North West Ghana, Africa
The Wechiau Community Hippo Sanctuary
Creating Economic Sustainability through Conservation/Tourism

1999
Through the inspiration & initiative of John Mason, of NCRC, Wechiau-Naa, Gurungu-Naa, and Tokali-Naa and the foresight, guidance and enthusiastic support of Brian Keating and Alex Graham of the Calgary Zoo, The Wechiau Community Hippo Sanctuary was born.
Together these six men along with Donna Sheppard brought about many very positive changes for the people of Wechiau, now and in the future.

Calgary Zoo committed to an effort that would find a solution to conserve the last known pod of hippopotamus in North West Ghana near the small village of Wechiau

A couple of basic guidelines were provided:
• It must be supported by local people
• There must be a benefit/reason for them (the local people) to participate

What has happened since then?
• Working with a local Ghanaian Organization, NCRC (Nature Conservation Research Centre), a Local Management Board of Directors was established made up of:
  - The Director of NCRC, John Mason
  - African Chiefs from the local area
  - a couple of business men
  
  Wechiau-Naa  Gurungu-Naa  Tokali-Naa
  Paramount Chief

The Calgary Zoo provided start up funding
• A Business/Development Plan was adopted by the Board and presented to the local people

Business Plan Guidelines
• Establish the boundaries for the Conservation Reserve
  (Approximately 5 km’s wide and 40 km’s long along the Black Volta River in North West Ghana, near the village of Wechiau)
• In order to save the hippo’s the villagers would have to relocate away from the shores of the river
• Work together with NGO’s to establish support, both financially and with human resources
• Work to attract other Conservation Organizations
• Calgary Zoo would provide annual financial and human resources support
• NCRC would oversee, provide guidance and monitor financial and human resource support
• Villages had been relocated – An additional benefit to the relocations has been the villages are no longer damaged when the river floods during the rainy season.

By 2006 – Funding had been sourced

The following achievements had been completed:
• All villages had water wells dug and operational to provide clean fresh water
• Each village had a small solar lighting facility

Mohammed Ali - Chief Ranger

Talawona students reading to Axel by new solar lights

• A new school had been completed

A U.K. group “The Friends of Wechiau” have developed a scholarship program for the community schools

The Sanctuary Board administers a Scholarship/Bursary program of their own

Research was being conducted on the potential development of Shea Butter products from the nuts of the Shea Nut Tree, and also secure a fair market for the nuts gathered by the local women.

“Last week, a woman struggled the two kilometres from her village to bring a 70lb sack of nuts to the Wechiau market to sell. She was paid by the trader and took her small fortune to the cement shop and ordered one bag of cement (value of one sack of Shea nuts = CND $40-$50). When she produced the same bills to pay for the purchase, the man laughed and said ‘that can’t work’. She produced all of her money and still the answer was the same: as it turned out, she had been deceived and paid only a tenth of what she deserved.” Donna Sheppard – September 2007 Sanctuary Update

• Conservation officers were expanded and new bicycles were provided

2010-The second school is constructed and operational

Further development & staffing of the Visitor Centre

• The Medical facilities are stocked and operational – at least partially sponsored through the Kiwanis

Medical Records System developed by the U.S. Peace Corp

Lighting systems are completed – Canadian Hydro initiative with Light up The World

Wechiau is now on the countries electrical grid & has limited internet service

Interpretive Signs have been installed in the sanctuary

Shea Butter processing facility is partially funded, construction has begun
International Recognition

- 5th Annual SKAL (International Travel & Tourism Association) International Ecotourism Award
- United Nations Equator Award

The Equator Initiative is a partnership that brings together the United Nations, governments, civil society, businesses, and grassroots organizations to build the capacity and raise the profile of local efforts to reduce poverty through the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.

Started in 2002, the Equator Initiative evolved in response to: the fact that the world’s greatest concentrations of biodiversity are found in countries also beset by the world’s most acute poverty; and the evolving trend of local leadership in advancing innovative projects in biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction.

As sustainable community initiatives take root throughout the tropics, they are laying the foundation for a global movement of local successes that are collectively making a significant contribution to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as well as adapting to and mitigating the effects of climate change.

The Equator Initiative is dedicated to:
- Celebrating successful local initiatives
- Creating opportunities for sharing community experiences and good practice
- Informing policy and fostering and enabling environment for local action
- Building the capacity of grassroots organizations to deliver results and scale-up impact

The Next Phase

The Tourist Lodge has been identified as the key factor that needs to be addressed in the long term sustainability of the Sanctuary. The Lodge is identified as being a strategic and key component in terms of Sanctuary revenue and local employment.

Current challenges: The existing lodge has become outdated to meet the needs of today’s tourist. The lodge is very small, is often inadequate to cope with the current demand and has no additional capacity. Bathroom and bathing facilities are primitive at best. The current lodge cannot justify the type of room rent that is available. In addition the Lodge facilities are beginning to suck resources for repairs and maintenance.

What happens to the present form of construction when it rains and the damp moves in?

Facility required: A facility that contains a cooking, eating and sleeping areas, constructed of the same quality materials as the new schools, but front dressed preserving the appearance of the Lobi family compound structures. Although the proposed new lodge will not be the same caliber as the comparisons in the following pictures, we hope for a facility that is comfortable and inviting to all visitors & tourists to the sanctuary. Estimated costs $140,000.00.