

Community-based Ecotourism at Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary, a Sacred Natural Site in Ghana

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Summary

For generations, communities in Ghana have protected small forest areas for cultural reasons. Many of these forests, deemed sacred, are considered to house local gods, also called fetishes. The sacred grove at Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary in Ghana provides an example of how economic incentives can link with traditional protection for successful natural resource conservation. For centuries, traditional law protected this sacred forest and the natural resources it housed, including a species of sacred mona monkey (*Cercopithecus mona mona*) that was taboo to hunt. As newly-introduced religion began to erode traditional beliefs, the incentive to protect the forest and monkeys was weakened. It was not until the introduction of ecotourism, and the benefits that followed, that traditional protection was reaffirmed and incentives to use and destroy the forest were replaced by incentives to protect it. Ethnographic research conducted in 2004 and 2006 at Tafi Atome revealed the history of the sacred site, purposes for its protection, taboos relating to natural resource use and community attitudes toward the forest and ecotourism. A qualitative, ethnographic research methodology

was used, including semi-structured, open-ended interviews. Results indicate that participation in management, level of community involvement in the ecotourism project and ecotourism profit sharing are key to 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.

Introduction

Ghana has a long history of community protection of sacred forests. For centuries, communities secured these forests for religious practices, burial grounds, and water resources (Campbell, 2005; Chouin, 2002; Lebbie and Freudenberg, 1996; Dorm-Adzobu et al, 1991; Castro, 1990; see also Chapter 15). The size of groves varies from small plots (less than one hectare) to several thousand hectares (Ntiamao-Baidu, 1995). Ghana has over 1900 sacred groves (Ntiamao-Baidu, 1995). Within these sacred forests, often referred to as fetish groves, taboos on hunting particular species offer protection to the natural resources housed by the forests (Amoako-Atta, 1995). Traditional fetish beliefs and a taboo therefore serve as incentives to conserve natural resources. However, such sacred

forests are vulnerable to the changing values and practices of the people around them. The fetish is a local god often associated with a sacred grove and looked after by a fetish priest who communicates with the local god and conveys messages to the local community. The fetish chief also cares for the fetish shrine, makes appropriate offerings or sacrifices and performs rituals associated with the fetish. The chief is a member of the fetish family, who are the clan or family group historically associated with the sacred species.

The sacred forest at Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary in Ghana provides an example of shifting traditional beliefs and how the introduction of ecotourism to the community helped reaffirm traditional conservation practices. For approximately 200 years, local beliefs have protected the sacred forest that contained a subspecies of sacred mona monkey that was taboo to hunt. However, as the influence of Christianity eroded traditional beliefs, protection of the monkeys was weakened. Ecotourism initiatives have helped to provide economic incentives for forest protection.

Ecotourism is a promising method by which the demands of both conservation and local development can be met. In general, ecotourism can provide the necessary incentives for people to conserve a resource by providing an alternative and/or supplementary means of livelihood (Furze et al, 1996; Honey, 1999). The concept diverges greatly from the potentially destructive movement of mass tourism that can be harmful to both culture and natural resources (Asiedu, 2002). The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and Ceballos-Lascurain (1996, p20) 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.

The 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. Research at Tafi Atome investigated the community's perception of the ecotourism project and its cultural impacts, documented changes in use of forest resources, tourism benefits distributed within the community and the level of monkey protection since the inception of the ecotourism project in Tafi Atome in 1996.

Site description

The village of Tafi Atome has over 1000 residents and is located within the Hohoe District of the Volta Region of Ghana (see Figure 22.1). The language widely spoken in Tafi Atome and throughout the region is Ewe. The village is surrounded by a sacred grove of approximately 28 hectares (see Figures 22.2 and 22.3). The grove is a dry semi-deciduous forest and lies within the forest-savannah transitional zone (NCRC, 1997; Gocking, 2005). Both grassland and cultivated farmland immediately surround the sacred grove. The grove most closely fits into IUCN protected area Category IV, a habitat and/or species management area (Dudley, 2008). The area is protected by a 2006 Hohoe District bylaw for its main value as a habitat for its sacred monkeys. The grove supports the only protected population of true mona monkeys (*Cercopithecus mona mona*) in the whole of Ghana (see Figure 22.4). The monkeys are found in the lower and middle layers of the forest, usually in troops of approximately 12 monkeys, feeding on fruits and leaves (Switzer, 1996). They have a reddish brown back and two white spots on their tail, with a bluish face.

