Potentiality Assessment for Ecotourism in Rural Communities: A Case of Fayoum Governorate, Egypt
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Abstract
Ecotourism is seen as one of the aspects of sustainable economic growth of rural communities. Although the rich natural, archeological, and cultural heritage of the Fayoum, ecotourism development faces a growing number of challenges; including poverty, depopulation, environmental changes, and lack of vision among official stakeholders. This study aims to assess the existing ecotourism development potentials in selected villages within the Fayoum governorate (Tunis, Nazla, and Abu Ghandir) through introducing the hurdles facing this development. This will evaluate the current situation of the three rural villages, the interest of specific stakeholders, the potential of each village as an ecotourism destination and the requirements to achieve the expected results. Situational analysis of rural communities was used to gather and analyze primary data, In-depth semi-structured Interviews with official stakeholders, group discussions with local communities and In-depth structured Interviews with foreign expatriates to collect information on their impressions of the villages visited. The study revealed major issues should be recovered from the viewpoints of local communities, official stakeholders, and expatriates and from the situational analysis of the villages.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Fayoum governorate, Local community.

Introduction
The Fayoum is one of Egypt’s most valuable governorates in terms of natural, cultural and rural assets. The combination of stunning landscapes (agriculture - coastal - desert) and the proximity to Cairo - approximately 96 km - made the scenic oasis of Fayoum an attractive destination. In the Fayoum villages, huge assets can be exploited for developing ecotourism businesses including: agriculture, wildlife, handicrafts, cultural and natural heritage sites, and traditions and customs (Ibrahim and Jones, 2011).
Three villages in the Fayoum - Nazla, Tunis, and Abu Ghandir - are selected to conduct this research following selection criteria based on: unique location, distinguished features, and closeness of major cultural and natural heritage sites.
Tunis is a small village on the south-western coast of Lake Qarun. It’s location on a high ground overlooking Lake Qarun and its vicinity to Qasr Qarun temple and Wadi Rayan Protected Area, made it an important ecotourism site. The village was described by Lina El Wardani, a journalist at Ahram online as: "a village that combines arts, adventure, relaxing, swimming and farming in one charming place" (El Wardani, 2016:1). It is home not only to glazed pottery workshops but also to artists, writers, and small art galleries.
Nazla, is a village that has over 20 open-air pottery workshops and ovens and a pottery
network of experienced traditional artisans. It is located 35 km south of Lake Qarun on extraordinary valley called Masraf El Wadi with unique natural beauty. The site allowed maintaining a traditional utilitarian pottery production inherited from the Pharaohs. Abu Ghandir, a village in the south of the Fayoum where a charity association of a group of women members produce handmade products such as clothes. It is considered the entrance to Madinet Madi - a unique archaeological site of the Fayoum.

Local people in these villages can provide tourists not only their natural beauty, unique traditions and customs, and handicrafts but also their local knowledge about the environment in which ecotourism takes place. Undoubtedly the most appropriate people to narrate visitors about a destination are the local people; they have a local knowledge and folklore which can contribute to the ecotourist’s overall experience when visiting the village (Huy & Khin, 2016).

Despite the existence of a variety of handicrafts and unique features of those local communities that could provide ecotourists with wonderful memorable experiences, their involvement in the ecotourism process is very poor. Encouraging local community participation in the ecotourism destination development process in the Fayoum is as essential target when developing ecotourism in the region. On the way to achieve this, there is a need to study the current ecotourism situation of the three villages. This would serve increasing the understanding of the main issues and identify necessary actions to address the priority areas in the villages and allow drawing recommendations. Therefore, this paper aims to assess the potential ecotourism development in the three selected communities through evaluating the current status, the interest in the matter of specific stakeholders, the potential for further developments and the requirements to achieve the expected results. Thus, the following objectives are developed:

- Identify important cultural and natural features of the three villages.
- Find out the touristic services already provided in the three selected villages.
- Evaluate the required support levels from official authorities.

**Literature Review**

Historically, the concept of ecotourism appeared in the late 1980's and grow rapidly as a major topic in the literature in the last few decades as an alternative strategy of economic development in less-developed communities (Getahun and Yeshanew, 2016). In past ten years, the small scale and low impact ecotourism provided a unique travelling experience in the sensitive natural and cultural sites (Nigatu, 2016).

However, the definition of ecotourism is still controversial; The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) explained that the term refers to any environment friendly form of tourism development (2005). In this regard, Bhavani (2016) asserted that ecotourism reveals the ecological, economic and community aspects as it contributes positively to the conservation of nature; it is used as a tool for a sustainable economy (Eshetu, 2014; Russo, 2005; Walmsley, 2003); and it empowers the community by improving their participation. Also, ecotourism is to apply the concept of green economy, low energy consumption, and low pollution tourism (João et al. 2014). A comprehensive definition of ecotourism was introduced by Ibrahim and Jones (2011:75) “Ecotourism is the best example of sustainable tourism development and implies responsible travel experience to an undisturbed destination with characteristic natural and/or cultural heritage where tourist motivations, activities and satisfaction levels can be achieved by collaboration amongst all destination...
stakeholders aiming at directly foster economic, socio-cultural and environmental wellbeing”.

