

Ecotourism Workshop report

Kotagudi Panchayat – Theni

16-17th July 2013



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Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Peeyush Sekhsaria, Gouthami from ‘Travel another India’ for helping in formulating the ecotourism workshop and the interview surveys. We would also like to thank C. Pandi, our local project assistant for helping in undertaking and managing the workshop. Senthil from Kestrel Adventures for training and engaging with the participants. Mr. Selvaraj (Drafting officer) and Mr. Rajendran (Bodi ranger), Theni Forest Department for taking time out of their busy schedule to talk to the participants and Saravana Kumar for providing literature which was useful for the participants

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Aims of the Workshop

- To build a network of guides in the Kottagudi Panchayat which is part of the proposed Theni Conservation Reserve.
- To explain the concept of ecotourism in order to reduce the tourism footprint on the biodiversity rich area.
- To identify tourism related problems and opportunities.
- To provide basic training and formulate ethics and regulations to improve the trek experience for tourists.
- To introduce to the Forest Department the guides that undertake tourism in the area.
- To identify the potential of forming an association of guides and other tourism service providers in Kottagudi Panchayat.
- To improve waste management practices to be followed by the guides.

Workshop Schedule

Day 1 (16/7/2013)

Morning session (10:30 am to 1:00pm)

- Introduction (Base-line questionnaire survey).
- Delivering Eco-Experiences: Improving the tourist experience through the integration of biodiversity, culture and folklore.
- Understanding the tourist: Understanding where their discomfort lies and measures to be taken to provide assurance to them. How to be resourceful? Learn first aid and suggest proper clothing for tourists while trekking.
- Interactive session to identify the current problems and the changes required.
- Income generation and SHGs(Self Help Groups).

Afternoon session (2.00pm to 4:30pm)

- How can the Government help? Forest department officials providing information and rules to be followed during treks and with tourists. Discussion with the Forest Department about legal provisions for setting up entry stations, self help groups and ID cards for the guides and home stays, schemes available through the FD.
- Concur on Ethics: Fix ethics amongst the guides including the monetary element. Finalize a constant rate and sticking to it regardless of the tourist type. Work against littering the area. Avoid night treks regarding to safety and law.
- Documentary screening and discussion.
- Facilitating tourism: Establishing clean and desirable standards in lodging, food and sustainability in energy.
- Waste management: Management of plastic and other wastes, recycling waste.

Day 2 (17/7/2013)

Morning session (7:00am to 9:30am)

- Trek
- Summary and conclusion
- Feedback forms

Delivering eco-experiences:

- Ecotourism is to protect the natural ecosystem and the cultural heritage.
- The motto is to make the trek informational and lively.
- Show and tell, this is better than just telling anything at all. Need to know when to talk and allow the groups to listen to nature.
- Participants should be encouraged to participate and interact with the environment. (Like spotting a bird or other animal and encouraging the tourists to watch them or take photographs of it and should know when to halt if tourists show unacceptable behavior).
- Be aware of the flora and fauna (their regional names, folklores regarding it, local heritage).
- Make them understand the importance of the ecosystem and the dependence of local people. (Like about the pipeline to Bodi so as to make sure they do not throw litter into the water).
- Clear, true and concise explanations of trekking route, area, resting time and place, overnight stay and food arrangements.
- Thorough knowledge of what should be done before, during and after the trek.
- Suggest backpack luggage (only essentials, strictly not any valuables) to be carried during the trek.
- Ask the tourists to wear proper light colored clothing, proper shoes, and hiking stick, sunhat, raincoat and other regular medicines that they use.

Understanding the tourists: what do they expect? How do we provide their needs?

- Ensuring security and safety of the tourist.
- Be sensitive to the clients, help, and encourage them.
- Be aware and equipped on how to act during emergencies (During instances of communal riots or tension do not hesitate to ask the tourists not to visit).
- Carry first aid kit with at least painkillers and band-aid and be aware of preliminary first aid practices.
- Essential commodities and equipments like torch, knife, tents, water.
- Set a pace based on the slowest member of the group, offer enough opportunities to rest, drink and eat snacks but without littering the forest. (Drive the tourist to be responsible).

Interactive session to identify the current problems and the changes required.

