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SAVING THE LEATHERBACK TURTLE IN GRANDE RIVIERE, TRINIDAD

Community engagement at work

Johnny Coomansingh

28.1 Introduction

Grande Riviere, a tiny hilly village located on the north coast of Trinidad, is part of the Toco/Sangre Grande constituency on the political map of Trinidad. Devoid of natural resources such as petroleum, gas, and other high value mineral matter, it is well known that the Toco/Sangre Grande constituency is the poorest of all constituencies in the country. Sand, gravel, rock, and some timber seem to be the only natural products the area has to offer. With a predominantly agrarian lifestyle, Grande Riviere, the village that earned its name from the big river that flows through the area, was once a giant in the production of cocoa beans. During the cocoa production era, Grande Riviere prospered. In the 1920s, the slump of the cocoa industry on the world market saw the village begin an economic tailspin. The economic troubles of the village resulted in a rural-urban drift. Opportunities for gainful employment were limited and many villagers left to seek employment elsewhere. The few that remained eked out a living from short-term crop gardening, hunting, and fishing.

The hilly nature of the landscape did not allow for much development. Most of the dwellings were set along the Paria Main Road that services the coastal villages before and after Grande Riviere. A few paces from the main road lies the Grande Riviere Bay into which the big river pours its crystal waters. The water in this river is rendered clear because of the quartzite rock that lines the river bed. Expansive stands of bamboo forms part of the riparian vegetation on both banks of the river as it approaches the sea. Wild almond trees (*Terminalia cattapa*) proliferate the stretch of beach; but this is no ordinary beach. Although it is not the best for sea bathing, it is fortunate that, by nature, this beach is a world-famous nesting site for the leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*). According to Discovernt.com, it is the second largest leatherback nesting site in the world.

After the fall of the cocoa industry, many villagers saw the leatherback turtle merely as food. Concomitant with the “harvesting” of the turtle and its eggs, the numbers of this animal coming up to nest on the beach dwindled. It was about survival. Nevertheless, the “tragedy of the commons” would not last. Seeing the debacle and the severe loss of a valuable natural resource, local and international organizations intervened to halt the destruction of the turtle population. In a unified effort with an engaged community to save the leatherback
turtle, Grande Riviere was enlightened to showcase the animal as a tourist attraction. The villagers realized that they had to commit to stop eating the animal. They had to cooperate and understand that the turtle was their ticket to find employment and make a livelihood. Today, nesting leatherback turtles are the primary reason that both domestic and foreign tourists come to Grande Riviere.

While the saving of the leatherback turtle progressed, the fires of the cocoa industry were also being rekindled. Through the efforts of the Cocoa Development Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited (CDCTTL), two Grande Riviere cocoa production entrepreneurs and two others from the village of Tamana were thrust into the international spotlight for their prized cocoa beans. Their cocoa farmers took first place out of 223 entries from 55 countries at the International Cocoa Awards (ICA) in the 25th edition of the Salon du Chocolat in Paris, France.

This chapter gives a synopsis of the tourism situation in Trinidad as compared to some other Caribbean islands. It also seeks to highlight that tourism development can come through the cooperation of a people. Through community engagement, Grande Riviere has shown that a rural population can be enabled to find solutions to their economic problems. Although everything is not 100% perfect with regard to the proper training of personnel in the management of the leatherback turtle resource, the village of Grande Riviere is well on its way to being successfully tagged as an example to the world.

28.2 Tourism and the Caribbean region

In preserving the leatherback turtle in Grande Riviere, community engagement involving the villagers must be highlighted. In light of this, it is imperative to provide a synopsis of the tourist industry in the Caribbean region and its impact as it relates to Trinidad. From the London Metropolitan University, David Harrison, a researcher on the village of Grande Riviere, reported in 2004 that, with the exception of Cuba, tourism in the Caribbean prior to 1945 was centred mainly on cruise liners that plied in the waters of the region. In his paper “Grande Riviere, Trinidad: From Cocoa to Conservation and Tourism, “ he writes about how large-scale tourism post-1945 commenced with the availability of surplus aircraft, improved technology, higher standards of living, and the appeal of tropical Caribbean islands.