Ecotourism is a part of sustainable tourism as the latter embodies the relationship between ecotourism and sustainable development (Sâmbotin et al., 2011; Bansal and Kumar, 2011). Min (2015) also emphasized that to achieve sustainable tourism development, energy conservation and pollution reductions are required to build a responsible community. Therefore, sustainable tourism will focus on three areas: I. Quality of visitor experience, community identity, and environment; II. Continuity and regeneration of natural resources; III. Balance between industry, local community, and environment (Kiper, 2013; Williams and Ponsford, 2009).

Ecotourism activities are primarily delivered to small groups’ and focuses on the contribution to the conservation of biodiversity and natural resources; the empowerment of the local peoples particularly for the rural peoples; the interpretation or learning experience (Wood, 2003). Consequently, the contribution of ecotourism packages in the world travel market is usually competitive (UNEP-WTO, 2005). Furthermore, a general agreement was agreed upon among UN member countries for “Promotion of ecotourism for poverty eradication and environment protection” (UNEP, 2013:275), for and setting policies to enable them to communicate ecotourism as a means of income generation, job creation and education (Getahun & Yeshanew, 2016). In a word, ecotourism activities focus on local cultures, natural scenery, wildlife and cultural heritage (Huy & Khin, 2016).

Ecotourism is communicated as one possible means of development in rural areas or the tool for revitalization of the rural identity (Hakkarainen and Seija, 2008; Murphy and Murphy, 2001; Turnock, 2002). Rural areas in general face severe problems of depopulation, economic decrease and environmental changes, which are the result of the increase of natural resources exploitation (Verka and Emilija, 2012). As a result, out migration process of youth is long lasting and aged population prevails (Knowd, 2006). In order to stop further deterioration and to protect what has left of natural resources and young people, it is crucial to set strategies to balance the usage of available resources and the needs of all involved stakeholders (Naah and Martin, 2003).

In this regard, developing communities consider ecotourism as an instrument of awaking potentials within the national boundaries, especially in rural areas (Mafunzwaini and Hugo, 2005). While in most of developed communities, ecotourism has been already well established in rural areas. It is regarded as new source of income and a tool of restoring regional balance (Clark & Chabrel, 2007) - (see Fig.2).

Promoting rural areas in the Fayoum governorate as an ecotourism destination can be achieved through the creation of a cluster in which natural, archeological, and cultural heritage are integrated and harmonized into innovative activities. Therefore, achieving poverty irradiation of small handicrafts producers, of women excluded from labour, and of unemployed youth, by tackling the challenges hindering the full development of Fayoum governorate.
Research Methodology
This paper assesses the ecotourism situation in the three rural communities to reveal the elements that would require further development. Hence, through the series of inputs from various sources, the main research question which the assessment should answer is: What are the requirements to develop a sustainable ecotourism environment covering infrastructure, handicrafts and site visits?

The primary data was collected through a participatory qualitative research approach. A short literature review was carried out to build on the results and knowledge of previous work on ecotourism development in rural areas. A Research method includes:

- Situational analysis in the three selected villages.
- In-depth semi-structured Interviews with official stakeholders.
- In-depth structured Interviews with foreign expatriates.
- Group Discussions with local communities.

The participatory qualitative approach was designed to identify the perspectives of the related stakeholders on the key evaluation parameters: relevance, feasibility, requirements and sustainability. The combination of results revealed the issues facing the different stakeholders, the identified needs and the possible outcomes.

Population
The targeted population for the assessment consisted of:
• Official stakeholders: They are mainly concerned by the development of ecotourism in the Fayoum governorate or who may be involved in tourism management affairs (i.e. responsible in tourism authorities or in relevant ministries).
• Foreign expatriates: under normal circumstances tourists should have formed this group. However, in the obvious absence of tourists in the Fayoum, the foreign expatriates who are living in Egypt and mainly in Greater Cairo and visited the villages became a target group. The main reason for this choice stems from the fact that many foreign expatriates either own a property in the Fayoum or spend weekends in the guest houses or with friends in the area of the Lake Qarun and visit the selected villages during their stay. They are also known to be consumers of the local handicrafts.
• Local community groups in the three selected villages comprising members of a charity association and handicraft producers. These are aware of issues relating to sales and marketing of products as well as of production conditions and of tourism interest.

Sampling
In view of the diversity of the research population in term of size and interest and motivation for this paper and also the limited resources of the assessment exercise, a small sample was designed to capture through in-depth interviews and discussion groups of key informants. A qualitative opinion on the relevance, the feasibility, and the needs from the perspective and interest of each group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Sample Size</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Target Group</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tunis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nazla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abu Ghandir</td>
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<tr>
<td>Official Stakeholders</td>
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Research Tool

Situational Analysis
It was performed in the three selected villages to cover issues such as accessibility, environment, cleanliness, and the planning for ecotourism facilities.

