

# THE TURTLE VILLAGE TRUST, TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO: SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH STRATEGIC BRIDGING, GREEN ALLIANCE AND ENVIROPRENEURSHIP

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Abstract: The Turtle Village Trust (TVT) is a consortium of stakeholders including the Trinidad and Tobago government, the villages of the North East coast of the island and BHP Billiton, a major multinational corporation with operations in that vicinity. The central objectives of the TVT are conservation of the large populations of seasonally visiting leatherback turtles and the socio-economic enhancement of the North East region which has historically consisted of poor and rural communities, largely dependent on agriculture and fisheries livelihoods. This paper analyses the motives, incentives, costs and benefits of each of the key stakeholders in building, operating and expanding this collaborative sustainable development and conservation model. We discuss these relationships and stakeholder dynamics in the theoretical contexts of green alliances which focus on mutual benefits between partners; enviropreneurship which emphasises non-confrontational stakeholder engagement and operational effectiveness; and strategic bridging that establishes operational linkages, provides shared resources and avoids duplicity of efforts among partners. Emerging from this analysis is a sustainable best practice model for government-private sector-NGO collaboration which can be applied to conservation and socio-economic development efforts in other developing countries.

Keywords: strategic bridging; enviropreneurship; green alliances; socio-economic development; turtle conservation; small island developing states.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the twin-island state of Trinidad and Tobago where one of the largest populations of nesting leatherback sea turtles can be found, five community groups or Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have become involved in leatherback turtle

conservation for quite a number of years. Turtle conservation was proving to be a challenge to these five NGOs (Nature Seekers Incorporated, Fishing Pond Turtle Conservation Group (FPTCG), Grande Riviere Nature Tour Guide Association, and SOS Tobago) in the areas of obtaining

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Table I Summary of the opportunities derived and risks faced by an NGO in an alliance

Opportunities	Risks
Provision of ecological, scientific and legal expertise (Milne et al., 1996; Hartman and Stafford, 1997).	Erosion of public trust of the NGO (Stafford et al., 2000).
Reduction in duplicity of effort and efficiency in utilisation of resources and staff.	Intensive stakeholder scrutiny and critism (Stafford et al., 2000).
Ability to access funding and other financial backing.	Strategic risk (Stafford et al., 2000).

adequate funding and having trained staff<sup>1</sup>. They came together to standardise their conservation strategy and to develop their organisational structure so that they would be able to present themselves as a stable, well developed organisation when making attempts for corporate support and funding.

As part of their attempts to obtain corporate support, approaches were made to BHP Billiton by the fledgling group. The Trinidad and Tobago Community Relations Advisor to BHP Billiton, Mr. Sheldon Narine, presented a challenge to the group to develop a business plan that would enable the group to become self-sufficient<sup>2</sup>. The aim of this challenge was to serve as a catalyst for self sufficiency through sustainable development since the operating environments within which these NGOs function were essentially rural with a high degree of unemployment and lack of societal and economic mobility.

This challenge proved to be the initiative that eventually gave rise to the Turtle Village Trust (TVT), in 2006. As part of its overall goals, approaches were made to the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago through the Ministry of Tourism. These approaches proved successful and the Ministry of Tourism partnered with the TVT. The formation of TVT presented

opportunities as well as threats for all the various collaborators (see Table 1). The success of such a venture depended entirely upon the degree of commitment of each collaborator and required a great degree of 'buy-in' to negate the risks involved and the possibility of failure.

### THE COLLABORATORS

Nature Seekers Incorporated: this organisation is a community-based organisation that was established in 1990<sup>3</sup> for the sole purpose of protection and conservation of the Leatherback Turtles in the area of Matura. Traditionally, the endangered Leatherback Turtle has been nesting on beaches on the North East Coast on the island of Trinidad. During this nesting period the turtles were slaughtered by residents in attempts to remove their fins. In 1990, the Wildlife Section of the Forestry Division of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago designated the nesting beaches as Prohibited Areas under the Forest Act (chap 66:01) from 1 March to 31 August for that year and subsequent years.