History

According to residents interviewed about the history of the sacred grove, approximately 200 years ago, the ancestors of the residents of the Tafi Atome area migrated from Assini in central Ghana. They brought with them an idol or fetish that was placed in the sacred forest in Tafi Atome in order to keep it safe. The fetish family resided near the forest of Tafi Atome, reasoning that the gods would desire a cool place to stay within the forest. Following this settlement by the fetish clan, the forest was immediately considered sacred and therefore protected. A short time after their arrival in the area, the village residents began to notice monkeys that they believed they had seen in their original



Figure 22.1 Map of Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary within Ghana

Source: M. Hibbard

region of Assini, and therefore believed that the monkeys had followed them to Tafi. The monkeys were considered 'representatives of the gods' and therefore protected as sacred. The fetish priest of Tafi Atome acts as the messenger between the village residents and the idol. Because the monkeys are associated with the idol, it is taboo to kill them. 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.

The influence of Christianity brought opposing views to traditional law, which led to the deterioration of spiritual connections with the fetish forest, and erosion of traditional protection. Particularly during the 1980s, there were several

incidents of a local priest encouraging the killing of monkeys in an attempt to display the falsities of traditional religion. Whereas traditional law strictly prohibited any use of the sacred forest (except for limited usage by the fetish family for traditional rituals), with the erosion of tradition residents began to cut down economically viable trees. Clearing the forest for use as farmland also began to place particular pressure on the forest boundaries (NCRC, 1997). It was not until the arrival of ecotourism that incentives to conserve the forest began to outweigh pressures to degrade the forest.

The economic prospects from ecotourism supplied the community of Tafi Atome with new

