

**TO DO!96
CONTEST SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE TOURISM**

Award Winner

***TOLEDO ECOTOURISM ASSOCIATION
Village Guesthouse / Ecotrail Program***

represented by Mr. Pablo Ack and Mr. William Schmidt

Punta Gorda, Belize

Rationale for the Award

by

Hermann Warth

1. INTRODUCTION

At the request of the Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V. (Study Group for Tourism and Development) the expert has visited Belize from December 2nd to 10th, 1996 or to be more precise, from the 4th to the 7th, since the rest of the days were spent travelling. The aim of this stay was to assess the „Village Guesthouse Ecotrail Program“ of the TOLEDO ECOTOURISM ASSOCIATION (TEA) with its headquarters in Punta Gorda. Due to the excellent cooperation of the TEA staff and their consultant/assistant William Schmidt, the assignment could be carried out without any complications.

2. BACKGROUND

Belize (until 1981 British Honduras) in general and Toledo District in particular have a great tourist potential which, in comparison to other/similar countries, has not really been discovered or realized yet: 40 per cent of the country is covered with tropical rainforests, there is a great diversity in its fauna, there are many hidden caves in the jungle, clean rivers, brooks, waterfalls and wet areas. Belize is situated at the Gulf of Honduras with its mild climate (with the exception of the summer hurricanes) and there are two reefs, the inner and the outer one. The outer reef is the second biggest in the world after the Australian one. Innumerable lagoons and islands make up this rich biosystem.

This diversity in nature match up with the ethnic diversity: Mestizo (Indian/European), Mulattos (African/European), Creoles (African slaves/British pirates), Maya (indigenous population), Garifuna (African slaves/Indians) and a number of other smaller ethnic groups. In this country with a population of only 200 000 they all live in relatively peaceful co-existence. 70 per cent of the inhabitants of Toledo District are Maya and Garifuna who speak Kekchi and Mopan. Their natural, friendly and helpful attitude, never demanding (no begging), has a beneficial effect on visitors, and so has their lifestyle which is so close to nature.

Still: the Maya and Garifuna suffer from the structural neglect on the part of the politically and economically dominating Mestizos, Mulattos and Creoles. Judging from the available monetary means the Maya and Garifuna belong to the poorest in the country. Especially the Mayas live off the forest, mostly as subsistence farmers. Despite the fact that they have been guaranteed their traditional rights of use, their living sphere and lifestyle is threatened: by Mexican and mainly by Malaysian timber concessionaires, and in addition by offers from outside people who want to buy/lease the common land of the Maya for plantations and tourism infrastructure. It is also threatened by road construction. The present construction of a big through road, sponsored by the World Bank, from Punta Gorda to the western border with Guatemala (among other to transport huge amount of logs of the Petén to the Caribbean coast) will greatly affect the lives of the Maya and Garifuna. The same goes for the realization of the Free Trade Zone which the USA are rigorously pushing for and which is supposed to improve the traffic infrastructure between the USA, Central and Latin America. The kind of mass tourism which might follow in its wake would certainly be a heavy burden for the population.

Against the backdrop of this situation the Village Guesthouse Ecotrail Program of the TEA was developed and expanded, and it will now work towards the development of a big Eco-Park comprising 32 villages.

3. The TOLEDO ECO TOURISM ASSOCIATION

3.1 History of TEA

TEA was founded in 1990. The American William Schmidt - he has the Belize nationality - settled in Punta Gorda in 1971 and established the „Nature´s Way Guesthouse“. Maya women came to this place in order to sell handicrafts produced in their villages to tourists. Some tourists wanted to visit the producers in the villages but this was difficult because there was no adequate accommodation available. This led to the plan to set up guesthouses run by village organisations. Since the government is keen on developing tourism in Toledo District, this plan was submitted to them with the request to support it. When the government sponsored the programme with US \$ 10.000, some guesthouses were built and equipped on a voluntary basis in four villages in 1991. Meanwhile the programme has expanded to 14 villages of Toledo District. This was possible through additional government assistance and the support by foreign NGOs, by the UNDP, WWF and USAID.

