimal ecological impact. It offers sustainable learning and demonstration sites where work is based on perm culture principles and sustainable food production (www.ourecovillage.org).

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual analysis is necessary at this stage to ground the study. The Sustainable Livelihood Framework developed by Department for International Development (1999), was slightly modified/adapted to suite the study. Every geographical area has its background characteristics be it socio-cultural, economic or environmental factors which gives rise to their livelihood assets (asset pentagon), which are grouped as physical, financial, natural, human and socio-cultural capitals which are possessed by rural people (Carney, 1998; Ellis, 2000; Rakodi and Lloyd-Jones, 2002). The level of assets "in stock" determines the degree to which people can improve their well-being either directly or indirectly (Rakodi and Lloyd-Jones, 2002). Bebbington (1999) argues that "a person's assets, such as land, are not merely means with which he makes a living: it also gives meaning to that person's world. Assets are not simply resources that people use in building livelihoods: they are 'tools' that give them capability to be and to act. Assets should not be understood only as things that allow survival, adaptation and poverty alleviation: they are also the basis of agents' power to act and to reproduce, challenge or change the rules that govern the control, use and transformation of resources". In the case of Mognori, they possess natural capital (wildlife, land, rivers), socio-cultural capital (Music, dance, folklore, friends and family), human capital (health/physique/fitness, knowledge and skills) and physical capital (access roads though poor in outlook) as posited similarly by Lister (2004).

Changing climatic patterns (long dry season) and seasonality of the agricultural production makes them vulnerable (Ellis, 2000; Cahn, 2006). However, captioned within the public and private domains (policies, institutions and processes), the Ghana Wildlife Division and SNV (Netherlands Development Organization) have brought in interventions (establishment of the ecovillage project and funds for baseline studies respectively) which is impacting positively on their livelihood activities (farming, fishing, tour guiding, boating to sites, performance of cultural dances and sale of handicraft to enhance the souvenir trade) enabling them to attain their livelihood outcomes of more income, reduced vulnerability and more sustainable use of natural resources (see Figure 1).

Realizing the benefits accruing from tourism activities/visits, the rural community with their natural resources in "concert" with the park management is beginning to incorporate sustainable development into the planning of natural resource management. Thus, the impacts of such sustainable tourism projects are more apparent in a rural setting than an area that is urban biased (Long, Perdue and Allen, 1990).

