This was about a decade after Hector Ceballos-Lascurain coined the term ecotourism; it was later defined by The Ecotourism Society as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people.” This newfound concept of ecotourism, it was believed, would transform tourism practice into an economic activity that, apart from bringing benefits to the investor, would also invest in the environment and support local people. This would be sustainable tourism!

To further the principles of sustainable tourism, ESOK was mandated, at its inception, to develop standards for best practice tourism, especially ecotourism, and promote sustainable tourism practices. This mandate culminated in the launch of a certification programme for accommodation facilities in October 2002, thus achieving a milestone for Kenya’s tourism industry. The subsequent development and launching of Safari Codes, a joint initiative of ESOK and Friends of Conservation (FOC), with collaboration of key industry associations, was a bonus to an industry that already appreciated standards. The codes will help to extend Kenya’s sustainability agenda to our visitors and move a step closer to meeting the objectives of Agenda 21 for Sustainable Tourism and Travel.

ESOK's mandate did not end with development of standards. There was need to create awareness on this emerging concept of tourism if standards were going to be beneficial to the industry and lead to implementation of sustainable tourism practices. Thus ESOK was additionally charged with the responsibility of creating awareness on the concept of ecotourism and to ensure that this awareness translated into improved economic, social and environmental practice by tourism business; sustainable utilisation of resources; and economic benefits for local people. This is the genesis of ESOK’s mission of bringing together tourism, conservation and communities. To realise this mission, the early years of the society were dedicated to creating awareness on ecotourism and sustainable tourism practices through organisation of conferences, seminars and workshops, networking, recruitment of members and participation in activities of likeminded institutions. In the later years, the setting up of an ESOK website, publication of a newsletter and brochures, e-groups and a community outreach program have been introduced to increase awareness.

By its very nature, ecotourism is a dynamic concept. People, resources and businesses are...

by Judy Kepher-Gona

ESOK Executice Committee with chairman of KTB standing (middle)
The Uaso Nyiro Cultural Centre is located at Archers Post in Waso division of Samburu district. It is an initiative of Umoja Uaso Women Group, a community-based organization registered with the ministry of culture and social services. The group has 48 members representing some 48 families each with an average family size of 7 adults. The center is strategically located along the Northern Kenya tourist circuit and targets visitors from the neighboring lodges including Samburu Lodge, Samburu Serena, Samburu Intrepids, Larsens Camp and Sarova Shaba. The key activities of the centre include; a cultural centre that offers cultural experience to visiting tourists through demonstrations, narrations and performance of dances; a cultural museum where old ornaments/artifacts are preserved; a curio shop and camping activities along the Great Ewaso Nyiro River. The centre was built with support from donors.

The objective of the cultural centre is to sell Samburu culture to visitors and to generate revenue for members. Ultimately the members are looking for an improved livelihood from extra income earned through the centre. In principle, visitors to the centre pay an entrance fee of $20 per visitor, but due to unfair trade practices, the centre only receives a fraction of this amount from the middlemen, namely tour guides. The little income earned from entry fees and selling of traditional artifacts to visitors goes to assist members in educating and paying for school fees for children, running a nursery school built by the centre and meeting other basic requirements such as food and clothes. When there is extra income after these needs have been met and this is rare, the credit balance accrued is used for maintenance of the cultural centre. This means that the status of the cultural centre has steadily deteriorated since its initiation to a level where it is no longer a true representation of Samburu culture.

There are many centers like Uaso, struggling to grab a piece of the ecotourism pie; but with little knowledge on the ingredients required to bake the pie and no knowledge on the baking process itself, their future is uncertain. Yet, for many communities, the establishment of cultural centers as ecotourism initiatives remains top on their agenda. This is because culture is perceived as cheap. Hence cultural centers are perceived as cheap to implement, cheap to sell and cheap to maintain. And this cheapness is what keeps visitors and tour operators away, leaving the centers at the mercy of unscrupulous tour guides who exploit owners by collecting the visitors fees and only forwarding an insignificant fraction of the amount collected to the centers. The net effect is that the dozens of cultural centers that dot major tourist circuits in Kenya continue to offer poorly designed products, poor interpretation of culture and poorly finished artifacts.

