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Sustainable Tourism in São Tomé e Príncipe

**by Bruce Potter of
Island Resources Foundation,
for The Earth Institute at Columbia University**

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Terms of Reference

Island Resources Foundation was invited to São Tomé e Príncipe to participate in the São Tomé e Príncipe Advisory Program begun by Dr. Jeffrey D. Sachs of Columbia University (New York City) at the request of the President of the Republic in 2003. This is the fifth or sixth review conducted in that on-going process, with others looking at energy, telecommunications, fisheries, and elements of the health sector, in addition to the central issue of a modern legal and financial framework for the oil industry. A review of agriculture is also planned. Among the priority activities requested by President Fradique de Menezes in those original discussions was a review of tourism sector development options for São Tomé e Príncipe.

Island Resources Foundation was sought for this work not only because of our experience in a number of travel and tourism projects, but also because of our 33 years and 175 projects addressing sustainable development for *small tropical islands*. Island Resources Foundation has been a global leader in addressing the special environmental and socio-economic conditions of small tropical islands. In addition, twelve years ago Dr. Edward L. Towle, the founding president and now Chairman of Island Resources Foundation, spent several weeks working with Mr. Henrique Pinto da Costa, Director of ECO - São Tomé e Príncipe, in São Tomé to define conditions, opportunities, and an institutional framework for environmental management in STP.

Introduction

Long ignored by the world community, impoverished, and weakly linked with larger regional or other interest groups such as the Association of Small Island States (AOSIS), the island republic of São Tomé e Príncipe enjoys one of the richest and most unique natural environments in the world, combined with a national culture combining West African and Portuguese threads in a plantation-based society whose vestiges can still be observed.

As indicated in the brief for the overall São Tomé e Príncipe Advisory Program, 1) management of future oil revenues, 2) revitalization of agriculture and fisheries, and 3) tourism are recognized as three legs of a diversified development strategy for São Tomé e Príncipe. There have been a number of studies of general tourism issues for the Republic in the past four or five years. The subject of this review is the development of specific, feasible next steps that will move São Tomé e Príncipe in the direction of long-

term tourism growth that builds on the country's evident advantages and promotes longer-term equitable development.

Existing Conditions

Infrastructure in General

Too often, tourism is seen as a sector that competes with local populations for critical infrastructure. A low impact form of eco-tourism, featuring small lodges close to the most interesting ecological zones, requires the same improved infrastructure as that desired by the residents of these same zones. Instead of competing for resources in different parts of the country, roads, water and power needs for tourism and local communities are complementary. A road, a water line, or an electrical network that meets the needs of the local population will also serve tourists. In addition, improved infrastructure in the interior of the island will also help to keep populations in their traditional sites, rather than forcing them to come to the urban areas to improve their standard of living.

Protection of Capital

Island Resources Foundation is a strong advocate for developing tourism on the basis of small, local owner-managed lodges and resorts, situated inland, close to the primary forests and bird watching areas, as suggested by several of the tourism studies. But we believe São Tomé e Príncipe needs to provide much stronger security for potential landowners and investors, including the ratification of the *International Convention on the Settlement of Investment Disputes*.

To a considerable degree, successful small resort development on small islands is based on real estate investments. The owner-managers of "eco-lodges" and resorts usually break-even on day-to-day operations and realize their real profit when they sell the lodge or resort after years of effort. Both São Toméans and outsiders need assurance that their long-term property investments will be secure from arbitrary and capricious government actions.

Physical Infrastructures: Water, Power and Roads

There are many development plans and programs that have cited the need for priority attention to the three basic infrastructures of sanitary water, electrical power and adequate roads. The development of the tourism sector needs the same kinds of resources that will benefit the entire population.

The special needs of the tourism sector are to have reliable and consistent plans for an integrated provision of these services. It makes no sense to build a resort at the end of the new road, *if* there is no power and no water planned for that area for decades. . . and so on . . .

Supplies

Even more than many other small island states, São Tomé e Príncipe have extremely long and difficult supply lines, with very high exposures to a wide range of logistical and economic problems, compounded by the combination of small population and low incomes. In addition, it seems unlikely that the development of the country's offshore oil resources will result in any direct major increase in daily commercial activity which would increase supply system capabilities, since it makes most sense to service this industry from the existing facilities in Rivers State and other areas of Nigeria (a partner in the offshore lease areas).