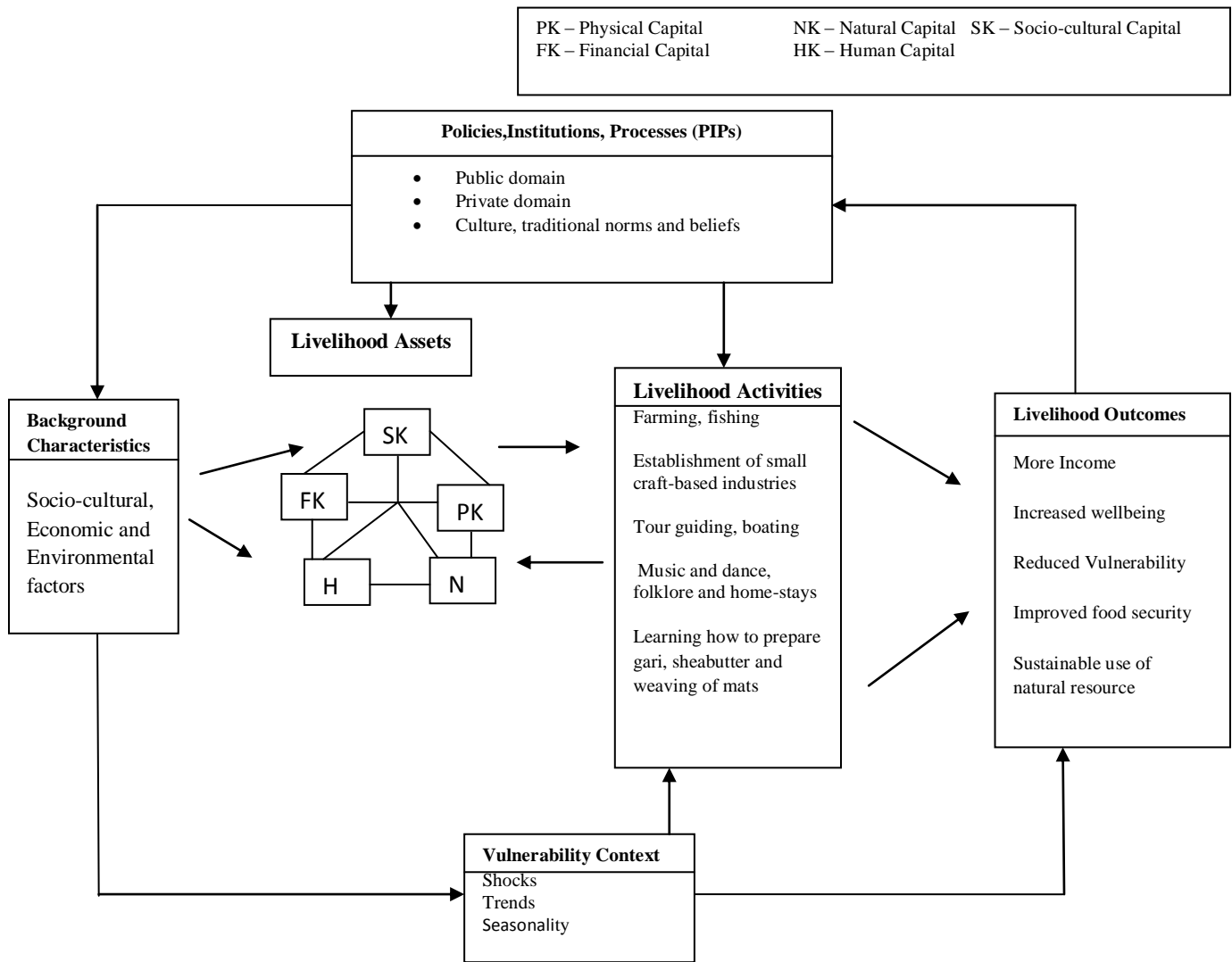


Figure 1: The Sustainable Livelihood Framework

Adapted from Department for International Development (1999)

Study Area and Methodology

Mognori community lies on the south eastern boundary of the Mole National Park and is about 15kilometres from the park headquarters in the West Gonja District (Damongo) in the northern region of the country. The vegetation is mainly the guinea savanna grassland with scattered trees which exhibit deciduous characteristics. According to oral history, their great ancestor, a Moshi hunter who hailed from Burkina Faso settled in Murugu land somewhere around the early 1800’s. He and his descendants later moved and settled on Mognori land to basically farm, fish and assist people travelling to cross the river. The tourism project is owned by the community and operates as a nature and culture based venture under the Community Resource Management Area (CREMA). Mognori has a population size of 393 inhabitants (GSS, PHC, 2000).

Sampling

The study made use of Fisher, et al (1998) formulae for calculating sample size for an area when the population of the locality is less than 10,000.

$$n = \frac{z^2 pq}{d^2}$$

Where:

n = the desired sample size (when the population is less than 10,000)

z = the standard normal deviation, usually set at 1.96 (or more simply 2.0) which corresponds to 95 percent confidence level

p = the proportion in the target population estimated to have particular characteristics

$q = 1.0 - p$ (75% in Mognori are aware of tourism resources. This figure was arrived at through a house to house survey; hence 0.75 and 0.25 will make up 1 as seen below)

d = degree of accuracy desired, usually set at 0.05 or occasionally at 0.02

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 (0.75) (0.25)}{0.05^2}$$

Hence $n = 69$

The Population and Housing Censuslist for households was obtained from the chief, from which selection of household heads was based on the use of the simple random sampling method, basically employing the lottery technique to obtain 33 respondents from the community who are household heads (see Table 1).

Table 1: Number of people sampled and technique employed

<i>Group</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Sampling Technique</i>
Chief and elders	4	Purposive
Homestay operators	6	Purposive
Tour guides	2	Purposive
Tourism committee	5	Purposive
Cultural Troupe	16	Purposive
Canoe Safari Operators	3	Purposive
Household Heads	33	Simple Random
Total	69	

Source: Authors 'construct 2011

The study also made large use of purposive sampling whereby key informants in the tourism development effort within the community were contacted. The snowball method was used to 'track' all 36 respondents whereby any person contacted in that "cohort" willingly took us to the others or simply directed us. The reason for contacting these 33 other "neutral" people (household heads) was to cross check whether their responses corresponded with the other 36 (those specifically into tourism development in the community). Those who had no formal education had their questionnaire translated to them in the local dialect (Gonja) and their responses recorded. The few literates responded to the questionnaire on their own. They had a four week period to respond after which their scripts were retrieved. Data collection was from 1st of October, 2011 to 30th November, 2011.

