

TO DO!95
Contest Socially Responsible Tourism

Award Winner

"Woodlands Network"

represented by

Mrs. **Sarojinie Ellawela**, Woodlands Network, Bandarawela, Uva
Province, Sri Lanka

Rationale for the Award

by Hermann Warth

1. Introduction

On behalf of the Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V. an expert was staying in Sri Lanka from January 24th to February 1st, 1996. The aim of this stay was to assess the project WOODLANDS NETWORK (WN) which had entered the contest TO DO!95 and which, on the basis of project documents submitted, was considered to deserve the award.

Due to the excellent cooperation of the WN staff the assignment could be carried out without the slightest complications. The expert was able to gain deep insights into the field work as well as into the organisational structure and working methods of WN in Bandarawela, Uva Province. The most important findings of the assessment were discussed with WN prior to the expert's return to Germany.

2. Background

In the early 70s German market analyses emphasised, as extraordinary tourist potentials of Sri Lanka, sun, sea, sand, the exotic population and ancient monuments. Accordingly, the concept for mass tourism which had just started at that time, included short trips to always the same attractions in the interior, combined with long stays in beach hotels, and this concept was accepted. Up to this date nothing has changed in this regard.

Yet, parallel to this, the so-called "alternative tourism" has also been existing and has been expanding steadily. It preferred lodges, a more intensive contact to the population, and public transport to the programmes offered by mass tourism. According to recent research this trend is still on the increase. It must be noted, however, that its representatives today are "youngish, professional, well-to-do, well-educated, cosmopolitan in outlook, keen to learn from others and critical of modern developments." (WN, Pre-release, 1, 14/3/1995).

The aim of WN and its predecessor organisations has been and is to promote these tourists, the so-called FITs (Foreign Independent Tourist) and alternative tourism, mainly in Uva Province. They do so out of their conviction that this kind of tourism is far more useful for Sri Lanka and for the tourists than mass tourism with all its well known side effects.

Parts of Uva Province are situated in the central highlands and the southern lowlands of Sri Lanka. This is an attraction by itself. Temperatures in the highlands are pleasant during the day and cool at night; mountains, rivers, waterfalls, forests and tea estates hold an extraordinary aesthetic attraction. The railway line from Colombo passes a number of bridges and 44 tunnels until it reaches the provincial capital of Badulla, and this trip has a very special charm. In the lowlands forests and coconut palm groves alternate with rice fields all the way down to the beaches. A great number of Buddhist/Hindu temples and monasteries give evidence of the lively culture of the Province. All over Uva a rich fauna can also be observed, especially in the various botanical gardens and national parks. Buddhists, Hindus, Moslems and Christians live peacefully together. The hospitality is overwhelming.

3. WOODLANDS NETWORK

3.1 Pre-history, aims and organisational structure

WN has been in existence since 1994. There were three predecessors, INTERCULT (IC), 1983-90, UVA TOURS (UT), 1990-92, and TOURIST INFO CENTRE (TIC), 1992-93, all of which were predominantly supported by a European advisor. The priorities of IC were research and "thinktank" work, of UT publications, and of TIC taking care of tourists and information in the context of tourism.

According to the self-characterisation of WN, responsible tourism means service to local and foreign tourists, entrepreneurs and employees, foodstuff suppliers, tourist guides, farmers, gardeners and shop owners, public transport business and taxi drivers.

Responsible tourism is based on the traditional forest culture of Uva Province whose inhabitants are living close to nature in forest areas, in gardens interspersed with woods and in the shadows of forest trees. It is based on a growing number of families offering their homes (homestay tourism) and lodges, accommodating local and foreign tourists; on research, experience and experiments with alternative forms of tourism over the last decades as well as on a solid knowledge on intercultural issues.

In practical terms "responsible tourism" means the acceptance and use of the existing culinary culture/gastronomy and hospitality, the Sri Lankan affection for forests and agriculture, the various climatic conditions (upper and lower Uva), the cultural setting, and architectonic witnesses, the mosaic of an ethnic, cultural and religious diversity (four world religions live in peaceful co-existence) and the general atmosphere of striving to improve living conditions.