3.2 Organisational structure and objectives

TEA is a **self-help organisation** of 14 village associations with its headquarters in Punta Gorda. There is a Board to assist TEA. It is composed of one representative each of the Belize Tourism Industry Association, the Toledo Maya Cultural Council, the Toledo Homesite Farming and Ecology Center and the Toledo District Development Officer. The legal status of TEA is that of a non-profit, non-political, non-sectarian, non-government community based association. The office staff work primarily on a voluntary basis (and therefore not full-time) since the income so far achieved through tourism is not enough to pay for salaries - according to a distribution pattern only 16 per cent go to the apex body for administration, advertisement and taxes, whereas 84 per cent remain in the village.

Each of the TEA village organisation is supported by 7 to 9 members (families) who are responsible in their area for the programme coordination and the guesthouse and who share the profit derived from accommodation fees. In addition there are service providers who offer meals, who act as guides for excursions on boats, on horses, through the jungle or caves, there are those who perform as story tellers, musicians or as dance groups, and all this for a fixed amount of money. In each guesthouse there is a room with a small library where village handicrafts can be bought.

At regular official meetings the members and their above mentioned executive body of seven, all matters concerning the organisation are discussed and decided upon.

The TEA is supported by William Schmidt who understands his role as a „sensitive intermediary“, and by tourists who are willing to assist the programme on a voluntary basis for a certain period of time.

The **objective**: In view of the given parameters and the anticipated development initiated from outside, the local population should have the possibility to be/to become the „masters in the processes“ affecting their own living sphere. Ecological tourism is one way of achieving this. The profit gained from this is to be used as a compensation for the renunciation of using rights (burn and slash cultivation, income of the government through the granting of logging concessions), it will be used to finance measures for the protection of nature and in order to improve the income and working conditions of the population. Sustainable development, compatible with nature, must be rewarding for the participants and at the same time conserve the environment.

3.3 Working principles

The TEA pursues a **holistic approach**, which integrates tourism in ecological, economic and socio-cultural/political objectives. Accordingly, tourism is not supported as an economic means in itself and as a substitute for the prevailing agricultural subsistence economy, but it is rather considered to be a complement. Tourism is part of a development concept through which the programme - from a geographical perspective - is spread out to different regions according to their ecological and socio-cultural capacities and through which care is taken, by a rotation system, that the income is shared in a fair way among villages and service providers. In this way villages and families will neither be too much strained nor favoured. In order to strike this balance TEA has decided to keep a low profile in its relation to big tourism enterprises.

TEA works as an **intermediary institution**. Apart from the office and the guesthouses there is no other infrastructure. The organisation uses public means of transport, boats, horses and local food. By doing so TEA hopes to create a favourable climate for the development of small and very small enterprises and to promote local income and local know-how.

3.4 Activities

An important element is **networking** within the organisation and its 14 sub-organisations, with the district administration, central government, with national and international institutions supporting the TEA, with national and international scientists and research institutions, for whom eco-tourism becomes increasingly interesting as a subject of research, and with the media at home and abroad.

Another area is **training**. Members and **service providers** are trained in guesthouse management, cooking, hygiene, preventive medicine, in attitudes and behaviour towards tourists during boat, jungle and cave excursions, in music and dance performances and in simple book-keeping. So far about 470 persons have taken part in this training. The people trained in this way are then the trainers of newcomers. On arrival at the TEA office in Punta Gorda the tourists are introduced to the programme and get some written orientation which provides them, if they are open-minded, deep insights into the culture and nature of Toledo District.

The emphasis is on the **implementation of the programme**: Administration and maintenance of 14 guesthouses with an increasing number of overnight stays - 1992: 200, 1996: about 450 - taking care of the tourists through the hosting families, through the guides when they go on sightseeing tours or during sporting tours (boat, horse, rain forest walks, cave excursion), organisation of cultural events, proper book-keeping and the just distribution of profit as well as the decision on new investments etc.

