



Online Ethics Center
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

Case: Ecotourism

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Description

This case explores a variety of ethical issues concerning ecotourism. The setting is a fictitious lodge in Botswana's Okavango Delta, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Mini-vignettes offer three perspectives. Nuru is a poor Botswanan who lives near the lodge and would like to be involved in its activities. Rachel, the lodge's new manager, has just come to the position from working as a field biologist specializing in African elephants with Conservation International (CI), a non-profit dedicated to worldwide conservation of ecosystems.

Abstract

This biodiversity case is part of a larger collection of Life and Environmental Science ethics education resource sets on ethics of emerging biotechnologies, big data in the life sciences, human enhancement, and biodiversity. Doctoral students from Arizona State University's Center for Biology and Society developed the resources under the direction of Karin Ellison and Joseph Herkert between 2014 and 2019.

Body

Setting

Okavango Game Lodge lies on the outskirts of the world-famous Okavango Delta in Botswana, Africa. A UNESCO World Heritage site, this delta is unique because it floods during the dry season in what would be an otherwise arid landscape. Thus, the flooded delta draws a remarkable number of wildlife from all over southern Africa, including cheetahs, rhinoceros, lions, zebras, giraffes, and elephants.

When the lodge was built in 1980, environmental impact was a minor concern. In recent years, however, the lodge has shifted its focus to eco-tourism, or tourism that is directed toward enjoying the natural environment while supporting conservation efforts. The redirection came in part from the realization that the lodge depends on the delta's wildlife as a draw for tourists. In addition, lodge managers were intrigued by a national certification program that provides incentives and guidelines for the development of eco-tourism lodges (Botswana Tourism Organisation 2013).

Nuru

Nuru lives in a small village near the Okavango Game Lodge. Her people, the Hambukushu, are one of the many groups indigenous to the area, each with a distinct culture and language. The Hambukushu are known for their mixed economy of agriculture, fishing, hunting, and pastoralism (Bock 1998). Nuru is an accomplished blanket weaver, and she also works with her husband and their four children on their small sorghum farm. Despite these means of income, Nuru and her family are living below the poverty line in Botswana, like most of their neighbors. Nuru, her family, and the community are excited by the expansion of ecotourism in the area because of the potential for increased job opportunities and development.

As required by Botswana's government for any ecotourism venture, the village must elect a Community Trust, a board of trustees who mediate between the village and the lodge to ensure equitable distribution of benefits. Several large-share landowners step up to the plate; they are well-known in the community, all older men, long-time residents, and among the most affluent. Many of them own larger parcels of land closer to the center of town or near new roads and see the potential to develop shops, restaurants, and services that benefit from the influx of tourists.

Nuru's small farm lies several kilometers from the lodge, the town, and the newest roads, and thus does not benefit from such development. But the Community Trust notifies her that as part of the Okavango Game Lodge's ecotourism initiative, Nuru and other community members are invited to sell their handmade crafts in the Craft Market during the high visitation season, May through December. Nuru also notices that members of her own community who already have lucrative jobs as shop owners, small-hoteliars, or safari-managers (most often men) are securing jobs at the Okavango Game Lodge in the kitchens, as waiters, and as cleaners.

One day, Nuru sees a job posting for safari guides and wildlife educators at the lodge. Although she has no formal training, Nuru has been living and farming in the delta region her whole life, so she decides she has the know-how to perform the job duties. This could be her first chance at a steady income to support her family.

Rachel

The lodge's manager, Rachel Jacobs, is a South African biologist with a lifelong passion for wildlife. She completed her bachelor's degree in Conservation Biology and her master's degree in Wildlife Ecology and became a field biologist with a focus on African elephants with Conservation International (CI), a non-profit dedicated to worldwide conservation of ecosystems. After 5 years working throughout many southern African countries with CI, she learned that Okavango Game Lodge was seeking a new manager to direct an eco-tourism overhaul of their safari and educational programs, as well as their facilities.

She applied for and accepted the job, seeing it as the perfect opportunity to apply her passion for wildlife and conservation in the hotel and game-lodge industry that she believes is too often at the heart of many human-wildlife conflicts. In her work with CI, she often confronted lodges and hotels over issues with over-exposed wildlife, development, and pollution. Safari and trophy hunting programs would sometimes allow guests to come too close, too often to wildlife. And lodge facilities come with a host of infrastructure projects that increase the flow of visitors, and thus also increase amounts of waste and pollution, further development, and wildlife exposure.

Upon arriving to the lodge, Rachel immediately went to work on initiatives to help the lodge reach their new environmental and sustainability goals. However, she was

presented with two concerns.