Some members of the Matura community were trained in tour guiding and this proved to be the genesis of the Nature Seekers organisation<sup>4</sup>. The members of this organisation have engaged in beach patrols and tour guide services to visitors

during the leatherback turtle nesting season. Additionally they have participated in an international turtle tagging programme. Due to its efforts in Turtle Conservation, Nature Seekers has received several local and international awards since its inception.<sup>5</sup>

Grande Riviere Nature Tour Guide Association: the Grande Riviere Nature Tour Guide Association (GRNTGA), was formed in response to the need for trained individuals in turtle and environmental conservation<sup>6</sup>. Its predecessor, Grande Riviere Environmental Trust (GREAT) was established following the success of Nature Seekers Incorporated, with the similar aim of protecting nesting Leatherback turtle on Grande Riviere beach (Harrison, 2007). GREAT began by training tour guides, embarking upon revenue-generating tour guiding enterprise and eventually lobbied to have the Grande Riviere beach declared a prohibited area by legal notice 71 dated 10 April 1997. Subsequently GREAT evolved into the Grande Riviere Nature Tour Guide Association.

Save Our Sea Turtles (SOS): The Save Our Sea Turtles group is a small, NGO that was created in 2000 with the aim of conserving Tobago's Sea turtle population and their coastal and marine habitat through research, education and eco-tourism. They have identified the three biggest threats facing these turtles as being over exploitation, loss of secure nesting beach habitat due to sand mining and increasing human activity that have negative effects on these turtles. SOS embarked on its mission through several approaches<sup>8</sup>. The first being education which seeks to increase public awareness through lectures and field trips; the second being beach patrols specifically in the Black Rock area during the turtle nesting season to discourage poaching and to tag turtles for international research purposes; and thirdly to encourage eco-tourism whereby local guides, guest houses and international tour operators are linked so as to maximise the amount of financial benefits that the community can derive from the turtle conservation efforts.

FPTCG: The FPTCG, was established in the late 2005. This was done to satisfy the need to properly manage the natural resources in the community. This group is the vehicle through which projects developed by the Fishing Pond Environmental Projects are implemented. The Fishing Pond Community has been actively pursuing protection of the nesting Leatherback turtles for the past 15 years. These activities became formalised with the establishment of the FPTCG in 2005. Additionally this formalisation allowed for collaborative efforts to be pursued with other such organisations in the island of Trinidad.

Matura to Toco Network, M2M: the network was created from the Committee known as the Stakeholders Against Destruction (S.A.D.) for Toco that was formed in response to Government's intention to establish a port in the Toco area in 2000. The Toco region consists of 14 coastal villages with a combined population of approximately 5,000 people and is situated on the North East Coast of the island of Trinidad from Matelot to Matura. This Committee comprised representatives of all the perceived interest groups from the villages from Matura to Matelot (Mc Intosh, 2002). The Committee succeeded in having the Government shelve its plans for the port and subsequently received two local awards for its contribution in community development. The Committee drafted an Alternative Development Plan for the area and subsequently focused on its implementation. A Leadership Training Programme entitled "Bringing Out the Leader in Me", was conducted in 2002 and was attended by 37 community leaders representing 23 different community organisations and served as the catalyst for eroding mutual suspicion and distrust that had existed for several years amongst them<sup>10</sup>.

BHP Billiton: Started operations in Trinidad and Tobago in the year 1996<sup>11</sup>. It pursued offshore explorations off the Northeast coast of the island of Trinidad. These explorations proved successful and in 1999 natural gas discoveries were made. Since then BHP Billiton has made several new oil and gas discoveries in the same region. BHP Billiton commits itself to environmental responsibility in all spheres of its operations<sup>12</sup>. It commits itself to the 'stewardship approach'. This approach conveys that in all its operations it will take care of the environment within which its operations are ongoing. It acknowledges that the nature of its operations has 'the potential to affect the environment in many ways'13. The company list six specific ways<sup>14</sup> in its charter by which it can fulfil its commitment to be responsible in environmental affairs, these are:

- 1 Efficient use of resources.
- 2 Reduction of pollution.
- 3 Enhancing biodiversity protection.
- 4 Open and honest engagement with stakeholders.
- 5 Meet and/or exceed mandatory standards for all aspects of environmental management.
- 6 Prioritised its improvement of the management of energy and greenhouse gas emissions.

