

**A Preliminary Strategic Vision for the  
Monkey River Tour Guide Association**

**Harry Crissy, M.S.**

In consultation with

Frank Higdon, Ph.D.

**Pennsylvania State University**

**March 2005**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This strategic planning report was designed and conducted by a team of Penn State students on a field research trip in Monkey River Village in March 2005. The report is intended to help shape the decisions and future activities of the Monkey River Tour Guide Association, an organization that is playing a key role in the development of an expanding ecotourism industry in this remote corner of Belize. The Monkey River Tour Guide Association is a new but important community-based group in Monkey River Village. The community has grown dependent on the tourism industry, and the Tour Guide Association is responsible for channeling the direction and benefits of an increasing level of tourist traffic and economic opportunity in the community. This being the case, the reader will notice the terms community and Tour Guide Association used almost interchangeably throughout this study. The paper was written in the hopes that it will help leaders in the Monkey River community take proactive steps to harness the power of ecotourism in the Monkey River watershed, and make decisions that will improve the lives of local tour guides, business owners and local residents. The results are exploratory and based on limited evidence.

### **The Problem**

The Monkey River Tour Guide Association (TGA) is interested in increasing their economic activity in order to more fully employ the community, and increase their ability to improve their quality of life. Although fishing and

lobster trapping still accounts for a substantial portion of Monkey River Village's income, they've become more dependent on the tourism industry in recent years. The local watershed and ecosystem are under stress as well, both from natural disasters (hurricanes) and pollution from agriculture and human settlement.

Much of the current tourist industry in the Monkey River watershed is being managed by resorts in the nearby resort community of Placencia. Although the TGA still benefits from these tours by hiring out local guides to accompany these groups, their economic impact on the village is marginal. The TGA usually has a substantial percentage of its boat inventory sitting idle throughout the day, indicating the need for local tour guides to develop a better operating strategy and a business plan that benefits local tour guides and local tourist enterprises.

### **Goals and Objectives**

The main goal of the study is to inventory and explain the current internal and external factors affecting the tourism industry in Monkey River Village. A better understanding of these factors will help the Tour Guide Association in order to develop a strategic plan. It offers an outsider perspective on issues that may not be apparent to an insider in terms of product and market improvement. In the final section it will outline a set of recommendations based on clearly identified opportunities for local tourism enterprises, the Monkey River Tour Guide Association, and the larger community.

## **Strategic Planning Process**

The study used a number of methods in order to establish a perspective of Monkey River Village, its assets, the concerns of the community, and possible strategies for the Tour Guide Association. After assessing possible external factors that might affect tourism in Monkey River Village, the authors traveled to the community with a group of 16 graduate and undergraduate students from Penn State University. Six members of the group (including the authors) were assigned to assess the ecotourism operations in Monkey River Village.

Each ecotourism student received five survey documents to administer to members of the Tour Guide Association. The group completed a total of eighteen individual interviews with tour guide operators and members of the community. The surveys consisted of open-ended questions designed to address local community concerns and desires, as well as identify possible tourism strategies. Eight questions concerning the ecotourism industry were asked of each participant. Three questions were added to assess the impact of agriculture on the local ecosystem. It should be noted that interviewers were instructed to not include the local concern for electricity, as it is assumed that this is a universal desire for the community. Figure 1 summarizes the questions and answers.

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Figure 1: Summary of Interview Questions and Answers for Belize Rural Study (some subjects listed more than one response for the questions and some did not respond to certain questions)

**1. What do you feel are the biggest concerns facing your community?**

*A: unemployment(7), village cleanliness(2), beach and river bank erosion(4), not enough extended stay tourists (2), marijuana, conservation, the need for a bridge, underemployment of women, lack of tourism infrastructure (hotels, restaurants)*

**2. If you could choose a project for the community to focus on for development, what would it be?**

*A: visitor's center, lobster shades, cabana for fishing, tourism project (flow increase plan) (6), jobs, power lines, new resorts(2), a bridge(2), beach replenishment(2)*

**3. Can you identify any negative impacts that visitors have on your community?**

*A: no(14), big boats cause river bank erosion(2), garbage, conflict within TGA distribution of tours*