In-depth Semi-structured Interviews with Official Stakeholders
Including the representatives of the marketing staff of: Ministry of Tourism, Egyptian Tourism Authority, and Fayoum Tourism Authority. They are mainly concerned by the marketing of ecotourism in the Fayoum governorate.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 2: Distribution of the In-depth Semi-structured Interviews</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egyptian Tourism Authority (ETA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fayoum Tourism Authority (FTA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Tourism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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Foreign Expatriates
In-depth structured interviews have also been developed to gather data from the expatriates of foreign residents in the Greater Cairo area who had the chance to visit any of the three villages. To collect in the perceptions and attitudes towards the ideas of ecotourism and the needs required for allowing for its development, and generally opinions on the general situation and the interest of the interviewees on the matter. Therefore, six in-depth structured interviews were carried out.

Group Discussions (Local Communities)
The group discussions were composed of a variety of groups comprising members of a charity association, producers of traditional pottery handicrafts and young artists producing glazed pottery handicrafts. In order to catch the perspective of these groups among which a women’s group, a total of three group discussions were planned and carried out over the villages. Table (3) summarizes the composition and number of group discussions with the village population:

Table 3: Distribution of the Group Discussions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village</th>
<th>Target Group</th>
<th>Number of group discussions</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tunis</td>
<td>Mixed group (Males and females) partially educated artists producing creative glazed pottery</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nazla</td>
<td>Males producing traditional pottery items</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abu Ghandir</td>
<td>Women group members of a charity association</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The discussion groups’ guidelines were developed to incorporate the same themes that were presented to the different groups. The themes covered: the available equipment and tools; what training is required; how well the groups know the area; what issues concern the sustainability; what are the issues when dealing with official authorities; what are the relations with other groups; the issue of marketing of the handicrafts; the question of price structure and finance.

Data Analysis
The situational analysis was performed in the three selected villages with the assistance of the local groups and by questioning village authorities. The interviews and group discussions were recorded in Arabic. The tabulation of the content of the transcripts were carried out from the original text in Arabic and later translated into English. Main themes were then captured and the implications were extracted from the transcript to gain results.

Results
Situational Analysis
The situational analysis conducted in the three villages of Tunis, Nazla and Abu Ghandir demonstrates that each of them has specific attractive ecological features. Tunis village has an exceptional location along the lake Qarun, while the other two benefit from geological
conditions providing each one with a unique location i.e. a depression allowing a stunning view over an agricultural landscape. Each of them is located in proximity of exceptional sites both natural and archaeological or even religious with the presence of the Azab Monastery in the case of Abu Ghandir. Tunis village is advantageously located as it is close to the desert sites allowing tours to use the village as starting point. There are horseback riding stables and also camel stables as well as ecolodges like guest houses allowing tourists to combine ecotourism activities and excursion into the desert or the natural sites. Such facilities have not been identified in the other villages. Tunis’ location is easily accessible from the Cairo – Fayoum highway, yet the village could benefit from a better road signage. The other villages are more difficult to access though one road only of the offered alternatives is in bad shape. Road signs exist but are small in appearance or only in Arabic. This is an area of improvement as bigger signs in two languages would definitely be helpful.

While Nazla village is close to Qarun protected area and Monastery of Angel Gabriel, it is situated within a magnificent agricultural landscape. Abu Ghandir is located nearby Azab Monastery and Medinet Madi temple which is an important Middle Kingdom temple in Egypt as it contains the only wall texts and scenes dating back to the 12th Dynasty reign of Amenemhat III and Amenemhat IV. This very important archaeological site can now be reached via Wadi Rayan Protected area through a nice 20 km track which allows avoiding the rather difficult road to Abu Ghandir.

One of the important elements to allow for the presence of tourists is the existence of public sanitary facilities in good and clean conditions. Public toilets attached to Mosques are usually in good conditions and are accessible to all. Within the villages however there are no signs leading to these. Abo Ghandir misses such facilities and the only possible alternative would be a private facility in a guest house. Unfortunately this doesn’t exist yet. It is interesting to note that there is no tourist information available in Abu Ghandir village and there is a Map of pottery workshops at the pottery school in Tunis. Only in Nazla could a detailed information panel be found within the pottery factory contains info on village with a map of the village but in a bad condition. Similar information would be of use in popular places or guesthouses. They should be standardized and contain basic information on sites and other helpful information for emergencies.

In Nazla, the main concern for the environment is the accumulation of garbage and the absence of appropriate services. The existence of services taking care of the garbage is probably not enough to change the minds of people who use the public area as dump site. This applies also to the canals which are reseeded with all sorts of waste transforming the waters into a cesspit. It also applies to the depression area where people abandon the litter in lower areas that cannot be seen. The garbage issue is a long lasting effort that requires the support of public authorities as well as local initiatives.