After the Second World War (WWII), and the onset of neo-colonialism, the Caribbean enacted a strong pull on foreigners, especially from Europe and North America. With respect to the region’s involvement with the tourist industry, McGonigal (1996, p. 68) referred to the Caribbean as “the encapsulation of paradise.” This description of the region is bold, but also correct. Columbus in his writings described the islands of “the New World as the most marvellous, beautiful, and fertile lands he had ever known, filled with flocks of parrots, exotic plants, and friendly natives” (Rowntree et al. 2006, p. 179). Despite the beauty of the region, the daily economic struggle of the masses is all too apparent. On the one hand, the “tourist gaze” (Urry 1994, p. 3) captures vibrant and vivacious images of white sandy beaches, ideal weather, a literal melting pot of cultural forms...a musical, “carefree, fun-loving society” (Coomansingh 2006; Potter and Lloyd-Evans 1997, p. 19; CGCED 2000), a people negatively branded with a carnival mentality (Green 1998).

Notwithstanding the beauty of the Caribbean region, Potter and Lloyd-Evans (1997, p. 19) presented the truth about the area in question with the following statement: “Beneath a contemporary surface shaped by the dictates of international tourism, the realities of political struggle, oppression, and the daily round of poverty are all too clear. “In terms of tourist receipts as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP), the figures have not changed much
since 2000. Note that tourism was only 3% of the GDP of Trinidad and Tobago (Trinidad). There were reasons for this, including debates over multipliers and linkages, demeaning work (bell boys, janitors, and chambermaids), moral pollution vis-à-vis sex tourism, and total commodification of the country and its culture.

28.3 Trinidad – no true history of tourism

According to Coomansingh (2004), Trinidad and Tobago, the most southerly English-speaking isles of the Caribbean, has not had a history of tourism. The development of hydrocarbon reserves in the republic stymied the promotion of tourism. Being slow off the blocks with respect to the tourism race was not the fault of the masses. It was due to the mandate of the first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and the leader of the People’s National Movement (PNM), Dr Eric E. Williams. As Henry-Kunzel (1994) explained, Trinidad and Tobago under the leadership of Williams (1956–1986) was discouraged from developing tourism. Williams perceived that there is a tendency for tourism to place inhabitants of the host community in a subservient position. He did not want Trinidad and Tobago to become another victim of neo-colonization, nor for its citizens to become a nation of janitors and busboys (Trinidad Express 2000). Racial tensions during the late 1960s and 1970s also exacerbated the problems with the tourist industry in Trinidad. (This aspect will be given greater clarity in the conclusive remarks of this chapter). Nevertheless, in 1986 Arthur N. R. Robinson, a Tobagonian by birth, democratically wrested political control of the country.

It was under the leadership of Robinson that tourism became a priority (Henry-Kunzel 1994). Was tourism development helpful? According to Fidler (1997), Trinidad and Tobago has always had a small share of the Caribbean tourism market. From 1990 onwards, tourist arrivals in Trinidad and Tobago have increased gradually. As an emerging tourism destination tourist arrivals totalled 260,000 in 1995 and 276,000 in 2019, almost a 2% increase (Chaitram 2020). It is clear that the tourist industry is becoming increasingly important, as evidenced by the establishment of a separate ministry for tourism, as Freeman (1997) noted. Although this ministry was formed to manage “tourism” in Trinidad, many were the upheavals and misunderstandings, mismanagement, and miscalculations in the industry. It seemed from all angles that the tourist industry in Trinidad was given piecemeal attention. Now, with a better understanding of the situation with tourism in Trinidad, it is necessary to give the village of Grande Riviere its power of place and identity, and look at the role of community engagement in the creation of a tourism product.

