



Perceptions of Tourism at Sacred Groves in Ghana and India

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Abstract

Sacred groves are forested sites that have cultural or spiritual significance. They exist around the world and represent a long-held tradition of community management of forests. While most sacred sites are not tourist destinations, tourism may represent a method to provide additional protection for sacred sites, including revenue to help with management and conservation. Tourism can celebrate the cultural aspects of the site, in the case of cultural heritage tourism, or ignore them as is often the case with mass tourism.

This paper presents the results of research in two countries with numerous sacred groves: Ghana and India. Ethnographic research was conducted at five sacred forests that allow tourism, in 2006 at two sites in Ghana, and in 2009 at three sites in the state of Meghalaya, India. The research focused on community attitudes toward the sacred forest and tourism. A qualitative, ethnographic research methodology was used, including semi-structured, open-ended interviews. A total of 103 residents were interviewed, 59 in Ghana and 44 in India. Three main research questions were explored: How do residents near a sacred grove perceive current and potential future tourism to the grove? How are residents and the sacred grove affected by tourism? What do residents envision for the future of the sacred grove? Case studies of each site are presented, as well as a comparison of the five sites.

Research in Ghana and India revealed sites with a range of stages of tourism development and levels of revenue sharing. Each site has a different history of local community and/or external support as well as approaches to manage tourists. A number of factors contribute to pressures on the groves, including cultural changes and natural resource demands. In some cases, economic incentives can link with traditional protection for successful natural resource conservation. Tourism represents both a possible benefit to groves through recognition and valuing of the site that can lead to funding and conservation support, but also a threat to sacred sites due to the negative consequences of possible over-use, such as solid waste disposal and ecological impacts. Support for traditional rituals, community resource management, and education programs associated with the groves is recommended. Culturally sensitive tourism guidelines and tourism profit sharing plans, developed with the input of sacred grove stakeholders and custodians, are needed. Visitor carrying capacity should be considered, as well as the possible implications of designating sacred groves as World Heritage Sites.

Biographical Sketch

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Introduction

Sacred groves are small forested areas that are protected due to their local cultural or spiritual meaning. These forests may be sites for religious practices or ceremonies, burial areas, and/or the location of key water sources (Castro 1990; Dorm-Adzobu et al. 1991; Lebbie & Freudenberger 1996; Tiwari et al. 1998; Chouin 2002; Malhotra et al. 2007; Sheridan & Nyamweru 2007; Ormsby & Bhagwat 2010). Sacred forests often have associated myths and taboos on the use of specific plants and hunting of certain species of animals within the area, as well as traditions that can serve a conservation role. Typically, sacred groves have limits on who can access them. For example, women are not allowed to enter some groves. In India, residents explained that some groves are only visited once per year for annual festivals. Ownership and management of the groves varies by site, within and between countries.

Many places in the world have sacred natural sites, but certain countries stand out for the number and age of sites, specifically Ghana and India. The country with the highest concentration of sacred groves is India, but these are disappearing due to cultural changes and pressure to use the natural resources within the groves (Chandrakanth et al. 2004). Ghana, with over 1,900 sacred groves, has a long history of community protection of sacred sites for cultural reasons (Ntiamao-Baidu 1995). These sites are commonly referred to as fetish groves and may contain a shrine or serve as a burial ground (Amoako-Atta 1995). Local residents often believe that sacred forests are inhabited by ancestor spirits or a god, and many large groves contain a smaller area that is most sacred and may contain a shrine. In both Ghana and India, the groves are protected to respect the god that dwells in the forest.

Some sacred sites, such as Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary in Ghana, are officially government-protected sites, but the majority of sacred forests are culturally protected, as locally managed lands that are vulnerable to the changing values and practices of the people living around them. Taboos on the hunting of particular species, such as certain primates, offer a form of protection from the harvest of wild meat for personal consumption or the bushmeat trade (Ntiamao-Baidu 1987; Lingard et al. 2003). Many sacred groves are the only remaining fragments of intact forest habitat, which is surrounded by farms, pastures and houses, and therefore may serve an important role in biodiversity conservation (Campbell 2005). Pressures on these forest remnants come from farming, bushfires, plant and wood collection, and hunting.