WN is a **self-help organisation** comprising six women (three managers, three secretaries/bookkeepers) who get a monthly salary (slightly above average) from the income earned from the services rendered to tourists and from the sale of tea, spices, herbs and cookery books. The group sees itself as an organisation promoting the spirit of self-help both with regard to its own structure as well as with regard to outside structures, i.e. for the **promotion of local capacity, structures and institutions**. It has applied for official registration with the district authorities. The group is supported by a consultant, and by tourists who teach English and German language courses free of charge. The office in Bandarawela has three computers, e-mail and an extensive address file of Sri Lankan private families, lodges, hotels, institutions and of international contact persons and organisations.

For reasons of emancipation and in order to facilitate contacts between local women and women tourists, the group would like to stay together as a women's group.

WN sees itself as a **service enterprise**, levying handling charges from the tourists it takes care of, selling local products to tourists and earning income by selling these products through a world-wide marketing network (so far lodges and hotels are not charged with a commission for referring WN tourists to them).

3.2 Working Principles

WN is committed to a **holistic tourism approach**, striving to achieve progress in its tourism work in the area of economy, ecology and ecumenism through interdisciplinary, international and inter-cultural methods, having in mind an "oikos" (Greek for household) for whose survival it is necessary that economic, environmental and social actions on the part of its members are compatible with one another.

Quite deliberately WN tries to integrate the "search for the meaning of life" into this holistic approach by promoting the spiritual exchange between local people and tourists, in the sense of the Greek (stoa) oikeiosis = striving to live according to the nature of the cosmos and of the human being.

Mutual participation in the WN concept means that WN informs local tourism partners about the needs and the conception tourists have of themselves and, on the other hand, that tourists are exposed to the realities of Sri Lankan living conditions.

WN follows a **decentralised tourism approach** in order to achieve income for a relatively broad stratum and to minimise the socially and ecologically negative effects of tourism.

WN works as a **mediating institution**, promoting dialogue between the different actors. As a consequence, apart from the office, WN does not support any other infrastructure, but it uses public transport and existing accommodation possibilities. WN tries to create a favourable climate for the formation of local small entrepreneurs in the sense of modern development policies which are now far more oriented towards the promotion of local capacity and organisation building than they used to be, so as to promote local income earning capacity and local know-how.

3.3. Activities

The following activities emerge as a consequence of the objectives and working principles applied:

The focus is on networking with a multitude of persons and institutions. WN identifies - mainly in the Province of Uva - families, lodges, hotels, factories, monasteries and other institutions offering accommodation, and it refers tourists to these places. Quite in line with the integrated approach these groups comprise farmers, scientists, entrepreneurs, monasteries as meditation centres or with an emphasis on social activities (e.g. work with street children) etc. Tourists can live and work there. They are free to choose one locality, one accommodation or institution for their stay, or else they can stay in several different ones, moving from one to the next, in order to get to know the whole spectrum of Sri Lankan life.

Moreover, WN entertains a multitude of international relationships, such as to similar institutions in India and Indonesia, to the Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism in Thailand, to church-related aid agencies in the USA, Great Britain and Germany, to Third World Shops etc. This networking brings forth clients and feedback. Therefore, dealing with correspondence preoccupies the office to a large extent.

A second area is **training and in-training**. As to the training aspect, WN predominantly cooperates with the LINK FOUNDATION (LI), a Bandarawela based, registered institution, specialised in English language training and training of tourist guides and lodge owners. WN developed and continues to develop, together with LI the curriculum needed for these trainings, which among other things includes the following subjects: tourism in general, Sri Lanka (geography, flora, fauna, culture, economy), English (optional subject German) and on-the-job training. Graduates of LI are given a certificate recognised by the State. At the moment 22 persons are undergoing training (including two women); the training is so far free of charge. LI finances itself through fees from general English courses.

In-training refers to WN staff proper. Training is offered throughout the year, in languages (mainly English and German), bookkeeping, computer, management, communication and cooking (as a medium to become aware of one's own culture and to convey culture to tourists) in informal courses, often with the support of tourists who stay for a longer period of time and volunteer to work for WN.