**4. Do you travel outside of Monkey River Village? Where? Why?**

*A: Punta Gorda(pleasure[4])(business[4]), Seine Bight(pleasure), Guatemala(pleasure[2]), Placencia(pleasure[4])(business[6]), Belize City(business[5]), Ladyville(business), Independence(pleasure[2])(business[7])*

**5. Do you notice certain moments during tours when you can count on the tourists to get excited?**

*A: shortcut to Placencia, birds, bats(2), jaguars(2), howler monkeys(10), crocodiles(5), golden web spiders, tarantulas, medicinal trees and plants, trails, in the community, bamboo forest (2), snakes, iguanas, mangroves, when their expectations are met ("seeing what they came to see"), snorkeling*

**6. What are your favorite activities when you are not working?**

*A: play pool(2), football(2), read(4), local bar(4), fishing(3), conversation(2), exercise, dominos, embroider, movies, music, TV(2), play bingo*

**7. Do you notice any changes in the land or wildlife activity since tourists have been visiting?**

*A: less birds and animals on river(3), no(10), erosion of river bank(3), more manatee sightings, more crocodiles because of restrictions on hunting*

**8. Would you like to see tourism activity grow, shrink, etc.? Why?**

*A: grow-jobs(12), grow-improve village life(3), grow(3)*

Questions added for the agriculture group

**1. Does local farming affect your business? If yes, in what way?**

*A: no(10), industrial farming does(outside workers overfishing[2])(river ecology[5]), yes*

**2. Do local farming practices have any negative impact on the environment?**

*A: yes(river[10])(kills ocean marine life[2]), no(6)*

**3. Does it seem possible to incorporate local farms into ecotourism activities (through tours, etc.)?**

*A: yes(12), no(4), unsure (2)*

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After completing this portion of the study, visiting Placencia, and taking as many of the local tours as possible, the team members were better equipped to identify external factors affecting the local tourism industry. As a group, the team worked together to identify these factors in terms of the environment, political forces, economic forces, social forces, cultural forces, technological forces, and competitive forces. Certain forces were identified as key external factors to be considered for the project. Some of these factors were adjusted as more specific information was acquired later in the study.

Using a very basic weighting system, the external forces were evaluated in terms of their importance, and the community's response to them. Although there are hundreds of instruments for evaluating external factors, this project utilizes a strategic planning model developed by David (2001), because of its interpretability to most readers.

## External Factor Evaluation

The strategic planning model asks evaluators to identify key external opportunities and threats. The evaluator then assigns a significance percentage to each of the factors so that the total percentages add up to one. A response factor is assigned in terms of the organization's strategic response to the items identified, with a one being a poor response, a two being an average response, a three being above average, and a four being a superior response. A total weighted score of 2.5 is considered an average strategic operation. One of the convenient aspects of this form of evaluation is that when an item is assigned a great deal of significance and a poor response rate, the need for a new strategy becomes obvious. Table 1 shows the main factors identified and evaluated for this project.

**Table 1**  
**External Factor Evaluation Matrix**

<b>Opportunities</b>	<b>weight</b>	<b>rank</b>	<b>wt. score</b>
Improve relationship w/Plac.	0.025	2	0.05
Reforestation: habitat improv.	0.05	1	0.05
Educational tourism	0.025	2	0.05
Peace Corp Volunteer	0.05	1	0.05
Work with more institutions (Univ., NGOs)	0.1	2	0.2
Website improvement	0.1	2	0.2
Placencia booth	0.2	1	0.2
Fly fishing focus	0.025	3	0.075
New Placencia road	0.1	1	0.1

### **Threats**

Tour Guide Conflicts	0.025	2	0.05
Jungle regrowth timeframe	0.05	2	0.1
Youth drain	0.05	2	0.1
Lack of local interest in surroundings	0.05	2	0.1
Invasion of outside industry	0.05	3	0.15
New Placencia road	0.1	2	0.2
	1		<b>1.675</b>

## **OPPORTUNITIES**

There are clearly strategic business opportunities that need to be examined by the Tour Guide Association to fully develop ecotourism in the community and each of the following recommendations flow from the many specific factors outlined in Table 1.