Finally ambulance or health services are available. The level of service of those existing in the villages is most likely sufficient to treat minor diseases and accidents, while the nearest hospital is in the Fayoum town. There are pharmacies available in the villages which can provide assistance for minor diseases like infections or bites or allergies. It is possible to consider that the health centers could be equipped with supplementary pharmaceuticals should there be a more intense flow of tourists visiting the Fayoum.
Table 4: Summary of the Situational Analysis of the Three Villages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tunis</th>
<th>Nazla</th>
<th>Abu Ghandir</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Accessibility from Cairo</strong></td>
<td>Cairo / Fayoum highway-Lake Qarun Tourist Road.</td>
<td>Cairo / Fayoum highway- Lake Qarun Tourist Road - Ishawai touristic Road – Abu Gensho Road – Shawashna Road – Nazla.</td>
<td>Cairo / Fayoum highway - 29km away from Fayoum town - Easy access from abu Esh road – Motoool village (bad condition of the road) – Abu Gandir.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major ecological features</strong></td>
<td>Located south west of Lake Qarun, on a hill overlooking the lake. Known for its rural and coastal environmental features.</td>
<td>Located in Youssef el Sidiq District. Known for the rural and agriculture environment and is considered as one of the major ancient pottery centers in the Fayoum and Egypt.</td>
<td>Wide rural and agricultural area – palm trees area used by the Palm products industry in Fayoum – Natural depression 7 km before the village entrance with different levels of the ground surface, and a terrace south of the village allowing a panoramic view of the village and the neighboring villages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Directional Signs</strong></td>
<td>Signs appear in Lake Qarun road after Shakshouk village – 700 meters before Tunis village entrance. Many well-written(A/E) informational signs in the village.</td>
<td>Sign in Arabic at village entrance refers to the village name.</td>
<td>Small sign at village entrance refers to the village name. Another sign at the village entrance indicates road to Medinet Madi archaeological site.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proximity to cultural and/or natural heritage sites</strong></td>
<td>The village is close to many archaeological and natural sites: - Qarun Protected Area. - Wadi Rayan Protected Area - Qasr Qarun temple. - Dimai Sibaa. - Qasr el Sagha temple. - Medinet Madi.</td>
<td>Qarun protected area. Monastery of Angel Gabriel.</td>
<td>Medinet Madi 8 km. Azab Monastery 12 km.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sanitary facilities</strong></td>
<td>There is a public toilet belongs to the Mosque inside the village.</td>
<td>There’s a public toilet close to the pottery factory - bad condition.</td>
<td>Not available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tourist Information Available</strong></td>
<td>Map of pottery workshops at the pottery school.</td>
<td>Pottery Factory information panel contains info on the history of the pottery and a map of the village.</td>
<td>Not available.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tunis</td>
<td>Nazla</td>
<td>Abu Ghandir</td>
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<td>--------------------</td>
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<td>------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambulance Service</td>
<td>The nearest is in Lake Qarun road close to Shakshouk village.</td>
<td>Health unit inside the village.</td>
<td>3 km before the village entrance.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**In-depth Semi-structured Interviews with Official Stakeholders**

Interviews were conducted with the representatives of the Egyptian Tourism Authority (ETA), the Fayoum Tourism Authority (FTA), and the Ministry of Tourism. The first question asked to the authorities relate to the studies performed on any of the three villages of the Fayoum governorate. While the representatives of the Ministry referred the question of studies to the ETA, the ETA confirmed that its Market Research Unit has not done any study, and neither did the FTA. With regards to a development plan, the ETA mentioned that it organized a series of events in the Fayoum such as the yearly handicrafts carnival and the Sun Wonder to the Qasr Qarun temple. The FTA also indicated that there is an ecotourism plan that has been elaborated by an Italian organisation but the plan has not been implemented due to missing funds.

When asked about the major ecological features, the three tourism authority representatives mentioned the two pottery villages of Nazla and Tunis and referred to their known handicap production of pottery but none mentioned Abu Ghandir. Regarding the obstacles the representatives mentioned the issue of real estate planning with the emergence of concrete buildings (from the family response due to the real estate price inflation) combined with the garbage that is accumulating and not been taking care of. For the representative of the Ministry of Tourism, the Fayoum destination can only be considered for day trips. That and more requires that the local population is prepared to receive foreign tourists i.e. has the right accommodation and creates the appropriate welcoming environment.

From the point of view of the Ministry of Tourism, integrating these villages is not a strategic priority. First comes the beach resorts, then the cultural tourism focusing on Cairo and the area of Luxor and Aswan. Integrating Fayoum would require contacting international media, the tourism authorities in Egypt, and tour operators both in Egypt and abroad. The FTA representative confirmed that these steps have already been taken as there was a handicraft festival in November 2012 organised by the FTA which also contacted foreign tourism companies to put Fayoum on the list of ecotourism destinations. In addition, the FTA participated in the ITB (Internationale Turismus Börse) in Berlin which is the largest tourism fair worldwide. Pursuing in the same line of thought, the ETA representative considers that the governorate should be more involved and should take care of the issue of cleanliness not only in the Tunis village area. In one of the locations in Fayoum there are water wheels that also of interest but for the time being the area is rather filthy “I had a cup of coffee on the cafeteria beside the water wheels down town Fayoum, it was awful views and unclean”. Figure (3) summarizes the obstacles of development of ecotourism in the three villages in Fayoum from the viewpoint of official stakeholders.
The ETA representative considers that to implement an ecotourism project there is a need to attract local businessmen, identify possible foreign investment and target local tourism companies followed by foreign tourism companies. The FTA representative adds that there is a need to contact all stakeholders who includes the transport companies and the environmental authorities to plan for the ecotourism project. That view is shared by the Ministerial representative who considers as well the governor as a key stakeholder for this project.