The Stewardship Approach adopted by the company also applies to its involvement in the communities in which it operates. The

company becomes involved in the operating communities in such a manner so as to 'improve the livelihoods of the people... in a sustainable way'. This entails working with established organisations in projects for which due diligence reports have been done, expectations have been set out and for which constant monitoring is carried out to ensure that the expectations are met. This Stewardship Approach is indeed embodied in BHP Billiton's operations in Trinidad and Tobago.

Ministry of tourism: the government of Trinidad and Tobago established the Ministry of Tourism in 1994<sup>16</sup> in an attempt to develop Trinidad and Tobago as a premier tourist destination. As part of its portfolio, the Ministry of Tourism was given the mandate to 'Develop and implement tourism-related projects'. The Ministry of Tourism actively promotes community initiatives that seek or demonstrate the potential to increase the tourism marketability of the country. One such example of such a venture was carried out on the 4 June 2009, when the Ministry of Tourism opened a new visitor centre at the Grande Riviere Community dedicated to turtle conservation eco-tourism efforts<sup>17</sup>.

# THE COLLABORATIVE VENTURE

The TVT is a complex organisation in terms of its composition and the type of interaction that occurs amongst its constituent partners (see Figure 1). In reality the TVT is an umbrella body that adds cohesiveness amongst all these constituent partners. Within the organisation there is a sub-group consisting of the NGOs that already had in place a high level of collaboration. The Corporate partners, BHP Billiton and the Government (represented by the Ministry of Tourism) collaborate with the collective group.

**Table 2** Analysis of the manner of collaboration that exists within specific sub-groups of the TVT and the benefits derived from these alliances

Type of collaboration	Exists amongst	Benefits derived
Strategic bridging	The NGOs	Reduces duplicity of effort and personnel to accomplish tasks.
Enviropreneurship	NGOs and the Ministry of Tourism	The eco-tourism thrust is capitalised upon as a revenue earner and as a means to provide financial returns to the group.
Green Alliance and Corporate Account ability Partnership <sup>18</sup>	TVT and the Ministry of Tourism	Rebranding of the NGOs as one entity, creating a unified entity which utilises the eco-tourism thrust which appeals to niche tourists markets thus attracting visitors to the country, generating revenue for the communities and fulfilling the Tourism Ministry's mandate.
Corporate Social Responsibility Partnership <sup>19</sup>	TVT and BHP Billiton TVT and Ministry of Tourism	BHP Billiton fulfils its mandate under its Steward- ship Approach to develop the capacity within these communities for self-sustenance and sustainable use of the natural resources.
Conventional Business Partnership <sup>20</sup>	TVT: all partners	The collaboration of all the partners developed a viable business unit with a development plan that allows for the generation of finances from a limited resource base.

Thus, the entity, TVT, is an all encompassing body that manages group activities, presenting a unified voice for purposes of representation, collaborative efforts, strategic planning and obtaining international recognition (funding and support). It also attempts to provide accountability at a time when integrity is a declining quality in business operations. It can be concurred that TVT, from all appearances, also contributes to the international appeal of the group enabling them to better be able to garner essential support where necessary. Further analysis of TVT reveals that within the organisation there is a plethora of collaborative types that exists (see Table 2). As such there are unique benefits that are derived from each type of collaboration. In essence this type of complex structure maximises the quantum of benefits (see Table 2) and actually harnesses all that is available to TVT.

Green Alliances are collaborative partnerships between businesses and environmental groups which seek to integrate corporate environmental responsibilities with market goals as an effective marketing strategy (Gunningham, 2004; Hartman and Stafford, 1997). Green Alliances consist of Enviropreneurship which essentially is a thrust at partnership between environmental NGOs and business entities with the express aim of addressing environmental concerns (Gray, 1989; Stafford et al., 2000); and Strategic Bridging which involves the formation of alliances among stakeholders of similar interests (Brown, 1991; Stafford et al., 2000; Westley and Vredenburg, 1991).

There exists a strategic bridging alliance amongst the NGOs, since all of them are involved in the same type of conservation

efforts, rely basically for scientific support from the same international research organisation and are all community focused. This alliance allows for proper development of the human resources, opportunity for shared transfer of knowledge in terms of conservation strategies and development of a common pool of resources and trained personnel thus reducing the demands for expenditure. These nesting beaches have reached their carrying capacity in terms of the numbers of visitors that can be accommodated thus, it is imperative that these NGOs reduce their overheads and expenditure if they are to be viable.

