

A RIVER, A MONSTER AND RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

An innovative Gambian initiative, several decades in the making, is at last ready to emerge from its long incubation, turning cryptozoology into currency.

BY ALASTAIR HAGGER



Sunset at Albadarr Pier Albreda

AS THE ROUGH BEAST THAT WAS 2020 slouches off into the past, a more benevolent creature is stirring. Some say it's a horned serpent, or a horse-giraffe-crocodile hybrid; others call it a fearsome dragon, or a rainbow-colored mystery that descends with the heavy rains.

It's the Ninki Nanka, and its powerful charisma could be a shot in the arm for the Gambian tourism industry in a post-Covid environment hungry for adventure with a conscience.

Tales of African cryptids are common across the continent:

the Congo River has its quasi-plesiosaur Mokélé-mbembé, Botswana has its village-stomping Kgogomodumo.

The swamp-dwelling Ninki Nanka of West African folklore is another frightening enigma, weaponized in the evening-stories of weary parents to deter curious children from venturing too far after dark.

There are still local fishermen who refuse to enter certain creeks, such is the Ninki Nanka's ancestral resonance. Some believe encounters spell certain death, unless the dragon is viewed in a mirror, but a scale recovered from its body unlocks a

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magical wish for an adventurous survivor.

Now, in 2021, an innovative Gambian initiative, several decades in the making, is at last ready to emerge from its long incubation, turning cryptozoology into currency in a way that promises to deliver real-world benefits to local communities.

The idea of monetizing this myth into a creature-spotting 'Ninki Nanka Trail' began with the founders of Gambia River Excursions in the 1980s, and was introduced into the Gambia Tourism Board's 2006 Master Plan by the current Chairman of the Institute of Travel and Tourism of The Gambia, Adama Bah.

“If you know The Gambia, it's nothing but its river. It's us, really,” he says.

“We've talked a lot about river-based tourism, but

never done it very well. The Gambia is known as a winter sun destination; what we have on the coast is mostly cheap leisure tourism, 10% or less of which will go upcountry. Many people nowadays want tourism which is more sensitive to culture and the environment. The way to make it beneficial to the population is to make sure tourists have another experience, where the product portfolio is diversified with ethno- and eco-tourism.”

Between 2010 and 2014, Commonwealth Scholarship funding allowed a group of Leeds Beckett University's MSc in Responsible Tourism Management students to partner on the project with the University of the Gambia and the International Centre of Tourism West Africa. In 2013, Leeds Beckett staff, appointed by the Association of Small Scale Enterprises in Tourism, were able to begin a feasibility study, thanks to additional financial support from the World Bank, and in 2019, International Trade Centre funding for the Gambia Tourism Board and the Gambia Youth Empowerment Project pushed the plan into its crucial delivery phase.

“It's been a lot more complicated than just putting together an itinerary,” says Leeds Beckett University's Lucy McCombes, co-founder with Bah of the Ninki Nanka Encounters foundation, a charity supporting the development of community-based tourism in The Gambia. “It's more about developing responsible

Photos by Ninki Nanka Encounters



Ninki Nanka Encounters boat trip

tourism along the River Gambia, with all the partners involved. It's been very much a Gambian-led, organic process. What we have been trying to do is create an experience where tourists and local people can meet in a mutually beneficial way, learn about each other, and have a very positive cultural exchange, which is in contrast to a lot of the interaction that goes on in package holidays in resorts."

The Ninki Nanka Trail, officially launched by the Gambia Tourism Board in February 2020, is currently frozen in a kind of ready-for-purpose cryogenic suspension until the Covid-19 leviathan can finally be brought to its knees.

Once active again, it will feature visits to the Juffereh slavery museum at the birthplace of Kunta Kinte; cultural immersion experiences in the village of N'Demban; or exploration of the island of Janjanbureh, formerly Georgetown, and the UNESCO-recognized Wassu stone circles 25km to its north.

"The Gambians involved in this trail really wanted people to understand its diversity," says McCombes. "So we've carefully crafted the interpretation along the trail so that you can learn about the main ethnic groups that live in The Gambia, and the key characteristics of their culture. Tourists are going out into a more fragile environment in many ways. You want to make sure that you are encouraging more and more to go who do it right."

Travelers can choose to sleep in homestays along the route, or on specially-prepared boats under the mosquito nets and the stars; ornithologists will flock to the Bird Reserve in the Tanji National Park, an area famed for its 500 species of birds (and a rumored favorite haunt of the Ninki Nanka).

All of these offerings are tied into a broader vision which empowers local people, and gives them ownership of their incomes, as well as their folklore.

"If you start community-based tourism projects, you also



Ndemban village tour

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have to help those communities," says Bah.

"To help them develop their products, to get training, to build their capacity, and where necessary provide finances for projects they want to do that will also have an impact on the Ninki Nanka Trail."

Might the trail serve as a rubric, a template for other 'monster'-branded tourism initiatives elsewhere?

"That process of developing community-based tourism, of developing products and a trail to link it together, using a 'dragon', could be replicated," says McCombes.

"Wouldn't it be great to have a few of these across the world?" 



Juffereh Slavery Museum