

# Ecotourism as a Means of Community Development: The case of the indigenous populations of the Greater Caribbean

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## Abstract

■ There are many types of tourism on offer in the world market, with tourism types being as diverse as the kind of experience that the visitor demands. Destinations characteristically engage in tourism models that cater to the needs and wants of the tourist market they attract. However, research and experience have shown that different tourism models affect the local people of a destination in different ways. For example, some models favor greater participation of historically marginalized communities than others. This paper focuses on two tourism models: ecotourism and community-based tourism. It is conceptual in nature and builds on previous academic research and secondary data in addressing the very topical theme of the use of ecotourism as a means of community development. It presents successful case studies of community-based ecotourism, making particular reference to the indigenous populations of the Greater Caribbean to make these connections. There is reason to believe that the lessons derived from these case studies will be of interest and use to other indigenous communities in the Greater Caribbean and similar geographical regions in search of an alternative path of development that conserves natural areas while capitalizing on the opportunity for social welfare development and economic diversification for present as well as future generations.

### *Key Words:*

Ecotourism, community development, poverty alleviation, indigenous peoples, Greater Caribbean

## Resumen

■ El mercado mundial ofrece muchas clases de turismo con tipologías tan diversas como las experiencias demandadas por los turistas. Los destinos se especializan en modelos turísticos que satisfacen las necesidades y deseos del mercado turístico al cual atraen. Sin embargo, la investigación y la experiencia han demostrado que los diferentes modelos turísticos afectan de diferentes maneras a la población local de los destinos. Por ejemplo, algunos modelos favorecen la participación de comunidades históricamente marginadas más que otros. Este artículo se centra en dos modelos turísticos: el ecoturismo y el turismo basado en la comunidad. De naturaleza conceptual, se construye sobre investigaciones académicas previas e información secundaria aplicando el tópico del uso del ecoturismo como medio de desarrollo comunitario. Presenta exitosos estudios de casos de ecoturismo basados en la comunidad, haciendo una referencia especial a las poblaciones indígenas del Gran Caribe para establecer dichas conexiones. Hay razones para creer que las lecciones derivadas de estos estudios del caso serán de interés y de uso para otras comunidades indígenas en el Gran Caribe y similares regiones geográficas en búsqueda de una vía alternativa de desarrollo que conserve las áreas naturales al mismo tiempo que capitalice la oportunidad para el desarrollo del bienestar social y la diversificación económica, tanto para las presentes generaciones como para las futuras.

### *Palabras clave:*

Ecoturismo, desarrollo comunitario, reducción de la pobreza, población indígena, el Gran Caribe

## Introduction

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■ There are many types of tourism on offer in the world market, with tourism types being as diverse as the kind

of experience that the visitor demands. Destinations characteristically engage in tourism models that cater to

the needs and wants of the tourist market they attract. However, research and experience have shown that different tourism models affect the local people of a destination in different ways. For example, some models favour greater participation of historically marginalised communities than others (Ashley, 2006).

Alternative forms of tourism that seek to enhance the benefits of tourism while reducing its disbenefits are seen as the best way forward in this regard. Unlike conventional mass tourism, alternative forms of tourism such as ecotourism are characteristically supplied through small and medium operators and are most likely to bring direct revenue and benefits to rural communities, indigenous communities and the poor. Moreover, the upsurge in interest in the equity dimension of sustainable development within recent years has led to con-

siderable attention being paid to the community as a critical element in achieving sustainable development goals (Hall, 2007:112).

Thus, in the face of burgeoning poverty levels, two tourism models - the ecotourism and community-based tourism models - have gained widespread attention in the Greater Caribbean primarily because of their potential to bring meaningful benefits to historically marginalised communities. The prospect of merging these two models into what is known as community-based ecotourism presents a valuable opportunity for several communities in search of an alternative path of development that conserves natural areas while capitalising on the opportunity for social welfare development and economic diversification for present as well as future generations.

## **The International and Greater Caribbean tourism landscape**

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■ Tourism has assumed prominence as the largest business sector in the world economy; the world's leading source of export earnings; and among the world's largest employers. According to the World Tourism Organisation (WTO), the number of international tourist arrivals has experienced an average growth rate of 6.5% per annum between 1950 and 2006. In 2006, there were 846 million international tourist arrivals with international tourism receipts totalling US\$ 733 billion, or US\$ 2 billion a day; tourism accounted for approximately 35% of the world's export of services and over 70% in Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Moreover, international tourist arrivals are forecasted to reach 1.6 billion by the year 2020 (WTO, 2007).