Sacred groves have local significance. They may not be known to people outside the region, and the location of sacred sites may be kept secret to avoid harm to the grove. A small number of groves are tourist destinations, and although tourists are allowed to visit these sites, it is usually forbidden for them to enter the most sacred core of the grove. Increasingly, sacred sites are being declared as World Heritage Sites to provide additional protection through international recognition and funding opportunities (Schaaf & Rossler 2010). This designation draws more conservation support for the site, but also can lead to increased tourism pressures.

Ecotourism is a promising method by which the demands of both conservation and local development can be met. If implemented as 'true' ecotourism, the concept diverges greatly from potentially destructive mass tourism that can be harmful to both culture and natural resources (Asiedu, 2002; McKercher & du Cros 2002). In general, ecotourism can provide incentives for people to conserve a resource by providing an alternative and/or supplementary means of livelihood (Furze et al., 1996; Honey, 2008). The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and Ceballos-Lascurain (1996: 20) define ecotourism as:

environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present), that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.

Over the last two decades, environmentalists and scientists have touted ecotourism as a valid tool for conservation (Boo 1990; Ceballos-Lascurain 1996; Fennel 2003). Many believe that if people can benefit financially from enterprises that depend on natural areas, they will be more likely to conserve and use resources sustainably (Ormsby & Mannle 2006; Gurung & Seeland 2008). Yet, there should be caution with this concept.

Unchecked ecotourism can disturb wild animal populations (Bouton & Frederick 2003; Ellenburg et al. 2006), degrade the environment (Schelhas et al. 2002), and lead to the loss of traditional lands and food, as well as create social conflict in areas that attract ecotourism (Southgate 2006; Stronza & Gordillo 2008). Local residents usually do not have enough start-up capital to finance ecotourism operations and thus large operators have little competition (Yu et al. 1997; Kontogeorgopoulos 2004). External operators often do not distribute profits evenly on the local level so there is no clear transfer of revenues to create the links between conservation and livelihoods (Walpole & Goodwin 2000). Privatization can marginalize locals from development thereby excluding them from potential revenue streams (Bianchi 2004). Even when tourism revenue reaches the local community level it is often unequally distributed among residents and may strain power relationships in communities (Belksy 1999; Duffy 2006; Holladay & Ormsby 2011). These risks need to be considered when culturally protected sacred groves are opened to tourism.

Cultural heritage tourism can be considered a subset of ecotourism, since it may focus more on the cultural dimensions of a site and less on its ecological aspects. Silberberg (1995: 361) defined cultural tourism as “visits by persons from outside the host community motivated wholly or in part by interest in historical, artistic, scientific or lifestyle/heritage offerings of a community, region, group or institution.” It has the potential to generate more interest in the conservation of sacred sites and support for traditional culture and beliefs (McKercher & du Cros 2002). Sacred groves represent a place where tourists can experience and learn about both ecological and cultural aspects of a conservation area.

This study investigated resident attitudes toward sacred forests and tourism at five sacred groves; two in Ghana and three in India. Research focused on the following questions: How do residents near a sacred grove perceive current and potential future tourism to the grove? How are residents and the sacred grove affected by tourism? What do residents envision for the future of the sacred grove?

Methods

Research was conducted at two sacred groves in Ghana from June to August, 2006, and at three sacred groves in India from October to December, 2009. A qualitative, ethnographic research approach was used, including interviews, participant observation, and focus groups (Weiss 1994; Morgan 1997; Krueger & Casey 2000; Creswell 2003; Bernard 2011). Using the approach of participant observation, guides were observed as they interacted with tourists at research sites.

Interviews were conducted with residents of five communities near sacred groves to investigate the following research questions:

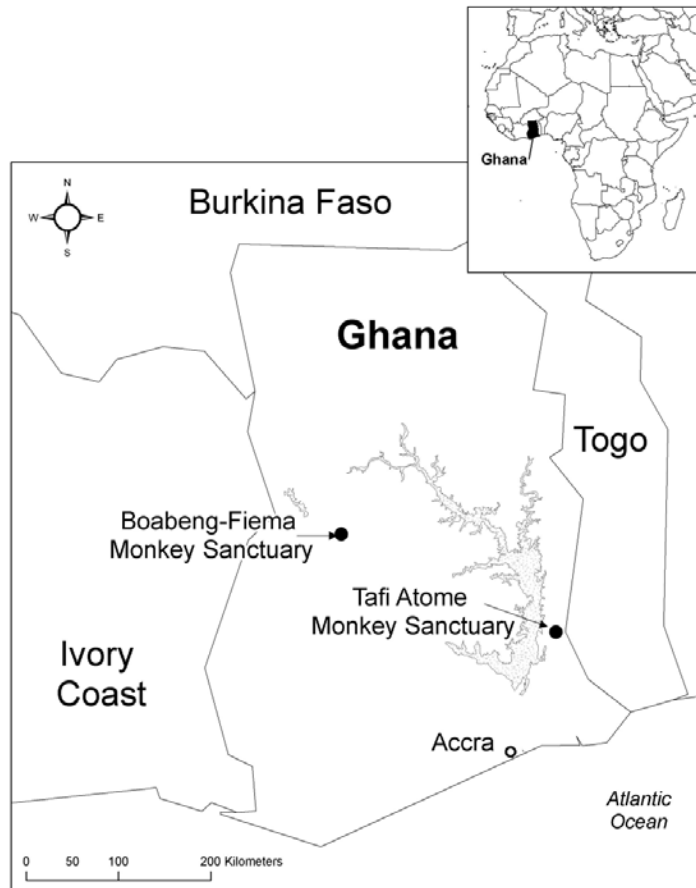
1. How do residents near a sacred grove perceive current and potential future tourism to the grove?
2. How are residents and the sacred grove affected by tourism?
3. What do residents envision for the future of the sacred grove?

In addition, this research investigated how sacred sites in Ghana and India are different in terms of tourism development and community involvement.

Semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with a translator and using a questionnaire. First, a map was created of each community. Interviewees were selected using a variety of approaches – key informant, snowball sampling, and stratified sampling by village neighborhood and by occupation (Babbie 1990). Initially, key informants such as the grove manager, community leader and/or temple committee member were approached for permission to conduct research and to seek a person with whom to visit each grove. In some cases, focus groups were held. In order to obtain a variety of perspectives, residents representing a number of occupations were sought, including farmer, priest, teacher, and herbalist. In particular, people who might use or manage the grove and who are involved with the tourism industry were interviewed. An attempt was made to get an even gender distribution of interviewees, but this was not achieved in every community due to the availability of interviewees and timing of the interviews.

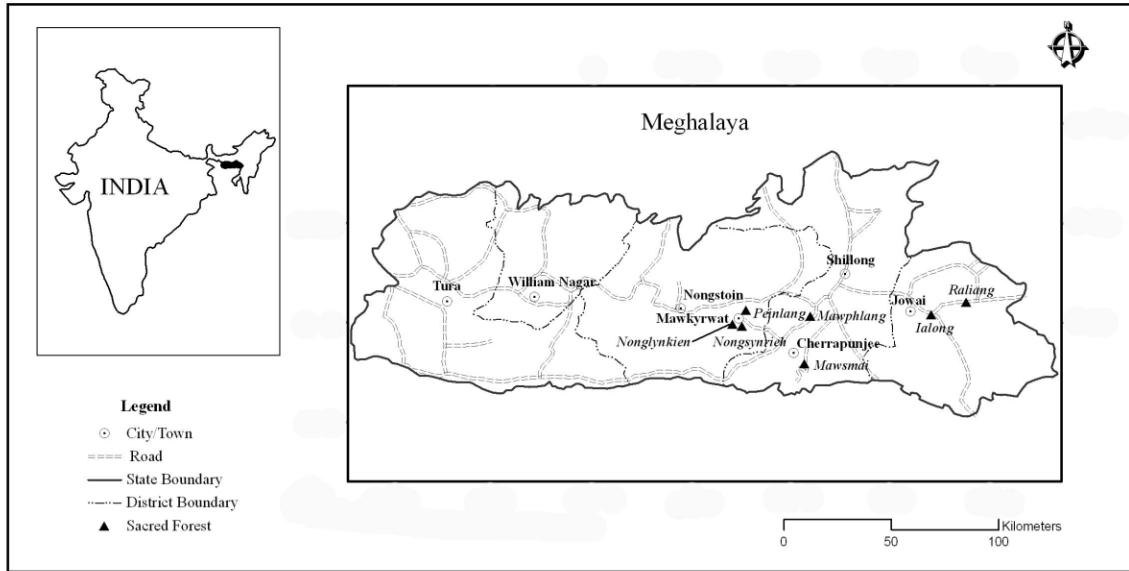
During June and July, 2006, working with a local translator, 33 residents (17 men and 16 women) of Tafi Atome, Ghana, were interviewed (Figure 1). Residents speak Ewe. Group interviews were conducted with the Tafi Atome Tourism Management Committee during and at the end of the research period to obtain feedback. In July and August, 2006, 26 residents of Boabeng (15 men and 11 women), and 29 residents of Fiema (13 men and 16 women) were interviewed. These residents speak Twi, and in both locations, a variety of community members were interviewed, including Tourism Committee participants, elected officials, sanctuary employees, storeowners, and religious leaders.