**In-depth Structured Interviews with Foreign Expatriates**

Despite an intense effort to contact the foreign community to collect information on their impressions of the Fayoum villages visited, the received number of responses do not allow concluding on trends or general impressions. The following thus can only be considered as approximate indications that need to be confirmed by further investigations conducted with the foreign community living in Cairo as well as with visiting tourists once these resume visiting the Fayoum and its villages.

The interview tried to cover several fields of interest starting with general information on the visitor, followed by questions on the visitor’s appreciation of the service quality in the village, of the site attributes and about the likelihood of a future visit. The interview concludes with the actions a visitor may take.

All six visitors went to Tunis village. Their educational background is identical since all have a post graduate level independently from their age. Regarding the age structure three belong to the age group 31-50, two to the age group 18-30 and one to the age group 51-65. They used different transport means: a personal car (three) and the bus/microbus solution (three). One combined the microbus transport with the use of a bicycle. Five of the visitors came as members of a smaller group of friends or family while one came as an individual. See figure (4).

**Figure 3: The Obstacles of Development of Ecotourism**

The perception of the quality of the transport to the site depends on the type of transport means. Those using personal transportation means are very satisfied while those using bus/microbus...
qualify these as below satisfactory. The judgment about the signs follows the same patterns with a perception of satisfaction for those using the personal means while those coming with the bus are not very satisfied. The quality of the printed material is considered as satisfactory though there is also an opinion that the printed material quality is of poor quality.

The question on the quality of food achieves high scores among all visitors. It would be worth analyzing where the visitors had their meals. The variety of the gallery is perceived as good by all visitors, which is confirmed by the judgment on the range of activities in the village which achieves similar values.

All the visitors had a similar perception of the safety existing in the village. This is a very positive sign as it also highlights the fact that the local population is acquainted with the presence of foreigners. The question on the ambulance services was answered only by half of the visitors probably as these are not necessarily visible to all visitors. It also not known whether the services have been used by the visitors and if that motivated their answers. In average, the visitors considered that the accessibility to the sites is rather poor. That is an indicator for the possible changes to be performed in the infrastructure and should be further investigated. Similar results are obtained for the cleanliness of the sanitary facilities and the garbage disposals. In both cases the visitors considered the level as poor. Some visitors valued them higher but it is not clear whether there may have confused the situation of the hotel with those of the site. Considering the above and the variety of answers delivered by the small numbers of visitors, further investigations appear necessary. This would help getting a better profile of the appreciation of the visitors’ perception.

When considering the site attributes, there is a general consensus on their uniqueness. The answer to that question obtains the highest score of all questions. The consensus also applies to the perception of the site’s authenticity and of its tranquility. The questions on the on-site tracks and the relevance of the existing buildings however do not receive the same positive response levels. In particular, the variations within the range of the visitors’ responses show that such questions can provoke the sensitivity of the individuals. The responses on the friendliness of the people met show that the visitors overwhelming appreciated hospitality and friendliness.

Though the majority of the visitors did not come for the first time (5/6), their motivations were quite different and included enjoying the nature, finding more about the History, to buy handicrafts or combining some of the motives. Despite the variety of motives, the satisfaction levels emanating from the visits are pretty high. Interestingly, the sole individual that visited the village for the first time considered that the amount of time spent was far beyond acceptable yet this did not influence the individual’s satisfaction of the site and the village visit.

The level of satisfaction is also expressed in the actions envisaged by the visitors to promote the village and sites. When it comes to spreading the word to friends, recommend the place and encourage friends to visit site and village the responsiveness is very high. Though there is a general appreciation of the village. The visitors are slightly less enthusiastic to put the village as prime destination for their next visit while firmly confirming that they will return.

Group Discussions

The group discussions took place in the three villages visited. In Abu Ghandir a group of women members of a charity association operating in the area of handicraft production volunteered to participate in the group discussion. In Tunis and Nazla, the participants were all handicraft producers. They produce pottery though their styles substantially differ.
While the group in Tunis produces glazed pottery based upon the teaching of the Swiss pottery expert that settled in Tunis decades ago and taught generations of youth in the arts of pottery production and design, the group in Nazla produces pottery that is based on ancient Pharaonic techniques transmitted from generation to generation. In both cases the majority producers are illiterate.