Many governments have realised and have even lauded,

the potential of tourism as an economic development tool to the extent that tourism continues to be adopted as a priority development option for many struggling economies searching for viable alternatives (Cattarinich, 2001:1). The Greater Caribbean circumstance is a case in point. The development of tourism –especially international tourism– has been identified as a priority by many governments, with governments generally being attracted to tourism on the strength of its potential to create jobs, provide much needed foreign exchange, and opportunities for economic diversification. In 2007 for example, the Caribbean received 19.3 million tourists or 20% of world arrivals. The travel and tourism industry accounted for 16.4% of the region's GDP; and provided 2.6 Million jobs which equals 15.5% of total employment (UNWTO 2008).

## **Tourism and poverty alleviation: prospect and peril**

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■ Notwithstanding the existence of extreme poverty in many developing countries around the globe, it is not uncommon that these countries have also experienced substantial growth in international tourist arrivals and receipts (Cattarinich, 2001:1). For example, in 2001, tourism was a significant sector in eleven of the twelve countries in the world which were home to 80% of the world's poor (Cattarinich, 2001:1). Moreover, "developing countries received US\$177 billion in tourism receipts in 2004, with tourism being the primary source of foreign exchange earnings in 46 of the 49 poorest nations that the UN describes as the "Least Developed Countries" (eTurboNews, 2005a in Hall, 2007: 114). This has led some observers like the World Tourism Organisation and the World Travel and Tourism Council to regard the tourism industry as playing a vital role in poverty alleviation on the merit of its labour intensive

nature and its inclusion of historically marginalised groups such as women, the informal sector, rural communities and the poor, who have few other employment generating opportunities.

Others have adopted a more tempered outlook on the issue, suggesting instead that major challenges exist in unlocking the potential of tourism to contribute meaningfully to the poverty alleviation agenda. Research and experience has shown that some tourism models favour greater participation of local communities and people than others (Ashley, 2006). Several valid points have been put forward in this regard. It is widely accepted, for example, that tourism is inherently a commercial activity that is governed by the laws of supply and demand. As such, the possibility of the creation, and it seems, the perpetuation of economic and social inequities within

this tremendous sector exists. In many developing countries around the world, it has been observed that there has traditionally been unequal social benefit distribution within the sector. Of key concern is the fact that the consumption of tourism remains the domain of the wealthy; and so too has its production (Hall, 2007:116). This is because the traditional structure and organisation of international tourism trade has seen a pattern of ownership which favours inputs and participation from the for-

mal (and often times foreign owned) sector such as international airline operators, foreign-owned hotels, large scale external travel distributors, and ancillary tourism businesses owned by a small cluster of local elites. To date, there are several cases in which local, economically marginalised communities (whether poor, indigenous, rural or a mix of all these) that account for most of the socially disadvantaged of this world, have found it difficult to participate meaningfully in such a system.

## Problem definition

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### Dependency on Tourism

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■ It has been observed that “for poor countries and small island states, tourism is the leading export - often the only sustainable growth sector of their economies and a catalyst for many related sectors” (eTurboNews, 2005a in Hall, 2007:114). The Greater Caribbean region’s tourism statistics reflect a profound dependency on the industry: tourism is the single largest earner of foreign

exchange in 16 of 28 countries in the wider Caribbean; directly or indirectly employs one in four people native to the Caribbean; and generates income for the region in excess of US\$ 2 billion per year. It accounts for approximately one-third of the region’s GDP, reflecting nearly 30% of all jobs and more than 75% of all the investment in the Caribbean (Griffin, 2007).

### Chronic Poverty among some Social Groups

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■ However, like many other parts of the world, the growth in tourism numbers has not necessarily translated into economic, social or environmental benefits for many Greater Caribbean territories. Although many examples of shortcomings exist in each of these categories, one area of disparity stands out for the purpose of our discussion – the fact that in tandem with the growth of tourism in the Greater Caribbean has been the persistence of poverty in the region. According to Bourne (2005), surveys of living conditions conducted in many Caribbean countries between 1996 and 2002 revealed that several countries were positioned at various points along the poverty incidence spectrum. Haiti and Suriname for example, were at the high end of the spectrum of poverty incidence with an estimated 65% and 63% respectively of their populations below the poverty line; Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, St. Kitts and Nevis and St. Vincent and the Grenadines had poverty incidences of 30%-40%; while Jamaica, St. Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago and the Turks and Caicos Islands were between 20% and 29% (Bourne, 2005).

