Greetings!

**How to engage the local community in your tourism business**

Community involvement in tourism is becoming increasingly popular in countries practicing sustainable development and it is a means of contributing towards poverty alleviation and rural development. Tourists who visit the local areas seek to discover the unique experience of the existing local heritage and natural resources and interact at a deeper level with the local communities. Most accommodation facilities are located within local areas and have the responsibility to engage the local communities in their tourism business with the aim of promoting sustainability.

This week’s eco-byte focuses on some of the ways in which the local communities can be involved in ecotourism. Sustainable development efforts should be directed towards engaging the local community in ecotourism and all other activities that relate to it.

Ways in which the local community can be involved in your facility;

- Promote the local culture. Inform the visitors in your facility of the local culture and educate them of its importance. One of the ways this can be achieved is by creating an information folder with elaborate information about the local people, their culture, values, etc. such folders can be placed within guest rooms, library, visitors’ lounge, or any other place where guests can have access to reading material.

- Create programs through which the guests can visit the local community. In most cases, a fee is charged for village visits. The best practice however, would be to organize a system in such a way no cash payments are exchanged between guests and the locals, e.g. an organized receipt system may be implemented where the local village is paid on a monthly basis, so as to prevent the creation and promotion of “commercialized cultural villages”. You may also want your guests to experience the local culture while they are within the facility. Invite the local dance and other entertainment groups that have been
formed in the local community to perform for your guests (the proceeds should directly benefit the local community).

- Source for labor from the local community. Where possible, recruit staff for skilled jobs and managerial positions from the local community to promote empowerment. At least 30% of your employees must be recruited from the local community for either skilled or unskilled labour. Where the locals are employed as naturalists and guides, they are able to preserve their rich culture and history and your guests also get the opportunity to obtain first-hand information about the local community. This creates a competitive advantage for your business. As local communities begin to see their natural resources as sources of income and employment, they become actively involved in protecting those resources.

- The facility can create a program that helps employees from the local communities to improve their skills/levels of education (especially those that are marginalized and therefore have generally low levels of education). Also ensure that the employment opportunities and other income generating activities target both genders. However, this is only possible where culture is not a limiting factor.

- Involve the local community in decision making. This may help prevent conflicts between you as an investor and the locals. Inform the locals through their local leaders or the local administration of your development plans and consider their views during the decision making process.

- Create avenues through which the locals can sell their local products within your facility. You can also opt to source for quality products from the local community such as fruits, vegetables, curios, beadwork, etc. where possible. This boosts the local economy and also improves the livelihoods of the local people.

- Help improve the well-being of the locals by partnering with other organizations or the government that support community projects such as building of schools, health facilities, supply of water to the locals, construction of roads within the local area, among other initiatives.

- Promote domestic tourism by lowering the accommodation rates or offering discounts for locals and residents. This may act as a favorable cushion for your business during the low peak tourist season.

- Involve the local communities in environmental conservation projects such as tree planting and environmental clean-up activities. Create awareness to the locals of the importance of conserving natural resources.

The local communities play an important role in promoting sustainable tourism. Their traditional practices and wisdom can help boost your profits and also improve the local economy. Therefore, seek to engage them actively in your activities in order to attain sustainability.

*It’s smart to be responsible!*