



Students from the US and Ethiopia Assist Communities with Tourism Business Planning



Community members from the Lake Ziway Area discuss potential tourism products they could offer

In early March, the USAID-funded Ethiopian Sustainable Tourism Alliance (ESTA) took members of the Ziway, Lepis, and East Langanjo community committee on an experience sharing trip to Adaba-Dodola. While there they toured pristine forests and met with proud community members who had been successful in conserving their area through the pursuit of alternative livelihoods - eco-tourism being prominent among them.

Familiarization trips to Ziway and Lepis were also organized for area hotel owners and top Ethiopian tour operators. The visits were followed by lengthy feedback sessions in which the familiarization trip participants explained to community members the types of products that would be marketable.

After these feedback sessions the communities were ready to begin the business planning process. To assist in the process, a group of graduate students came from George Washington University and teamed up with Ethiopian tourism students from the University of Hawassa, ESTA staff and consultants, and ESTA partners SNV and EWNHS. Their role was to provide guidance throughout the process and to ensure the decisions were made by the communities.

Over the next week and a half, four preliminary business plans were created for communities in Lepis Forest and the Lake Ziway area. In Lepis, products included horseback riding and trekking tours as

well as a community campsite with cooking facilities. In the Lake Ziway area, products included an island tour featuring a monastery with millennium-old relics, a community restaurant, and bird watching tours.

Also in Ziway, an interesting opportunity arose to provide business planning assistance to a fledgling boat owners association. It was clear from the tour operators that tourism in the Ziway area would not be possible without safer, more comfortable boat service. Yet the boat operators admitted that they did not understand why they were unable to attract tourists.

ESTA brought in experts from two Ethiopian lakes with highly successful boat tour operations to share their experiences. After several days, the Ziway boat operators felt confident enough to make decisions on issues such as product offerings, priority market segment, a business structure, and minimum standards for members that included provision of shade, seat cushions, life jackets, and trained guides.

Not only was the business planning process highly beneficial for the communities to organize their ideas, but it will also help ESTA to ultimately determine which businesses it will be able to support at a deeper level.