For all the group discussion participants, the presence of ecotourists is of vital importance since the local village market can only absorb a limited amount of the production especially for the pottery.

For the Tunis potters, the urge is to have any visitor while they also put forward the need for them to organize a yearly exhibition to gather all pottery producers of the area. In the group discussion one member mentioned “The most important thing is to organize an international exhibition at least once a year at a fixed time and venue for all handicraft makers in the governorate”. Another indicated the expectations addressed to the Tourism Authority and the private sector: “The event should be sponsored from tourist companies and the Fayoum Tourism Authority (FTA)”. The Tunis group also indicates that not only they would benefit from the presence of tourists: “Various handicrafts are an important factor for ecotourism. They generate income to the locals whose majority are illiterates. Poor women villagers for example are making very simple small beautiful ornaments out of linen such as birds or animals to sell them to tourists. Moreover, ecotourism is considered a source of income also for camel and donkey owners, boatmen, farmers, etc”. Such statement is indication to the local situation which combines poverty with illiteracy and the poor condition of women. Their abilities to produce various linen ornaments should be promoted with the assistance of the local guesthouses as well as with that of the tourism authorities. As indicated the presence of tourists would provide several professional groups with an income opportunity.

The Nazla group puts forward that there is a difference between ecotourists and the average tourists who are only passing by without stopping to purchase items. The “Ecotourist is the only one who visits Nazla village” and stops to exchange thoughts and ideas with the local producer which obviously has impressed the pottery producer: “I feel warmthness when I talk to an ecotourist. He talks to me as a friend”. For the women group in Abu Ghandir, the presence of tourists is also vital as they are obliged to adapt their prices to the local market conditions and have difficulties in selling their productions to the local population. Selling to tourists would represent a lucrative alternative.

In terms of equipment the Nazla group totals 20 ovens and 36 workshops producing pottery in a traditional way while the Tunis group mentions the cost for the equipment for glazing pottery. The equipment is said to cost approximately 8,000 - 10,000 EGP with additional costs of 2,000 EGP for supplementary equipment. The cost must be borne by the producer. The women group in Abu Ghandir produces linen, baskets and glassware and has modest production costs.

There are significant differences between the groups when it concerns training. While the Nazla group indicates it received no training in pottery techniques, the Tunis group benefits from the Swiss expert for training in all aspects of pottery production. The training has been going on for generations and as a result there are now several workshops in which younger generations are trained in pottery techniques. The pottery makers are also convinced that their training has provided them with the ability to exploit their imagination rather than use preconceived models. The Abu Ghandir group received training in sewing but though there is a demand for continuous capacity building as no further training was provided.
Other than on techniques, there has been training on marketing provided to the Tunis group. The Nazla group indicated the need to receive basic English training. Among the groups there is also a significant difference in the knowledge of the local environment and of the archaeological and natural sites. The groups in Nazla and Abu Ghandir do not know the background of some of the archeological or religious sites that are located nearby their village (Monastery of Angel Gabriel for Nazla and Medinat Maadi for Abu Ghandir). There is a limited knowledge of the sites around the Wadi Rayan but do not know what these fossils are. If they know about the concepts of protected areas it is only a vague knowledge. Also, the Tunis group is aware and appreciates the beauty of the natural but is not necessarily able to explain the archaeological sites. It knows about the concept of protected area and considers it important. It pointed at the fact that the Environmental Protection Agency should be more active and control the use of raw material around the lake Qarun to produce mats as done by the fishermen. It also pointed at the threat that the protected area faces with the possibility of land acquisition by private owners in areas that are crucial for birds which would destroy their natural habitat. There are already private houses in the Tunis village and the interest for this area has increased among the wealthy Cairo upper class and certainly some may have envisaged building villas in places which are unique in their capacity as host for a variety of species. This should be further investigated so that action could be taken to halt such real estate development.

The question of sustainability is approached differently by the groups. Abu Ghandir and Nazla groups highlight the issue of pollution but for the solution they have different opinions as to how to solve this issue. Abu Ghandir believes that the support of local authorities should suffice to make things change while the Nazla has decided to have one of them guarding the area where they worked which is below the road level and thus considered as dump by many. As one group member indicated “When I see somebody throwing garbage in our workshop area, I try to prevent him, however, he sometimes struggle with me and I have to go and complain in the Local Village Council”. The Nazla group also mentioned the issue of the canal water which appears to be polluted for some of the members.

To bring tourists to the villages there is a necessity to have adequate roads and signs guiding to the villages, safely guide the tourist to the village and once in the village there is a need for some bathroom and tea or coffee and food. The Nazla group is well aware of the conditions of the logistics for tourism transport. The road to the Nazla village is not very good and the signs should be more visible and earlier in places like the Cairo - Fayoum highway. In an area where families have in average 6 to 8 children, it can be expected that these run around in the village streets. This is one of the issues noted by the Nazla group namely that children tend to run after the tourist cars and ask for money. Some see the reason for such action in the fact that there is no education teaching the children how to behave with visitors. This could be done by providing children with specific educational programs. However, there is also a belief that foreigners are generally friendly towards children. Once at the site the visitors may want to eat and drink but as the Nazla group mentioned there is no guest house or restaurant despite the promises of the Fayoum governor to create such establishment.