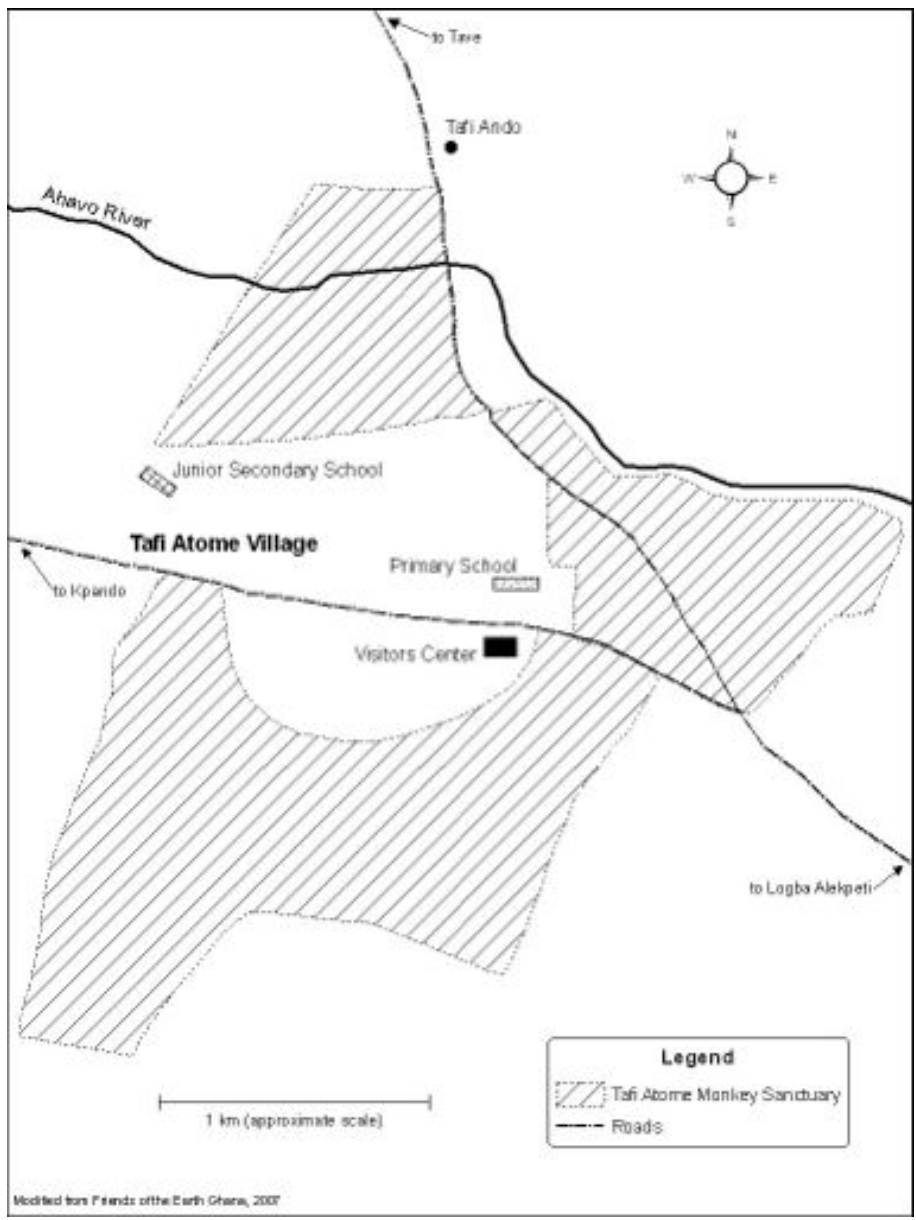


Figure 22.2 Map of Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary, a sacred forest

Source: M. Hibbard

motivation to practice conservation of the forest. In 1995, John Mason of the Accra-based Nature Conservation Research Centre (NCRC) visited the village of Tafi Atome after hearing about the area and its particular species of interest, the true mona monkey. Upon arrival, Mason saw the sacred forest in a state of degradation; the larger

trees were being felled, the grove was shrinking due to pressures from farmland expansion and bushfires had destroyed portions of the area. Mason reasoned that the introduction of tourism into the community could provide a plausible and practical solution to the impending problem. The NCRC has played a crucial role in the establishment of the



Figure 22.3 Main road through Tafi Atome village with sacred grove on the left

Source: S. Symon

sacred forest as a tourism destination, affording it an additional level of protection to support local tradition.

In 1996, a community-based ecotourism project began in the village of Tafi Atome. Through the decision of the community itself and support from the other project stakeholders including NCRC and the Ghana Tourist Board, the project became a reality and the Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary and Cultural Village was created. The project began with the goal of providing an alternative incentive to protect the forest and its rare subspecies of mona monkey, and is now further evolving to promote community development.

In 1997, mahogany trees (*Khaya senegalensis*) were planted to demarcate the boundary of the sanctuary in order to halt future encroachment of farmland upon the forest edge. In 1998, a tourist welcome centre was built to serve as the first point of contact for tourists arriving at the village. The community members funded and built the centre themselves, with only partial funding from external partners. Visitor fees are collected at the centre, which contains a small gift shop, but has limited interpretive or educational material for visitors. A guesthouse was built by community member labour.

Rationale and methods

Edelman and Ormsby conducted surveys with the residents of Tafi Atome in 2004 and 2006. A total of 63 community members living within the study area were surveyed; Edelman interviewed 30 residents (18 men and 12 women) and Ormsby interviewed 33 (17 men and 16 women). This research investigated the following issues:

- use of the resources in the sanctuary forest;
- perception of tourism and its cultural impacts;
- perception and protection of the mona monkeys;
- potential benefits of tourism and project stakeholders.

A qualitative, ethnographic research approach was used, including interviews, participant observation and focus groups (Bernard, 1988; Creswell, 1994; Krueger, 1994; Weiss, 1994; Morgan, 1997). Ormsby conducted a focus group interview with the Tafi Atome Tourism Management Committee. She used a stratified sampling method for individual interviews to include representatives of each clan in the research sample. In Tafi Atome, residents generally live in the vicinity of their family members or clan group.

Edelman administered questionnaires in October and November 2004; Ormsby conducted interviews in June and July 2006. The questionnaires were administered individually, in the company of a local community member who served as a translator, and by whom the questions were read in Ewe; answers were translated back into English for the interviewer to write the responses. The interviewees were assured upon introduction of the confidentiality of their responses. Along with asking basic demographic information, the questionnaires consisted of open-ended and closed-ended questions. A wide variety of ages and occupations were targeted for the interviews.

Results

Sanctuary forest use

Interviewees identified three main possible threats to the sanctuary forest: the felling of trees (73.3 per cent), farming in and near the sanctuary (56.7 per cent) and bushfire (40 per cent). One respondent stated that 'our lands are not so big, so we farm on the same place every year'. Another resident explained that 'there used to be a lot of land to grow on, but now we depend on the same area for a long time because of increased population.'