Indigenous people and ethnic minorities are particularly at risk as among some of the poorest groups in the world. Duffy (2002) for example uses the case study of the Mayan communities in Belize to make this connec-

tion. She argues that “Mayan communities have the highest rates of infant mortality, illiteracy, poverty and malnutrition in Belize... Most Mayan people experience social, political and economic marginalization, and even exclusion” (Duffy, 2002:113). Torres (1997) concurs in her reference to the Mayan Indians who inhabit the peripheral *Zona Maya* of Quintana Roo, Mexico as ‘the poorest of the poor’. Eight years later in 2005, little improvement has been made. Torres et al. (2005) relates:

“Most of Quintana Roo’s inhabitants are still Mayan Indians. The *Zona Maya* is the most marginalised and impoverished region in Quintana Roo, with over 75% of its inhabitants speaking Maya. The Mayas of this peripheral region are the ‘poorest of the poor’”.

Torres, 1997

Torres et al. (2005: 276) describes “the general lack of economic opportunities in Mayan villages” and in doing so presents alarming socio-economic statistics: adults with education above primary school account for only 27% of the local population; illiteracy is at 13%; while infrastructure is severely lacking. There is only one hotel in Felipe Carillo Puerto and it does not qualify to receive a single star (Torres et al., 2005: 275).

### Failure of Some Tourism Models to Bring Grassroots Benefits

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■ Geographically and politically speaking, the Greater Caribbean is highly diverse and complex. Within this region there are several opportunities for the natural and

cultural to be displayed and for the tourism industry to provide access to these benefits of such activity. Yet, the Caribbean tourism landscape is one of successes and

failures in tourism with many models of tourism failing to live up to their promises of equitable tourism benefit to all sectors and communities within host societies. In general, as Zhao et al. (2007) note: “policymakers usually pay considerable attention to the expansion of the tourism sector, but much less to the real issue - to what extent tourism development in practice contributes to poverty alleviation” (Zhao et al., 2007: 120).

Torres et al. (2005) uses the example of (state or master) Planned Tourism Development (PTD) to point to the fact that PTD has “failed to stimulate significant backward linkages to other economic sectors, notably agriculture and small scale industry. PTD has not significantly improved, appreciably, the socioeconomic conditions for the majority of Quintana Roo’s original rural Mayan inhabitants” (Torres et al., 2005: 260). Her study of Cancun, Mexico’s first PTD resort and its impact on the different social groups and regions within Quintana Roo

concluded that “while the resort has generated profit for the Government, transnational corporations and entrepreneurial elites, it has failed to improve conditions for the region’s most marginalized populations” (Torres et al., 2005: 260). This case study reflects what others have already noted, namely that “the disadvantaged socioeconomic status of the poor, characterized by lack of human and financial capital, greatly constraints their abilities to identify and pursue well-rewarding employment opportunities in the tourism sector” (Liu & Wall, 2006 in Zhao et al., 2007: 127-128). Thus, “it is not uncommon that in many destinations of developing countries, nearly all or most well-remunerated management positions are occupied by foreign professionals; in addition, local small enterprises and vendors could be easily squashed out of the market by multinationals and other better-standing competitors” (Brohman, 1996; Brown, 1998 in Zhao et al., 2007: 128).

### Lack of Community Involvement in Tourism Development

■ One way to overcome this general deficiency is the meaningful involvement of local people and communities. In fact, “since the 1970’s, ‘community participation’ in tourism has become an umbrella term or a supposedly new genre of tourism development intervention” (Tosun, 2001). “Community participation is often suggested as an essential ingredient in improving the quality of tourism’s contribution to national development” (Novelli et al., 2007: 449). “Local participation is believed to be able to create larger and balanced economic opportunities for the local poor, increase local tolerance and positive attitudes to tourism development, and facilitate the implementation of the principles of sustainable tourism” (Tosun, 2005 in Zhao et al., 2007: 126).