**Improve relationship with Placencia:** Placencia is a nearby community that is the primary local destination for international tourism. In the past there have been some minor conflicts between Placencia’s Tour Guide Association and Monkey River Villages Tour Guide Association. At one point the Monkey River tour guides blocked the river from use for tours not originating in Monkey River Village. They felt that the tour guides from Placencia were bypassing the village. No economic benefits were being received locally. Eventually an agreement was reached where Placencia tours would hire Monkey River guides. They would pick them up on there way up the river. As the tour groups left the river, they would stop for lunch in the village. Some conflict still exists between the two guide groups. Monkey River Village is dependent on Placencia as a feeder community to its river tours.

**Reforestation/ habitat improvement:** The surveys made it apparent that howler monkeys are crucial to the ecotourism industry. In 2001, hurricane Iris devastated the local jungle, depleting their food source. As a result, the local howler monkey population has been reduced by 80 percent. Although the jungle is replenishing itself at a rapid pace, certain strategies to speed up their return could be implemented. Since fig trees grow at a rapid pace, and are a favorite food of the monkeys, it has been suggested that the community should begin planting these along the river. This would enhance the tourist's experience, and word of mouth advertising.

**Educational tourism:** A large percentage of ecotourists are college educated. The nature of this sort of tourism is that it attracts those interested in natural habitats and local cultures. Specialized programs involving plant and wildlife education could be developed as a new product strategy.

**Peace corps volunteer:** Monkey River Village is eligible for assistance from the U.S. Peace Corps. These volunteers are Americans with training and education who want to work with local residents to help improve the quality of life in the community. The village could request one of these with experience in environmental resource management, marketing, web design, hospitality, or a combination of these.

**Work with more outside institutions:** Since many universities take an interest in international studies, the village could pursue new relationships with these institutions. Many Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as TIDE and BFREE operate in southern Belize and other parts of Central America. New partnerships with these groups might be advisable.

**Website improvement:** Although the Tour Guide Association has a website, it is difficult to find. A simple change of wording in the site banner would make it more accessible to search engines.

**Placencia booth:** Since most tours to Monkey River are booked through agents or booths in the village of Placencia, it is advisable for the Tour Guide Association to develop their own marketing channels. The tour booths in Placencia offer the river tours as just one of many options. With a specialized marketing booth, the Association could offer interpretive services, making their product superior. This would also open up merchandising and secondary tour opportunities to better utilize the village inventory of boats and employable community members.

**Fly fishing focus:** This suggests an increased marketing effort for the local saltwater fly-fishing. Some of the best facilities in the world for this activity are in the Monkey River region.

**New Placencia road:** A new paved road that was planned for construction in 2002, but is now slated to begin in June of 2005 will open up new traffic opportunities for the river. Advertising and the development of new channels of distribution would likely serve the community well.

## **THREATS**

**Tour guide conflicts:** This refers to the conflict between the two Tour Guide Associations. If the Placencia Tour Guide Association chooses to minimize the use of Monkey River, in favor of other destinations, the Monkey River Tour Guide Association could suffer.

**Jungle regrowth timeframe:** The period of replenishment necessary could slow the momentum of tourism in Monkey River. New destinations might be favored by resorts and tour booths in Placencia.

**Youth drain:** The limited opportunities and lack of electricity in the village threatens to decrease labor for the Tour Guide Association. If traffic increases, this threatens to limit the local economic possibilities for the Association.

**Lack of local interest in the surroundings:** Few tour guides seem to be interested in their surroundings for their recreation. This is common among tourism destinations. As interests turn towards outside sources, local culture and knowledge is often left behind.

**Invasion of outside industry:** Industrial farms upriver are already affecting the river. Also, outside investors might steer the tourism development in a way that is not cultural friendly (cruise industry, etc.).

**New Placencia road:** As access increases to Placencia, real estate prices are likely to rise. Once this happens, if the Tour Guide Association has not established itself in the town, they may be at the mercy of those that are already established, making it more difficult to later develop a presence in Placencia.