To improve the provision of basic supplies to support the tourism industry, and a wide variety of new business opportunities coming from increasing local incomes, government should develop policies that support more robust and competitive commercial sector. This would include financial incentives that overcome the monopolistic tendencies of historic "commercial agency" types of restricted licenses and distribution agreements.

Health

The section below on issues in the tourism sector describes special problems of malaria and the problems of potential coastal waters contamination. Both of these are the result of major challenges to the public health sector, in which the interests of tourism and the community-at-large are closely aligned.

Sustainable Tourism Issues

São Tomé e Príncipe has participated in a number of tourism studies and recommendations over the past few years. The two most recent programs are the study of "eco-tourism" in 2003, and the major round table conducted just a year ago by the World Travel Organization, the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Program. Obviously there are many groups interested and willing to assist São Tomé e Príncipe in tourism development, but it also seems that there is a need to focus the recommendations from those studies on a more realistic assessment of the opportunities and risks being faced by STP in these difficult times.

Risks for Tourism

Malaria

There is widespread risk of malaria throughout the country, including zones of greatest biological diversity and interest to nature tourists. Because malaria is feared by many developed country residents, tourism marketing focus needs to focus especially on more adventurous segments of the eco-tourism market, gradually expanding to a wider clientele as malaria and yellow fever conditions improve.

Coastal Waters Pollution

The failure of many tourism studies to acknowledge the risks of the coastal water pollution around São Tomé is common in small island planning. There are major implications for promotion of international mass tourism in coastal areas (*i.e.*, "sun, sand and sea") until that public health systems can reliably document the quality of local beaches.

In Europe and many overseas tourist destinations, there is a standardized testing process called "Blue Flag," which guarantees the safety of beaches that fly the distinctive blue flag. In 1999, the Caribbean Conservation Association began a campaign to get beaches in the Caribbean islands certified by the Blue Flag. There has been strong support for this in many islands of the Caribbean, but even after 5 years, the program is only operating on a pilot basis in five or six countries of the region. Similar slow progress in getting a beach testing and certification process can be expected in São Tomé e Príncipe.

In this modern internet-linked world, the international tourism operators cannot afford to expose tourists to unnecessary risks. The country needs to recognize that fact and needs to deal with these issues in its planning. Given that tourists will want to swim if at all possible, and knowing that not all beaches are definitely uncontaminated, the public health authorities should include occasional testing and publicity for selected beaches on the offshore islands and the south of the island of São Tomé where swimming and diving can be responsibly encouraged. Dive operators, who will continue to develop dive and offshore fishing activities in safe zones, should be enlisted in this process.

Naturally, pollution risks will diminish when the solid and liquid waste problems of the urban areas and larger outlying communities, *roças*, and sub-units are solved.

Shifting Focus of Tourism Marketing

The priority given to nature tourism has not been very realistic in its understanding of marketing changes needed. Specifically, tourism marketing will move away from traditional markets in Portugal to concentrate on new tourism recruits from the "bird watching" communities in northern Europe. This should also shift more tourists into the winter season, and during periods of major concentrations of migratory birds and other species (*e.g.*, whales) in the Gulf of Guinea.

There is general awareness and agreement on the idea of doubling the number of annual tourists from an estimated base of roughly 10,000 visitors in 2003, to 20,000 in five or seven years. This understanding needs to be refined. Out of those estimated 10,000 visitors, the World Tourism Organization (WTO) study in 2003 estimated only 30% come for recreational purposes. If most of the growth of tourism to the goal of 20,000 tourists by 2010 or 2012 is to come from recreational tourists, this means that in five to seven years, the number of recreational tourists needs to increase from about 3,000 to about 12,000. That is a much more challenging goal.

In addition, partial data from the WTO surveys in 2003 indicate that nearly half of all current tourists (43%) are from Portugal. But a realistic assessment of the interests of tourists indicates that most of the new tourists must come from outside Portugal --- probably northern Europe which enjoys the comparative advantages of: 1) an active bird watching and nature tourism market; 2) relatively close air connections; and 3) winter vacations in São Tomé e Príncipe's warm environment.

