

Dr. T. Vasantha Kumaran,
Professor and Head, Dept. of Geography,
University of Madras
Chepauk, Chennai 600 005
thangavelukumaran@gmail.com

Eric Miller
World Storytelling Institute
Nungambakkam, Chennai 600 034
www.storytellinginstitute.org
eric@storytellinginstitute.org
98403 94282

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Recommendations for the Proposed Nocchikuppam Educational and Cultural Tourism Project

These recommendations have developed out of:

I) The *Kattumaram Thiruvilza (Wooden Boat Festival)*, including a performance of the "Sea Story", at Nocchikuppam grounds, on 15 July 2006.

II) A Workshop on 24 March 2007, at the Dept. of Geography, U. of Madras.

III) A Meeting on 2 April 2007, at the Centre for Counselling, attended by Nocchikuppam community members,

1) A. Sheila

2) M. Lakshmi

3) P. Shrividhya

4) P. Kumudha

5) Balama

6) Dhanalakshmi

(The above are members of women's self-help groups.)

7) G. Muthu

This project presents an opportunity to educate and entertain the public about the sea and sea-related cultures. It could serve to gather and exhibit Tamil Nadu's ancient sea-related heritage before it is lost. The project could be a centre which could help to represent the knowledge and traditions of sea-fishing communities all along southeast India's coast and beyond -- to Africa to the west, and to the South Pacific Ocean to the east. In this entire region, following the Tsunami, educational and cultural tourism efforts are underway, and this project could play a leadership role.

To fulfill this project, these workplaces are being requested: 1) an outdoor theatre, 2) an auditorium, 3) a library/museum/education-centre, 4) a gift shop, and 5) a restaurant (and/or food stalls or coffee shop) -- along with a community fish market, and a community place to dry fish.

In the Nocchikupam area, there are 69 women's self-help groups. Each group has 20 members. The members of these groups would like, as much as possible, to help plan and manage the proposed project's educational and tourism facilities. A local NGO with a sincere interest in, and respect for, folk traditions could also help to manage the project. Thus, the management of this project could be a combination of private business and NGO.

In addition to the community fish market, there could be a community place to dry fish, where the fish-drying process could be shown and explained to visitors (and where the finished product could be sold). This could be part of the "living" museum. There could also be a section of the beach on which the boats, nets, and boat engines could be explained.

(A "living" museum, is a museum -- which can be partly outdoors -- in which community members explain about the objects that are still in everyday use in the community.)

There could be a shop/exhibition area where visitors could see and buy: 1) Shells, and shellcraft jewelry including hair-clips, earrings, bracelets, and necklaces. 2) Photos of fish, which could also have captions, giving the local Tamil name for each fish and explaining about the characteristics of each fish (in what season it is caught, etc.). 3) Sea- and sea-fishing-related paintings; books (fiction and non-fiction), including cookbooks; bookmarks; audio and video recordings; computer-video games, screen-savers, and other items.

There could be an aquarium. Here, ornamental fish and accessories could be sold.

There could be a video-internet-computer education-centre about the sea. This centre could feature computer animations about how tides, waves, currents, and storms form. Satellite photos could show how weather conditions develop. The fishing men could teach members of the public how to read the sky and the waves "as if you were reading a face". Another topic could be the physics of kattumarams (catamarans, the traditional small boat): How are the planks of wood processed? How are they strapped together? How do kattumarams move through water?

The library/museum/auditorium education-centre could have a video-telephone (video-conference) facility so that school children and others -- from around the state, country, and world -- could visit as a "virtual study-trip." Community members could be trained to interact with, and help to educate, such visitors.

Thus, this education-centre could feature a combination of scientific knowledge (presented by high-technology), and anecdotal experience-based knowledge (presented by storytelling). University Departments -- such as the Dept. of Geography, U. of Madras -- could help to organize the lessons for the public.

It might be somewhat risky to actually take visitors out to sea in small boats, so an alternative might be to show visitors video recordings of what one sees when one is at sea on a small boat.

There could be an outdoor theatre, where there a 35-minute "Sea Story" drama could be presented at 5pm each day, featuring rowing songs and other folksongs. (At 4pm each day, a bus could go to Chennai's leading hotels and pick up tourists; at 6pm, the bus could take them back to the hotels. This would involve coordinating with the hotel people and travel agents.)

There could be "Storytelling by the Sea" each Saturday or Sunday morning, featuring *Kathaiyum Pattum (Story and Song)*, *Villupaattu (Bow Song)* and other styles of storytelling -- which members of the public could also learn to perform.

The performers for the above could be a mix of community members and others.