By simply concentrating on a few of these opportunities and threats, the Tour Guide Association can position themselves in a way that will increase their likelihood of being a significant player in the local tourism industry. This benefits the entire community, as they are empowered to make their own choices, rather than being dependent on decisions and actions made by other groups outside the community. Also, by increasing their economic activity, they become more favorable for attention from the Belizean government.

As an example of a possible strategy from this sort of evaluation, a response to the booth (changing the response from 1 to 4), a response to the website improvement (changing the response from 2 to 3), and a response to the Peace corps volunteer (changing the response from 1 to 4) results in an above average overall strategic operation. After initially being evaluated well below average, the organization would take a few steps and become much more relevant in a growing tourism market.

## **Internal Factor Evaluation**

The strategic planning model used for this study requires evaluators to identify key internal strengths and weaknesses. The evaluator then assigns a significance percentage to each of the factors so that the total percentages add up to one. These significance percentages are to be assigned to represent the factors importance in the industry. A rating factor is assigned in terms what that particular factor represents within the organization. For strengths only a three or four is assigned. A three indicates that the factor is a firm's minor strength, and a four indicates that this factor is a major strength of the firm. Weaknesses can only be assigned a one or a two. A one indicates that this factor is a major weakness within the firm, and a two indicates that this factor is only a minor one. One of the convenient aspects of this form of evaluation is that when an item is assigned a great deal of industry significance and a poor firm position, there is an obvious need for a new business strategy. For example, in some cases a minor strength can be turned into a major one, or a strategy to move a minor weakness into a minor strength might become apparent. A score of 2.5 is considered average. Above 2.5 indicates a strong internal position, and below indicates a weak internal position. It should be noted that no financial factors were considered for this part of the analysis, limiting its usefulness. The internal factors identified and evaluated for this project are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Internal Factor Evaluation Matrix**

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>weight</b>	<b>rate</b>	<b>score</b>
Grassroots organization	0.05	4	0.2
Proximity to airport	0.1	4	0.4
Knowledgeable guides	0.05	3	0.15
Institutional relationships	0.05	3	0.15
Friendly people	0.075	4	0.3
Vast natural attractions	0.1	4	0.4
<b>Weaknesses</b>			
Internal conflicts/competition	0.025	2	0.05
Lack of training (for best use of assets)	0.075	1	0.075
Lack of electricity (full time)	0.15	1	0.15
Jungle/beach still depleted	0.15	2	0.3
Poor communication of product	0.075	1	0.075
Lack of market control	0.1	1	0.1
	<b>1</b>		<b>2.35</b>

**STRENGTHS**

The following discussion examines some of the internal factors identified in the evaluation process. This analysis is only preliminary and should be looked upon as a preliminary step in the identification of strategic strengths for the TGA.

**Grassroots organization:** All members of the Tour Guide Association are from Monkey River Village. A community relationship exists among members. This indicates that they might look out for one another’s best interests in the long run since the families depend on one another. In addition, they are more likely to be protective of their assets when they are threatened by outside business.

**Proximity to airport:** Accessibility is crucial to success in the tourism industry. Monkey River Village is a pleasant thirty-five minute boat ride from Placencia, the location of the nearest airport.

**Knowledgeable tour guides:** Although this is an important asset, during the visit a customer expressed concern that they were being shown the exact same animals, in the exact same locations as their last visit. Although the tour guides are very knowledgeable about their region, this might indicate complacency among the Tour Guide Association's operation, hence the rating of 3.

**Institutional relationships:** Penn State and the University of Calgary are both working on projects with the region. In addition, various nongovernmental organizations work with the community.

**Friendly people:** Research within the tourism industry indicates that this is a key factor for a positive evaluation from visitors. The people of Monkey River Village are very friendly.

**Vast natural attractions:** For ecotourism this is most crucial. Although the hurricane in 2001 set the region back for a period, the jungle is recovering rapidly.

## **WEAKNESSES**

**Internal conflicts:** Some Association members feel that favoritism sometimes exists in the distribution of tours. Some association members pursue their own interests, which weakens cohesion among the group. This is considered as only a minor weakness.

**Lack of training for best use of assets:** This weakness pertains more to the community than to the Association. Strategies for tourism retailing, as well as profit maximization within the existing hospitality facilities were identified as needs within Monkey River Village.

