

Project Update: December 2015

In the last 12 months, we have made progress in meeting the project objectives as follows:

Objective 1: Developing a contextually relevant and operational definition for ecotourism:

When we first started interacting with the communities in the three selected villages, we realised that they saw 'ecotourism' as a distant concept that did not concern them. Many people equated the idea with outsiders coming into the area to buy land and establish luxury hotels. Accordingly, they feared tourism as a mechanism leading to misappropriation of resources and land, bringing with it uncontrolled presence of outsiders, with high risk of misbehaviour towards women. Our first task therefore, was to create awareness about ecotourism, its defining principle of integrating social, economic and environmental parameters in tourism activities, the emphasis on community participation and partnerships, and different models through which this can be achieved. We have made significant progress in this respect, evidenced by the coming together of 30 households to set up a tri-village group –Juhila Ecotourism Group. At the community level, dialogue is currently underway to further define ecotourism in terms of culturally appropriate and legally compliant activities. The role of the communities, industry and the forest department in gradually becoming clearer through these discussions. In the meanwhile, from discussions within the forest department it has become amply clear that there is no single conceptualisation of ecotourism and the role of communities and industry. Impressions range from full participation and control by communities, to a passive role for communities, merely as recipients of a share of revenue earned by the protected area through visitors' entry fees. This has important implications for the ways in which the ecotourism policy is interpreted and implemented.

Objective 2: Voluntary preparation of a buffer zone management plan including land use analysis, framework of incentives, and tourism management plan:

When we started the project, we had assumed that digitised images of the buffer zone and the three villages would be available. However this was not the case so we secured the satellite images for the buffer zone and the cadastral maps for the three villages and geo-referenced these. We have analysed land use and land cover on the basis of these maps and transect walks in all the three villages. In the coming weeks, we would like to share our findings in the villages and better understand the causes of degradation. Based on recommendation by the Juhila Ecotourism Group, we have identified areas of tourism interest, including three different routes suitable for walking/cycling. We are now in the process of developing a tourism business plan. We feel impatience setting in the villages, who would like to experience the benefits of tourism right away. We are therefore debating the possibility of bringing in a trial group of tourists to the area. Finally we have a preliminary understanding of the framework of incentives likely to influence conservation and ecotourism and are in the process of systematically compiling these and getting stakeholder feedback.

Objective 3: Partnerships among stakeholders and trust building:

This is work in progress and we have made some advancements. There is a willingness of some senior forest officials in the state of MP to support the ecotourism work and they have assured us of support. At the local level, just as we started to make headway with the forest officials, they were transferred out. We have now started the process afresh with the newly appointed staff. Where industry is concerned, there seems to be an in-principle agreement

to working with the communities but not with the forest department unless this is through a negotiated agreement. And communities are wary of both the forest department and the industry and would like us to mediate an agreement. We are planning on starting our tri-partite discussions in January 2016.