

Paper 2: Environmental Protection and Tourism: Issues for East Timor

by

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A quick review of the past

In Melbourne, I presented a paper outlining the contribution tourism can make to the East Timorese economy. I stressed the importance of early policy formulation and development planning to control and shape the nature of tourism, so that negative impacts are minimized. This message remains relevant.

Because tourism can be of economic benefit for East Timor's development, and because it relies on the support of many industry sectors, I proposed it could act as a focus of much infrastructure development. Because tourism relies on clean environments, I proposed that it should, at least initially, be strongly linked with environmental protection. In terms of the last proposition, CNRT has moved to make such a link, but tourism remains in the wilderness in terms of being a focus for the future.

I acknowledge the efforts of UNTAET and other UN agencies in many areas of concern, and look forward to seeing the benefits of their efforts flow through to our people. However, many of my specific areas of concern, remain concerns.

Environment

Briefly, I am aware that many environmental management issues are being addressed as part of health and infrastructure development programs. I am also aware that many programs are being designed that have the potential to significantly impact upon the environment. I strongly encourage UNTAET to review all projects in terms of both their social and environmental impacts. I am not calling for delays, merely disciplined and transparent consideration. In this sense, I am dismayed to hear that UNTAET is considering making environmental considerations everyone's responsibility.

I am concerned that if it is everyone's responsibility, then no-one will actually be responsible. Authority and responsibility are separate issues. At times it is appropriate that they be integrated: at other times they must be clearly separated in the interests of public accountability. I call on this assembly to consider this issue carefully.

I consider that even well-meaning units within UNTAET perhaps need an independent environmental watch-dog. I encourage UNTAET to consider the many models from around the world that establish such independent agencies and the rationale for this.

Specifically, I draw this conference's attention to two serious environmental issues that perhaps go un-noticed by many. Firstly, forest destruction for firewood and small pole timbers. One merely has to travel the road behind Dili to see the forests being removed. This resource is renewable but it is not being renewed. The loss of the forests will

seriously undermine hill stability and reduce water quality. Reafforestation is a priority. Those responsible for projects that call for timber products must consider the environmental impacts of their actions, otherwise the community of East Timor may be left with a seriously degraded environment and major land stability issues.

The second concern is related. In many of our mountainous districts, farming practices are unsustainable. I particularly refer to the farming of steep slopes. Again, land degradation is inevitable under these land management regimes and valuable top-soil is currently flowing out to sea, polluting our rivers and despoiling our marine resources. Improved agricultural production is a worthy goal, but it must be sustainable, environmentally. Again impact assessment is necessary.

I remain concerned for waste generation and disposal, the control of noxious chemical use, the quality of our waters and trust that everyone here is equally concerned. These matters are not luxury items to be considered last. On going commitment to environmental best practice now, is essential to our future. I am not suggesting that we should not exploit some of our environmental resources, and I include clean air, water, forests and productive soils. Indeed, I fear that for pragmatic reasons we will probably have to exploit in the interests of developing our nation in the short term.

However, all environmentally impacting activity must be reversible.

I have not done the environmental issues we face justice in this paper, but I will raise others in my discussion of the future of tourism.

Tourism

At the Melbourne conference, I proposed that tourism should be environmentally focused, community driven and different to what is offered elsewhere in the region. I proposed that we should begin planning and doing things on the ground immediately. Since returning home, I have had no reason to change my views. But unfortunately, little has happened to implement the vision I outlined. In fact, there are some involved in the reconstruction of East Timor who appear not to share my vision.

Tourism is happening right now. Our market is a bored UNTAET staff that either travels off-shore on their days off or visits places such as Baucau, Ramelau and Tutuala. In all cases, we are not taking advantage of this market and developing a tourism industry in a gradual, controlled way.

Soon, "real" tourists will arrive, based on word of mouth recommendation and those wishing to not only see the effects of recent events, but to also contribute, in a small

way, to the reconstruction of our nation. If we act now, East Timor can have a bright tourism future.

If we do not want to lose control of how tourism develops...if we want local people to benefit from the visits...then we must plan now and build the capacity of local communities to respond to tourism demand with quality services and attractions.

In Melbourne, and at last week's economic development workshop, I spoke of the importance of protecting natural and cultural resources, and providing necessary physical developments. Today, I want to present a strategic framework for beginning to establish a tourism industry at minimal cost and maximum benefit to local communities, and in turn the national economy.

Yes, we will eventually need capital intensive development; but it will be best if we prepare the community in advance. We must start now. I estimate that we have, at the most, three years to get our plans, policies, infrastructure and businesses in place, along with an aware community ready to meet the challenge of tourism for the country's benefit.

Some immediate actions

So what can be done, now?

Firstly, we must show the world that while our country is young, we are mature. We must show the world that we have natural environments that we value and wish to share.