Figure 1: Location of Study Sites in Ghana



Research was conducted in Meghalaya, India, from October, 2009, to December, 2009. During the research period, 43 interviews were conducted with residents (24 male, 19 female) of three villages near sacred forests in Meghalaya that are also tourism destinations: Mawphlang, Mawsmal, and Ialong (Figure 2). Residents of Mawphlang and Mawsmal, located in the Khasi Hills District, speak the Khasi language. Residents of Ialong, in the Jaintia Hills District, speak the Jaintia language (Anthropological Survey of India 1994).

Figure 2. Study Sites in Meghalaya, India



Results

A detailed description of each of the five research sites is presented, followed by a comparison of the sites.

Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary and Cultural Village, Ghana

In Ghana, research was conducted at two sacred groves: Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary and Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary.

Tafi Atome is a village with over 1,000 residents located on the eastern side of Lake Volta in the Volta region. For centuries, traditional rules protected the Tafi Atome sacred forest and the natural resources it housed, including sacred mona monkeys that were taboo to hunt. As introduced religion began to erode traditional beliefs (a local Christian priest supported hunting monkeys), the incentive to protect the forest and monkeys was weakened. Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary and Cultural Village (TAMS) (Figure 3) was officially established as a tourism site in 1996 with the help of a non-governmental organization to protect the subspecies of true mona monkeys (*Cercopithecus mona mona*) living there (Ormsby & Edelman 2010; Ormsby 2012). A festival to celebrate the monkeys takes place every February, managed by the fetish priest who kills a goat and pours libations at the forest shrine.

Figure 3. Sign at entrance to Tafi Atome



The sanctuary is approximately 28 hectares in size and is run by a community Tourism Management Committee that employs four local guides and a gift shop manager. Tafi Atome received approximately 2,850 visitors in 2005: 1,820 foreign, and 1,030 Ghanaian. Some revenues from tourism at Tafi Atome are shared with the community and quarterly revenues are calculated and posted in the sanctuary Visitors Center.

Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary, Ghana

Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary (BFMS) is located in the Brong-Ahafo region, Ghana. The sanctuary is named after two villages, Boabeng and Fiema, which each have an associated sacred forest. The Boabeng forest is the one that is visited by tourists. The population of Boabeng is approximately 1,000, and that of Fiema is about 1,800. The core sanctuary area is 36 hectares in size but the official sanctuary size is 85 hectares, which includes forest fragments in a farm matrix around the core sanctuary area (Campbell 2005). The core forested area of the Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary has a well-developed trail system for use by tourists as well as researchers. The Boabeng grove contains a sacred area where ceremonies and rituals are performed. Both Boabeng and Fiema have separate annual yam festivals that also celebrate the monkeys, although according to some interviewees the intensity of the festivals has diminished in recent years.

BFMS was legally recognised in 1975 to protect two species of primates, the black and white colobus monkeys (*Colobus vellerosus*) and Campbell's mona monkeys (*Cercopithecus campbelli lowei*). The sanctuary is managed by government employees of Ghana's Wildlife Division: an officer-in-charge, wildlife officer, technical assistant, and sanctuary guide. There is also a community Sanctuary Management Committee that employs an additional sanctuary guide.

Tourism rates for BFMS have dramatically increased over time, from 150 tourists in 1991 to nearly 6,500 in 2002 (Fargey 1992; Densu 2003), and 10,000 in 2005 (T. Dassah pers. comm., July 29, 2006). As of August, 2006, information about revenues from tourism at Boabeng-Fiema

Monkey Sanctuary was not shared with the community, but according to interviewees, revenues were allocated quarterly, with some tourism income given to the community.