Concur on ethics

- Fix guide charges amongst themselves and stick to it regardless of any tourist.
- Operate legally and ethically.
- No eve-teasing activities should be practiced by the guides or other locals as this reduces the number of tourist who visits.
- No loud music or other entertainment related electronic gadgets. (You are here to enjoy nature).
- No alcohol consumption should be allowed inside forest or during treks.
- No campfire inside the forest. No cooking or disposal of cigarettes in the forest, which can start a fire.
- Make sure tourists do not litter. (Instill upon them a sense of littering your home) Pack up trash and dispose it off only in dustbins. (Make provision for garbage bags to dispose trash).
- No use of soaps/shampoo/detergents near waterfalls. (Do not promote it by selling sachets of these articles).
- Ask tourists to keep reasonable distance from wild animals and not to provoke them. No feeding of animals.
- No night treks. (Due to safety concern about tourists and not affects the activities of nocturnal animals).
- Make rules and code of conduct for tourists.
- Organize occasional meetings amongst guides.

Income generation and distribution

- Guide charges, entrance fee, permit fee, (Employment of more locals).
- Home stays and local food.
- Encourage tourists to buy and consume locally made food than packaged ones (like replace murukku for packed chips).

Facilitating tourism

- Every activity should be in accordance with minimizing impact on environment and wildlife.
- Use local materials for building purpose.
- Accommodation infrastructure: lodges, tents, huts. (Accommodation standards may be simple but should ensure basic comfort and cleanliness).
- Rest rooms and toilets: Western toilets, septic tank. Cleanliness is given utmost importance. Make sure the rooms, toilets and bed materials are clean and devoid of dust or mud, toilets), Electricity: Solar power.
- Water supply: Restrict use of bottled water. Provide drinking water through basic Pure IT filters mentioning the date of cleaning.
- Waste management: Plastic should be collected in dustbins and transported to Bodi/Munnar for recycling. (Do not expect money and transport the waste yourself).

Workshop participants

Trainees: There were altogether 17 individuals from the Kotagudi Panchayat, five from Top station, seven from Kotagudi, and five from Kurangani.

Trainer: Mr.Senthil Kumar, Mr. Ancel Correya and Mr. Saravana Kumar from *Kestrel Adventures* (Munnar).

Theni Forest Department: Mr. Selvaraj V. (Drafting Officer), Mr. Rajendran (Ranger, Bodi)

Workshop facilitators from WILD: Arun Kangavel, N. Nithula, Sethu Parvathy and C.Pandi.

Workshop Content and activities

Day 1

The workshop was participatory and activity based. Attendees were encouraged to ask questions and discuss amongst themselves, various group activities were also promoted. The introduction session let the participants and the trainers have a general perception about themselves, ecotourism and the purpose of the workshop.

The first activity initiated was to identify the prospects of tourism as understood by the trainees. For this, the participants formed three groups based on the village they belonged to. They were asked to write about the best tourist places, potential areas for developing tourism, problems that they faced facilitating tourism and how tourism could be improved. These were put up so that everyone could scrutinize one another's perception.