The TEA is presently involved in the **preparation for an Eco-Park comprising 32 Maya villages** in the west of Toledo District. This is done in order to prevent the granting of even more logging concessions, to contain damages caused by the road to Guatemala presently under construction, and in order to offer some alternatives to the population to deter them from the slash and burn cultivation still practised, timber smuggling and poaching. The nucleus of this programme will cover some 12 100 hectares which will be surrounded by a large buffer zone of 55.455 hectares in which the subsistence economy of the population will be enhanced through various programmes. The decision of the government is still pending. But the chances seem to be good.

TEA is looking for **additional income generating activities** such as the sale/export of cocoa and hand-picked coffee, decorated timber product (now and then logging concessionaires, either because they are in a hurry or because they don't pay or cannot pay their logging fees, leave behind a number of precious mahogany trees, which TEA is allowed to process), and medicinal herbs about which the local people are very knowledgeable. With the support of Pheman Pharmaceutical, a US company, nurseries were set up in three villages for medicinal herbs cultivation. After germination the shoots are then transplanted in the forest in order to be harvested later on.

3.5 Appraisal

In comparing the TEA programme with the TO DO!96 criteria for a socially responsible tourism the following appraisal can be made:

- **Contest criterion:**
„Involvement of the different interests and requirements of the local people through participation“

The programme basically complies with this criterion since, as described above, the village based self-help groups plan, implement, direct and control the programme and they reap the benefits from it, because almost all the income remains with them.

This procedure is guaranteed through the following measures:

- a) the village families volunteer to participate in the construction and maintenance of the guesthouses. The number of participating families in each village controls itself as not all of them want to be involved in the work load required (families can join in the guesthouse programme at a later stage. They will then have to pay a certain amount of money corresponding to the voluntary work of those having constructed the guesthouses.);
 - b) the voluntary participation on the part of the **service providers** who offer meals to tourists or who, as guides, hire out boats and horses;
 - c) the involvement of the whole village community by re-investing 4 per cent of the earned TEA income into educational and health programmes for the villages.
- **Contest criterion:**
„Strengthening of awareness among the local people with regard to the chances and risks of tourism development in their daily economic, social and cultural life“

This is a very important aspect considering the fact that contrary to other areas in Belize, Toledo District is still in a „pre-tourism stage“ despite its rich tourism potentials. TEA takes this into account through its concept of „personalized tourism“, which means for instance that individuals and small groups live in village guesthouses, built in the style of village houses, they take local meals with the families, and, if they wish, they can join in the day to day routine work so that the local people and the tourists, slowly but all the more intensively, get accustomed to each other and so that the locals have the possibility to experience the chances and risks of tourism.

In view of the parameters described above the „Toledo Maya Cultural Council „ came into being. Since the Eco-tourism of the TEA takes into account the capacities available, this Council sees a chance for a sustainable economic improvement and for the preservation

of a lifestyle compatible with and integrated in the natural environment, and therefore it supports the plan of an Eco-Park.

- **Contest Criterion:**
„Participation of a broad local population strata regarding the positive economic, social and cultural effects of tourism“

By shaping tourism in a decentralized and labour-intensive way care is taken that none of the 14 villages will either have too great an advantage or too many disadvantages. Of course, this cannot be meticulously regulated since it is mainly the tourists themselves who set their priorities. The brief insight gained by the expert revealed however, that each one of the four villages he visited shows its own profile and potential which are worth experiencing, which means that the tourist profiles of each of them will largely be the same. The TEA pays attention to the fact that the equipment of the guesthouses and the quality of the meals in the 14 villages are comparable. In order to keep the work load at a reasonable level, each of the guesthouses provides only 8 beds. 57 TEA staff (30 women) and 475 service providers are presently profiting from the programme.

When tourists are introduced to the programme in Punta Gorda the TEA points out this labour intensive rotation system to them. In order to evenly distribute income and workload, care is also taken that the meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner) are served by different families in the respective village. These rotation systems offer the chance that the effects of tourism are shared on as large a scale as possible.