**Lack of full time electricity:** This also pertains more to the community than to the Tour Guide Association. The need for a long term strategy in order to be included on the local power grid should be addressed as soon as possible. The community has sufficient generators to accommodate visitors, but they are expensive to run, and not entirely dependable. Since a desire for extended stay tourism strategies such as fly fishing are in the process of being developed, this is an important issue.

**Jungle/beach still depleted:** This is considered a minor weakness, as the jungle is replenishing itself rapidly. The Association does not currently focus on beach tourism.

**Poor communication of product:** This refers to both internet and local marketing. As previously mentioned, the website needs attention. Also, Monkey River is offered as a secondary day trip at most locations in Placencia. It should be noted that over promising can be damaging to a tourism operation. On one occasion this occurred during the study. A guide inflated the expectations of some of the evaluators taking the Manatee tour. A good product was perceived as substandard as a result.

**Lack of market control:** Since the Tour Guide Association has no real presence in Placencia, they are at the mercy of outside forces to book their tours. Snorkeling and fishing trips require a costly middleman.

This evaluation indicates that the Tour Guide Association is in a slightly weak internal position relative to other ecotour operators in the region. By developing a “scout” strategy for guides, where one or two guides go up the river early in the morning in order to locate wildlife to show visitors, they would have a distinct advantage over their competitors in Placencia. By developing relationships with other universities, who break at different times, they could set up courses similar to the one for this study, increasing their extended stay customers. Training, market communication, and market control would put the Tour Guide Association in a strong internal position (a 2.6 overall score).

## S.W.O.T. Analysis

A SWOT analysis compares internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats in order to develop strategies that can better position the organization to take advantage of market conditions. In this case the main internal and external factors are exhibited in Table 3. The strategies being developed are indicated in the center squares as combined factors.

Corresponding numbered statements that follow in Table 3 list the actual strategies developed from these combined factors.

**Table 3: SWOT Matrix**

	<b>Weaknesses</b>	<b>Strengths</b>
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Int. Conflict</li> <li>2. Asset use training</li> <li>3. Electricity</li> <li>4. Jungle/beach dep.</li> <li>5. Product communication</li> <li>6. Market control</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Grassroots org.</li> <li>2. Near airport</li> <li>3. Informed guides</li> <li>4. Institutional relationships</li> <li>5. Friendly people</li> <li>6. Natural attractions</li> </ol>
<b>Opportunities</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>O1, W2, W5</b></li> <li>2. <b>O2, O5, W4</b></li> <li>3. O3, W2</li> <li>4. <b>O4, W2, W4, W5</b></li> <li>5. <b>O5, W2, W4, W5</b></li> <li>6. O6, W5</li> <li>7. O7, W5</li> <li>8. <b>W1, W5, O7</b></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>13. <b>O1, S1, S3, S4</b></li> <li>14. <b>S4, O2, O3, O5, O6, O7</b></li> <li>15. <b>O3, S3, S4, S6</b></li> <li>16. <b>O4, S4</b></li> <li>17. <b>O7, S3, S4</b></li> </ol>
<b>Threats</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. <b>T1, W1, W2, W5</b></li> <li>10. <b>T2, W4</b></li> <li>11. <b>T3, W2, W3</b></li> <li>12. <b>T4, W3, W4</b></li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>18. T1, S1, S5</li> <li>19. <b>T2, S4, S6 (FISHING)</b></li> <li>20. <b>T3, S1, S4, S5</b></li> <li>21. <b>T4, S4</b></li> </ol>

## **Strategic Recommendations (based on SWOT Analysis)**

1. Improve relations with Placencia. Maybe learn better ways of asset utilization, and maybe convince them to improve their marketing efforts for Monkey River. Try to decrease any hostility between guides and communicate more freely.
2. Collaborate with university programs and NGOs to plant food sources for wildlife. They also might find more efficient irrigation systems for upriver industries, resulting in increased water flow and beach replenishment. Also, we might use these as legal advocates for the community.
3. TGA could invite university tourism students interested in learning about ecotourism at a discount in exchange for a community development program such as planting fig trees for the howler monkeys.
4. Request a Peace Corps volunteer in order to obtain a trained professional well-versed in tourism, marketing or agriculture, to assist the community.
5. Recurring need- training for website development.
6. Recurring need- training for local TGA staff and tour guides.