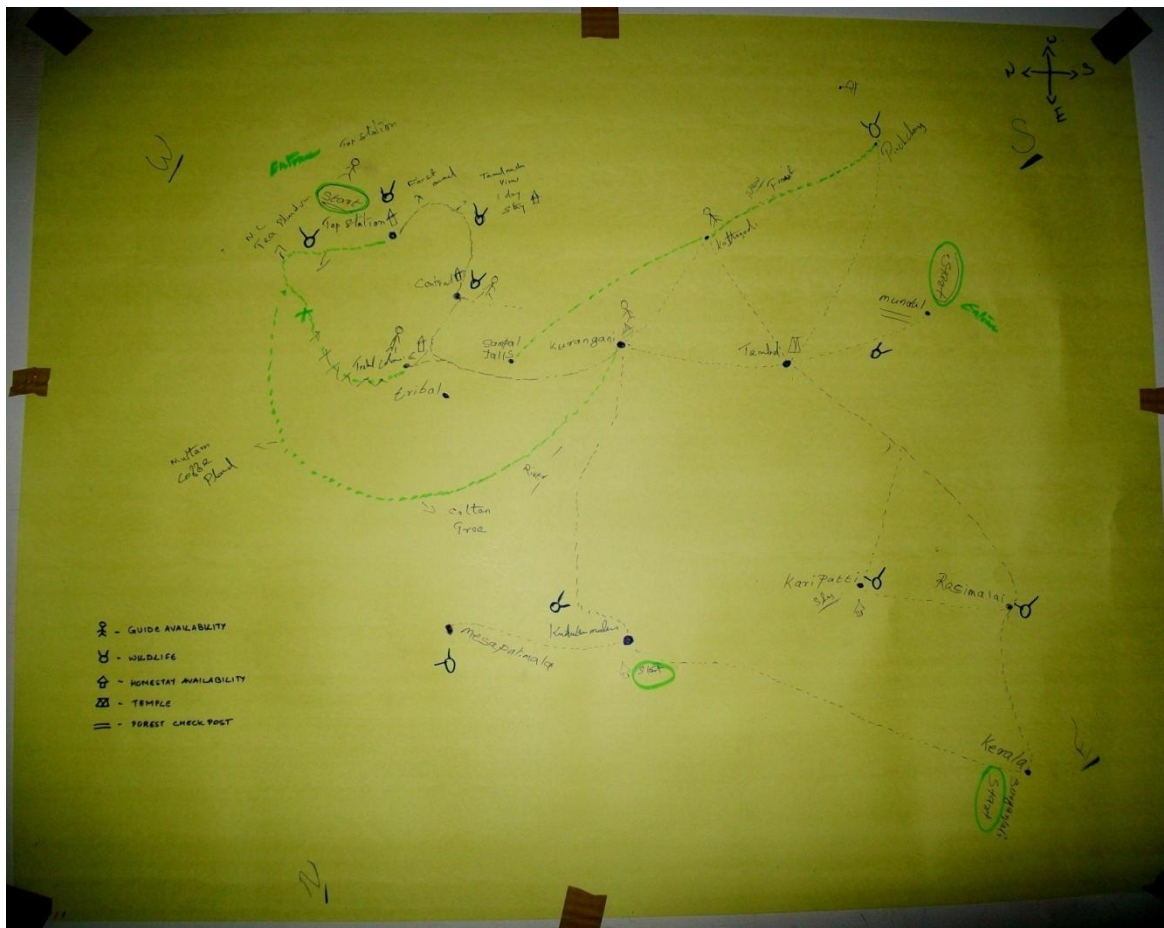


On board! Stick-ons with problems faced by guides from each settlement and their perceptions on improving tourism in their area.

They pasted their individual comments on the board. All the groups perceived Top station, Kolukkumalai and Kurangani as the best tourist places in the panchayat. Attendees believed that the whole of kotagudi panchayat has the potential for development in tourism but some specified that it could be the Sambal waterfalls. The group from Top station and Kurangani found the Police, Forest Department and the lack of basic facilities especially toilets, to be their most

important problems. Some attendees from Kurangani also stated that there were problems within the community in their village, which affected tourism. Individuals from Kottagudi perceived the bad mobile connectivity, roads, and problems with the Panchayat administration and absence of tourism-related development as problems to tourism in their village. The group from Top Station opined that setting up of a park, elephant safari and waste bins could improve tourism. Kurangani held that a better roadway, a park, hospital, banning alcohol and plastic and harvesting rainwater could enhance tourism.

In order to understand the existent tourism and infrastructure in the Kottagudi Panchayat, the trainees mapped the villages, existing and prospective trek routes, waterfalls and other tourist attractions, lodging and villages where guides were available and wildlife could be sighted., .



It is here! Community map showing existing and prospective trek routes and tourism-related infrastructure

After completing the mapping exercise, the attendees marked the entry points used by tourists to enter the landscape and those which are most frequently used by tourists. The most frequently used were Kurangani via Munthal and Top station via Munnar. The group suggested that a request could be made to the Forest Department to set up entry stations to avail entrance fees into the landscape and to keep a check on plastic and alcohol use by tourists.

The attendees then discussed among themselves to identify and decide the ethics and rules that they as guides needed to follow while trekking. One of them noted down the rules that they collectively agreed on. This included banning night treks; discouraging tourists from consuming alcohol and drugs, maintaining punctuality and in order to provide enough time for the tourist with the lowest pace, they agreed that the trek duration mentioned would be two hours more than the actual time. They agreed on conducting monthly meetings amongst them to continue dialogue on tourism-related issues and developments. Towards the end, the attendees stated that more time and meetings among them were needed to formulate the ethics completely.

