



## **MAKASUTU AND COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM IN THE GAMBIA**

Ida NJAI\*

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests, etc.....

My Name is Mrs Ida Njai, and I am the General Manager of the Mandina River Lodges at Makasutu Culture Forest. I have been involved in the tourism industry in The Gambia for over 20 years, in which time I have seen the country go through many changes.

I am here to represent The Gambia as a whole, but mainly focusing on a private eco tourism project that is leading the way in the world of responsible tourism.

On behalf of the President, Dr Alhagie AJJ Jammeh, the Ministry of Tourism And Culture, The Gambia Tourism Authority and the Directors of Makasutu, I would like to welcome everyone here to the world of Makasutu.

### **THE GAMBIA-A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE TOURISM INDUSTRY**

The Gambia is one of the smallest countries in Africa, with an estimated population of just under 1.5 million people. As an ex-British colony, English is the official language, with Mandinka, Wolof, Fula and Jola being the main local languages spoken.

The country is dominated by The Gambia River, and is roughly 300 kms long, and averaging 35kms in width. The Gambia is surrounded on 3 sides by its bigger neighbour Senegal, except for 80 kms of coastline that borders the Atlantic Ocean. The country is an area of around 11, 000 sq km. 90% of the population are Muslim.

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The Gambia gained its independence from Britain in 1965, with Dawda Jawara becoming the first President of the new republic. The main source of income in the country is agriculture / ground nuts (peanuts), with tourism becoming more important as a source of foreign income arriving in the country.

Tourism began in 1966, with 300 arrivals from Scandinavia. The country since has become a haven for winter sunshine for the European market, now receiving 100,000 + visitors a year from all over Europe. The American market is still in its early stages, with The Gambia being the host of the now yearly ‘ROOTS HOMECOMING FESTIVAL’ which encourages people of the Diaspora to re connect with their history and culture.

The Gambian tourism market has been since the beginning mainly focused on the white sandy beaches, and the tropical sunshine to entice visitors to the country. A few hardy travellers make it up country to visit the rural interior, but 99% of tourism is concentrated on a very small strip of land, no more than 10 km long. Most visitors do not choose to visit The Gambia because it is an African country, instead because of its climate and beaches.

## **MAKASUTU HISTORY**

Makasutu Culture Forest is a private 1000-acre reserve located on a small bolong / tributary off of the river Gambia. The project began in 1992, when two English adventurers, James English, an engineer and Lawrence Williams, an architect found the Base Camp area and purchased an initial 4 acres of land from the local family owners, with the intention to create a small camp for back packers and adventure travellers. However during a 2-month trip back to Europe at the very beginning of the project, over 200 palm trees were cut down on the land bordering the fence. With all of the deforestation that was happening in the area, the local tribal owners of the land the Sanneh Kunda, as well as the Department of Forestry encouraged James and Lawrence to purchase the area for protection. Over the next few years’ 20,000 trees were replanted into the area.

The name ‘Makasutu’ is a Mandinka word, ‘Maka’ meaning Mecca, the Saudi Arabian Muslim holy land, and ‘Sutu’ means forest. So the direct translation is ‘HOLY FOREST’. The area has a wealth of history behind it, with tribal battles taking place on the land hundreds of years ago, there is a folk law that states that there is a kings head, crown and thrown buried on the land somewhere. The local people also used to believe that the ‘ninkinanko’ or devil lived on the land, and would not stay in the area after dusk. This has now all changed since it has been developed in to a tourism project,

The forest is the first that you reach after crossing the Sahara desert, and if this area had been destroyed, the encroachment of the Sahel could have spread to the south of The Gambia. Preservation of this critical environment took priority over the business, and within the next few months the reserve was created. This has all gone ‘hand in hand’ with the creation of alternative livelihoods in the community by the direct cash employment of

over 250 local people, in an area where there is no industry and high unemployment. Most employees have approximately 4 children and sustain a family compound with an average of at least 10 wider family members. Indirect beneficiaries are at a minimum 3,500 people.

Makasutu is promoting local African culture, arts and crafts, food and life style to the visitors to The Gambia, while allowing the indigenous people of the area to continue their traditional ways of life. Thus allowing them to make a direct income from tourism, without having to change their lifestyle or culture. By working with local communities, it is possible to minimise rural – urban drift, and also install a feeling of pride in local heritage and culture for the youths, who are more willing to stay in their villages, rather than wanting to leave for the city or Europe and the USA.

Makasutu is now the premier eco tourism destination within The Gambia, working with all the major ground tour operators, as well as having one of the top exclusive eco lodges in the world.