Mawphlang Sacred Grove, India

The village of Mawphlang is located in the Khasi Hills District and is a large community of approximately 3,400 residents. It is about 25 kilometers southwest of Shillong, the capital of the state of Meghalaya in northeast India. Mawphlang has one main sacred grove that is approximately 77 hectares. The forest is bordered by farmland on rolling hills and a large grassy area that is a popular location for leisure activities such as sports and picnicking. Visitors even come to picnic from the surrounding areas, including Shillong, a one-hour drive away. The grove is accessed by a road with an entry gate where visitors are required to pay an entrance fee. Currently there are several footpaths and a cart path within the sacred grove – which is bounded by community farms and forests – and residents use these paths to access their farms. Some community residents wash their clothes in a small stream that flows through the forest, and in the past, residents collected drinking water from the grove.

Rituals are performed in association with the grove, although some residents were unaware of the continuing tradition of the rituals and others were unsure of how often the rituals occur. Residents said the rituals are conducted when needed, such as in times of plague or conflict. There is a strong belief that a deity called *labasa*, which takes the form of a tiger or a leopard, inhabits the grove and offers protection for the community as the patron god of villages (Nongkynrih 2007). Protecting the grove is a form of respect for the deity, who protects the village and its people from harm. Resource extraction from the grove is quite limited. It is a common belief that if someone violates a taboo of the grove, they will fall ill and even die. The grove is under local management by the *lyngdoh* (traditional priest), *myntri* (government minister), and the *rangbah shnong* (headman of the local area). The annual rate of visitation to Mawphlang is estimated to be 600 foreign tourists and 3000 domestic tourists (T. Lyngdoh pers. comm., August 2, 2011).

Mawsmmai Sacred Grove, India

Mawsmmai is a small village located in the Khasi Hills District, approximately 45 kilometers from Shillong and 6 kilometers south of Cherrapunjee (locally known as Sohra). The region around Sohra has many resource extraction activities, ranging from small-scale coal mining to stone quarrying and lime production from quarried stone. The main sacred forest associated with the village is called *Mawlong Syiem*. There is a sharp boundary edge between the forest and the surrounding landscape, which is predominantly grassland. The sacred forest of *Mawlong Syiem* contains the Mawsmmai cave, a well-known tourist attraction (Sanyal 2005) and is estimated to be 122 hectares in size (pers. comm. D. Syiemlieh, December 16, 2009).

Interviews in October and December, 2009, with residents of Mawsmmai revealed that the history of the sacred forest is no longer well-known. Most residents know that the site was protected by the village ancestors; current residents mainly respect the forest to follow the wishes of their ancestors. The forest is also valued for its ecosystem service in terms of watershed protection. A stream that originates from the forest is an important source of drinking water for the village of Mawsmmai, a value that is recognized by residents who were interviewed.

The rituals that were once conducted annually in the sacred forest are no longer performed. Some residents attribute this to the conversion to Christianity of most residents,

saying there is no longer anyone to perform the rituals. Residents interviewed in October, 2009, could not remember when the last rituals were performed.

In the past, it was forbidden to take any resources from the grove. Currently, people are not supposed to cut trees, although the collection of medicinal plants is allowed with prior permission from the headman. The *Mawlong Syiem* grove is managed by members of the village, specifically by a committee made up of community authorities including four village leaders. There are plans to create more tourist paths within the grove. The annual rate of tourists visiting this site is estimated to be 7,500.

Ialong Sacred Grove, India

The region of the Ialong community in Jaintia Hills District, approximately 60 km east of Shillong, is known for its coal mines. The roads are full of coal trucks, and surplus coal is conspicuously stockpiled by the side of the road. The region's hilly topography has many secondary pine forests. The sacred forests of this region are relatively well-preserved, and many people still follow the traditional religion, *Niam Tre*. As one resident of Ialong said about their sacred forests, "This is part of our identity – it helps preserve our identity."

The village of Ialong is easily accessed, being just 6 km (about a 20 minute drive) from the economic center town of Jowai (population approximately 25,000). Ialong is an established tourist spot, with an eco-park that was launched in 1997 by the Forest Department, and a prominent sign along the main road. The community has established an Ialong Tourism Society and three tourist cottages that will provide a place for guests to stay. There is a gate through which tourists access the eco-park, where an admission fee is collected.