First, to initiate and sustain improvements, Rachel would like to secure investments from American developers. With such investments, the lodge could employ electric vehicles and solar-powered boats, build the infrastructure to recycle grey-water, and manage their own waste recycling plant. Through these efforts, they could cut their waste footprint by as much as 85%. But to recruit top investors, Rachel would need to agree to share a margin of the lodge's profits with the investors, cutting from the revenue that could otherwise enter the local economy.

In addition, Rachel faces a hiring conundrum. To improve the lodge's wildlife conservation and educational programming, Rachel would like to hire more safari guides and wildlife educators. As she pages through applications, she recognizes some old friends. A handful of her colleagues from university and CI have applied to be safari guides and wildlife educators, and Rachel believes their world-class expertise could inspire and impress guests of the lodge. But she also notes a dozen applications from members of the nearby Hambukushu village. One application, Nuru's, catches Rachel's eye as the only woman from the village who has applied to be a safari guide. Nuru could be the first woman villager employed in such a position. This excites Rachel, but still, can Nuru's application compete with an expert hire from Conservation International? In general, she wonders, would village members know enough to lead safaris? The lodge already hosts a twice weekly fair for village members to sell crafts to tourists, and several village members work in the kitchens and in housekeeping. Perhaps that is enough.

Mahendra

Mahendra, an animal behavior specialist who studies elephants, hails from Massachusetts, United States. In addition to being a well-known expert in elephant behavior and social structures, he is an avid traveler and photographer. Mahendra is planning a trip to one of his regular field sites, the Okavango Delta. In fact, the largest population of elephants in the world (~130,000) migrate to the flooded plains each year (UNESCO 2017). This July, he will be bringing his wife and teenage daughter for the first time so he will be staying in a hotel or lodge rather than his usual "roughin' it" conditions. As Mahendra begins to plan his trip, he reviews his accommodation options.

First, there is an affordable option. Sanctuary Inn is in the town of Maun, the closest city to the delta. The Inn is staffed and owned by long-time residents of Maun. They provide breakfast and modest amenities at a rate less than half what the large game lodges charge. Mahendra would need to take a daily car or jumper-plane to field sites, but he could probably afford more days in the field staying at a cheaper inn.

Dreaming, Mahendra also looks up rates at the Royal Safari Camp. This one is located right in the heart of the delta. As with any lodge in such a location, you can see wildlife up-close-and-personal, sometimes daily! Work would be right on his doorstep. The price is steep, but the amenities are similar to a four- or five-star hotel in Boston. That would be the best of both worlds, and his family prefers this option.

Finally, Mahendra views the Okavango Game Lodge. Mahendra notices that the lodge is Green and Green+ certified by the Botswanan government, indicating that conservation and sustainability are priorities for the lodge. They also host a “Craft Market.” Local men and women line the road leading up to the lodge, selling baskets, bracelets, woven clothing, and other local goods and souvenirs. The lodge is located on the delta, so the prices are high. But the lodge has more rustic accommodations, so rates are not so steep as at the Royal Safari Camp. In any case, Mahendra would have easy access to field sites as well as the opportunity to cross paths with fellow elephant expert turned eco-lodge manager, Rachel Jacobs.

Discussion Questions:

Nuru

1. How are benefits to the community distributed among different households, including Nuru’s? Is that distribution equitable?
2. How can the village achieve more equitable distribution of benefits of ecotourism? Can the lodge help? How?

Rachel

1. Summarize the competing interests Rachel must consider in her management of the lodge. Which should she prioritize? How does her background potentially influence her priorities? Might Rachel be problematically biased against “experiential knowledge” (vs. knowledge that accompanies advanced degrees)?

2. Should Rachel accept the money from foreign investors to achieve her sustainability and conservation goals? Why or why not?
3. Should Rachel hire Nuru as a safari guide and wildlife educator? Why or why not?

Mahendra

1. Where should Mahendra stay for his trip to the Okavango Delta, and why?
2. What ethical, logistical, and other concerns are relevant to his decision?

General

1. In an ecotourism project, how should environmental and social-developmental goals be combined? Are there trade-offs between affording new sustainability measures vs. development goals? Justify your position drawing on the experiences of each character above.
2. When involving the community, should the lodge accept existing local gender and wealth hierarchies or should they address the inequities they perceive? Explain your response by citing examples from the case.

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Links:

The International Ecotourism Society:
<http://www.ecotourism.org>

The Nature Conservancy:
<https://www.nature.org/greenliving/what-is-ecotourism.xml>

Botswana Ecotourism Certification System:
<http://www.botswanaturism.co.bw/eco-certification-system>

Notes

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