When working on projects in a rural environment or Community development many different factors have to be taken in to account. Education for the local population is of the utmost importance. Without the correct level of understanding of the project to be undertaken, you cannot expect to receive the support of the villagers. From our own experience, the youths usually have a much better understanding of tourism, and by working with them in the correct manor, they can be the best people to explain what is happening in an area to the elders of the community. In the example of Makasutu, we approached each of the chiefs in the villages that surround the park, and with a member of the Sanneh family that were the original tribal owners of the land as interpreter, explained the fact that the area was to become a reserve. When changing the use of an area that has been part of life to a community for as long as anyone can remember, there is a very fine line between helping and harming that community. We stopped the illegal cutting of trees, but at the same time made it known that any dead wood could be taken, and also any traditional medicinal plants could still be harvested from the forest. The forest was a very limited source of revenue that would have been fully depleted 6 months to 1 year later if the area had not been protected. The forest is now fully established, and will continue to be a source of income through tourism, hopefully for many generations to come.

Makasutu has won the prestigious ‘British Guild of Travel Writers Award’ for ‘Best Overseas Development’ beating 750 other projects world wide, as well as being highly commended in the ‘Responsible Tourism Awards’ for ‘Best Poverty Alleviation’. The Sunday Times newspaper from the UK voted us ‘Best New Eco Hotel in The World’ as well as winning a number of regional eco-tourism awards.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

James and Lawrence were asked in 2004 to present Makasutu as a case study for the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) at the first seminar of the S.T.E.P program (Sustainable Tourism to Eliminate Poverty) that was held in Benin. They then followed this up by presenting at seminars in Tanzania and also Guinea.

Through the contacts that were made at these seminars, they decided that there was more that Makasutu could be doing for the local communities, by way of creating self-sufficiency within the region. The policy at Makasutu has always been to inject as much money into the local area, rather than sending it further a field. The produce for the restaurants is bought on a daily basis from the local markets, and 99% of the building materials are all sourced locally. Cement is bought from local suppliers, and then transported to the site using donkey carts. The cement could be sourced from the main supplier in the capitol Banjul, with free transport to the site, but this means that the small-scale supplier is missed out of the equation, and a vital form of revenue slips away.

## **MAKASUTU WILDLIFE TRUST**

We established Makasutu Wildlife Trust in 2000, with the help of two zoologists from the United Kingdom. The trust is the leading wildlife conservation non-governmental organization in The Gambia. It is a non-profit making, non-religious and non-political registered charity.

Makasutu Wildlife Trust was established to conserve the biodiversity of The Gambia by encouraging a greater awareness, appreciation and participation in all aspects of biodiversity; its conservation and sustainable use of the environment, through the active involvement of local communities.

The trust is part of the Darwin initiative project funded by the UK Government, and awarded to the University of Warwick in the UK, and Makasutu Wildlife Trust in The Gambia. The Darwin grant is one of the hardest and most prestigious grants available for biodiversity.

Makasutu Wildlife trust offers the visitor a rich and unique experience, with something to suit every taste. The wide diversity of flora and fauna, habitat type, and the opportunity to view wildlife in its natural habitat attracts much interest both locally and internationally.

Makasutu Wildlife Trust is funded through education, teaching and research, and also by the sale of guidebooks that have been written and published by the trust, and also by selling t-shirts and post cards to the tourists.

The trust will play a major roll in the next topic that I am going to talk about.

## **THE BALLABU CONSERVATION PROJECT**

The idea of the 'Ballabu Conservation Project' grew out of these findings, with an initial tentative approach being made to the local government to see their reaction. The result was a letter of encouragement from the commissioner of our region, which we then used to build support from other areas and institutions.

The concept of the Ballabu is to create an 85 sq kilometre conservation area, incorporating 14 villages with close to 100,000 people living within the proposed area. Each village will have a community forest park established, as well as some form of industry in the form of eco lodges, recycling plants, skills training centre, agriculture and live stock. The hope is to alleviate poverty for the village people, by making each village self-sustaining. These projects will be 100% community owned, with the profits going into community development projects in the form of water resources, education, healthcare and renewable energy. The community forest parks will be a long-term project, where each village will have their own site where eco tourism can be concentrated. By creating a park in each village, the hope is that they will eventually link up, creating a wildlife corridor, to allow the safe passage of animals through the villages, thus continuing their migration patterns, which have been lost due to urbanization of this rural area.

Many of the existing forest cover have been cut down for subsistence use, fire wood and building materials being the two main factors. With a rapidly expanding population the land will not sustain its people unless drastic measures are taken to reverse this negative trend to the bio-diversity of the region.

It has taken two years of development, but a memorandum of understanding was signed in June of this year, between the village chiefs (Alkalo) and the regional chiefs, after an initial 3-day workshop that was held by our sister non-governmental organization 'Makasutu Wildlife Trust' (MWT). The results were taken back to the village level by the chiefs, who then voted on whether or not the particular village was interested in being part of the conservation project.

A further meeting held at Makasutu, saw 100% of the chiefs sign up for their villages to become part of the program. A memorandum was signed, and since then the constitution has been put into place.

### **Local Partnerships**

Local partnerships should be created, incorporating not just the local community, but also Government, Local NGO's and private sector. If all sectors can come together to create their own micro version of the global community that we hear spoken about so much these days, the accumulation of shared knowledge will result in harmony between all sectors, and cooperation to help create a tourism industry that is truly sustainable.