Results and Discussions

Socio-demographics

A total of 69 respondents were surveyed in Mognori and out of this, majority contacted (68%) were males while the female was 32%. With regard to age groupings, 12% were within the age bracket of 20-30, close to 35% of respondents were within 31-40 age groups whilst age groups 41-50 and 51-60 were 25% and 18% respectively (see Table 2). The aged, which is, those 61 years and older constituted 10% of respondents contacted.

Table 2: Socio-demographic background of respondents (N=69)

Gender	Male 68%	Female 32%			
Age group	20-30 12%	31-40 35%	41-50 25%	51-60 18%	61+ 10%
Educational Attainment	No formal education 52%	Basic education 38%	Second cycle education 6%	Tertiary education 4%	
Religious affiliation	Islam 72%	Traditional religion 20%	Christianity 8%		
Occupation	Traditional authority 6%	Tourism related job 46%	Farmer/household head 48%		

Source: Field Survey, 2011

With regard to educational attainment, 52% of respondents had no formal education while the highest educational attainment (tertiary level) of respondents was 4%. On religious grounds, 72% professed to Islam, 20% were traditional worshippers while 8% were Christians. In terms of employment background of respondents, the chief and his council of elders constituted 6%, farmers who were also household heads were 48% while those into some forms of tourism related jobs constituted 46%. This last group were however quick to add that they were also into farming since the tourism business is not in large scale to warrant full scale withdrawal from their traditional economic activities implying that economic carrying capacity is not exceeded.

Economic Effects (Benefits)

Information gathered from respondents in the community indicated they obtained income from services of tour guides, home stay operators, performance of cultural ecovillage dance troupe, boating on the Mognori River to engage in rural fishing including crocodile and bird watching. Table 3 shows fees charged per activity in the community. It was further revealed that 20% of fees charged by any person engaged in any community related tourism activity went into a community common fund/pool. This money was used to sink a borehole and to help provide some logistics like textbooks and other writing materials for the community's basic school.

Table 3: Commonly engaged eco-cultural activities per fees charged

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Fee charged</i>
*Tour guiding/community walk	GHc5.0
Home stay	GHc5.0
*Cultural dance	GHc30.0
*Boating on the Mognori River	GHc5.0
Learning to prepare gari, shea butter balls, indigenous foods and local drinks "fuura"	GHc5.0 and above
Consulting the fortune teller	Donations

Source: Information gathered from Tourism Committee, November, 2011

*Activities engaged in by guests who do not spend the night in Mognori

Ecotourism according to them has raised income levels of some local residents in Mognori though majority was not able to give an estimate of their income before the inception of the ecovillage project. Others also obtained income from sale of handicraft, foodstuff and fish to visitors. Many were also introduced to bee keeping by the Ghana Wildlife Society from which some farmers earned income from sale of honey to visitors. All respondents agreed ecotourism had improved their livelihood economically and this confirms the assertion of Epler-Wood (2002) that ecotourism must bring economic benefits to local communities and direct revenue to local people living adjacent national parks.

Socio-cultural effects (benefits)

Results depicted in Table 4 shows the perceptions of community members on socio-cultural benefits of host-guest interactions in the community.

Table 4: Perceived Socio-cultural benefits derived from ecotourism by Mognori Community

Group	Increased host-guest interaction		Appreciation of culture by guest		Friendly host-guest interactions		Increased Social cohesion		Tourism has made the community popular	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Chief and Elders	4	-	4	-	3	1	4	-	4	-
Tourism Committee	5	-	5	-	4	1	5	-	5	-
Cultural Troupe	16	-	16	-	14	2	16	-	16	-
Home stay Operators	6	-	6	-	6	-	6	-	6	-
Tour Guides	2	-	2	-	2	-	2	-	2	-
Canoe safari Operators	2	1	3	-	1	2	3	-	3	-
Household Heads	24	09	28	5	23	10	33	-	24	9
Sub-totals	59 (86%)	10 (14%)	64 (93%)	5 (7%)	53 (77%)	16 (23%)	69 (100%)	- (0%)	60 (87%)	09 (13%)
Total	69		69		69		69		69	

Source: Field survey, 2011

The socio-cultural effects of tourism on the community were of interest because the ‘phenomenon’ in the community can be likened to eco-cultural tourism (people-centred). Close to 86% of respondents indicated there is an increase in host-guest interaction due to the fact that Mognori is increasingly becoming popular reminiscent of the number of guests ‘pouring in’ in recent times. Cultural empowerment was another area worth mentioning because guests appreciated the performances of the community’s cultural troupe including recital of tribal history/folklore and story-telling. They further indicated guests who visited Mognori were ever willing to pay to access their cultural troupe display (88% attested to this) and this seems to confirm the assertion that socio-cultural capitals are possessed by rural people which can be used for livelihood enhancement (Carney, 1998; Ellis, 2000; Rakodi and Lloyd- Jones, 2002). Again, majority of respondents (83%) indicated their community has become popular because of the introduction of the ecovillage model with some stating they are aware the name of their community and its tourism related activities is now on the internet and this has made them proud and brought them together in unity (social cohesion) and this seems to exemplify Dawson’s (2006) of idea of ecovillagers placing lots of value on community living.