There exists some element of enviropreneurship with the establishment of the TVT and the involvement of the Ministry of Tourism. These NGOs now have a greater bargaining power as a single entity which allows for greater negotiating power and recognition locally and internationally. Further, the Ministry of Tourism provides branding and support in the form of advertising both locally and internationally. This serves to guarantee a steady visitor rate to these areas during the Turtle Nesting Season.

The Ministry of Tourism has also attempted to be the catalyst for the development of stay-over accommodation facilities within the region. It is understood that with the carrying capacity of the beaches saturated, the visitors must be enticed to stay over and participate in other activities within the same area. This is actually being realised with the establishment of a Visitor centre at Grande Riviere and recreational facilities at the Salibea area by the Ministry of Tourism. This partnership between the NGOs and the Ministry of Tourism is a hybrid amongst the Conventional Business partnership where revenue generation is the focus, the Corporate Social Responsibility partnership in which marketing opportunities are established and pursued and Corporate Accountability partnership where some form of rebranding occurs and the Ministry of Tourism is exploiting the eco-tourism niche market by promoting the TVT.

The involvement of BHP Billiton with these NGOs is rather perplexing for a casual observer. However upon careful examination of the mandate of BHP Billiton by the Stewardship Approach of its charter this relationship can be classed as a hybrid relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility partnership and Social Economy partnership. It tends to be a Corporate Social Responsibility partnership in that BHP Billiton is a business entity partnering with a non-business entity (the NGOs) in a voluntary venture which doesn't bring any returns to BHP Billiton, but which allows the NGOs to accrue business and managerial expertise and thus, some level of economic return. In terms of the Social Economy partnership, the partnership is for the sole purpose of sustainable development of these communities rather than to provide any economic gain to BHP Billiton. What is apparent is that there is overlap in the benefits derived from the various collaborations. As such there will be very little friction amongst them but rather a concentration in the efforts to achieve the results and benefits that the TVT developmental plan seeks to achieve.

### SUSTAINABILITY IMPACTS OF TVT

A period of a mere four years has elapsed since the establishment of the TVT in 2006. It can be stated that the start up and establishment period for TVT as compared to other collaborative ventures would indeed be different. This would be so due to the complex nature of this collaborative effort which does not emulate any one established model of cooperation.

In addition to this complexity in structure, the TVT has been faced with a great hurdle, the global recession that started at the end of the year 2007<sup>21</sup>. This resulted in a reduction of economic activities, vacation and company spending. TVT was forced to slow down the implementation of its development plan, a long term plan that was expected to achieve full fruition in the years 2015 to 2016<sup>22</sup>. It was reported that this global economic recession directly affected new business start-ups worldwide<sup>23</sup>. The TVT was therefore forced to hold back on launching its full business initiatives contained within its development plan.

Nevertheless, a visit to the various communities presented great evidence of ongoing activities. Amongst evidence of progress were:

- 1 The installation of TVT signage in all related communities.
- 2 The establishment of the visitor centre at Grande Riviere under the aegis of the Tourism Ministry.
- 3 The procurement of a boat/barge and portable office facilities at the Fishing Pond community.
- 4 The production of information flyers for distribution to visitors at each area.
- 5 The setting up of a water park facility including kayak rental, life guard facilities, washroom facilities and parking lots at Salibea, Matura under the purview of Nature Seekers.
- 6 The ongoing beach clean-up activities prior to the turtle-nesting season.
- 7 The presence of a clearly identifiable base of operations within each operational community.
- 8 The presence of international and local visitors in each of these districts.

The operational communities have indeed begun to benefit from the activities of TVT. There has been establishment of commercial activity associated with TVT development plan being set up, this resulted in the creation of direct jobs through employment and indirect jobs through commercial activity by the residents such as retailing. As such, there has been a great outpouring and buy-in by the members of each community.

Further to all the activities done by TVT that have benefitted its operating communities, the Ministry of Tourism as an active partner engaged the scientific community by hosting an international conference entitled 'Turtle Conservation, Ecotourism and Sustainable Community Development'<sup>24</sup> right here on the island of Trinidad on the 28 and 29 of the month of July in 2009. The intention was to provide a forum where knowledge of best practices could be disseminated no doubt to the benefit of the TVT personnel as well as all other interested parties.