Yet culture is an expensive commodity that if properly packaged, can attract the attention of established tour operators for inclusion in visitor itineraries. It can offer visitors value-for-their-money through proper interpretation and generate adequate revenue for communities. But communities can only achieve this through development of operational standards and appreciation of the said standards. Then there is need for development partners to build the capacity of those selling culture to enable them identify ecotourism ingredients, bake the ecotourism pie and share it equitably among members. For in this lies the future of preserving culture for posterity and promoting global peace through tourism.
Promoting community ecotourism initiatives is a mucky affair for many tourism operators. There is a general belief that these initiatives are in unattractive and remote locations, inaccessible, are poorly designed and constructed and do not offer quality service. Worse still, community initiatives do not receive publicity because they are unable to produce glossy brochures that will catch the attention of most tour operators and they also lack knowledge on how to get their product to the consumer, and/or the broker. Yet, most of the time, unique and novel community approaches to ecotourism are not public knowledge, not because they are ‘mucky’, perhaps because they offer competition to the high priced alternative eco-products.

While it is certainly useful to examine international bench marks of ecotourism ‘best practice’, unique circumstances will often require local informed approaches to ecotourism. Herein lies the advantage/benefits of promoting exclusive examples of ecotourism and offering a diverse product to visitors. Just like we are happy to report when ecotourism is providing hope for better livelihoods for communities, if a community has developed accommodation bandas, a campsite or nature trail, let’s read about this as well in tourism brochures and other promotion media.

So how can information on community ecotourism initiatives be made more readily available to travellers? One approach is for tourism operators to hand-hold community ecotourism initiatives, work with them to improve standards, train them on product development and support their promotion and marketing strategies so they remain viable. The advantage of hand-holding is that it helps to add value to community ecotourism initiatives while transferring enterprise management skills to local people. The end result is a win-win situation for all; local people will acquire entrepreneurial skills, their enterprises will be sustainable while participating operators will diversify their products while improving their corporate image prompting more operators to emulate their good example. Perhaps this is something more tourism operators should be pursuing in Kenya; supporting community ecotourism initiatives and building a case for ‘best practice’ tour operation in order to convince some of the more hesitant operators that social responsibility is a worthwhile goal for any business.
Whether a stranger to or already conversant with ESOK, you’ll admit that reading that brochure, visiting the website, or even calling the secretariat won’t tell you enough on how it works. Having been an intern at ESOK for almost a year, I can tell a bit of the inside story.

Among other things, ESOK acts as a link between communities, tourism businesses, resource managers and environment practitioners.

When planning community ecotourism project, issues take many perspectives. There is the question of converting landownership, labour, and other such intangibles that communities have into investments that will guarantee them returns. Then there are explanations to be made to eager community groups as to why it is always taking a little longer to get the projects started and the benefits of partnerships. In addition to this, the ESOK secretariat has a responsibility of showing development partners the need to speed up release of funds because communities do not appreciate it if you give them tomorrow what they think they should have had yesterday. Further, one has to ensure that all the grand talk about Mother Nature translates into action on the ground. It is a tight rope.

Then there is the regular communication with members which includes updates on happenings in the industry and conservation world, information on sustainable technologies and developments at ESOK, not to mention the difficult bit of recruiting, retaining and follow up members to renew their membership. As if this is not enough, there are numerous calls and visitations to offices to be made, looking for varied information on ecotourism and tourism in general. ESOK is perhaps the most accessible tourism organization in the country today and where information is shared freely with all who care to ask. Invitations to participate in, organize and make presentations at various forums are numerous. The ESOK secretariat is as busy as a bee.

