

TourismConcern

campaign report

Developing a Code of Conduct for houseboats in Alleppey, Kerala, India

Summary

This report documents our 2015 work with partners in Alleppey to develop a Code of Conduct for Houseboats. The work follows on from previous project work with southern Indian coastal communities.

Houseboat tourism offers a wonderful way to experience the beauty of the backwaters. Although it could and should be a model of ethical tourism, and a valuable and sustainable source of local income, its current expansion is unregulated, causing increasingly adverse social and environmental impacts.

In 2012 we undertook a survey of 1000 families living along the backwaters. This indicated that houseboat tourism was adversely affecting their lives and that the issues troubling them also threatened the environmental sustainability of the backwaters and of the houseboat industry itself.

Prompted by these findings we have been talking with as many stakeholders as possible in order to understand the issues better and to come up with practical suggestions for addressing them. This process has led us to drafting best practice guidelines and to proposing a process for encouraging and monitoring compliance, both agreed with the Kerala Department of Tourism.

Key Achievements

A survey of nearly 1000 households on the backwaters in the Alleppey region, revealing a range of negative impacts deriving from houseboat tourism (2012).

Feedback from Tourism Concern members and other tourists regarding their own experiences of houseboat tourism in Kerala.

Establishing support for the initiative from UK tour operators who take guests to the backwaters, including through AITO, ABTA and the Travel Foundation.

A comprehensive consultation with those involved in houseboat tourism including: local communities; houseboat owners; houseboat owners' associations; government departments; the Department of Tourism; academics; etc.

A meeting, chaired by the Director of Tourism, of over 40 representatives of these stakeholders. An outline of our key findings was presented. Agreement on the need for a Code of Conduct and for establishing a committee, with representatives of the key stakeholders, to oversee the development, adoption and monitoring of the Code.

Development of detailed best practice guidelines, including suggestions for practical ways in which their adoption might be facilitated.

Setting up and meeting of the Implementation and Monitoring Committee under the auspices of the Department of Tourism.

Adoption of our draft Code of Conduct by the Department of Tourism.

Agreement to develop 'model boats' – helping up to 50 boat owners to comply with the Code. In the process, identifying practical challenges to be met so it will be easier for all boats to be operated more sustainably.



Background

Tourism Concern has worked with partners in southern India since 2004. Following the tsunami in December that year, communities who had been devastated by the disaster were facing a range of problems being wrought by aggressive tourism development in its aftermath – exploiting their vulnerability, forcing them off their land and threatening their livelihoods.

From 2009 to 2012 we ran a DFID-funded project: *Empowering coastal communities for effective tourism policy engagement*, seeking to help some of the people being affected. Our work was particularly effective in the Alleppey region of Kerala where, working with our local partners Kabani and GSGSK, we developed a comprehensive network for in-depth engagement with grassroots level groups, particularly women.

In 2012, we conducted a survey of nearly 1000 households asking questions about tourism and how it affected them. Amongst other things, this revealed that houseboat tourism, whilst clearly benefiting the local economy, is also creating a range of negative impacts, not least due to the sheer number of boats crowding the backwaters.

The issues

One of the most pressing issues revealed in our survey is that sewage and plastic waste are regularly being dumped into the waterways. With over 80 per cent of households who live along the backwaters relying on them for washing, cooking, and even drinking, such pollution poses a real threat to people's health.

Meanwhile, local fishermen stated that fuel, sewage and plastic are affecting fish and prawn catches. Livelihoods within the agricultural sector are similarly being hit,

with paddy fields irrigated by the backwaters suffering from oil, sewage and rubbish from the houseboats.

Local people also told us about invasion of their privacy, with tourist boats mooring wherever they want – often even overlooking private houses. They described inappropriate behaviour by visitors, including drunkenness, noise and explicitly sexual behaviour.

Clearly not every houseboat operator pollutes the waters, or allows the behaviour of their guests to adversely affect local people. Nonetheless, the problem is very widespread. Increasing numbers of tourists and tour operators, including those from the UK, have been wanting to know how to choose better run boats. Thus was born the idea of developing a Code of Conduct – both to hold houseboat owners to account and to help identify and promote those who are pursuing best practice.

Legitimacy

Tourism Concern's policy before adopting any proposed project is to establish whether it is appropriate and legitimate. What are the sources of motivation, power and expertise involved? Can we offer expertise which will help to improve a situation and have we the right to do so? In this case our help was being sought by NGOs representing local people in India, and we felt we had experience that might help us to act as a catalyst for positive change.