Tosun’s typology of community participation is based on three levels of community participation going from the lower ‘coercive participation’ through the middle ‘induced participation’ to the higher ‘spontaneous par-

ticipation’ which he defines as ‘an ideal mode of community participation’ (Novelli et al., 2007: 448-449). “Full managerial responsibility and authority to the host community is believed to be a form most beneficial to locals in comparison to induced participation and coercive participation” (Tosun, 1999 in Zhao et al., 2007: 128). However, the concept of community participation “is tricky, not easy either to define or to accomplish” (Tosun, 2001: 616). For instance, it has been observed that real mass public participation actually seldom happens to the poor (Zhao et al., 2007) as “increased participation of indigenous communities actually means involving low-income groups and people in rural and urban areas, who are not normally involved in the process of government” (Novelli et al., 2007: 449). Thus, in developing countries it is not uncommon that “involvement is more likely located on the lower rungs of the ladder” (Novelli et al., 2007: 449).

### Taking an ‘Alternative’ Approach

■ The upsurge in interest in the equity dimension of sustainable development within recent years has led to considerable attention being paid to the community as a critical element in achieving sustainable development goals (Hall, 2007:112). Moreover, many have called for a tourism-based approach to sustainable development that demands an examination of the extent to which tourism development contributes to poverty alleviation not just in theory, but more importantly, in practice. Van der Duim et al. (2005) cite Milne and Ateljevic (2001: 374) who argue that ‘community-based’ approaches are central to many tourism development plans around the world and there is a growing realization that localized

cooperation, trust and networking are essential ingredients in providing the right mix for successful tourism development outcomes (Van der Duim et al., 2005: 287). In addition, they point to Mowforth and Munt (2003) who are also hopeful of communities being able to take control over the development of tourism (Van der Duim et al., 2005: 287).

Alternative forms of tourism that seek to enhance the benefits of tourism while reducing its disbenefits are seen as the best way forward in this regard. Unlike conventional mass tourism, alternative forms of tourism are characteristically supplied through small and medium

operators and are most likely to bring direct revenue and benefits to rural communities, indigenous communities and the poor. Ecotourism and community-based tourism

models represent alternative forms of tourism that fit this mold in many ways.

## Ecotourism

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■ The Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as “purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the culture and the natural history of the environment; taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem; producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of the natural resources beneficial to the local people” (Epler Wood et al., 1991: 75). According to Ross et al., (1999), the multiple goals associated with ecotourism are reflected in this definition. Thus, the fundamental functions of ecotourism are protection of natural areas, production of revenue, education and local participation and capacity building” (Ross et al., 1999: 4).

Participants to the World Ecotourism Summit in 2002 recognised that “ecotourism embraces the principles of sustainable tourism, concerning the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism” (Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism, 2002:1). Indeed, in many parts of the world, “ecotourism has provided a leadership role in introducing sustainability practices to the tourism sector” (Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism, 2002:2).

Similarly, academics and practitioners alike have commented on the value of ecotourism as an ‘alternative’ approach to conventional tourism development models (Cater, 1994, Norris et al., 1998; Epler Wood, 2001). Unlike mainstream models, the ecotourism model offers the prospect of:

- Tangible economic, infrastructural and social welfare benefits;
- The generation of both formal and informal employment and income through small-scale, locally owned and managed initiatives that cover a broad spectrum of tourism related activities including (but not limited to) the operation of small hotels and guest houses, restaurants, ground transportation, souvenir holdings, guiding and interpretive programmes;

- The protection or conservation of natural areas by creating sources of employment and income that depend upon keeping the natural and, by extension, the cultural patrimony intact;
- Grassroots participation through the use of nature-based attractions, amenities and activities closest to the rural poor; and
- Community education and empowerment through capacity building that strengthens the ability of communities to fully participate in the industry by engaging in alternative income generating activities that generate revenues both for conservation of the community’s natural assets and the upliftment of the community’s quality of life.

The prospect for using ecotourism as a means of community development is brighter now than ever before. One reason for this is the fact that ecotourism is reported to be one of the most rapidly increasing segments of the tourism industry. Though the figures on ecotourism are difficult to compile, the WTO estimates that global spending on ecotourism is increasing steadily by 20% per year, approximately five times the growth rate of the tourism industry as a whole (Garraway, 2007). The increased demand for ecotourism can be attributed in part to the wave of global environmental consciousness. Important too, is the desire of the tourist to take experiential, multi-activity holidays engaged in the natural, archaeological, historical or cultural heritage of a destination. The statistics support this trend. They indicate that during the last ten years, there has been a shift in preferences for nature-based destinations in developing countries over the traditional European destinations. The growth in international market demand for ecotourism experiences, which depend on natural and cultural resources, makes it possible to include communities in the Caribbean with access to these resources directly in tourism development (CANARI, 1999).