Ialong has four sacred groves: *Khloo Blai Phlong*; *Khloo Ryngkaw* (or *Rkaw*); *Khloo Myntang*; and *Thanglipdang*. The eco-park contains one of the community's most sacred groves (*Khloo Ryngkaw*), which has been fenced to keep visitors out. It is within this grove that annual chicken sacrifices take place to initiate the planting season and to protect the village from harm such as diseases. According to residents of Ialong, there is a strict taboo on taking anything from the sacred forests or any inappropriate behavior such as going to the bathroom or spitting in the forest. As residents said, "You cannot even pluck a leaf or pick up a stick from the ground." If anyone were to break this taboo, sickness would befall them and there is a possible fine.

A paved road has been constructed to access the eco-park. This road project generated controversy in the community as it went through the large sacred forest, *Khloo Blai Phlong*. Some of the trees were cut to create this road and to make a parking area, reducing the size of the sacred forest. In addition, parts of this forest have been converted to less strictly protected community forest, reducing the total size of the Ialong sacred forest (*Khloo Blai Phlong*) from 30 hectares in 2003 (Upadhaya et al. 2003), to an estimated 10 hectares (K. Upadhaya pers. comm. December 17, 2009; Ormsby 2011).

Comparison of Research Sites

The five study sites represent a wide range of stages of tourism development, including the number of annual visitors, the size of the sacred grove, and the type of site management (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparison of Study Sites

Site	Size	Entrance Fee	Number of Visitors	Guide Required?	Grove Manager	Number of Interviewees
Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary (TAMS), Ghana	28 hectares	approx. \$3 U.S.	2,850 (in 2005)	Yes	Community	33
Boabeng Fiema Monkey Sanctuary (BFMS), Ghana	85 hectares	approx. \$2.60 US	10,000 (in 2005)	Yes	Government (with community management committee)	26
Mawphlang sacred grove, India	77 hectares	approx. \$2.40 US	3,500	Yes	Local committee	21
Mawsmmai sacred grove, India	122 hectares	10 rupees (\$0.22 US)	7,500	No	Local committee	11
Ialong sacred grove, India	10 hectares	10 rupees (\$0.22 US)	unknown	No	Local and regional committee	12

In response to the question, “What do you think about tourism to the sacred grove?”, 89.5% of respondents in Meghalaya, India, expressed positive opinions about tourism to sacred groves; 10.5% were neutral, and no one expressed negative sentiments. As one Mawsmmai resident said, “I am happy for people to come to know the place.” Similarly, a Mawphlang resident expressed, “People shouldn’t just hear about the sacred forest, they should come see for themselves.” Residents are looking for economic opportunities through initiatives such as tourism.

Of the five research sites, Boabeng-Fiema Monkey Sanctuary (BFMS), Ghana, has by far the highest tourism rate and many tourists come to visit as a day trip. There was speculation by interviewees about what happens to income from tourism, representing a potential source of conflict regarding the sanctuary. Due to the tourism success of the sanctuary, six neighboring villages are proposing establishment of their own forest protection in the form of corridors connecting to BFMS. Due to the taboo on hunting, the populations of monkeys are growing in the sanctuary (Saj et al., 2006), and in recent years, monkeys have been observed in increasing numbers in neighboring villages due to primate population growth and dispersal. However, there may not be enough tourism demand to support these new initiatives at multiple locations.

At all five research sites, residents were asked if they personally benefit from tourism. The general responses were that most residents do not perceive a personal (monetary) benefit from tourism to the sacred grove. Specifically, at Boabeng Fiema Monkey Sanctuary (Ghana), slightly more residents (55%) said they did not personally benefit from tourism; at Mawsmmai sacred grove (India), 90% of residents said they do not personally benefit; at Mawphlang sacred

grove (India), 76% of residents said they do not get a personal benefit; and at Ialong sacred grove (India), 78% of residents said they have no personal benefit from tourism to the sacred grove. However, many residents in all sites mentioned community or non-monetary benefits from the groves, such as road improvements, cultural exchange, and development of the area in general. The exception to this pattern was at Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary, where 65% of residents said they have a personal benefit, in ways that ranged from direct employment as a guide to shop owners who sell to tourists, and parents whose children's school fees are paid by visitors to the sanctuary. It is important that local representatives are actively involved with financial matters regarding tourism at sacred groves, as is the case at Tafi Atome in Ghana.