Negative Socio-cultural effects

With regard to any noticeable negative socio-cultural effects in the community, respondents (100%) stated that there were neither incidences of stealing from guests nor instances of prostitution in the community in the wake of ecotourism development. Close to 93% stated locales do not beg from guests because they were sensitized by the Park Management and officials of SNV that begging could constitute a source of harassment to guests and could scare potential tourists away. On smoking and alcoholism, respondents indicated (87%) that they do see some tourists smoking in the community but the youth do not copy these behaviours, only the few old men who were smoking tobacco before the inception of the project are the ones still continuing the practice and this does not result from foreign influence (see table 5).

Table 5: Likely negative socio-cultural effects in Mognori

Group	Incidence of stealing from guests		Instances of begging by locales		Incidence of smoking/Alcoholism		Change in dressing mode		Incidence of prostitution in the community	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Chief and Elders	-	4	-	4	3	1	-	4	-	4
Tourism committee	-	5	-	5	4	1	-	5	-	5
Cultural Troupe	-	16	-	16	12	4	-	16	-	16
Home stay Operators	-	6	-	6	6	-	-	6	-	6
Tour Guides	-	2	-	2	2	-	-	2	-	2
Canoe safari operators	-	3	-	3	3	-	-	3	-	3
Household Heads	-	33	5	28	30	3	-	26	-	33
Sub-totals	-	69 (100%)	5 (7%)	64 (93%)	60 (87%)	9 (13%)	7 (10%)	62 (90%)	-	69 (100%)
Total	69		69		69		69		69	

Source: Fieldwork, 2011

Resource Conservation Measures in Mognori

Measures identified by the community members on minimizing their impacts on the Park included reduced incidence of hunting, no harvesting of fuel wood and or grasses within the park, no bush burning and farming activities within the confines of the park. This brings to the fore the fact that the community is only re-instilling the regulations of the Park. They were quick to add that the financial benefits obtained from ecotourism encourages them to adhere to these conservation measures and this confirms Murdock (1980) who posited that economic developments in communities can go a long way to alleviate poverty and population growth which are the main causes of natural resource degradation and biodiversity loss. It also further confirms the assertion that poor people often tend to clinch to a more sustainable use of resources when financial benefits begin to flow their way (Department for International Development, 1999) whilst reaffirming Gilman's (1991) definition of ecovillage which iterates that human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world.

Conclusion

Ecotourism generally poses both positive and negative effects to participating communities but with regard to Mognori, so far so good, no noticeable negative impacts were noted per the tenets of this study. Economically, they earned an extra bit of income from ecotourism activities which they claimed was not enough. Most operators in the sector still depend on farming and many of them have to be called from their farms when guests arrive. It can therefore be concluded tourism development therein is not large scale. However, community participation is high from the months of October to April due to less farming activities this time. Culturally they are empowered by the appreciation of their dance performances as all guests who visited the community were interested in witnessing the display. The community is happy that their facility is making them popular and appropriate resource protection options not different from that instituted by Park Management are reaffirmed by the community due to benefits accruing to them.

Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations:

- Mole National Park management should unceasingly appeal to tourists who come to the park to also take the opportunity to visit the Mognoriecovillage. This will ensure the flow of financial benefits to the community.

- The West Gonja District Assembly in conjunction with other development partners should help provide solar powered lamps at vantage points in the community to brighten the community in the night. It will also offer pupils in the community a chance to study to be able to rise up in academia and come back to help in the ecovillage development effort.
- The District Assembly should also avail the services of the unit of Micro and Small Scale Loans Centre (MASLOC) and Livelihood Empowerment against Poverty (LEAP) to the community to enable small craft/weavers access credit and exploit their potentials in the souvenir trade. This will go a long way to diversify the local economy, alleviate poverty and enhance resource sustainability in the area.
- The ecovillage project should be continuously monitored by public and private agencies to guard against any possible negative effects that are likely to arise.
- Efforts must be made to induce public and private sector participation/investment into the transport services to the area while publicizing the project on the national front to attract domestic tourism which is also an important segment of the market.

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