The afternoon session after lunch began with a discussion with the Theni Forest Department, Mr. Selvaraj (Drafting Officer) and Mr. Rajendran (Bodi Ranger). They elaborated on conserving wildlife and forests and that the tourist guides should also protect them. The guides enquired why the Police department posed as a hassle to them for taking tourists on treks. The Forest Department officials stated that they should approach the Collectorate and request for an Identity card issued for guiding tourists, since the problem was that they were not certified. To attain this they were asked to approach the Collector as a group. The Bodi Ranger stated that an ecotourism initiative undertaken by the Forest Department would be begun soon at Top Station. The Forest Department stated that the guides and the Forest Department were 'two wheels of the same vehicle' working for the same cause, which was conservation. He elaborated on biodiversity conservation and the afforestation scheme that could be utilized by the whole community. They were also positive towards establishing local community-based ecotourism in the area and urged the guides to act collectively towards it.



The Problems?? Mr Selvaraj (DO, Theni) examining the perceptions of the guides on tourism in the Kottagudi Panchayat.

The next session dealt with the basics of ecotourism as a concept for responsible tourism. For this, Mr. Senthil and Ancel asked the participants to form groups to discuss the idea of tourism and why they wanted to do it. Senthil explained that this activity would help him know about the knowledge of the guides, which would enable him to plan the rest of the session accordingly. One group stated that ecotourism was a cue to developing their village, to generate income and that it dealt with teaching the tourists about their culture and making them contemplate about the beauty of their place. Another group also stated that ecotourism would facilitate development, job security and attain basic facilities for their village. The third group stated that it would give them whatever that they wanted and that they should take care of tourists as their guests.

Mr. Senthil then explained that ecotourism is when the local community own, learn and earn from tourism. He told that change in lifestyle, better education, job security and environmental conservation would follow, if they set up a proper ecotourism venture in the Kottagudi Panchayat. The session was interactive with the locals asking questions on the development of roads and electricity. They were answered not to be stringent on building road ways as it would negate the tourism and the profession of tourism guides in the area with them 'digging their own grave'. When the discussion advanced on how less propitious they were in terms of tourism in Kottagudi, Rajan, an attendee from Top station informed about a rock carving that he saw near the Kottagudi village, which revealed that there were inhabitants there nearly 2000 years back. A discussion on a traditional art form at Kottagudi also came up, revealing that one of the trainees was part of it.

Mr. Senthil stated that Kurangani, Kottagudi and Top station were in the early stages of tourism and if it proceeded in the right track, they could reap success in the industry. For that, he explained the importance of organizing themselves, sharing knowledge and maintaining a pleasant relationship amongst the three villages. He urged them to find proper ways for waste disposal and improve the information provided to the tourists regarding the trek plan and undertaking it. The role of the character and personality of the guides, appearance and acts of courteousness were discussed. He recommended that they fix a rate for the service and make sure nobody deters it.

The team from WILD society then gave a brief introduction on how they could organize themselves and brought out the idea of a Self Help Group into the discussion. Further description on its functioning and composition, the necessities for registering such a group and the manner in which the activities should be focused to avail the entitled Government schemes was provided. They were asked to facilitate meetings amongst themselves in order to elect the five leading members. They all agreed that this association could help establish better communication amongst them.

The last session was to clear any doubts the attendees had. Many questions came up of which Kumaresan from Kotagudi wanted to know about the permits one needed to take when building a home stay or cottage. This was answered by explaining the difference between a home stay and a cottage and that necessary permits had to be taken from the Panchayat. With this, sessions for the first day of the workshop were completed.

Day 2

Trek training

The second day of the workshop was attended by 12 of the 17 participants. The training was planned such that the five experienced guides amongst the group were asked to lead the “tourist” group in turns and explain how they would coordinate with their assistants and guide the tourists. During the trek, they also explained how they kept track of all the guests and ensured their safety by counting their numbers every now and then. They explained to the inexperienced the need to coordinate amongst the guides and to keep at the pace of the slowest guest. They explained about the history, showed them the tribal villages and other attractions in view. One of the guides elucidated about the medicinal plants they came across on the way like lemon grass, *eenji* which was used to make brooms and *keezharnelli*, “touch-me-not” plant, silver oak, cotton and mango plantations. They pointed out the water pipeline that originated in Kurangani through which the water went to the Bodinaickanur Municipality. They also pointed out a Scarlet Minivet, sunbird and a shrike.



...and that you see on the top is Top Station! Wilbert, an experienced guide from Top Station introducing the place to the group.