Asked about their use of the forest before and after the arrival of tourism, the majority of respondents (66.7 per cent) claimed to have never taken any form of forest products from the sanctuary forest before the promotion of tourism, with many interviewees referring to the sacredness of the forest and lack of ownership of the land. It did appear that there was some level of use of the sanctuary forest before the promotion of tourism, when a substantial percentage of community members were able to find the products and animals (NTFPs) they needed. None of the residents interviewed in 2004 admitted to be taking materials from the forest, whereas in 2006, 15 per cent of respondents said they took products from the forest.

Perceptions of tourism and cultural impacts

Community members were asked about their perceptions of tourism at the sacred forest. Asked

in 2004 whether or not the arrival of tourists has caused any harm to the community, the forest or the monkeys, all respondents said no. During a 2006 focus group, the Tourism Management Committee (TMC) was asked if there could or should be a maximum number of tourists per week (a visitor carrying capacity) to which the TMC responded 'there is no limit', basically, there is no such thing as too many tourists.

With the arrival of tourism, it is possible that changes to the cultural cohesion and traditional values of the community may have occurred. This appears to be the case within the study area, in that 93.3 per cent of the respondents interviewed in 2004 recognized some level of change, predominantly positive – that the cultural values of the community have improved as a result of tourism promotion. Only 3.3 per cent of interviewees believed that tourists had worsened the community's cultural values. As one resident stated: 'When tourism was not established we did not mind our culture too much. But now when tourists come, we display and practice our culture.' It appears that because tourists come to visit a 'cultural village,' they wish to see displays of culture, which are performed to them by the community in the form of dancing, drumming and storytelling. This seems to have rejuvenated some cultural practices that were beginning to be eroded. According to one respondent, 'before tourists came here we nearly forgot our culture. We now display our culture to them.'

Species protection and perceptions of the mona monkeys

Residents were asked in 2006 to identify taboos associated with the sacred forest. Hunting was identified as forbidden by 52 per cent of respondents. When asked whether they would kill the monkeys if the animals were not protected by a taboo, 83 per cent of the respondents stated that they would not.

The monkey population in the sacred forest area appears to be growing with the renewed protection of the forest as a monkey sanctuary. In 1996, the total mona monkey population was estimated at 47–52 (Switzer, 1996). In 2004, although no scientific study had been carried out,



Figure 22.4 True mona monkey

Source: M. Scace

each guide working at the sanctuary said there were approximately four troops, each having a total of 65 monkeys. In recent years, guides feed the monkeys to lure them close for tourist photo opportunities, changing the monkeys' natural behaviour.

Benefits of tourism and stakeholders

The main decision-making body governing the tourism-related issues of Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary is the Tourism Management Committee. The TMC was first created in 1996 and the members had a leading role in creating rules and deciding the distribution of revenue throughout the community. The TMC is concerned with all issues pertaining to tourism development and implementation, and is made up

of 10–14 elected members, with representatives from each of the eight clans within Tafi Atome. Since the commencement of the project, the TMC meets weekly to discuss a broad range of issues including accounting, revenue disbursement, village development projects, rules and any problems that arise. This committee collaborates with the chiefs, elders and the fetish family, and holds community meetings to make decisions and implement efforts for tourism development.

Distribution of revenue was originally decided by the TMC, chiefs and elders (see Table 22.1). Tourism income is disbursed by the TMC to the different groups quarterly before accounts are openly posted in the visitor centre.

Residents were asked if they received a personal or family benefit as a result of tourism. A common benefit noted was a sponsorship programme whereby donors pay the school fees of some students in Tafi Atome. Thus far, over 100 students have been sponsored within the community, mostly from visiting tourists or secondary connections through the tourists. Other benefits mentioned included the renovation of the primary school, interactions with tourists, the arrival of electricity and gifts given by tourists. As one resident explained about the benefits received, 'I have never gone abroad before, but now that my stories are taken with the visitors, my voice has been able to go.'