If Eco or sustainable tourism is to be fully realised in an area, private investors, local or overseas, must be willing to put focus on to the local people, by creating schemes and allowing local entrepreneurs opportunities for business. Within the tourism industry, there is a large enough profit margin to be able to sustain micro business for the local population. This can be in the form of supply, for example buying all food products from local producers, even to the level where you encourage the diversification of what is produced within an area, to fit in with the needs of the tourism product, or even to allow the export of products out of the country. Also the encouragement to get local communities involved in creating lodges, or on a much smaller level using oxen carts to transport the tourists round the village, or the hiring out of bicycles to the tourists to explore the region. The potential for small-scale industry is limitless.

A community that is situated in an area of natural beauty has the chance to give concessions to potential investors in the form of land. This is where Government and also NGO's come into the picture in a large capacity. It is the roll of the Government to become a mediating force to ensure that the community is fairly represented, and also that the investor is protected.

Government should be involved in the creation of policy for rural tourism, and also be mediator between the 2 parties. Once these policies are passed in congress, the roll should then be handed to local NGO's to continue the process.

## **THE GAMBIA TOURISM AUTHORITY**

In the case of The Gambia, the introduction of the Gambia Tourism Authority revolutionised the tourism investors experience when dealing with officialdom. Still not quite the 'one stop shop' that many countries are promoting but in reality very rarely achieve, the GTA gets closer than most in reaching this ambitious goal. By creating a working relationship with private entrepreneurs, representatives from community projects and also government officials, all stakeholders in the tourism industry are fairly represented. The GTA realise that all parties have there own experiences and ideas to bring to the table, and by working as a team, results can be achieved a lot quicker with the diverse range of skills that are on offer from the different sectors within the tourism package as a whole.

## **COMMUNITY FORESTS**

The creation of community forest parks in areas where there is still existing forest cover, or in areas where deforestation has been a big problem can be incredibly beneficial. Sustainable logging within these areas can create huge revenue for communities, as long as there is a proper management plan in place. Planting hard wood trees back into indigenous areas is a slow process, but as trees mature, and selective cutting is permitted, there can be a continual income from such schemes.

These community forest parks, help towards the appreciation of the environment as a source of income generation for the local people, and also help towards educating the community on environmental issues.

By helping to establish the empowerment of the local community, and also creating pride for long term conservation projects within the local area, there is a greater chance that communities will police their own environment, especially if there is a direct financial benefit to be seen within the community. If there is a real sense of ownership of projects, communities will not allow people from outside to enter and cut the trees that are a direct lifeline to a village.

## **THE EDEN PROJECT / OVERSEAS PARTNERSHIPS**

The Eden Project is a charity based in Cornwall in the United Kingdom, and is home to the world's largest indoor tropical forest. We approached the people at Eden about the 'Ballabu Conservation Project' and recently had the curator of the Humid Tropics Biome visit Makasutu, where he spent a week visiting villages, and finding out first hand what the immediate issues were facing this rural area, and how the villages wanted to tackle these issues.

We foresee The Eden project becoming a major force in the Ballabu Conservation Project, through introduction to their funding partners, but also through being able to gain access to the wealth of knowledge that the team there possess.

## **FUTURE PROJECTS; COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

The next plan for the community is to build small scale Eco-lodges in the 6 local villages surrounding Makasutu. One of the main things that we learned from the last seminars that the World Tourism organization held in Benin and Tanzania was the importance of location for the community lodges. By establishing these lodges around an existing tourism business, the chance of the project succeeding is much higher than if it is in an area with no tourism infrastructure.

The tourist's who stay in the lodges will be expected to participate in rural life, helping out in work around the village & sharing skills. The long-term goals are to get the guests that visit the project to continue to participate in the development of the community, long after they have returned home.

Makasutu will carry out all design and building of the lodges, as well as training the staff within the existing tourism business. There will also be continued supervision by the NGO Makasutu Wildlife Trust, when the project is completed. Unlike most development projects, there will not be an end to the commitment, as Makasutu has been developed for the long term.

All profits from the lodges will go to education, healthcare, water and agriculture projects for the community. This will directly benefit ALL members of the community in an equal measure.

Each community will donate the site where the lodges will be built, but will also have to dedicate an area of land that will be used as a community forest. Makasutu will source the hard wood seeds from areas around West Africa for the communities to plant. We have been approached by the West African Botanical Society to become a member, which is a real honor for us to be considered worth by such an impressive organization.

## **INVESTMENT IN TOURISM**

The potential for investment in The Gambia is incredible. The Gambia River is untouched by tourism, with scope for the country to become like a mini Amazon in South America. There is a need for up river, luxury lodges and camps, as well as a scheduled boat service that tourists and local people alike can board and travel the length of the river, stopping at small villages on the way.

The President is actively seeking investors to the country, and the GTA have now put in to place a new law that states that no hotel can be built in the country below a 4 star level. The Gambia is perceived as a low-end destination, but infact, many new 4 and 5 star hotels and lodges are springing up, and thus changing the face of tourism in the country.

We believe the new positive face of Africa will originate in The Gambia.

I welcome you to visit our “Smiling Coast of Africa”

I thank you for your time and interest.