The security issue has been mentioned by the Tunis and the Nazla groups. For many the police escort is too tight and irritates ecotourists because they feel restricted as the police officer would like to finish his shift and return home so there is little time for the villagers to treat the visitor and to make the visitor appreciate the beauty of the location. A good example of how tricky the situation can become “Sometimes tourists would like to visit more places, the police escort refused and ask tourists to hurry up and finish their tour”.

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The relation with the tourism authorities is of interest for all groups. The Nazla group states that they are quite disappointed by the village authorities as they have not taken care of the issue of garbage or for paving the village road which would allow tourists to have better road conditions and the pottery makers to save money in transferring their raw materials. So far there was only words “The previous governor visited Nazla village and promised us to get rid of rubbish problem, pave the road and establish toilets and cafeteria in Nazla workshops’ area”. The Abu Ghandir group is less critical and may be less ambitious than the other two and sees the need for support from the tourism and local authority in providing them with more training.

An issue that appeared specifically in Tunis relates to the real estate situation. With more private villas being built in the village, the real estate price rose significantly. In order to meet the demand for housing for the coming generations, rather than buying new land which is too expensive, the elder generation decided to add more floors to their houses. With the considerable amount of children seeing a six storey building is thus not surprising. The question of construction rules in such environment has not yet been solved. There are very little differences regarding the issue of cooperation between producers. The Abu Ghandir group put forward the benefit to get to know what the groups of handicraft producers are doing in Tunis. Potters in Nazla knew little about other producers in the oasis until an exhibition in Cairo made them contact their counterparts in Tunis village. The Tunis village potters highlighted that they are in contact with a lot of professionals in relation to the trips around the lake like camel or horse owners and as well with associations making soap and bags: “We take the soap products from Quta and the bags’ products from El-Namoo village to sell them in our workshops”.

The issue of marketing and of the connection with tourism companies revealed some differences in knowledge and approach. For the Abu Ghandir group though marketing of their product was viewed as the main issue, there was no indication that they would take initiative and contact some tourist companies or any other information source. They would need some assistance to help them perform some marketing effort. The situation is similar for the potters of Nazla who have a single window of sales opportunity with the contact they have with Fair Trade Egypt in Cairo. In contrast the Tunis does not rely on marketing or tourist companies to make their products knowledgeable to foreigners. They participated in many exhibitions both national and international and have acquired reputation and contacts. Their products are also sold through the Egyptian Crafts Center (ECC) on permanent basis.

In terms of pricing of the product the Tunis group estimates that the training received through decades of support from the Swiss expert allows them to identify the criteria that are needed to establish the price which include the volume of the piece, its shape, whether specific production techniques or colors are used, how fashionable the drawings and decorations are and the time it requires to make the piece. Thus they sell their products in a range from 20 to 350 EGP and above.

As opposed to this experienced price management, the Abu Ghandir Women group sells to the local population and thus the prices do not exceed 70 or 80 EGP for a table cloth set or for silk pieces. The same low price structure is occurring with the Nazla potters who incidentally do not price their products differently for their customers. It was suggested to levy a visiting fee of 10 – 20 EGP and the collected funds could be used for charity purposes in order to pay the hospital fees if anyone of them or their families gets sick.
Table 5: Summary of the Group Discussions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tunis</th>
<th>Nazla</th>
<th>Abu Ghandir</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The presence of Ecotourists</td>
<td>Provide several professional groups with an income opportunity.</td>
<td>The Ecotourist is the only one who visits the village and stops to exchange thoughts and ideas with the local producer.</td>
<td>Selling to tourists would represent a lucrative alternative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment</td>
<td>Cost approximately 8,000 - 10,000 EGP with additional costs of 2,000 EGP for supplementary equipment.</td>
<td>20 ovens and 36 workshops producing pottery in a traditional way.</td>
<td>Produces linen, baskets and glassware and has modest production costs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Benefits from the Swiss expert for training in all aspects of pottery production.</td>
<td>No training in pottery techniques.</td>
<td>There is a demand for continuous capacity building.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge</td>
<td>The group is aware and appreciates the beauty of the natural but is not necessarily able to explain the archaeological sites.</td>
<td>Do not know the background of some of the archeological or religious sites that are located nearby their village.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourism authorities</td>
<td>The question of construction rules has not yet been solved.</td>
<td>They have not taken care of the issue of garbage or for paving the village road.</td>
<td>The Abu Ghandir group needs for support from them in providing with more training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation between producers</td>
<td>They are in contact with a lot of professionals in relation to the trips around the lake like camel or horse owners and as well with associations making soap and bags.</td>
<td>Knew little about other producers in the oasis until an exhibition in Cairo made them contact their counterparts in Tunis village.</td>
<td>Put forward the benefit to get to know what the groups of handicraft producers are doing in Tunis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>They participated in many exhibitions both national and international and have acquired reputation and contacts.</td>
<td>They have a single window of sales opportunity with the contact they have with Fair Trade Egypt in Cairo.</td>
<td>They would need some assistance to help them perform some marketing effort.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pricing of the product</td>
<td>They sell their products in a range from 20 to 350 EGP and above.</td>
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Conclusion
This paper assessed the potential ecotourism development in the three selected communities by identifying the important cultural and natural features of the villages; developing an overview of ecotourism and needs of relevant players; finding out the touristic services already provided in the three selected villages; and evaluating the required support levels from official authorities.
It is concluded that there are significant differences between the three villages. First, the locations offer different opportunities in terms of infrastructure and access to natural and archaeological sites. Second, in terms of infrastructure there are considerable variations among the villages. And finally in terms the skills development and use of marketing tools,
there is a considerable difference between the village of Tunis and the two other villages. Regarding location, the Tunis village benefits from an exceptional location in proximity of archeologically and natural sites of stunning quality. Not that the other do not contain beautiful landscapes but the location of the Tunis is close to sensational. The view over Lake Qarun is breathtaking. Nearby along the lake shore there are opportunities to view some 150 or more varieties of birds according to the season. A bit further south there are vestiges of pharaoh temples and a natural site with the Wadi Rayan. There is also further inwards the desert there are is the protected area of the Wadi Hitan and the relics of the times when this area was an ocean with abundant marine life. For many years, private tours have proposed a combined way to visit these sites and paths exist to visit the bird-watching sites and the Wadi Rayan. These paths could be further arranged if necessary. Nazla village is in the centre of an typical oasis landscape that is ideal for walks. Tour paths could be developed through the fields with the involvement of the farmers in order to avoid that visitors may be considered as intruders.