Tourism Concern had also been contacted by returning tourists and tour operators taking guests to Kerala, all concerned about backwaters tourism. They were reporting similar problems, alongside issues to do with value for money and health and safety. They wanted help in identifying better run boats.

The team

We chose to work with Sudha Soni as our Indian partner. Sudha had taken over the role of Project Manager in India for the *Empowering Coastal Communities* project in 2011 and was very successful in focusing and deepening our engagement with the issues. This included overseeing the survey of households which precipitated the current project. Now running the Environment Collaborative, based in Alleppey, Sudha has demonstrated genuine concern, dedication and a unique ability to build trust with stakeholders, from villagers up to government.

Funding

Whilst our previous work in India had been made possible by funding from DFID, this work has largely been facilitated by Tourism Concern's own funds – mostly derived from the fees and donations of our supporters. We are proud to have achieved so much in under a year and with a budget of less than £8,000.



Project Activities

Gathering evidence

Our first priority was to seek to verify the findings of our survey. Extensive background research showed that similar concerns are expressed in numerous studies and reports, including by academics and by the Kerala government itself.

These included Kuoni's *Assessing Human Rights Impacts* report, published in 2014, to which Tourism Concern contributed. Its key aim was to 'gain a more precise understanding of the human rights context of its operations and business relationships in India' and the report included a section analysing the community impacts of the houseboat industry. Kuoni found the same issues that we had uncovered and gave a recommendation to 'launch and implement a project with innovative business partners, NGOs, specialists and the government to develop a best practice for houseboats' – clear synergy with our own findings.

Seeking consensus

It was vital to fully understand the nature of the various problems we had identified: not only why they

had developed, but also what the potential ways of mitigating them could be, and possible practical challenges. There are numerous groups and individuals (stakeholders) in houseboat tourism, from tourists to boat owners, government departments to local communities (see stakeholder table, right). All of these stakeholders have their own perspectives on the issues, some of which inevitably conflict.

It has therefore been important to listen to these views – via dozens of consultative meetings, focus groups and workshops in India. This required patience and even-handedness – the mutually reinforcing partnerships we have been trying to establish needed to recognise the self-interest of each party and seek to find some consensus.

Meanwhile we also followed up on the views of tourists and tour operators. Establishing and communicating their support was useful in demonstrating the business case for supporting a Code to houseboat owners. With the help of the Association of Independent Tour Operators (AITO), the Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) and the Travel Foundation, we

Stakeholders

Civil Society

Backwaters communities
NGOs representing them
Environmental groups
Academics
UK and international tourists
Domestic tourists
Houseboat workers
Trade Unions

Public Sector

Ministry of Tourism
Pollution Board of Control
Ports Authority
Local government (panchayat)
Kerala Responsible Tourism/KITTS

Private Sector

Houseboat owners' associations
Individual houseboat owners
Local tour operators
UK and international tour operators

were in touch with almost all of the tour operators taking UK guests to Kerala. There was widespread enthusiasm and support for our initiative. We were also helped in identifying some houseboats that are already being run sustainably.

Tourists, including Tourism Concern members, continue to provide important feedback about their experiences on the backwaters.

Presenting a draft Code

Throughout the process of investigating the issues and talking to various stakeholders, we have been drafting and redrafting the elements of the proposed Code, and looking at the issues that might arise in seeking solutions.

In April Peter Bishop visited India and met with many of the stakeholder groups, including the Director of Tourism, P.I. Sheik Pareeth. His visit concluded by organising a workshop in Alleppey,



chaired by the Director. Over 40 people attended and Peter and Sudha Soni presented the draft Code shown on the next page. It was deliberately presented as work in progress – whilst some were keen for us to simply ‘tell them what to do’, others needed reassurance that we were facilitators of a process in which they could continue to have meaningful involvement.

Establishing the support of the Kerala Department of Tourism has been an important outcome of our work to date. Under their auspices, the proposed multi-stakeholder ‘monitoring and implementation committee’ has now been set up. This will be an essential forum for seeking consensus and ongoing development of the code.

Challenges

Whilst the support of the government is essential, it also generates some challenges. There can be friction between the government’s desire to regulate houseboats and the practical challenges for houseboat owners in keeping their operations profitable. Just telling owners what to do has not proved effective to date; they also need training and practical assistance. There is a further danger that various pressures on government time could delay the process. A change of government could even derail it.