There could be food stalls and/or a restaurant in which different fish could be prepared in different ways. The restaurant could have an open kitchen, where customers could see how the different dishes are prepared, and the cooks could explain each cooking process, and teach that process to the customers. The recipes could be given on paper also.

There could be an outdoor coffee shop where people can sit and watch the ocean and the fishing activities (net repair, etc.) on the beach.

Regarding the fish market and the (proposed) restaurant: After cleaning, the fish waste at present is just thrown away. It could be processed as fertiliser. Therefore, community members request training and facilities for preparing such fertiliser (this is another activity which could be shown and explained to visitors). Visitors could also buy this fertiliser onsite.

Nocchikuppam has a huge location advantage in relation to this proposed project. It is adjacent to Chennai's famous Marina beach, which is by itself a major tourist attraction both foreign and domestic. Most of the proposed activities -- such as the daily drama, the weekly storytelling, and the tours of the boats, nets, and boat engines -- could be carried out mostly in the open, with the sea and sand as the backdrop. The vast crowds that throng the Marina beach on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays would certainly be attracted by the activities here.

As space is at a premium in this area, principles of Space Management for facilities would need to be applied skillfully. Bus, train, and auto-rickshaw transportation could be encouraged. Visitors could be charged steeply for parking, and parking areas some distance away could also be an option.

It is taken for granted that in the future the Nocchikuppam beach will be kept much cleaner. This would involve awareness-raising about sanitation and customer-relations among members of the community. Also, attractive and well-maintained public toilets would be a must.

The respective Government Departments would be requested to consider these logistical matters.

Although this project would be a year-round, everyday operation, it might also involve a festival period each year, perhaps around the time of and in conjunction with the Music and Dance season (mid-December to mid-January) or the Chennai Sangamam (mid-January, Pongal onward).

This cultural tourism project is envisioned as being owned and operated by Nocchikuppam people's self-help groups. However, due to the location of the project, the basic infrastructure (such as the building facilities) would need to be provided by the Government. Guidance and help for the project would be requested from the Government (including the Slum Clearance Board, the CMDA, the Dept. of Tourism, and the Corporation), NGOs, private business sponsors and supporters,

and educational institutions. In return, this project could make a significant contribution to society.

This project is a Neighbourhood Livelihood Initiative, focusing on entrepreneurship in the field of cultural tourism. It would include a skill creation/upgradation centre for community members, which could substantially change the economic and livelihood profile of the community. Nocchikupam community members could receive training, especially in relation to computer use, so that as much as possible they could be the ones to operate and manage the facilities that would constitute this project.

Towards this end, this May the Dept. of Geography, U. of Madras, is planning to invite 20 young people (aged 15-18) from the Nocchikuppam community to participate in a one-week course in the Department's computer lab (five computers). The course would be entitled, "Introduction to Skills Required for Operating a Cultural Tourism Project". A pre-requisite would be some knowledge of written and spoken English and Tamil. Subjects would include: 1) Basic computer literacy (operating a computer, word-processing, sending and receiving e-mail). 2) Putting photos on computers, and adjusting and archiving the photos. 3) Introduction to business management. 4) Designing lessons for visiting school children and others regarding the traditional objects in the community (boats, nets, boat engines, etc.), and geographical and atmospheric conditions (winds, storms, waves, clouds, currents, tides, etc.). 5) Soft skills (such as customer-relations etiquette).

What is requested of the Government at this time is for the Government to consider including plans for the requested facilities in the overall plan for the new Nocchikuppam.

Benny Kuriakose, a Chennai-based architect who has done a lot of post-Tsunami work in the Nagapattinam area, has made a set of architectural drawings of the possible outdoor theatre, auditorium, museum, library, gift shop, and restaurant. These drawings are meant only as a starting point for discussion, and Mr. Kuriakose has offered to make any follow-up drawings also.

Note: Although this project would include information about the 2004 Tsunami, the emphasis would not be on that particular crisis. Rather, the emphasis would be on the community's age-old successful methods of expression, communication, and production.

The Nocchikuppam community members who attended the 2 April meeting can be contacted through

1) Dr. T. Vasantha Kumaran, Professor and Head, and Dr. Suresh, Lecturer, Dept. of Geography, who are willing to help with educational aspects of the project.

2) Dr. Gunaselvam, a social worker who works with NGOs and with the Dept. of Geography.

3) Eric Miller and Magdalene Jeyarathnam Miller. Eric is originally from NYC, USA, and has re-settled in Chennai. He is a Ph.D. candidate in Folklore at the U. of Penn. in the USA. He would like to be considered as an applicant for the position of artistic and technology director of the project. Magdalene is a native of Chennai. She is a counsellor and a trainer of counsellors, and has founded the Center for Counselling. At present, Magdalene wishes her participation in the project to be considered only as volunteer social service.