### **FUTURE OF TVT**

TVT recognised that if it was to be successful, it needed to diversify its efforts from turtle watching activities to other revenue generating activities that would sustain not only the Trust but also the communities within which it operates. It resolved to focus on capacity building within its operating communities to foster sustainable livelihoods for the inhabitants. In accomplishing this aim the TVT focused on seven main areas<sup>25</sup> (see Table 3). Within each area of focus the broad aims were identified for implementation.

The TVT then came up with a development plan that emphasised, firstly, the protection of the environment, and secondly,

Table 3 The seven main areas of focus of the TVT and their general aims

Area of focus	Aims
Capacity building	Development of resources.
Baseline assessment/monitoring and evaluation	Assess what exists, improve and implement then evaluate success.
Public awareness and education	Develop community 'buy-in'.
Conservation	Maintain a leatherback turtle presence.
Research and monitoring	Identify impacts on nesting sea turtles.
Climate change	Investigate implications for turtles.
Sustainable community development	Provision of jobs and development.

Source: http://www.turtlevillagetrust.org/focus.htm

capacity building of the individuals in the operating communities. This plan recognises that the environment can be harnessed in the form of ecotourism to generate revenue for the communities, and that 'buy-in' by the members of the community must occur if these plans are to come to fruition.

The member communities within which the TVT operates are rural agricultural districts within which there are little employment opportunities and opportunities for advancement. The Toco area is considered to be one of the most economically depressed in the island of Trinidad with current unemployment rates between 55% and 60% (Mc Intosh, 2002). If 'buy-in' was to be achieved within these communities then the programmes to be implemented must enable the members of the communities to become self-sufficient. The development plan developed by TVT catered for this aspect by focusing on capacity building.

This development plan was arranged into a number of initiatives to be implemented over time and in several phases. These initiatives focus on an 'ecotourism project, a national monitoring programme and a signage project'<sup>26</sup> and were to be implemented in five phases. In phase 1 focus

would concentrate on the establishment of nature trails, promotion of cultural events, construction of accommodation, merchandising of crafts and souvenirs, and turtle watching and conservation; in phase 2 focus would be on the expansion of existing museum, construction of accommodation, an aquaculture project, an organic farming project and turtle watching and conservation; in phase 3 focus would centre on creation of a wildlife park, adoption of Green Globe international standards, and turtle watching and conservation; in phase 4 the focus concentrates on establishment of an entertainment centre, creation and refurbishing of beach and visitor facilities, and turtle watching and conservation; and the final phase would focus on the establishment of an aquarium, expansion of tours to include marine environments and the establishment of a turtle research centre.

It should be noted that in every phase of implementation that there is focus on turtle watching and conservation. This is essential since this is the core business upon which the TVT bases all its development. Turtle Watching activities is cyclical by nature since the nesting season for the leatherback turtles only last from the month of March to August each year. TVT

will use the revenue generated from the turtle watching activities to fund development of other projects that will in turn generate revenue after initial start up and allow for further expansion.

There are several positives derived from TVT, these include the possibility of collaboration amongst NGOs in the form of strategic bridging to achieve common outcomes; and the involvement of business in a professional capacity to guide the development of business plans and to lend management expertise; the involvement of Government to provide branding.

TVT is certainly an entity that can be replicated in the sustainable management of Common Pool Resources. TVT is an example of Sustainable self-governance of Common-Pool Resources. It manages a shared commons amongst several NGOs and operates within the principles as outlined by Ostrom (1990).

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### **NOTES**

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- <sup>2</sup> Pers. Communication with S. Mc Latchie of SAD.
- <sup>3</sup> Source: Nature Seekers (2010a).
- <sup>4</sup> Source: Nature Seekers (2010c).
- <sup>5</sup> Nature Seekers (2010b).
- <sup>6</sup> Turtle Village Trust (2010c).
- <sup>7</sup> The GEF Small Grants Programme (2010).
- <sup>8</sup> SOS Tobago (2010).
- <sup>9</sup> SAD For Toco (2010c).
- 10 SAD For Toco (2010a)
- <sup>11</sup> BHP Billiton (2010).
- <sup>12</sup> Source: BHP Billiton (2009).
- 13 ibid, p.34.
- 14 ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> *ibid*, p.30.
- <sup>16</sup> Ministry of Tourism (2010c).
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