It is therefore important for us to continue to lobby for the changes we wish to see, and to maintain control over some aspects of the work.

At the same time we recognise that Tourism Concern, having facilitated a process that has resulted in the draft code, should not necessarily be involved in all aspects of the practical decision-making and governance issues that must follow. Our role should be to continue to monitor and encourage the ongoing process, and to encourage UK and international



tour operators and tourists to choose best practice owners. We also aim to work with a number of ‘model boats’, helping them to comply with the Code while also learning more about the challenges to compliance.

Meanwhile the industry is a powerful lobby. Whilst we are supported by many owners, a few feel our work represents collusion with the government and threatens to interfere with their business. This sensitivity is understandable, particularly for owners who already run their businesses responsibly. It is also amplified by the fact that houseboats are not the only polluters of the backwaters. Agricultural run off, for example, has been shown to be particularly devastating for fish stocks.

Some owners feel that, having agreed the problems, they can be trusted to self-regulate. However, given the practical and financial challenges to compliance, we feel that there needs to be a more formal monitoring process. We would also like a process for recognising improvement towards compliance – a way in which prospective travellers can choose better run boats.

Another challenge lies in addressing the impact of the increase in domestic tourists, who often have different sensitivities regarding waste disposal.

There are plenty of reports of day trips, with perhaps 30 to 40 people on board, dumping rubbish as they picnic on the shore, and we ourselves have seen noisy and drunken groups on several boats.

What happens next?

There is agreement that our project team should conduct further research directly with houseboat owners and workers in order to understand better the practical issues of compliance. Information will be fed back to the committee, which it is envisaged will meet regularly to seek solutions to these issues as well as to monitor progress towards compliance.

Meanwhile we are seeking boats to take part in the proposed ‘model’ boat project outlined above, and fundraising to support this vital next stage. The boats taking part should represent different parts of the market – both the more luxurious boats and lower budget owners who may face different challenges.

Finally, we need to ensure the Code is widely recognised and promote boat operators owners that are seeking to adopt best practice. This work will be ongoing. We will continue to work with all the stakeholders to keep up the momentum towards a more sustainable approach to backwaters tourism.

Draft Code of Conduct

COMPONENT	RELATED ISSUES	SUGGESTED ACTIONS
1 Sewage disposal	Number of Sewage Treatment Plants (STPs) Access to STPs / Frequency of use Time taken to pump out	Provision of additional STPs Mobile STPs? Improved STP technology? Computerised records of pump out
2 General waste disposal	Segregation of waste into biodegradable, recyclable and other Collection of different waste Information for guests	Waste drop off points Composting facilities Collection of recyclable waste Making guests aware
3 Engine effluents	Disposal of waste oil etc Oil/water separators Engine maintenance	Provision of waste drop off points Regular maintenance
4 Numbers of boats/ congestion	Start and stopping points Routes Mooring points	Additional start and stopping points Moratorium on new boats being built Alternative start and finish points
5 Standard of houseboats	Inspections Classification	Regular inspections and classification of boats
6 Behaviour of guests	Zero tolerance of: Drug abuse Drunkenness Sex tourism Abuse of staff / local people	Staff responsible for guests' behaviour? Training of staff Information for guests
7 Information for tourists	What to expect Dos and don'ts Introductory video Code of conduct on tourist behaviour	All boats to carry standard information, and introductory video Briefing before departure All guests to receive a copy of Code
8 Health and safety	Provision of safety equipment Hygiene rules? First aid Emergency contacts	Clear information for guests Training for staff Enforcement of Port Authority rules Mobile police unit?
9 Staff training	All aspects Certificate of training	Government training programme Dealing with difficult guests. Hospitality training?
10 Fair Employment	Fair pay Working conditions (provision of adequate facilities on board) Union membership	Fair treatment of staff to be demonstrable to guests
OTHER	Monitoring Enforcement of rules Promotion	

Alleppey and Vembanad Lake



Alleppey is an area of Kerala in the far south west of India. Much of the district is taken up by Vembanad lake – one of the largest lakes in India (over 2000km²) and a Ramsar-protected wetland.

Major livelihood activities of the people living on the shores of the lake include agriculture, fishing, tourism, inland navigation, coir retting, and lime shell collection.

The lake is also at the heart of Kerala Backwaters tourism with hundreds of houseboats (kettuvallams) plying its waters and numerous resorts on its banks.

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