7. Develop a marketing booth in Placencia to direct tourists to local guides.
8. Teamwork is required in the development of the marketing effort.
9. External conflict with Placencia tour operators can increase internal cohesiveness if managed properly. Recognize that the Placencia Tour Guide Association could really hurt the market for Monkey River day-trippers. This issue needs to be addressed.
10. The TGA should focus on planting food trees and contacting agriculture upriver to attempt to build a working relationship.
11. Use hospitality training to improve opportunities for local families. Focus strategies, like obtaining electricity, to make the local community more attractive for business development and retention of youth.
12. By minimizing the hurricane effects (tree planting) and securing electricity, the community can force the government to recognize its economic significance, giving it a stronger argument for water use regulation.
13. Make a cohesive community effort to improve relations with Placencia. Use location at mouth of river as an added attraction for ecotourists and university groups. Both communities could benefit from collaboration.

14. Cooperate with interested universities and NGOs to improve the local habitat, educate the local population, make new business connections, help with websites, and develop a marketing booth in Placencia.
15. Focus on educational tourism using local natural ecological assets.
16. Recurring- Recruitment of Peace Corps Volunteer.
17. Staff booth with eloquent, knowledgeable guides, using university student groups to help develop marketing strategy and set up the booth.
18. There needs to be a community-wide effort to improve relationship with Placencia and other surrounding communities.
19. Target sport fishermen as an alternate tourism strategy while pursuing efforts to help watershed and jungle ecosystem to fully recover.
20. Try to develop an educational opportunity for local youth with universities, or employment opportunities with NGOs.
21. Use local and outside universities and NGOs to develop protective strategies to ensure grassroots development.

## CONCLUSIONS

This strategic planning process has helped to identify the most important, or most feasible steps that the TGA can act upon in order to improve the position of the TGA (and the community) in the ecotourism marketplace. A benefit / cost analysis would be useful for determining which actions are most important and how they might be staged over time. After deciding on what action steps are most important, a budget and timeline for each action in the final strategy needs to be developed by the TGA leadership. This report identifies certain strategic issues that need to be addressed in a relatively short time.

The study strongly implies pursuing the following actions:

1. Develop a Marketing Booth in Placencia;
2. Begin tree planting and riverbank habitat restoration;
3. Request a Peace Corps Volunteer with expertise in ecotourism;
4. Continue to make improvements to TGA website;
5. Intensify marketing for tourists interested in fly fishing and overnight stays.

This strategic planning analysis is an ongoing process rather than a single shot event. As improvements are made in the overall marketing and business strategy, new weaknesses could become apparent, new opportunities might present themselves, new strengths could dominate, and new threats might arise. There is a constant need for evaluation and assessment as the TGA moves forward with a successful strategic management process.

## **Study Limitations**

1. These observations were made by an outside group over a brief period, and some important issues concerning the community are likely to have been overlooked.
2. The absence of financial data pertaining to the Tour Guide Association make some of the findings of the study speculative. The research team felt that asking for such data was inappropriate at the time of the study.
3. Most sample data used for the study considers only the year 2005. This limited time frame disregards extraordinary circumstances unless the local population specifically pointed them out.
4. The findings of the study are limited to Monkey River Village and are not intended to inform ecotourism development outside the village.
5. Evaluators were given the freedom to choose their own subjects for the surveys used in the study. They may have selected certain individuals as a result of chance or personal preferences.
6. The sample size of the survey is small (less than 30). Although it was designed to include 30 subjects, there was not sufficient time to complete all the surveys.
7. Evaluators were instructed to tell participants not to consider any issues concerning electricity in the village, since this study assumes a universal desire among residents and business owners for the acquisition of dependable power.

8. Some respondents may have been reluctant to share their opinions with the evaluators because they may have felt uncertain how their responses impact their businesses or the community in general.

### **References**

David, F. R. (2001). Strategic Management Concepts. Upper Saddle Ridge, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.