WN is engaged in **lobby work** for locally oriented tourism in Uva Province by approaching the above mentioned international partners of the network, the Sri Lankan Tourism Board and the Provincial Ministry of Tourism.

Another area is the **promotion of fair trade**. WN uses its network in order to create direct business links between producers and buyers at home and abroad and by excluding middle men. In addition, WN runs its own shop in which the six women sell commodities produced in the Province. The income earned forms part of their salaries.

WN makes substantial efforts towards **research work and publications**. They do so to provide well substantiated proposals to tourists, on the one hand, and to help the Province of Uva to retain, or regain its identity, on the other hand. The research work entails data collection in the field, computer supported assessment, maintenance of an archive with clippings of newspapers and magazines, consultative and logistical support of researchers, and cooperation with the Tourism Department of the Samragenuwa University in Belihuloya.

WN publishes folders, brochures, books and the "Occasional Papers". The experiences and impact of WN are made known to the public also through the participation in a number of meetings and conferences.

3.4 Appraisal of the project in view of the contest criteria

Contest criterion:

"Involvement of the different interests and requirements of the local people through participation"

Given the objectives, organisational structure and methodology (self-help organisation), the participation of the local population in tourism development in Uva Province, initiated and conjointly shaped by WN, is fully ensured.

Contest criterion:

"Strengthening of awareness among the local people towards the positive and negative impacts of tourism development in their daily economic, social and cultural life"

Considering the fact that - despite rich touristic potentials - the Province of Uva is still in a "pre-touristic stage", awareness building is particularly important. WN takes this into account by its concept of "personalised tourism", i.e. individual tourists and small groups are accommodated with private people, families, and in small lodges, and, if they want, they can work with the local people. By doing so local people and tourists have the chance, slowly but all the more intensively, to get familiar with one another, and the local people have the possibility to experience the chances and risks of tourism.

The following aspects are also contributing to awareness building: formal and non-formal trainings for tourist guides, host families and lodge owners. This is done on the basis of a formal curriculum and from the background of inter-cultural experiences of the WN staff and their consultants. Included are the findings of tourism research, generally available publications, and public relations work in the form of discussion rounds, lectures and dialogues - also in schools.

Contest criterion:

"Participation of a broad local population strata regarding the positive economic, social and cultural effects of tourism"

As described above, WN sees itself as an organisation rendering services and promoting self-help structures, not carrying out tourism programmes itself, and not maintaining any infrastructure apart from the office. WN channels tourism requests to already existing local tourism agencies. And these are supported by offering them consultancy and training, in a decentralised way, in many places, to be precise, mainly in the Province. As a consequence a broad stratum of the local people is profiting from income earned through tourism services.

According to WN calculations, just about 30 percent of foreign exchange earned from "normal" package tours remain in Sri Lanka, whereas more than 90 percent of foreign exchange earned by tourism programmes sponsored by WN do so.

The integrated "fair trade" programme with direct links between producers and buyers all over the world generates income for an increasing number of farmers and it also sharpens their perception and awareness with regard to national and international realities of interdependence.

Due to time constraints the expert was not able to find out to what extent local people are involved in positive social and cultural impacts of tourism. As a matter of fact, well-behaved tourists are held in high esteem and may be taken as good examples. An often heard remark by a shop owner in Dambulla may underline this: "You are human tourist, they are plastic." And WN attracts such "human tourists" through the kind of programmes offered. They are well taken care of by WN staff, by the selected families, lodge owners and other institutions and by trained tourist guides.

Contest criterion:

"Guarantee of the attractiveness of jobs in tourism for the local people by improvement of working conditions in relation to payment, social security, working hours, education and training"

With regard to the six women of WN this criterion is fully met. They draw an above average salary, have normal working hours and enjoy an adequate training through the in-training programme.

According to WN statements the travel programmes for tourists are organised in such a way that full capacity can be achieved throughout the year. This is also true for tourist guides and for some of the families offering accommodation, for lodges and for owners of small busses. In addition, seasonal fluctuations are compensated through the economic activities described above.

