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THE OLIVE CURRENCY: A COMPARATIVE ACCOUNT OF COMMUNITY BASED ECOTOURISM VENTURES IN WESTERN INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

One of the fastest growing divisions of the tourism industry (Tisdell, 2003), ecotourism is touted for demonstrating both conservation and economic benefits. The main objectives of ecotourism are ostensibly to provide financial aid for conservation of natural areas and ensuring employment and economic profits for those living in the area. This is expected, in turn, to result in the involvement of local communities in conservation and management activities (Garrod, 2003). Consequently, local involvement could ensure the sustainability and longevity of such initiatives. However, very few of these initiatives have had great success (Sakata & Prideaux, 2013).

Several countries have sea turtle ecotourism initiatives, including those at Heron Island (Tisdell & Wilson, 2001a) and Mon Repos (Tisdell & Wilson, 2001b) in Australia, Rekawa in Sri Lanka (Tisdell & Wilson, 2005), Tortuguero in Costa Rica (Jacobson & Lopez, 1994) and Bahía in Brazil (Marcovaldi & Marcovaldi, 1999). While initiatives at Tortuguero, Rekawa and Bahía are managed by local communities, Mon Repos is managed by the Department of National Parks, Sports and Racing of Australia. Similarly in India, a few community run ecotourism ventures were started in Maharashtra (in collaboration with a local NGO and forest department), while Goa and Karnataka states' initiatives were supported by the local forest department.

Historically, ecotourism in India has mainly focussed on safaris in pursuit of tigers, leopards or elephants. However, in the last decade, there has been a rise in sea turtle ecotourism ventures on the Indian west coast, namely in the states of Maharashtra and Goa. In Maharashtra, in order to involve the local communities in conservation activities, the *kasav mahotsav* or turtle festival was initiated in 2006 by a local NGO called Sahyadri Nisarga Mitra (SNM). At the same time, there were several attempts in Goa by local villagers, shack owners and resorts to introduce sea turtle based tourism programmes. While the Maharashtra venture involved community-run hatchling release, the Goa efforts were relatively unplanned viewings of hatchling emergence and seaward crawl for tourists.

This paper provides an account of attempts at turtle based ecotourism at these locations in Western India; each initiated using different approaches depending on stakeholders' roles. It examines the factors that determined the success or failure of these initiatives and explores current and future challenges for these initiatives.

METHODS

The study was conducted on the west coast of India, in the states of Maharashtra and Goa which have a 720 and 160km long coastline respectively. Olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*) turtles are the only species that regularly nest on this section of the coast (Giri & Chaturvedi, 2006), with a few rare reports of green turtles (Gole, 1997) and hawksbills. The western coast of India has lower density nesting than the east coast, with Velas beach (3km), Maharashtra, receiving a maximum of around 30-80 nests/year.

We used qualitative, semi-structured interviews to survey a cross-section of stakeholders i.e. the founding NGO, tour operators, home-stay owners and experts. The key informants were the members of the founding NGO and experts who provided detailed backgrounds to the ecotourism ventures along with potential threats to the continuity of these programmes. Inputs from villagers and tour operators were crucial in understanding the management and composition of such ventures. They also reported their views on the success or failures of these initiatives and ways to improve them. Before each interview, potential participants were given information about the project and its objectives and permission to