## The Community-Based Approach

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■ The increased demand for ecotourism has coincided with yet another trend - that of communities having the desire to take the lead in the planning, development and operation of tourism development. For example, community based tourism (CBT) is being identified as a tool for development in Namibia (Novelli et al., 2007) while in some territories, like Kenya, community-based enterprises are preferred (Manyara et al., 2007).

And this is perhaps for the best. As we have noted, there is a relatively short history of the community-based, participatory approach to tourism development in the developing world (Novelli et al., 2007; Zhao et al., 2007). The reality is that, by and large, local, economically marginalised communities have remained outside of the circle of the tourism economy, and that tourism means very little or nothing to them (Zhao et al., 2007: 126). Indeed, for tourism development to be sustainable,

local people at the grassroots level must be involved in all decision-making on how the tourism product is developed, participating in the development of the product as well as the ongoing management of tourism activities. Zhao et al., (2007) speak of public participation that makes the voice of the poor heard in full consideration as different from participation by employment which is mainly driven by individual endeavors to reap economic benefits tourism brings and thus has more direct impacts on the life of poor households

(Zhao et al., 2007). In line with this, Novelli et al. (2007) explain that “community participation in tourism can take a number of different forms in terms of types of enterprises (i.e. accommodation, tour guiding, consumptive and non-consumptive safaris, craft, etc), level of involvement (possibly from mere employment to ownership or joint-venture operation with private investors) and nature of participation (individual – i.e. small B&B or collective - i.e. community guiding at heritage sites)” (Novelli et al., 2007: 452).

## Community-based Ecotourism and Poverty Alleviation in the Greater Caribbean context

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■ The involvement of communities in ecotourism development has led to a convergence between ecotourism and community-based tourism (CBT) approaches. Community-based ecotourism (CBET or CBE) is a concept that implies more explicit involvement of local communities and community empowerment in the development of ecotourism (Scheyvens, 2002 in Palmer, 2006). Community-based ecotourism is tourism that reflects ecotourism objectives, is community-based and involves local people. It seeks to achieve a balance between commercial success, the preservation of the cultural patrimony, and the conservation of the natural environment to the benefit of local and indigenous communities.

According to Epler Wood (2001), “community-based ecotourism (CBE) is a growing phenomenon throughout the world. The CBE concept implies that the community has substantial control and involvement in the ecotourism project and that the majority of benefits remain in the community” (Epler Wood, 2001:12). She makes reference to Wesche and Drumm (1999) who have identified three main types of CBE enterprises. “The purest model suggests that the community owns and manages the enterprise. All community members are employed by the project using a rotation system, and profits are allocated to community projects. The second type of CBE enterprise involves family or group initiatives in communities. This based upon voluntary participation. The third type of CBE is a joint venture between a com-

munity or family and an outside business partner” (Epler Wood, 2001: 12).

In the face of burgeoning poverty levels, the ecotourism and community-based tourism models of tourism have gained widespread attention in the Greater Caribbean, primarily because of their potential to bring meaningful benefits to local, economically marginalised communities. The prospect of merging these two models into community-based ecotourism presents an opportunity for several communities of the Greater Caribbean. Epler Wood (2001) noted that at that time, ecotourism had been “chosen by thousands of communities in the region as the preferred development alternative”. In fact at that time, there was a large demand especially in Latin American for assistance to communities seeking to develop local ecotourism products (Epler Wood, 2001: 12).

Today, many positive examples of community-based ecotourism already exist. Amongst them, Maroon communities in the Misty Blue and John Crow Mountains of Jamaica; Mayan communities of Punta Allen and Xcalak in Quintana Roo, Mexico; and the Toledo district of Southern Belize. These communities share a common experience in using ecotourism as a strategy for community development, one that not only satisfies the tourists’ desire for adventure and comfort, but also satisfies the basic socio-economic needs of the community while conserving the natural assets upon which these communities and the industry depends.

## Maroon communities in the Misty Blue and John Crow Mountains of Jamaica

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■ A positive example of community-based ecotourism can be found in The Youth Poverty Alleviation through Tourism and Heritage (Youth PATH) project - a UNESCO supported initiative that was started in 2000 and is nearing its completion. Youth PATH is a program designed to empower young people from economically marginalized communities through tourism. Youth PATH provided participants with opportunities to establish tourism businesses to improve their livelihoods while preserving

their natural and cultural heritage.