And to do this, they have a lean secretariat. Working long hours and having the executive officer doing fieldwork - (I thought Executive

Did you know?

all vulnerable to technological, economic and political changes, and so is ecotourism. It is also a multi-dimensional concept, involving social developmentalists, conservationists, economists and entrepreneurs and many other disciplines. Such a concept cannot therefore be the preserve of one institution or an individual. It is best understood from many perspectives, appreciated by diverse stakeholders and promoted by distinct institutions. Hence, as membership society, ESOK is strategically designed to attract individual and corporate organisations, and to use the diversity of members to draw knowledge on the various dimensions of ecotourism and use members as channels for disseminating information on ecotourism. Currently, ESOK’s membership stands at 141 comprising of conservation organisations, tour operators, hoteliers, students, government departments, donor agencies, university dons, learning institutions, various professionals, local community based organisations and laypeople, all contributing, participating in, benefiting from and spreading the knowledge of ecotourism.

In 2004, the challenges of ESOK remain as dynamic, multi-dimensional and diverse as the concept of ecotourism. There is the issue of fulfilling the needs of a varied membership, the ambiguity of operating in an industry that is threatened by global terrorism, failing economies and cut-throat competition, the duty of managing the expectations of enthusiastic community groups who seek knowledge of and benefits from ecotourism, the mandate of giving guidance on sustainable practices in an country where technology is less advanced and compliance with regulation is not priority, the task of convincing tourism business that it pays to be ‘green’ and last but not least, the challenge of realising our vision of providing leadership in the knowledge and practice of ecotourism in the region.

Yet, amidst these challenges, ESOK has managed to sustain a balance between remaining a membership society and at the same time providing a link between tourism, conservation and communities. This it has done by building and maintaining a large constituency of collaborators and supporters and maintaining a vibrant secretariat with guidance from an energetic Executive Committee. This is ESOK, and this far we have come! Join us today and be part of this great vision.
The 1st International Dry Toilet Conference was held at Tampere, Finland, from the 20th to the 23rd of August 2003. It brought together 168 professionals and other interested people from 30 countries who shared experiences, new ideas and achievements for using dry toilets.

The dry toilet is an ecological sanitation technology that uses diversion principles to allow for optimal re-use of human wastes. Dry toilets may have the superstructure (hut) of a VIP and a porcelain bowl like the standard flush toilets, but they are raised slightly to make room for the collection chamber, and have a separate compartment for urine diversion in their bowls. Excrement (dry waste) goes into the collection chambers below and ash, dry soil or sawdust is added onto it to absorb moisture, eradicate bad odours and flies. Once a chamber is full, it is replaced by a new one and compost in the first chamber allowed time to mature. Urine is diverted by a hose pipe into a tank or soak pit.

Separating wastes, and use of dry toilets has several advantages. The dry waste can be used as manure in gardens and once mature, is incredibly easy to handle. Urine, which contains high levels of Nitrogen, Potassium and Phosphorous does not go to pollute underground water and over-enrich water bodies with nutrients (eutrophication), but can be used as fertilizer by farmers in gardens and agriculture. Dry toilets promote health as pathogens are destroyed on the spot. Additionally, since they use little or no water at all, they not only conserve water, but also protect surface and underground water from faecal contamination. Dry toilets also come in handy in areas without centralized drainage and sewerage systems, and in times of crisis when electricity and running water may not be available.

Dry toilets come in different sizes and ranges, including mobile ones, non-flush or low flush, and can be installed in or out of the house. They are appropriate for public recreation areas, trekking tracks, boats, cottages, houses, game parks, mountainous and other places especially where water supply is limited or waste disposal is a problem. In Kenya, they have been used with varying degrees of success in Homa Bay, Wajir and Machakos.

