

## **Cultural Tourism in Botswana**

### **Community Participation in the Okavango Delta Tourism**

By Susan Keitumetse

Tourism in Botswana is dependent upon wildlife and wilderness, particularly those found in the Okavango Delta and Chobe regions in the North-West of the country. Due to this focus, business operators and the governments narrowly perceive of 'the environment' (biodiversity) as constituting only the wilderness and wildlife, excluding a heritage of human-environment interactions and local cultural values attached to the natural landscapes. The narrow approach creates a consumption pattern that alienates local communities and limits their meaningful participation in the Okavango Delta tourism.

Cultural tourism, in contrast, has potential to provide opportunities for local communities because it is a product local communities identify with at most levels. These alternative avenues for tourism are embedded in histories of human-environment interactions, archaeological records, folklore and folk-life, among others.

#### **Cultural tourism and protected areas**

The protected area model limits local communities' opportunities to engage their cultural landscapes in cultural tourism taking place in national parks. The Okavango Delta is an internationally recognised Ramsar site and Botswana's national parks and game reserves occupy approximately 17 percent of its land surface. Land allocation for tourism business in Botswana is further sub-divided into what is popularly known as Controlled Hunting Areas (CHAs), several of which are owned by local communities. However, most community members do not have sufficient investment capital and lack business and professional acumen to benefit from up-market tourism. The common practice is therefore to lease the once communal land to commercial operators.

The lease agreements of 15 years give temporary 'ownership' and control to the concessionaire (commercial operator). Therefore community members abstain from direct control and ownership of these cultural landscapes during this period. Cultural tourism can therefore curb the effects of total transfer of land management to a commercial operator hence sustaining a connection between cultural landscapes (CHAs) and communities during the lease periods. In that way locals get opportunities to interact with the international tourist at a more direct level, giving them exposure to tourism business needs. Moreover, since cultural authenticity is largely dependent on the local communities themselves, cultural tourism will enhance local participation almost by default.

#### **The Sankuyo Tshwaragano Management Trust**

The Sankuyo Tshwaragano Management Trust (STMT), one of the few successful community trusts in the Okavango Delta, provides an example of a community that is prepared to engage in a cultural tourism project but faces challenges of lack of expertise to execute the project, competition, and lack of marketing skills to attract tourists.

The Trust (STMT) was legally registered in 1995 and runs a lodge (Santawani) and a camping site (Kaziikini). It utilises wilderness and wildlife resources in wildlife management areas and one of the near-by national parks, Moremi. Accrued benefits from the management of wildlife resources benefit residents of the village of Sankuyo who are 'owners' of a concession area known as NG34. Now the Trust is embarking on a cultural village called Shandereka – “to showcase our living activities as opposed to a museum where one shows 'dead' objects”, explains Mr Mareja, operations manager. “We want to build a cultural village separate from the village so that we can separate business from people’s lives” says Mr O. Ditshupelo, STMT member. “The aim is to diversify our tourism product.”

“We want to embark on cultural tourism as a means to resuscitate the past and sustain our heritage”, says Mr Mareja. In general the STMT management define cultural heritage based on the following criteria: i) those aspects of their culture that used to be practiced and have since diminished completely; and ii) those cultural aspects that have since been grossly modified by modern approaches to life, e.g. girls' initiation into puberty (“ngwani” in Seyei language).

According to Mr Ndozi, a cultural village will promote culture in the form of dance, food, basketery, hunting aspects, initiation rituals, etc. “Archaeological heritage is not considered as part of the package”, says Mr Kobamelo, cultural village project manager. It is evident from the responses that cultural tourism can assist re-connect Delta communities with the Okavango Delta environment that is currently a tourism product. This can also address conflict of resources use between business operators and communities in some areas of the Okavango Delta.

However, it is also important to consider a sustainable approach as a proactive measure. “We are not going to exclude anything because we don't expect any disadvantage at the moment”, says Ms Mosa Ndozi. This can be problematic particularly since cultural heritage can extend to ordinary lives of the people. Training is therefore necessary to ensure sustainable development of cultural tourism and to develop a cultural package that is suitable for the current Botswana tourism strategy. The development of up-market museums and interpretation centres by business operators and the government is crucial in showcasing the histories of the Okavango Delta people and human-environment interaction aspect.

Tourists, as consumers of both natural and cultural heritage, also have the responsibility to demand cultural packages during their bookings or visits to wilderness and wildlife areas as a way of supporting local communities living around protected areas to benefit from these 'cultural' landscapes.

**Further Information: [www.santawanilodge.com](http://www.santawanilodge.com)**

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