The Abu Ghandir village is located close to the Madinet Madi heritage site and the Azab Monastery which are also unique sites that are certainly worth a visit. These sites can be integrated in an ecotourism itinerary but a general restoration of the site might be required. In terms of road infrastructure the Tunis village is the most easily accessible with a road connected to the Cairo – Fayoum – Upper Egypt highway and leading to the village. The sign requires to be improved as it is quite small. The road leading to the village is not paved but is quite short. Developed architecturally interesting eco-lodges offering a relaxing stay to guests with a cuisine *a la carte* presenting fresh products prepared in the local way.

Nazla and Abu Ghandir are off the beaten track with poor signals to indicate the village’s direction. A considerable effort is required in both villages from the authorities to improve this situation. For the accommodation and food and beverage issue, private initiative is required but it is unknown whether there is such possibility and provide a marketing opportunity of the village group products.

In terms of skills level, the situation of Tunis village is also outstanding due to the training efforts of generations of potters provided by Miss Evelyne Poret the Swiss pottery expert. There is a degree of professionalism and mastering of the techniques that is unequalled by the other locations. This professional attitude is translated in the marketing efforts the Tunis potters market their product. They organize regular handicraft festival and participated in local and foreign exhibitions. And finally the difference can be seen in the infrastructure.

In opposition, the potters of Nazla are in a critical situation. Their area of production due to its location is considered by many villagers as a dump site; thus, obliging the potters to complain about this to the village authorities. In terms of production there is no particular development taking place for skills enhancement or any other capacity building measure. As the potters have certain difficulties to sell their products support is of existential importance as the succession of the pottery production and the preservation of the ancient techniques from a generation to the next is threatened due to the little perspectives for economic sustainability and stable income presented currently by the pottery production. There is a certain degree of marketing but the price level is limited and not sufficient to create a sustainable income. Furthermore, the logistical issues that challenge the development of the area and the potters’ economic situation.

For the women group of Abu Ghandir, it appears to be potentially candidates for better income opportunities. They received training in handicraft production and are practicing a reasonable price policy. The site however is difficult to access and has no accommodation.
or other facilities suitable for visiting tourists. It appears to be far behind the other villages in terms of ecotourism development.

What the analysis also indicated is a limited level of coordination between the official stakeholders. The Ministry refers the ecotourism development to the Egyptian Tourism Authority and the Fayoum Tourism Authority; in other words, push the ball from one to the other. Participation of the respective authority occurs when there is already an initiative coming from the basis i.e. the local group. The FTA, for instance, organized participations in international fairs like the ITB Berlin to present the group of pottery makers after these insisted for support. It is also the at-the-base-root-level end of the village that individual initiatives developed and were at the origin of the pottery development. It is those initiatives that lobbied the tourism authorities to sponsor different types of activities. The presence of the foreign expert like in Tunis village is not a minimum requirement. It was fortunate for the Tunis village, but the other villages should benefit from the support of the respective authorities. These should assess the situation, prepare and implement an action plan as to how to develop an adequate product line or create the necessary infrastructure in terms of accommodation and for food and beverages. For that the tourism authorities need to sort out their level of intervention, coordinate with the village authorities and tourism stakeholders and decide jointly on the type of actions.

References