We must move to establish a national park system, with the support and co-operation of local communities. This requires funding for community consultation, training of park management staff and to take stock of our natural environments for the selection of suitable areas and for presenting their values. A well-managed protected area system is an indicator of a developed and responsible nation.

We need some funds for infrastructure development, so that tourists can be accommodated, presented with memorable experiences, and appropriately charged for services.

We need people to manage natural resource impacts; trained guides and individuals to provide hospitality services to value-add and gain economic benefits.

Prospective staff are waiting in villages to be trained and involved. They are prepared to invest with their own sweat.

We need a cultural rejuvenation program to revitalize out dance, carving, basket making and fabric weaving traditions. These products must be identified, certified and sustained as being authentic, if we are to reap maximum economic benefit. Tourists pay a premium for authentic experiences and souvenirs. At the same time, our culture and individuality as a people will be sustained.

An example

Let me give an example.

At Tutuala we have a community interested in being involved in tourism. They have a rich cultural heritage, expressed in craft, dance and lifestyle. Seed funding can rejuvenate traditions. Such traditions are tourist attractions.

We have spectacular coastal and mountain scenery, rainforest from mountain to sea. These resources are suited to hiking trails.

We have reefs for diving. We have beaches and clean waters for water activities and relaxation.

We have abundant wildlife, including monkeys and deer. Tourists are attracted to these resources which are also ideal for national park establishment.

We have an existing guesthouse that can be easily renovated.

UNTAET and other aid agency staff are already visiting: so we have an existing market.

What we do not have is a packaged tourism product. We do not have a trained staff to exploit this opportunity and develop it.

Phase 1

So, what I am proposing is a simple, small-scale project.

1. It involves initial awareness raising of what is involved in managing a nature based tourism business.
2. It involves rejuvenating traditional arts and crafts for paid exhibition and sale.
3. It involves training the local community in hospitality and skills such as track construction.

None of this is expensive. Within three months, the Tutuala community could be receiving an income directly from tourism. A tour-guide service out of Dili could be established to take visitors to the destination. Small retail outlets along the way would benefit. A small craft business could be operating and visitors would have their expectations met and leave with fond memories, souvenirs and stories, further promoting the destination and East Timor.

Phase 2

Phase 2 of this project would be to expand infrastructure: walking tracks and accommodation. Accommodation need not be 5-star. Rather, traditional houses could be constructed with community sweat money to provide an authentic East Timorese experience. Some additional hardware, such as refrigeration, beds, stoves, etc., would be needed...but compared with other projects, these costs are minimal, yet bring immediate return. This could be implemented within six months, and the community would be ready to respond to more capital-intensive development.

This type of grass-roots project could be repeated throughout East Timor, for example at Hatubuilico. The benefits of this approach are that:

- it gives added meaning and an economic rationale for regional infrastructure development;
- it gives a rationale for the conservation of natural resources;
- it brings cash to local communities;
- it earns taxation revenue;
- it prepares local communities for larger scale tourism;
- it is equitable, the wealthy are not advantaged;
- it meets our conservation obligations, which the world community expects of us;
- it shows the community that something to benefit them is being done.

Capital intensive development

So what about "big tourism" business and major economic investment?

If we show the world that we have safe, quality, financially-viable tourist products, then foreign investment will naturally follow. But we must have our investment policies and tourism development strategy in place. We should be

developing these in draft form now and review them as our experience with tourism increases!

We have a window of opportunity to get ready for tourism.

What I propose seems to match UNTAET, CNRT and most aid agency objectives. What I propose, I believe, is sustainable: environmentally, culturally and economically.

We have a supportive local community. We have a local environmental NGO to provide in-country and on-site support. We have expertise ready to respond to the task. All we need is a small amount of funding to set the process in motion.

For those who see tourism as too hard

Some people say that tourism can wait.

I say, if we are not to be an aid-dependent country in the future, we must be proactive. If we do not take the initiative, external investors will determine our tourism future, with profits leaking offshore. Our communities will merely be employees, not owners.

Some people say tourism is a dream. Who would want to visit?

I say, they must not have visited the places I know. I say, look at Cambodia. Look at Laos. Look at Sri Lanka. Look at Vietnam. Tourism is happening, but these countries are responding only. They react. They do not direct. We can have a tourism industry that is unique: the world's best ecotourism and cultural tourism example...but only if we give it some priority.

What priority should be given to tourism?

Is tourism planning and action really a priority?

My answer is simple. We have struggled for at least 25 years, a generation, for independence. I do not want a future for my children that is economically dependent. I do not want a country that is environmentally degraded for them to live in. I do not want a community that has lost its cultural soul.

If we are visionary... if we care for our children's future: then perhaps this generation should continue the struggle, and do without for just a little longer. I say, tourism is part of our future and part of our independence. It will give meaning to environmental protection.

Yes! It is a priority, because it is an economic necessity for we East Timorese.