UNESCO’s work with the indigenous Maroon community of the Misty Blue and John Crow Mountains that come from the rural St. Andrew communities of Irish Town, Middleton, Charlestown and Red Light is of particular interest. The participants were trained in tour guiding, crafts, bird monitoring, macro invertebrae sampling, plant inventory, in the use of plants for food, craft

and medicinal purposes, in the use of plants and recycled materials in the production of quality items for sale at the

Holy Well Gift Shop, and in the development of tourism product skills for the promotion of the National Park.

## **Mayan communities of Punta Allen and Xcalak in Quintana Roo, Mexico**

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■ A study conducted in the three Mayan communities of San Juan, Punta Allen and Xcalak all located in the state of Quintana Roo, Mexico in December 1998 produced a good example of the benefits of community-based ecotourism. The results also gives insight on exactly how some indigenous communities feel about community-based tourism.

Carballo-Sandoval (1999) relates: "In December 1997 in the village of San Juan, as a result of the hard work of a local NGO and the villagers, an ecotourism-cultural project was launched entitled "San Juan - Living Culture" (San Juan - Cultura Viva). This involved the participation of around 70 local villagers and portrayed the traditions and aspects of Maya culture. Forty persons can be accommodated in the jungle in order to experience this event. Each tourist is charged \$35 US dollars per play, including a meal. At the end, the financial benefits are equally shared between the participants.

Although only 140 tourists attended this play between December 1997 and December 1998, the general consensus is positive. The participants are satisfied with this cultural project. All were in agreement concerning the economic, social and cultural benefits that it brings for

the community in general. The main economic benefits arise from the opportunity for women to prepare food for the tourists, and thus obtain some income. They also have the opportunity to sell their home-made crafts to tourists. The main social benefit voiced was of promoting a strong feeling of unity amongst the villagers, and the main cultural benefit being that through these presentations Mayan traditions can be conserved for generations to come. Of special note is the fact that Mayan children and young people can also admire, take a pride in, practice and follow their traditions (Carballo-Sandoval, 1999: 12-13)."

Carballo-Sandoval (1999) emphasises that a consistent finding of his study has been that "the inhabitants of all three villages recognise that ecotourism is good for the community because of the economic advantages it brings... The majority of respondents (89.2% in Punta Alien and 80% in Xcalak), had noticed positive changes in the community as a result of tourists visiting the area, and 71.4% in Punta Allen and 100% in Xcalak, felt that ecotourism activity was the best option for the development of the community compared with other economic activities" (Carballo-Sandoval, 1999: 22).

## **The work of the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE) amongst the Mayan communities of the Toledo district of Southern Belize**

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■ Some observers (Timothy et al., 1999; Duffy, 2002) consider the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE), a grassroots initiative to empower the Mayan communities in the Toledo District of Belize to sustainably manage and use the district's natural resources, to be a notable case worthy of emulation based on the strength of its equitable distribution of tourism benefits as well as the project's resilience over the years. TIDE, a community based umbrella organisation, was initiated by local, indigenous residents in 1997 and still continues to be managed and controlled at the grassroots level.

It is good to note that TIDE has won an International Eco-tourism Society award for sustainable eco-tourism development (Duffy, 2002: 107). Regardless, such has been the success of this initiative that in making reference to this example, Timothy et al., (1999: 226) concluded that "sustainable tourism initiatives in developing countries can be conceptualised and operationalised at a very small scale, improve the lives of residents, provide enjoyment for tourists, and protect the natural and cultural environments". Although conceding that the pro-

gramme satisfied the criteria of success, at the time of writing the authors were hesitant to judge whether or not the project was sustainable.

Duffy (2002:106-125) aptly describes the Toledo, Belize case study and the work of TIDE. She speaks of the geographical remoteness of parts of the Toledo District, its relative lack of development, its reliance on subsistence agriculture and the small scale of its revenue-generating ventures. Native to this district are Mayan communities that live mainly in the Southern districts of Belize, and constitutes most of the population in Toledo District. Fortunately, "the Tourism Strategy for Belize identified the development of community-based initiatives and micro enterprises as part of the key to a successful ecotourism industry...In particular, the Toledo District was highlighted as a possible eco-cultural zone to attract international visitors, using a Mayan heritage trail as a marketing tool...As a result, Toledo markets itself as fly-fishing, kayaking, trekking and cultural tour destination" (Duffy, 2002: 106).