For more information, contact:
Eng. Dr. Ezekiel Nyangeri Nyanchaga
Email: enyangeri@uonbi.ac.ke or samez@insightkenya.com
OR visit the conference’s website: www.drytoilet.org
Community Education Programme

The ESOK Community Education Programme is complementary to the institution's vision of providing leadership in the knowledge of ecotourism. This programme targets communities living in areas of high biodiversity and who have potential for and plan to initiate nature-based enterprises. The purpose is to disseminate information that will help these communities make decisions on how best to approach the utilization of resources found in their areas. The education programme also provides ESOK with opportunity to share knowledge on environment policy, to educate the communities on policies related to conservation, to enlighten them on the concept of a market economy, to reiterate the importance of ecotourism in conservation, to emphasize the need for a good CBO governance, to bring to the fore matters related to gender and culture, to encourage quality in design and development of ecotourism initiatives and to encourage support for conservation. All visited groups are entered into a database to ensure continuous communication.

The Community Education Programme is conducted through visitation to communities and holding barazas (meetings under the tree), through semi-structured workshops/seminars and through sharing of literature on conservation and tourism. Under the education programme, ESOK also conducts sessions for analyzing resources together with community groups to identify their potentials. One major lesson learnt from this program is that with awareness, comes expectation, and expectation leads to anxiety. The greatest challenge of this program therefore has been managing expectation of the affected communities.

Eco-rating Scheme

The ESOK Eco-rating scheme was launched towards the end of 2002. As of 31st October 2003, 20 facilities had sent their applications for Bronze rating, 8 had been rated and awarded Bronze Certification and 10 are pending approval in January 2004 while the eco-rating committee deferred two certifications pending clarification of some issues by the applicants. Some 25 others have requested for applications forms and are at different stages of completing the forms. Those rated facilities include Lewa Safari Camp, Campi Ya Kanzi, Malewa River Lodge, Tortillis Camp, Elsa’s Kopje, Olonana Camp, Sarova Shaba and Mombasa Serena Beach. We look forward to having more than 40 facilities rated by end of March 2004. Our challenge to the industry is for them to take advantage of Kenya’s position as the first African country to develop a certification program for tourist accommodation facilities, and exploit the opportunity by projecting this new face of Kenya’s tourism through increased participation in the program.

For ESOK, the challenge is to provide an efficient and effective support system to the scheme that will encourage facilities to raise environmental, economic and social performance standards beyond compliance with regulation and towards best practice.
ESOK attended Solarnet’s 8th Solar Day Expo that was held on the 20th to 21st September 2003 at the Nairobi Arboretum. This annual event is intended to showcase the status, potential, availability and uses of renewable energy technologies in Kenya to the public, media, policy makers and the donor community. More than 20 exhibitors were in attendance this year.

For first time visitors and those new to renewable energy technologies, the event achieved one of its goals: it was an eye opener. There was a lot of the familiar solar system accessories, including solar cookers, solar modules (panels), solar water heating systems, batteries, charge controllers, inverters, lights, TVs, fridges and other DC accessories. There were also other relatively new and/or novel technologies, including various varieties of small sized convenient and portable solar panels, solar lanterns, solar torches, pocketsize solar ‘safari packs’ for charging mobile phones, torches, radios, etc; a powered PC (Sundaia), a ‘solar shower’ (a black 12-litre bag fitted with a shower head) and solar caps (fitted with a miniature cooling fan).

The event was well attended with Solarnet putting past attendance at approximately 20,000 people for these 2-day events. Many participants could be seen talking business with the dealers of solar equipment. There was also a lot of interest in Equity Building Society and Kenya Commercial Bank stands, as people enquired on the various financial products on offer for acquiring solar energy. Students too were many, though it was evident that these, and most of the other participants, were from Nairobi and its environs. Some tertiary institutions also attended.

