

Speech by Mrs. M R Dhanya, Panchayat President, Kumarakom, Kerala, India in the
World Responsible Tourism Day, World Tourism Market, London on 8th November 2011

Making Destinations more Sustainable
A Case study of
Responsible Tourism initiative at Kumarakom- Role Played by Local Panchayat

Respected Chair, Co-panellists and dear participants..

I am extremely happy to stand in front of you and talk about the role played by a Local Panchayat, Kumarakom in the state of Kerala, India, in creating a very successful model in Responsible Tourism benefitting local community and making the destination more sustainable.

In the state of Kerala we have a 3-tier Panchayat Raj System, that is, District Panchayat, Block Panchayat and Grama Panchayat. I am the president of the Grama Panchayat, elected by the members of 16 wards in the Panchayat. The main source of revenue for the panchayat is the plan fund allocated by the state government and the tax revenue collected from the houses and various establishments. There are specific guidelines on the expenditure of the plan fund. 40% of the plan fund has to be earmarked for the agriculture development, 30% for the infrastructure, and 30% for the service sector. The fund utilisation is decided by the grama sabha at the grass root level.

It is in this context, Kumarakom Panchayat took initiative as a pilot RT destination as decided by the State Department of Tourism under their guidance. There was no financial support from the state government except positioning a coordinator to assist the stakeholders and monitoring the initiative. It may be noted that till this initiative, the local panchayat was never involved in tourism development activities either by the state government or by the tourism industry. Rather, the tourism industry considered Panchayat as their enemies as panchayat often had to fight with them on the issues of non-tax payment, unauthorised constructions and polluting the backwaters. The local population also was considering the industry as intruders in their territory.

When the State Government decided to implement the responsible tourism initiative at Kumarakom, Panchayat responded very positively by preparing a supply calendar for the supply of locally available materials like vegetable, fish, milk, meat and other non-perishable items to the hotels and resorts. We have also initiated activities to increase the production of these items and enhance quality. Part of the plan allocation in agriculture is utilised for distributing seeds and manure for vegetable cultivation. Last year we have used about 250,000 Indian Rupees for this purpose. We have also supplied chicks, lambs etc to the women in the panchayat to enable more meat, milk and egg supply to the hotels and resorts. Women self help groups were formed under Kudumbasree to support production and supply systems.

Panchayat led the Pricing Committee and resolved issues on quality. The entire local community except few exceptions welcomed this changed situation and responded positively. There were number of initiatives from the local community in group farming, homestead farming, formation of ethnic restaurants, cultural group, handicraft units, eco-bag units, reacting against environmental issues etc. The responsible tourism initiative provides additional income to more than 1000 families in the panchayat. More than that, it helped in creating a very healthy relationship between the Community, Local Panchayat and the tourism industry.

I feel very proud in stating before you that the RT initiative at Kumarakom had proved the potential of tourism to provide sustainable livelihood to the local community. The success at Kumarakom is the result of team work and the commitment to work together. In this World Responsible Tourism Day, I take the opportunity to thank my fellow panchayat members, the Kudumbasree units, my predecessor Panchayat President Mr. G C Damodaran, the RT Coordinator Mr. Roopesh, the leadership from Department of Tourism Dr. Venu and U V Jose in attempting to make Kumarakom a better place to live in and visit. This model can be effectively used in making destinations more sustainable.

I once again thank the Commonwealth Secretariat and Dr. Harold Goodwin in giving me this opportunity...

Jai Hind