We then found a spot to sit and have a discussion. The discussion brought light on the existing waste management practice, which is ‘collect and burn’. The WILD team then explained to them that collecting the wastes, transporting and disposing it off in the nearest corporation was a better option than burning plastics. Establishing contacts with the rag pickers and using existing contacts to transport wastes were discussed. An attendee from Top station suggested that they first build cement rings to collect wastes because other metal or plastic bins would be carried away in the wind. He suggested that each guide take charge of transportation in rotation and that it should be financially supported by the guide’s collective effort. Cleanliness standards to be

taken into consideration in home stays, restrooms and toilets were discussed and the need to construct septic tanks was also conferred.

The next discussion started with organizing the SHG and its activities and including women and indigenous communities into it. All of them regarded it being a necessity and the session was dispersed after they agreed on a meeting within themselves to decide the bearers, members, and rules for the SHG.

Ecotourism workshop questionnaire and feedback report

Baseline information was collected before the workshop (Appendix 1) and a feedback form (Appendix 2) to the workshop was completed at its culmination. The responses were then summarized.

Seventeen individuals (five from Kottagudi, seven from Kurangani and five from Top Station) participated, among which 12 of them attended the workshop on both the days while the rest attended only on the first day. Of these 17 individuals, 12 of them were already experienced in guiding tourists on treks while two of them had accompanied other guides on treks. Three individuals were new to this profession and had no prior experience of guiding. While three individuals had an experience of 20 years and more, three had an experience of more than five years and the rest had less than five years of experience.

Five of them were working as full-time guides among which only one individual had no other secondary business. The remaining four members also had a shop, hotel or home-stay. For all the other members, working as tourist guides was not the main occupation. They were involved in other jobs (agriculture, grazing, JCB operator, Airtel marketing, CNC designing, solar energy dealer) and three of them were studying.

All the individuals were interested in working as guides and two of them were interested in setting up new home-stays. In addition, five of the guides had their own home-stays and food services for the tourists. Majority of the guides were not highly educated. The highest educational qualification was a Bachelor's degree (n=3) and 12th standard (n=2).

The respondents were of the opinion that tourist inflow was more during the vacations (April-May, December and weekends). There was an opinion that local tourists (Tamil Nadu and other states of south India) visited the place during weekends while tourists from other parts of the country and abroad mostly came during the vacations. Another opinion was that tourists came in during the season when paddy was sowed (February-March, November-December) and harvested (April-May, January-February) to enjoy the green pastures.

The charges varied among guides. The established guides charged the tourists depending on the packages chosen. There was a difference in rates for domestic and international tourists. The local guides fixed the rates based on the trek distance. They charged the tourists about Rs.500 - 2000 per trek/individual. The guides had to take permission from the Forest Department before a trek. The guides from Top Station had to take permission from the Kerala Forest Department in case they were walking through areas owned by them. Some of them were not aware of the permissions required while some more went trekking without any permission.

The guides were of the opinion that the tourists came to visit places around Kottagudi panchayat to enjoy nature, to have a break from the city lifestyle, to enjoy the waterfalls, climate and see the stone inscriptions found around Kurangani. There were also adventure enthusiasts who came for trekking. All the guides stated that they would explain the history and culture of the place and the names of plants and animals they knew. One of the respondents said that he would explain the names of medicinal plants to tourists. Only a couple of them were not sure of what they would tell the tourists.

All the participants of the workshop knew Tamil. A few of them could converse in Malayalam. Hindi and English were also known by a few of them but not very well. One of the participants knew Kannada. A major number of the participant guides agreed that they faced no problems when communicating with the tourists, as they would manage using signs and non-verbal means. One of the respondents said that problems arose when international tourists from places like Russia and France arrived. These tourists, according to the respondent, were not familiar with English and hence communicating with them was a problem. Only a couple of respondents said that they faced a problem with language, as they were not able to convey their thoughts and ideas.

While a majority of the individuals had no training in administering first aid, a few of them had received some sort of training earlier. While one of them was a compounder for 6 years, another individual learnt it from his friends who are technicians. Most of the individuals possessed knowledge of traditional/herbal medicines passed on from generations and they told that these remedies would be used during times of need during the trek. A couple of them knew how to save a drowning person and one also knew how to administer first aid during snakebite.