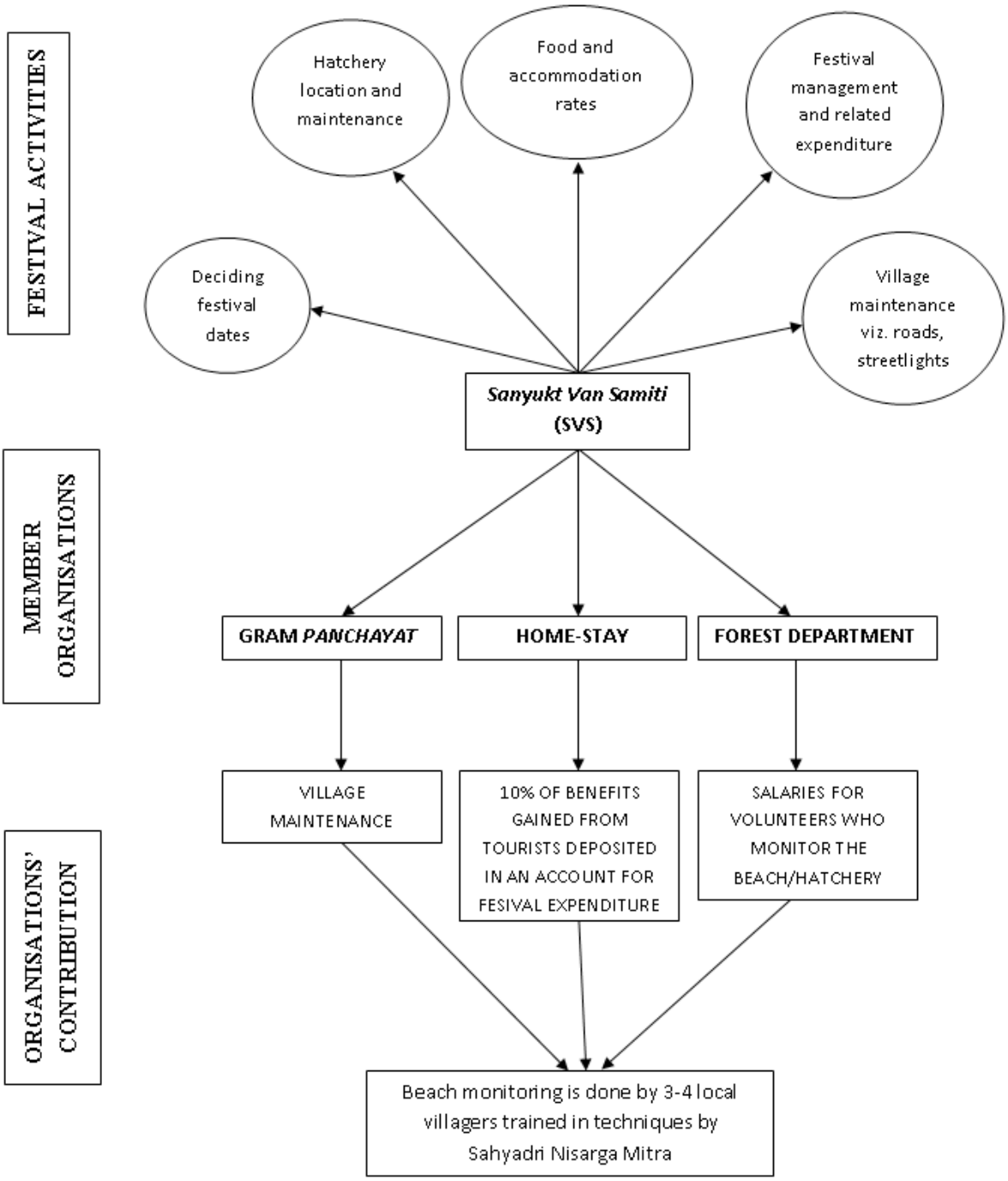

Figure 1. Contributions of stakeholders in the festival organisation.

record and use interviewees' responses was acquired.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stakeholders

The stakeholders involved in ecotourism in the two states varied depending on the socio-economic conditions, willingness to participate and resource availability. The participating groups mainly comprised of local villagers, Government departments and conservation NGOs.

In Maharashtra, consumption of turtle eggs was rampant

prior to the involvement of SNM (Darge pers. comm., 2015). After SNM's conservation efforts in the area, a ban was imposed on this consumption. To guarantee its proper enforcement, the local villagers of Velas were asked to join the monitoring and conservation programme and eventually, this was converted into a community run programme. Eventually, a turtle festival was initiated by SNM, which was over a period of time handed over completely to the local villagers and Forest Department (FD). The village governing council or *Gram Panchayat*, villagers and FD together formed a committee called the *Sanyukt Van Samiti* (SVS) to ensure proper management of the festival (Figure 1).