Although the exhibition aimed at representing general renewable energy technologies, it was evident that solar energy had priority, with other energy forms like wind and charcoal substitutes getting little attention. Briquette makers, for example, were only represented by Nyumbuni Women Group from Makueni who make briquettes from sawdust, leaves and waste papers. One would have liked to see other communities and their projects, in addition to seeing more on the other alternative energy sources. Additionally, there was a felt need for independent assessments on the standards and efficacy of some of the products, especially the new ones, to lend them more credibility and assure customers.

For more information, contact: Solarnet
Muringa Road, off Elgeyo Marakwet Road, P.O Box 76406-00508 Nairobi,
Tel: 254-020-572656/565027, Fax:254-020-571027,
Email:solarnet@iconnect.co.ke

I have been involved in many programs at ESOK, including gathering information, report writing, research, workshop organization, community outreach meetings and database updates. Working with a vague job description, and a teamwork arrangement that allows you to have ‘a finger in every pie’ is ideal for students and those eager to learn. Still, there are things that amaze me about ESOK. For instance, why, though relatively young and with such a lean secretariat, ESOK exudes a professional aura all around. ESOK is consulted regularly by environment and conservation organizations locally and abroad, by professors and students, by communities and tour operators, by journalists and laymen. One other thing that amazes me about ESOK is why membership continues to grow in an industry that is not doing very well. And talking of membership, I admit I am usually wary of joining membership organizations. I fear that many are bureaucratic oceans where people’s sacrificial contributions go to a salary here and an allowance there – never getting to the actual cause they contributed towards. At ESOK, trust me, all is accounted for.

Philip has been an intern at ESOK for one year and has a degree in environmental studies. He can be contacted at: Email - pireri77@yahoo.com
The Hotels and Restaurants Act (Cap.494) under regulations 2 and 7 of the Hotels and Restaurants (Classification of Hotels and Restaurants) regulations, empowers the Hotels and Restaurants Authority to classify hotels and restaurants in Kenya. These classes and standards were established for the first time in 1988.

Twelve years after the first classes and standards classification criteria were established, the Hotels and Restaurants Authority undertook a review of the criteria and revised classes of standards for the classification of hotels and restaurants. The new classes of standards were gazetted on 16th February 2001. The review was based on selected components of existing national and international standards but was tailored to address the critical issues faced by the tourism industry. Consideration was given to recent calls for increased corporate social responsibility and environment concern. The review was necessitated by the tourist market demands that need to be met, if Kenya as a tourist destination must compete favourably in the international tourist market place. The reviewed hotel standards are part of the qualitative measures designed to put Kenyan tourism product on the path to sustainability.

According to regulation 2 of the Hotels & Restaurants (Classification of hotels and Restaurants) Regulations Act 1988, hotels are divided into the following classes: Vacation Hotels, Town Hotels and Lodges. These are further divided into five classes denoted by stars with five stars being the highest class and one star being the lowest class. According to the said regulation a Vacation hotel is that which is located within or near a resort area and which the majority of clients are holiday-makers. A Town hotel is that which is located within or near urban centre where majority of clients are business travellers. A lodge is defined as accommodation that is located within or near natural habitat rich in flora and fauna and which majority of clients are leisure seekers. Each of these categories has special requirements that have to be met in order to be rated as five stars or one star. The star rating system is assumingly based on an international star rating system but has been domesticated to suite the local situation. Where international standards are a requirement, internationally ratified documents on various standards are used e.g. ISO 2002, WHO and/or internationally accepted traveller services.

The standards aim to raise the profile of tourism operation amongst consumers wishing to purchase a more environmentally and socially responsible product. They also aim to raise customer satisfaction levels and encourage repeat visitation. The classification allows the establishments to display their star rating, for marketing purposes, in their tourism brochures locally and internationally, allowing them to continually improve standards to higher levels of service excellence, in order to satisfy local and foreign consumers of the tourist product.

Clement Nyamongo is member of ESOK & Managing Director of Tourhot Management Consultants ltd - tourhot@avu.org