At all five research sites, residents were asked "What do you think should happen to the grove in the future?" No mention of tourism was made at two locations – Mawsmi and Ialong. But in the three sites with the highest rates of tourism, some residents did have comments about the future of the grove that related to tourism. For example, four respondents at BFMS had sentiments as expressed by one resident who wished to, "increase the forest, so more visitors will come." Five other respondents said, "pave the road to allow more tourists to come." Currently the road to BFMS from the largest nearby town is a dirt road. In contrast, one resident's hope for the future was "a well-conserved forest with no human activities." At Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary, two residents said that tourists are coming to the village, which is good, but that the community should have a bus for the tourists. Currently, transportation from the main road to get to Tafi Atome is unreliable, and only by hired taxi. At Mawphlang, the most well-known sacred forest in the state of Meghalaya, one resident wanted to make the "grove more beautiful and more tourists will come." Another resident said about the grove, "If possible, it should be expanded so more and more people will come to know about it."

Discussion

Results indicate that participation in management, the level of community involvement in the tourism project, and tourism profit sharing are key to the effectiveness of the forest's protection. Tafi Atome represents the potential of community-based ecotourism to combine the objectives of community development and natural resource conservation of sacred forests. The community-run Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary illustrates how the introduction of ecotourism and the economic incentives that follow can link with traditional protection for successful natural resource conservation. However, tourists expect to see the sacred monkeys for a photo opportunity and put pressure on sanctuary guides to attract monkeys by feeding them; the practice of feeding monkeys does not support any goals of nature conservation or link to the cultural history of the site.

To facilitate positive tourism development at the community level, transparency in revenue sharing is needed. Tafi Atome has succeeded at publicizing tourism revenues so far. With external funding entering communities from tourism and for tourism development it will be an ongoing challenge to keep the lines of communication open and avoid speculation and misunderstandings about the allocation of funds. There is a need for education and information sharing to explain how income is used in each community involved with tourist visits to sacred forests and how funding assistance is allocated for community development projects. A similar situation is being experienced at Mawphlang sacred grove in India. In both Tafi Atome and Boabeng-Fiema, Ghana, some residents did not make the direct connection between village projects, such as electrification, road, and school improvements, and the fact that these benefits

are in part funded by tourism revenues or, in the case of Tafi Atome, by direct benefactors who were former visitors to the sanctuary.

Can tourism be compatible with conservation at sacred groves? In the case of the sacred groves of Ialong, it remains to be seen whether tourism is compatible, even though the most sacred area of the grove in Ialong has been fenced to protect it. The construction of the eco-park has already resulted in a reduction in the size of the sacred forest and a change in forest composition. The area was made more recreational through the creation of cement walking paths and the fencing of the overall park area (as well as the smaller sacrifice area). In addition, the Forest Department has planted some exotic tree species in the park. Unfortunately, tourists may not respect the conservation tradition of the sacred forests, and higher tourism rates may result in more rubbish in the area and less respect for the forest. For example, in many of the groves of India, after festival days, or in groves with tourism, rubbish is left in the groves. This could be addressed if there was an active guides association or community group in charge of tourism management.

Opening a culturally protected sacred grove to tourism can cause a shift in the cultural significance of the site as well as an increase in the environmental impacts on the site (Anyinam 1999). At Tafi Atome, access to the core sacred fetish grove is still forbidden. In contrast, at Boabeng-Fiema tourists are allowed to enter the core grove. Because tourists might be unaware of the ceremonies associated with shrines in groves and the appropriate behavior in the most sacred areas of groves, the core groves should be kept sacred, with limited access, to protect each grove well into the future. At Ialong, residents have fenced the small, most sacred part of the grove, thereby preventing tourists from entering this sacred space within the larger grove.

Efforts to increase tourism may result in the loss of cultural traditions associated with a sacred site. Mawsmal's tourism focuses on the cave within the sacred grove, but there is no signage that explains to visitors that they are entering a sacred grove when they go to see the cave. Tourists visiting the cave have been observed to litter or otherwise negatively impact the grove, thus the cave tourism poses challenges to the preservation of the sacred grove. In addition, online promotions of the Mawsmal cave do not mention anything about the surrounding sacred forest (e.g. Sanyal 2005). Due to the widespread litter already present in the cave area from current tourists new path development in the Mawsmal grove may not be advisable or compatible with forest conservation.