In Goa, there were several attempts to initiate sea turtle conservation and tourism at different locations. In Morjim, north Goa, conservation efforts were initiated by a local retired army officer, Captain Fernandes who involved local communities such as fishermen and beach shack (wooden huts that serve as restaurants and places for tourists to lounge on the beach) owners (Shanker & Kutty, 2005). This evolved into a sea turtle ecotourism project to involve youth as guides who were in charge of protecting the nests *in situ*. Shack owners were encouraged to join the initiative because it attracted more tourists to their business. In other locations like Agonda, the Forest Department protected sea turtle nests by erecting fences around them, with the shack owners catering to tourists.

Currently, 18km south of Morjim, on a beach called Mandrem, a resort called *Elsewhere* and its staff are involved in turtle ecotourism (http://www.aseascape.com/story.html). However, this is not open to all and is restricted only to the guests of the resort. Eventually, except for the Mandrem resort, most other ecotourism attempts failed to develop into substantial projects but have continued their conservation activities.

Tourism

The category of tourist has played a crucial role in determining the fate of ecotourism at each of these sites. The hatchling festival in Velas mostly receives tourists from cities in Maharashtra such as Mumbai, Pune and Kolhapur with few from other Indian cities such as Delhi and Kolkata. On an average, Velas receives only around 30 foreign tourists per year for tourism or community development activities. As the festival is advertised mostly in local newspapers, it mainly reaches out to local tour operators and people in Maharashtra.

As the popularity of the festival has increased, the number of tour operators offering Velas trip packages increased with most companies providing a two-day stay deal giving the tourists multiple opportunities to attend the hatchling release. During the day, the tourists also use the opportunity to visit other neighbouring tourist attractions and beaches like Bankot Fort and Shrivardhan or Harihareshwar beaches.

Goa, a popular global holiday destination, attracts tourists from around the world. The nature of clientele has been very important in determining the success of sea turtle conservation and ecotourism. According to Kulkarni (pers. comm., 2015), some years, interests of the tourist in sea turtles was very low while in other years, tourists would wait patiently to watch nesting or hatchling emergence regardless of the amount of time involved. The presence of tourists interested in sea turtles resulted in local shack owners keeping records of nesting so that they could inform them and in turn, ensure clients for their shack business. This resulted in an interest in turtle conservation and tourism for a brief period.

Successes and failures

The ecotourism ventures in both these regions have had positive and negative influences depending on various factors. The most successful venture has, so far, been the hatchling festival in Velas which has persisted despite a change in the managing organization and a limited market of tourists.

The Velas festival continues as a successful community-run initiative after the local villagers appreciated the monetary benefits from the activity and developed an innate interest in it. Due to transportation constraints, SNM included locals to facilitate daily monitoring since it was not feasible for their members to do so. Velas, being a remote village, is devoid of resorts or hotels and the closest hotel is 30-40km away. To ensure accommodation for tourists visiting the location, home-stays were initiated in local houses. The idea of home-stays was kept simple and required basic food, lodging and sanitation facilities. The rates for these facilities are uniform in all homes and are decided at the beginning of each festival by the SVS committee. Most villagers agreed that having home-stays boosted their household income considerably. With the majority of the population being agriculturists, home-stays provided them an alternate source of income as nesting occurs during the lull in the agricultural season.

Other form of local involvement included sale of local produce such as mango and jackfruit products, sale of coconut water, butter, etc. Formation of self-help groups for women with insufficient space for home-stays assured them an opportunity to earn by helping out in houses that provide accommodation.

In Goa, several lines of conflict arose between local

groups where one supported economic gains and the other conservation, which led to the closure of ecotourism initiatives. The programme slowly began to decline in the 2000s due to lack of support and conflict within the community. Also, a clientele more interested in late night parties had resulted in increased sound and light pollution which deterred sea turtles from nesting at those beaches. The tourism initiative ended but the locals agreed to help the Forest Department in patrolling and protection of the beach (Shanker, 2015). Currently, some local shack owners protect (*in situ*) nests close to their shacks for their patrons to see hatchlings and sometimes even sea turtle nesting (Kulkarni pers. comm., 2015). Without regular monitoring in Goa, nests that are found by chance are protected by erecting a fence around it. In some locations like the resort in Mandrem, tourists are allowed to release hatchlings.