"In eco-tourism terms, Toledo is particularly known for

its Mayan village accommodation, where ecotourists are encouraged to spend time in a Mayan village as part of cultural tour of indigenous peoples” (Duffy, 2002: 107). TIDE Tours, a subsidiary of TIDE, was established in 1999 to promote ecotourism in the Toledo District. Its primary objectives are to provide an alternative and sustainable means of livelihood for area residents, to help reduce poverty in the Toledo District by introducing more profitable economic opportunities, and to generate funding for TIDE's conservation work. TIDE Tours takes the lead in providing training to local residents to enable their participation in the ecotourism industry. One of its most successful programs has been tour guide training and certification courses. As the result of this project, TIDE Tours has assisted a number of former fishermen to move into more sustainable and more economically profitable work as fly-fishing and wildlife guides. TIDE estimates that fly-fishing can earn a good tour guide US \$200 per day, an enormous contrast to the US \$25 per day for commercial fishing. TIDE approaches local hunters to become wildlife tour guides, since they know how to find pacas and jaguars which ecotourists are eager to pay to see, in the rainforests and mangroves” (Duffy, 2002: 107).

TIDE Tours also serves as an in-bound tour operator service, providing package tours of the Toledo District. It contracts with individual tour guides and small-scale tourism businesses to provide the necessary services, carefully ensuring that it works with as many individuals as possible on a rotating and equal basis. It owns kayaks, snorkeling gear and other sports equipment that it provides to local tour guides to assist in operating their tours. As part of its work, TIDE Tours also undertakes marketing efforts to promote the Toledo District, actively working to expand the tourism industry in the area.

These examples illustrate the potential of community-based ecotourism. The process of planning, developing and operating community-based ecotourism programmes is not without its challenges and problems and some valuable lessons have been and are yet to be learnt. However, cases like these speak to the promise of the community-based ecotourism model, a model that if carefully implemented and managed, presents a valuable opportunity for community empowerment and poverty alleviation.

## Limitations

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■ Community-based ecotourism can be considered as a viable option towards sustainable tourism development, but there are important qualifications. Ross et al., (1999) examine the all too common gap that exists between ecotourism theory as revealed in the literature and ecotourism practice as indicated by its onsite application while Epler Wood (2001) notes that the mislabeling of ecotourism by businesses and governments seeking to cash in on its perceived market allure as a very thorny problem. Where local communities are concerned, Novelli et al., (2007) make reference to Tosun (2005) regarding the “short history of the participatory tourism development approach in the developing world” while case studies have been presented that provide evidence

of the struggle for local control in ecotourism development (Palmer, 2006).

Moreover, tourism as an economic activity may not necessarily be desirable or feasible for every destination or even for every community within a particular destination. Nor as Zhao et al. (2007) argue, should tourism or its models/forms be viewed as a panacea for such long-standing and complex socio-economic problems as poverty. Tourism is one of perhaps many other viable approaches to poverty alleviation. As such, it should be recognised for its own merits as a *tool* and used in tandem with other sustainable income generating activities.

## Conclusions

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■ Since the 1990s, attention has shifted towards alternative forms of tourism that characteristically generate net benefits for the poor. Research and experience on the issue has shown that some tourism models favour greater participation of historically marginalised communities than others (Ashley, 2006). Although tourism is not going to be the sole savior of any community, the significant contribution that tourism presently makes and can make to Greater Caribbean communities in the future ought to be recognised.

In the Greater Caribbean, tourism is a major industry with considerable potential for further development, al-

though there are geographical and socio-economic disparities in the extent of development. With new non-traditional markets such as ecotourism emerging and growing, opportunities exist for participation and the generation of employment and income opportunities at the community level, especially near a natural resource (CANARI, 1999). It is therefore not difficult to understand why many believe that community-based ecotourism is the type of tourism that presents some of the best opportunities, when compared to other sectors, for the direct and long term economic impacts on local, economically marginalised communities, so that these become the beneficiaries and not the victims of tourism development (Garra-

way, 2007). It is hoped that communities plagued by poverty and economic marginalisation within the Greater

Caribbean will seriously consider community-based ecotourism as a viable option towards sustainable development.

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## Biographical note

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