Of residents interviewed in 2004, 23.3 per cent claimed to have received no benefit from the tourism project. This is important to note, in that the benefits received by the community may not be

Table 22.1 Distribution of tourism revenue at Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary

Stakeholder and portion	Intended use
50% community development	Used for community development, e.g. re-roofing the tourist guesthouse, general construction materials, chairs for the welcoming center, and cement electrical poles.
20% landowners	Paid to the six families who were original owners of the land within the sanctuary forest.
12% educational fund	Helps with local students' school fees.
8% fetish priests	Given to the fetish family for traditional purposes such as rituals and sacrifices.
5% chiefs	Given to the traditional chieftaincy.
5% tourism management committee	Paid to the TMC as compensation for their work with the sanctuary.

Source: Alison Ormsby and Craig Edelman

well distributed throughout the entire community. In 2006, 45 per cent of residents interviewed said they receive a personal benefit from tourism and 61 per cent of residents said the community benefits, for a variety of reasons ranging from education to community development.

Management and policy responses

Originally, unwritten laws protected the fetish forest, with any acts of non-compliance taken to the chief and the fetish family, whereupon the offender would be fined to help pay for a sacrifice or offering to pacify the unhappiness of the gods. The fetish forest is the core area of the larger sacred forest and is where the fetish shrine is located. Entry into the fetish forest is strictly forbidden, except by the fetish priest. When tourists visit the monkey sanctuary, the trails that they use do not go near the fetish forest.

The rules governing the forest and the tourism project have been fairly consistent since the beginning of the project; however, specific rules have been further emphasized. The original TMC created the rules pertaining to the sacred forest, with the approval of the chiefs and secondary approval from the community. There is no official written management plan for the sacred forest. The Hohoe District passed official bylaws in 2006, which include the following:

- No person shall enter the forest Reserve or Sanctuary without the permission of the management committee.
- No person shall fell, set fire, or otherwise damage any tree\timber\ property within the grove.
- No one shall make or cultivate a farm within any protected area.
- No hunting, shooting, snaring, capturing, destroying, or setting traps for any animal in the grove.
- No one shall catch or kill monkeys and other animals in the grove.

In 2006, residents were asked the open-ended question, 'What do you think should happen to the grove in the future?' The main responses were: expand the forest (36 per cent); protect the forest (29 per cent); plant trees (16 per cent)

and development projects for the community (8 per cent), such as a health clinic. When residents were asked in 2004 for suggestions to improve the ecotourism project with Tafi Atome, a wide variety of responses were given. Many desired to expand the forest with more trees for the monkeys, while others wanted stronger punishment for anyone who disobeyed the rules and some suggested improving the road to Tafi Atome (currently a dirt road) to facilitate access for both tourists and community members. Expansion of the forest would be a very difficult undertaking as the sacred forest is surrounded on all sides by farmland.

Discussion and recommendations

Perceptions of the tourism project are largely positive, as the residents of Tafi Atome seem generally happy with tourists coming to the village. The distribution of revenue and benefits along with the rules seem generally acceptable. It appears that support for the influx of tourism into Tafi Atome is high, as perceptions of tourism are optimistic. This is consistent with Doxey's (1975) model of typical stages of tourism development. Doxey proposed that tourism initiatives progress through four main stages: euphoria, apathy, annoyance and antagonism. Tafi Atome may still be in the initial tourism stage, euphoria.

In 1997, mahogany trees were planted to demarcate the boundary of the forest to prevent encroachment of farmland and minimize disagreements regarding land ownership. These trees are generally visible; however, in some areas the demarcation of the border seems rather unclear. It is possible that once the trees grow to substantial sizes the boundary will become clearer, but farming has occurred in some areas within this demarcation. Pressure on the forest can arise from the fact that the farmland lies directly adjacent to the forest, with no buffer zone to reduce impacts. With help from Friends of the Earth Ghana, the boundary was officially demarcated with cement boundary markers and surveyed in 2006. Overall, because farmland and forest lie directly adjacent to one another, multiple threats including bushfire, farmland encroachment and tree felling can potentially still occur to negatively affect

the sanctuary forest through the intentional or unintentional actions of landowners.

Although the sacred forest at Tafi Atome cannot be considered a completely open-access resource, free for the use of any community member, Ostrom's (1990) principles about sustainable management of a community resource are a useful tool to test the potential sustainability of this site. Ostrom identified seven conditions for sustainability:

- 1 clearly defined boundaries;
- 2 congruence between rules and local conditions;
- 3 those affected by rules can help change and modify them;
- 4 right to organize;
- 5 graduated sanctions;
- 6 monitoring;
- 7 conflict resolution mechanisms.