The following rules were set up by TEA with regard to the distribution of income from tourism: 80 per cent of the income from the guesthouses, meals, guided tours, boat and horse rentals and from cultural performances remain in the villages, 20 per cent go to the TEA office in Punta Gorda. From these 20 per cent, 55 per cent are spent on administration, 15 per cent on advertisement, 10 per cent on taxes; the remaining 20 per cent are deposited, in equal shares, into a village health and education fund and a village conservation fund.

Non-TEA members in the villages are equally profiting from the two funds mentioned above. The money is used for medicine, transport of sick persons, for the equipment and teaching aids for village schools, as well as for the maintenance of small roads, for afforestation and other environmental measures. The provision of these funds also for non TEA members enhances the general acceptance of the programme and it contributes to the continuation of the peaceful atmosphere in the villages: the social organisation in the villages is mainly based on cooperation and not on competition.

- **Contest Criterion:**
„Guarantee of the attractiveness of jobs in tourism for the local people by improment of working conditions in relation to payment, social security, working hours, education and training“

All the jobs mentioned are held by local people. These people are farmers and fishermen and through tourism they earn some additional income. This is partly what makes the jobs so attractive, because the farmers really do for the tourists what they are used to do anyway: they are very hospitable, they walk through the jungle (where they have their fields), they sail up and down the rivers (where they fish and transport their goods), they familiarize tourists with the products of the forests (which they collect for various

purposes), they sing their songs and dance their dances (through which they retain their tradition; more on this subject below).

The payment for the services is fair. The programme does not provide social security. This is still within the domain of the extended family and village community to which tourism contributes financially. Through the rotation system and the limitation to maximum 8 tourists per day/night per village the work-load of the people is not too heavy.

The TEA supports training in the tourism sector and promotes the revival of village handicrafts. Further training takes place through a regular monitoring system of the programme.

- **Contest Criterion:**
„Reinforcement of the local culture as well as the cultural identity of those living in tourism destination areas“

Due to the consistent and holistic tourism work of the TEA, the profile and potential of Toledo District are now well-known in Belize. TEA was therefore supported by the Government through various measures, such as for instance by providing them the nice and functional office in Punta Gorda free of charge.

TEA contributes to the fact that the indigenous people take pride in their simple and generally sustainable village life. This is because the programme does not only offer economic advantages but also because the tourists through their integration into village life, however short, appreciate and recognize the idealist values of a subsistence lifestyle which is practised on a cooperative basis and largely in agreement with the natural environment of the villagers. This feedback, which is not measurable, led to self-reflection, self-assurance and self-esteem on the part of the local people. Just to give a few examples:

- It was with great pride that the people showed the natural and cultural sights to the expert, demonstrated the enormous knowledge on the functions and products of the forest, explained the largely autonomous administration of the villages including resource management and simple litigation and arbitration system, mentioned the mysteries in the forest, but without revealing the sights to him (intact Maya temples in caves).
- While the Maya are rather passive in the meetings in Punta Gorda where they keep quiet rather than actively articulate their opinion, they talk to the tourists in their villages and houses, and often it is them who start the conversation, not the tourists.
- According to information obtained from the TEA staff, tourism has revived village handicraft, the occupation with medicinal herbs and above all the singing and dancing. As to the latter, one might get the impression that it is commercialized and meaningless. If one learns, on the other hand, that over-zealous missionaries almost succeeded in eradicating singing and dancing in the villages, then it must be regarded as sheer luck that the budding tourism industry has helped challenge this overzealousness: in their songs and dances the village groups express their history, feelings and experiences, just as the storytellers do in their stories.

- **Contest criterion:**
„Avoidance, minimization of social and cultural damage caused by tourism in destination areas“

TEA tries to meet this criterion through a decentralized tourism promotion, by taking care of small and smallest groups and individuals, by involving tourists in the local infrastructure and lifestyle, by informing, advising and escorting tourists, training of local tourist guides and by publishing and constant revision of information material.