Contest criterion:

"Reinforcement of the local culture as well as the cultural identity of those living in tourism destination areas"

The delving into the history and culture of Uva Province and the publications of the findings are a major contribution on the part of WN to promote the cultural identity of the region. Special emphasis is put on the thorough study of the Ravana and Sita Epics which are set in Uva Province and of the indigenous food and gastronomy (vegetable, spices, tea).

Home stays and accommodation in monasteries which are very appreciated by tourists, and the spiritual exchange in discussions, meditations and communal work which follow from these, are likely to have strengthening effects on the Sri Lankan culture because the tourists' esteem for this culture encourages the local people to reflect on their own culture and thus promotes cultural identity.

Moreover, most of the local people are not completely dependent on external tourism since they continue to be taxi drivers, small bus entrepreneurs for non-tourism trips, farmers, monks, producers, research institutions independent from tourism etc. This fact contributes to self-determination and confidence.

Contest criterion:

"Avoidance, minimization of social and cultural damage caused by tourism in destination areas"

WN tries to meet this criterion through the following concept: decentralised tourism promotion (avoidance of accumulation), taking care of small and smallest groups and individuals, involvement of tourists in the local infrastructure and lifestyle, informing, advising and

escorting tourists, training of tourist guides, publishing and constant revision of "guidelines for decent behaviour" for tourists.

Contest criterion:

"Application of new methods in qualifying partnership and cooperation between the external tourism industry and the local people"

This criterion does not apply to WN since the project does not relate to external tourism industries, neither at home nor abroad.

Contest criterion:

"Creation of other favorable conditions for a socially responsible tourism development in destination areas"

WN strongly pursues its tourism concept within its network and above all with the relevant institutions at the provincial and national level as well as abroad. Multiplication effects are achieved through its network partners even though they are statistically not measurable. The replication of the programme, or of parts thereof must be seen as a solid guarantee of sustainability.

Contest criterion:

"Projects or actions entered for the contest may not violate principles of environmental compatibility"

WN does not create any technical infrastructure, such as e.g. through the purchase of vehicles, construction of buildings, but it makes use of available potentials in a decentralised way.

This renunciation which is favourable to the environment, is complemented by actions promoting the environment: WN encourages producers to shift to sustainable agriculture (so far with modest results as these products are not yet marketable on a large scale and therefore quite expensive); WN propagates Sri Lanka's culture which is deeply rooted in nature; by influencing provincial authorities, WN tries to prevent hotel buildings from being built at scenic sites; WN appeals for the use of the railway which regularly runs from Colombo to the Province of Uva; WN propagates healthy food by using local herbs and spices.

The expert realised that there are some points in the present situation of WN which could be improved: The driving force and advisor behind WN, is still quite indispensable at present. If he withdrew from WN all of a sudden, the system could collapse. Everybody is aware of this fact. Therefore, hope is pinned on a teacher/farmer offering homestay tourism and on the three women managers of WN who stated that within a year they would be able to manage WN competently if the advisor continued to assist them. He said that he would gladly do so.

The office seems to have reached the limits of its capacity. WN would like to employ an additional woman, mainly to have the office open on weekends, too, in order to deal with requests and assignments. At present, though, the means are not available to secure the finances for such a post.

Some of the family accommodations offered are of such modest nature that only very few tourists are likely to accept them. This would be a pity because a "family work experience" can offer tourists a particularly genuine insight into the circumstances and lifestyle of the population - something the expert knows from his own experience. This problem was discussed with WN. WN now wants to investigate the possibilities and conditions which

would enable them to get subsidised interest loans and therefore cheap loans from rural banks which could be used by the "hosts" to improve the quality of their accommodation.

A small brochure at least in English and German should draw the attention of the relevant people to Uva and the WN concept and it should be distributed through the network in the countries where the tourists come from.

The expert suggests to the jury of experts and the organisers of the contest to award a prize to Woodlands Network on the occasion of the ITB 1996 for the objectives, working principles, activities and achievements of the organisation.