Following Ostrom's principles, the demarcation of the sanctuary boundary is of crucial importance to the project. The progress in demarcation bodes well to prevent future degradation of the forest. Tafi Atome appears to have worked through most of the constraints in this area, but the boundaries must remain clearly defined to all members of the community to ensure the protection of the forest. The community has created rules that are consistent with long-held beliefs to protect the sacred forest. However, because these rules are not publicly posted, residents may not be completely aware of the rules. Therefore the rules should be posted in the Visitor Centre.

Related to the Tafi Atome project and crucial to Ostrom's design principles is the idea that communities must have the right to organize on their own without control by outside forces, such as governmental powers. The District Assembly based in Hohoe has requested 40 per cent of the tourism revenue on numerous occasions and at one point was given 20 per cent for a period of four months in 2002. The community discontinued this payment following the support of non-governmental organizations for their cause and after realizing that the District Assembly was not giving any aid in return. This issue is one that needs careful attention as the project becomes more profitable, with increasing external interest.

Protective monitoring of the sanctuary is quite difficult to measure. No group of people is specifically in charge of monitoring the sanctuary; however, the TMC does have the duty of protecting the forest. The level of monitoring the changes within the forest is limited and needs improvement. In particular, the population status of, and behavioural responses by, the mona monkeys as a result of tourism impact needs to be researched. Ostrom emphasizes low-cost, easily accessible mechanisms to solve problems. In the study area, these criteria are met by general community meetings as well as sub-meetings with the chiefs, elders and the TMC. Current levels of communication seem to be effective.

Out of the seven design principles that can help construct the sustainability of a project, it appears that for Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary, monitoring and the right to organize are the most important as they are currently the weakest.

Conclusions

Sacred groves are a tradition that exists in West Africa, particularly in Ghana (Sheridan and Nyamweru, 2009). Tafi Atome Monkey Sanctuary is an interesting case of a sacred forest in Ghana that was traditionally protected for nearly 200 years, but subsequently needed outside intervention to reaffirm traditions and maintain the integrity of the sacred site. It is a place where conservation traditions have combined with an ecotourism initiative, to mutually beneficial ends. The tourism project has served to strengthen the cultural values of the site. It remains to be seen if tourism is a truly compatible use of a sacred site in the long term.

The community has already benefitted specifically from philanthropic tourists. Over 100 schoolchildren are now being sponsored and the primary school has been renovated, which are evidence of the successes that have arrived in the community from the tourism project at this sacred grove. The community also gains general benefits from the social, political, economic and psychological empowerment from a community-based project such as this (Asiedu, 2002). Furthermore, the negative cultural impacts along with the costs imposed on the community for changing their livelihoods appear to be low thus far, although this is typical of the early stages of

development of a tourism project (Doxey, 1975). The cultural tradition of conserving the forest does need to remain strong, as full reliance on tourism can backfire if events occur that prohibit or reduce tourism for any length of time.

Underlying the apparent and displayed positive aspects of the project also lie issues of concern that may limit its success. The community's capacity to sustain the project is important. Non-governmental organizations and other interested parties and individuals have supported this project; in the future, however, the extent to which they influence the grove management will need consideration. The community has had to adapt a system that works for them, instead of being forced to follow a set of rules governed by an external authority or stakeholders. Also, the community has had to deal with the problems that can arise with this type of community-based project. In particular, Tafi Atome struggles from the conflicts that can arise as a result of money influx to a project, particularly in terms of tourism revenue distribution. It is important to realize the sensitivity of this issue in that once money starts coming into a community, more people can start getting interested, and that is when problems can arise (Lindberg et al, 1998). In particular, this case and others like it in Ghana (see Ormsby, 2011) demonstrate the issues surrounding the reading of accounts and the distribution of revenue and benefits from tourism endeavours. Guidelines for sacred sites and suggestions for strengthening stakeholder participation, acknowledging management rights and recognition of the sacred site should be followed (Wild and McLeod, 2008). Overall, with the limited extent to which external support can be attained, the community of Tafi Atome and other community-based ecotourism projects must have the cohesion, determination, resilience, ingenuity and desire to partake in such a venture so that the objectives of rural development along with conservation of a sacred site may be satisfied.

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