- **Contest criterion:**
„Application of new methods in qualifying partnership and cooperation between the external tourism industry and the local people“

The TEA concept is innovative in as far as the partners of the external tourism, that is the local people, are not employees of this external tourism but are free small entrepreneurs who offer their services and decide on the prices for these services in their own groups. They remain the „masters of the process“. Furthermore, TEA does not recruit foreign guides but only trained local guides.

- **Contest criterion:**
„Creation of other favorable conditions for a socially responsible tourism development in destination areas“

The TEA strongly pursues its tourism concept by exchanging views with the relevant institutions at the district and national level as well as abroad. The replication of the programme or of parts thereof is a solid guarantee for sustainability. In this context mention must be made of the elaborate preliminary work carried out for the envisaged Maya Eco-Park and the intensive lobby work for this endeavour and for the TEA programme. Through its participation in various national and international conferences in Belize, too, the TEA tries to have an influence on the parameters in the sense of promoting socially responsible tourism which is also compatible with the environment.

- **Contest criterion:**
„Projects/measures entered for the contest must be in line with the principles of environmental compatibility“

Apart from the completely integrated guesthouses built in local style, TEA does not create any technical infrastructure. It rather uses locally available potentials in a decentralized way (14 villages) and limits visits to eight tourists per day and village. Therefore, this procedure does not significantly affect the environment.

This restraint on the one hand, which is favourable to the environment, is complemented by actions promoting the environment: TEA encourages a kind of tourism which is compatible with the environment, by integrating it in the lifestyle of the population which is so close to nature, and also by propagating the culture of Toledo District so deeply rooted in the nature (of the forest). The demand on the part of the tourist for this kind of experience brings about economic advantages to those who preserve nature and culture. Through this „tourist validation“, too, nature and culture turn into a precious good worthy of being preserved.

The expert notices some **points of concern which would need to be improved** in the present situation of TEA.

The concern for the sustainability of the programme comes uppermost. In order to safeguard this, TEA must break out of a vicious circle: There is the infrastructure of 14 well established guesthouses which will one day need substantial maintenance. Despite the roughly 450 visitors in 1996 (according to Pablo Ack, TEA chairman), with a turn-over of about US \$ 15.500 (of which only a small portion was obtained from accommodation - one night costs US \$ 4.62 per person) the guesthouses are not used to full capacity. Since there are not enough funds to pay for full-time staff, not much advertising was done, because with the present part-time staff on a voluntary basis it would not be possible to take care of a higher number of tourists. Therefore income is badly needed, also for the maintenance of the guesthouses. There are two alternatives to remedy the situation: the road from Punta Gorda to Guatemala is planned to be constructed with the help of a World Bank loan. In order to reduce the expected ecological, economic and socio-cultural damage, a programme for the alleviation of detrimental effects for the people living along the marked-out route will be financed by the loan. TEA hopes to get a subsidy from the budget item „institutional capacity building“ in connection with the planned Maya Eco-Park which would help them to finance the office personnel. In this context TEA is also in touch with „Meso America Biological Diversity Corridor Program“, the „Global Environment Fund“ of the UNDP and others which are sponsored by various organisations. If this cannot be realized the percentage of 4.66 per cent (of the 80per cent remaining in the village) which is deposited for the renewal of equipment and maintenance of the guesthouses, would have to be increased, in order to keep the present standard of the guesthouses.

In addition to the programme run by TEA there are nine other eco-tourism projects in Toledo District. This raises the question as to the ecological and socio-cultural capacity and the repercussion of competition among the village communities, which are normally not familiar with a competitive economy. The answer must surely be coordination and perhaps cooperation and the joining of capacities in the interest of sustainable resource management and of a broad and just distribution of income earned from tourism.

In some families the food offered was very good, but in others it was not worth the US \$ 3,25. Tourists used to simplicity and deprivation may not mind this, but it could prevent others from visiting the otherwise positive programme in other villages. And it is also not fair to the other families who serve good food.