The success in Velas can primarily be credited to the respect that local participants have for Mr. Vishwas (*Bhau*) Katdare, who initiated the sea turtle conservation activities in the region. Their participation in this initiative is credited mostly to the effort put in by Mr. Katdare for the festival in its nascent stage. His explanation to the villagers that it was turtles that attracted tourists and tourists brought benefits to the community led to their active involvement in not only the home-stay initiative but also turtle monitoring and conservation.

SNM also involved one local community member as a manager to handle most of the festival related activities such as monitoring, accounting, regulating tourist influx etc. On the other hand, the lack of community cohesion and an authority figure in the Goa initiatives resulted in the failure of ecotourism.

For monitoring in Velas, a few local individuals have been hired and trained in beach monitoring and hatchery management. Their work mainly involves deciding the hatchery location, construction, nest relocation and hatchling release. Tourists are not allowed to handle the hatchlings and these are released only by the appointed individuals. Stringent rules are in place to avoid any harm to the hatchlings. To ensure continuous funds for the turtle monitoring and festival, 10% of profits made by each home-stay owner are collected and used towards development of the village or other necessities for the festival. The success of the hatchling festival and its benefits has also encouraged the locals to host tourists year round for other eco-friendly initiatives. These include bird-watching, mango picking festival and garden tours to ensure tourist influx after the conclusion of hatchling festival for the year. This enthusiasm in hosting tourists should help ensure the continuity of the hatchling festival for years to come.

The equal and effective participation by all the stakeholders has resulted in a smooth running of the Velas festival. Each stakeholder has specific duties which they follow each year while making improvements in the process. Other motivating factors from the Government departments in the form of salaries, certification of quality from the state tourism department and awards such as *Sant Tukaram Gram Vangram* award (St. Tukaram award for forest friendly village) for conservation efforts in the district have also been beneficial (Upadhye pers. comm., 2015).

Potential future threats to ongoing efforts

At Velas, it is not clear whether all the nests found are relocated to the hatchery or just those that are under threat from predation. This raises questions about whether relocations are for conservation or the sole purpose of tourism. Although the tourists are warned before-hand about emergence being a natural phenomenon that cannot be guaranteed, most visit with the expectation of viewing hatchlings. Unruly tourists could be perceived as a threat to the culture of the village and lead to discontinuation of participation by the villagers (Joshi pers. comm., 2015). Some other threats that could endanger the festival are competition between the home-stay owners, poor waste management strategy, decline in nesting numbers, etc.

Currently, lack of development in the form of poor roads and electricity, and erratic phone connectivity is one of the major problems faced by the locals and tourists visiting Velas. According to the SVS, crowd management on the beach has also been a major challenge in conducting the festival. By rectifying shortcomings and avoiding pitfalls, Velas has the potential to build a successful ecotourism model. The adoption of approaches from the above case studies could help start similar initiatives elsewhere on the Indian coast and other developing countries.

CONCLUSION

From the described sea turtle ecotourism initiatives at Maharashtra and Goa, it appears that success requires involvement of locals, assistance from other stakeholders and assured sufficient compensation for their efforts. Handing over control to the locals, as in case of Velas, ensures they are able to make the necessary changes in its functioning in accordance with their needs and benefits. On the other hand, Goa showed that despite of favourable factors such as tourist influx and infrastructure, the efforts failed due to lack of enthusiasm at the community level and insufficient incentive to continue the projects. However, the success of community-based ecotourism activities has mainly

been credited to an effective partnership between local communities, government agencies and NGOs (Sproule, 1996), as has been the case in Velas. An increase in similar efforts would not only ensure income and employment for local communities, consequently enhancing livelihoods, but also boost the cause of conservation.

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