What guidelines are needed for tourism at sacred forests or groves? Three issues to consider are visitor carrying capacity, whether visitors should be required to be accompanied by a local guide, as well as where visitors should be allowed to go within the grove. During my focus group research with the Tafi Atome Management Committee, I asked the committee members how many tourists they would like to visit the community and sacred grove. The group replied that there is no upper limit to the number of visitors they would like to have. This seems unsustainable due to the small size of the sanctuary and sacred grove (28 hectares), as well as the limited number of trained guides and guest facilities. For sacred sites tourism, it would be ideal to determine the visitor carrying capacity and hold to this limit to minimize potential negative impacts – both cultural and ecological – to the site. Three of the five research sites require that tourists visiting the sacred grove be accompanied by a guide. In order for sites to remain sacred and to minimize negative impacts and bring economic benefits to local communities, guides should be required for tourists to all sacred sites.

Can culturally sensitive tourism happen at sacred sites? How are the cultural elements of sacred groves incorporated in the tourism experience? Cultural protocols for visitation to sacred

sites are needed (Johnston, 2006). Tafi Atome is called a “cultural village,” and is the only one of the research sites that celebrates the cultural aspects of the site and promotes this to tourists through optional activities such as a family homestay and evening drumming and dancing events. Ialong hosts a “Discover Jaintia” festival with aspects of Jaintia culture, but there is no connection to sacredness or the sacred grove at the festival. In addition, the event generates litter and involves an activity (e.g. consuming alcohol) that is typically taboo in sacred sites. Marketing efforts should promote sites to target culturally sensitive tourists and manage tourists’ expectations, for example, so they know that some sacred sites will be off-limits to visitation (McKercher & du Cros 2002). The IUCN Specialist Group on the Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas (CSVPA) developed guidelines for protected area managers to deal with sacred sites (Wild & McLeod 2008; CSVPA 2011). Regarding tourism, the guidelines urge that, “activities must be culturally appropriate, respectful and guided by the value systems of custodian communities” (p. 24).

Places trying to become designated as a World Heritage Site need to consider mechanisms to minimize tourism impacts before they are listed (McKercher & du Cros 2002). One outcome of the 1992 World Heritage Convention was the recognition of cultural landscapes as a category of heritage for listing. As of January 2012, 66 cultural landscapes had been designated World Heritage Sites, including the sacred Mijikenda Kaya forests of Kenya (listed in 2008) and the Sulaiman-Too Sacred Mountain in Kyrgyzstan (in 2009). Schaaf and Rossler (2010: 162) note about these sacred sites in Kenya and Kyrgyzstan, “inclusion on the World Heritage List enhanced their protection, but the local elders are now facing new challenges including very limited resources and pressure for access to these forest and mountain areas by visitors and tourists.” Sacred groves could benefit from the recognition gained by being declared a World Heritage Site. This may provide recognition within the country where the forest is located, as well as international attention, and funding support. However, tourism companies may target newly designated World Heritage Sites, resulting in higher visitation levels and associated impacts (Johnston 2006). Therefore, sacred grove managers should take into consideration and plan for tourism management, including training of guides and setting visitor carrying capacities.

Other issues to consider include what kinds of interactions should occur with visitors and when is photography appropriate. For photography, it is essential that tourists follow the policy of prior informed consent, asking permission before taking photographs of people, or at cultural events such as festivals (Johnston 2006). In India, there is often a camera fee at tourist sites and photography at some festivals is not permitted at all.

It is important that the integrity of cultural ceremonies be upheld (Johnston 2006). A cultural or heritage asset represents the uncommodified or raw asset that is identified for its intrinsic values. A cultural tourism product, on the other hand, represents “an asset that has been transformed or commodified specifically for tourism consumption” (McKercher & du Cros 2002: 8). Johnston (2006) cautions against commodifying culture, and as currently marketed and implemented, the Discover Jaintia event risks being a tourism commodification experience. In some cases, tourists can interfere with ceremonies, intentionally or unintentionally, and can also exhibit inappropriate behavior. How can this be avoided? Prior informed consent is recommended, such as asking sacred site managers for permission to take photographs, or for tourist presence at festivals.

It is likely that sacred groves, which are often the only remaining natural areas in many regions, will be under increasing tourism pressure in the coming decades. It is therefore crucial

that all stakeholders who are involved with sacred groves continue to participate in grove governance and decision-making regarding tourism initiatives, ranging from non-consumptive use to management of the forests by grove custodians. It is only in this way that these important biocultural landscapes will be preserved in the future.

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