Tourism and the *Roças*

It is a conclusion of this study that there have been some unrealistic proposals about integrating new tourism development with yet another attempt to revitalize the *roças*. For the most part the new tourist facilities will probably need to be new structures, closely cooperating with communities in their area (see "Community-Based Participation in Resource Management," below) for supplies, manpower and cultural amenities, but *not* as closely integrated as the traditional plantation societies.

Preservation of the *roças* needs to be a major element in São Tomé's protection of its attractive and unique cultural traditions and natural heritage, but that does not mean, in our judgement and experience, that forcing the *roças* into a tourism development scheme as lodging centers makes any sense from an economic or a social perspective.

The Natural Environment

There have been many studies devoted to the unique elements of the São Toméan and Príncipean natural environment. (In fact, development of a comprehensive "environmental profile" to bring together the multiple studies of the local environment by investigators from research centers around the world is a special need for São Tomé e Príncipe which can serve a variety of development, tourism, and conservation purposes.) The islands are extremely rich in unique native species, as they have been isolated in the middle of the ocean for tens of millions of years.

The issue that may not be properly appreciated by even experienced naturalists, and the idea that should become a powerful marketing tool for nature tourism promotion, is the *density, richness and accessibility* of the unique local flora and fauna of São Tomé e Príncipe.

To cite an example from bird watching that could be duplicated for a variety of other terrestrial conditions: The island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean has many natural wonders, including 26 endemic bird species. (Endemic species are those that occur nowhere else in the world.) The island of Hispaniola is approximately 75,000 square kilometers in area; the islands of São Tomé e Príncipe are a comparatively tiny 1,000 square kilometers in extent and they have 27 endemic bird species. Furthermore, any responsible guide service in São Tomé can virtually guarantee that any tourist will be able to see 25 or 26 of the endemic species with two days or less of observations, a degree of "saturation" of the rare species that is almost unknown elsewhere in the world

(excepting possibly the Galapagos) and a feature that is *extremely valuable* in the highly competitive world of bird watching.

Community-Based Participation in Sustainable Tourism

Small resort-based tourism projects do not work unless they provide direct, perceivable benefits to the communities in which they are embedded. Traditionally this has occurred "naturally" because local residents developed such facilities and services over generations, whether we've talking about mountain climbing guides in Nepal, or the samba instructors in Rio di Janeiro.

In a global economy, and given the needs to increase tourism resources in São Tomé e Príncipe on a rapid time-scale, frequently with outside owner-investor-managers, there is a need to focus attention on the process of enlisting community members in the educational and income generating processes that will support the small, nature tourism resorts, from staff positions in the lodges to a wide range of other services including resource managers (park rangers and natural resource monitors), guides and interpreters on the ground and in museums and visitor centers, and entertainers skilled in telling the tourists the stories of the "real" São Tomé.

There are a variety of community-based assistance groups which have demonstrated competence in providing these skills in the specialized environments of small islands, including the Foundation for the Peoples of the South Pacific, CANARI in the Caribbean, and RARE, which has worked in the islands of Indonesia, Central America and the Eastern Caribbean. Groups such as these should be enlisted early in the process of training and providing technical assistance to São Toméan and Príncipean NGOs to support community-based tourism initiatives.

Next Steps for Tourism Development in STP

There is a great deal of information now available in São Tomé among the members of both the private and public sectors about the risks and opportunities for new tourism development and promotion. This information needs to be better organized and shared among all the key actors in order to start effective action.

We have had very positive reactions from private operators in the tourism sector, the multiple government agencies who need to be involved, and other organizations of civil society, about the idea of convening a short national encounter of all of the national interest groups to share information and reach agreement on the essential first steps in getting started on what all recognize will be a long trip to substantially diversify São Tomé e Príncipe's economy with a truly durable and sustainable tourism activity.

Submitted by:
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[This is not a comprehensive list of references for tourism or development in São Tomé e Príncipe. It is designed to highlight some of the more recent studies and references relevant to the immediate problems of tourism development in the country.]

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