Only the experienced guides had a clear idea of how the safety of tourists would be ensured. Some of the responses were; a large group of tourists is escorted by more than one guide, informing the tourists to follow the instructions given and to maintain decorum during the trek. The guides also carried first aid kit along with them for use in case of emergency. An interesting reply that came about from one respondent was that he would pray to God and begin the trek. All the respondents, except one, said that they collected all the waste generated from the treks and dumped it in dustbins available at the place of stay or buried it in a pit. A few said that, they then set the waste on fire. Only one respondent said that he disposed the waste in the forest.

Ten respondents had attended a guide-training workshop previously. This workshop was conducted by GREEN, an NGO, who had also issued a training certificate to the participants. One of the participants had also worked under another guide during his initial days in this profession. The other participants had no training before and did not possess any certificate.

When asked about the competition they faced, most respondents were of the opinion that they did not face any. The reason for this according to one respondent was that the place (Kottagudi) has not been established as a tourist spot. One participant said that backpackers were a competition, as they did not hire guides. Another opinion was that there exists competition amongst the villages, as the tourists visiting a village were not allowed accommodation in another village. There were problems along the Kerala side; recently there was a case of a foreigner being teased in one of the home-stays after which running home-stays in Top Stations have become a problem.

The limitations that the guides faced were mainly a lack of experience and communication issues. For one respondent finance was a constraint as he was keen on expanding his work. Here again issues along the Kerala side were raised. One respondent stated that money was a major factor among the guides from Kerala. He said that if these guides were given money, they allowed tourists to do anything they wanted and hence tourists preferred to go with them.

Most of the participants attended the workshop with the expectation of getting an authorized ID card, license or certificate. Members from Kottagudi village came in with an idea of developing their village using tourism as a means and to learn more about how to do so.

After the workshop, a **feedback** questionnaire was asked to find out if the expectations from the workshop were met.

When asked to rate the content dealt in the workshop on a scale of one-five, the participant ratings varied between two to five with an average of four. The language used and the usefulness of the workshop were rated between two to five with an average for both being four.

The participants said that their expectations were met but not completely, as they had been expecting to get a certificate. A few also said that they were expecting to learn more about how to be a guide but that the workshop dealt mostly with problems related to tourism. However when asked what they liked the most about the workshop they stated that they liked the talk on how to guide tourists and how to be a good guide. The talk about waste management and the interactive activity were also appreciated by the participants.

When the respondents were asked how they would change the way they would guide tourists on future treks, they replied that they would include things that they had learnt in the workshop. They would explain the details of the place to the tourists and also make changes in the way they disposed the waste. Punctuality was another aspect they said they would follow during their future treks.

According to the respondents, the workshop was good for the beginners who participated. Some of them were also of the opinion that the information provided should have been more elaborate. A couple of guides stated that the success of the workshop in the future would depend on the interest and unity shown by them. A number of topics like building an association and its working, waste disposal, how to be a good tourist guide, how to interact with the tourists, language and communication were suggested for the follow up workshop if conducted. One of them also wanted to know the ways in which women could also enter this profession.

Appendix 1

Name:

Guide / home-stay / food / other..... **(Encircle)**

Age:

Education:

Settlement:

Income:

1. Have you been guiding people for treks? Yes/no
2. How long have you been doing this?
3. Is this a full-time job? If No, list the other jobs you do?
4. When do tourists come?
5. What are the charges per trek?
6. What are the permissions that you get before you take the tourists on a trek?
7. What according to you are the tourists looking forward to from their visit to the place you are guiding them?
8. What do you inform the tourists about the place?

9. What are the languages that you communicate in with the tourists?
10. Do you face any language problems when handling the tourists?
11. Have you been trained to administer first aid?
12. What are the safety measures you follow on a trek?
13. How do you manage the waste generated during the treks?
14. Have you been part of a training program before?
15. Were you issued a guide certificate?
16. What is the kind of competition you face?
17. Where do you think you fall short?
18. What are your expectations from this workshop?

Appendix 2

1. *Rate the following questions about the workshop on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest. (encircle the relevant option)*

Content was relevant 1 2 3 4 5

Language was understandable 1 2 3 4 5

Useful 1 2 3 4 5

2. Did you establish contacts with guides from other villages during the workshop?
3. Were your expectations from the workshop met?
4. What did you like most about this workshop?
5. Will you make any changes to the way you conduct tourism? If yes, what will they be?
6. How do you think we can improve this workshop?
7. What should the next workshop concentrate on?