28.4 Early development in the village of Grande Riviere

Around 1860, Grande Riviere started out as a tiny agrarian village with Spanish inhabitants coming in from Venezuela. These immigrants settled on the coast and around the “Big River” (Grande Riviere). The Spanish dwellers or Cocoa Panyols (Coomansingh 2016) were followed by people from Tobago (Tobagonians). The British annexation of Tobago as a ward of Trinidad began in 1883 and ended in 1889. From about 1900, cocoa was “king” in terms of the economy of the village. Gordon Grant, a wealthy landowner, dominated the village. He controlled about 400 plus acres of cultivated cocoa lands. During these times, Grande Riviere thrived; money flowed, the people were employed and happy, insomuch that they had frequent balls and parties at the Masonic Lodge. Two decades later, cocoa prices in the world market slumped. From 1921 onwards, Grande Riviere began to decline economically, and it seems today that the place never really recovered. In 1967, Grant sold his cocoa
plantation. The loss of jobs and lack of liquidity in the area, resulted in out-migration, which took its toll on the community. In terms of employment and a better standard of living, Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad, appeared more attractive to villagers. The rural-urban drift saw a fall in the villagers’ population from 718 residents in 1931 to 334 in 2000. Almost 50% of the villagers left.

Nonetheless, in the early 1970s there was a slight rise in the population to 504 people across 134 households. Fifty percent of the men and 50% of the women were “expatriates” of Grande Riviere. This scenario caused much uneasiness and “bad blood” among the villagers. People born and raised in Grande Riviere would sometimes “throw words” to those who were not born in the village: for example, “You just come here! I born and grow here” to indicate that they have more rights to whatever employment and benefits were available.

28.5 Employment and the struggle to survive

Employment centred around road works and subsistence gardening on small plots of land after the fall of the cocoa industry in Grande Riviere. Roadwork employment such as brush-cutting the verges, cleaning and clearing drains, trimming trees, and patching potholes favoured male insiders. Some people were still involved in cocoa production, but on a smaller scale. Since then, the village has sought to sustain itself through subsistence farming and has further resorted to “hunter-gatherer” exploits. Many gardeners planted root crops such as dasheen (Colocasia esculenta), cassava (Manihot esculenta), tannia, (Xanthosoma sagittifolium), yams, plantains, and bananas. Fishing and hunting for small game such as opossum (Didelphis marsupialis), agouti (Dasyprocta leporine), peccary (Pecari tajacu), lowland pac or lappe (Cuniculus paca), and a small type of deer (Mazama americana) formed part of the food in the survival of the villagers. Without the money garnered from the cocoa industry, Grande Riviere fell by the wayside; the culture gradually changed into a survival of the fittest mode. The result included the poaching and slaughter of the leatherback turtle (Dermochelys coriacea) for food. Occasionally a leatherback turtle would come to the beach to nest. Back in those times, the villagers captured and ate such turtles. The eggs were also eaten. This situation led to a serious reduction in the number of turtles coming to nest on the Grande Riviere beach. In 1970, the leatherback sea turtle was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Conservation Act. Slaughtered for their eggs, meat, skin, and shells, these sea turtles suffered from poaching and over-exploitation.

28.6 The society and its idiosyncrasies

Regarding the social life of villagers, most of the people would meet and greet in the grocery store at the main junction. A supply of electricity was absent. No doctor or nurse was stationed in the village. The nearest hospital or clinic was in Sangre Grande, about 35 miles away. There were separate activities for men and women; the street and “liming” (“hanging out” or “shooting the breeze”), card playing, hunting, and fishing for the men versus the home and domestic duties like cooking, cleaning, looking after children, and some backyard gardening ascribed to women. Everything was village oriented; Grande Riviere was an inward-looking place, the people were always suspicious of outsiders. No tourism existed then. In 1972, it was observed that the population of the village had decreased by 25%. In that same year, the school roll showed an attendance of 132 students. In 2004, there were only 37. The cocoa industry kept dying a slow and painful death. Roadwork continued to be the main occupation. Declare in the fortunes of the villagers was evident; population figures
were down, a fire destroyed the main grocery store, the cocoa plantation was divided in 1990 and sold off into smaller plots, and the old Masonic building was dismantled. However, it was around this time that tourism began to take hold in Grande Riviere.

### 28.7 Rural economic expansion

In the mid-1970s, electricity came to the village. The Paria Main Road to Grande Riviere was in a better state of repair and 30% of the homes now had a television set. Potable water was now available in homes. A health center was built with a nurse stationed in the village, and a doctor made weekly visits to the village. Between 1990 and 2004 several facilities to house tourists were erected. In 1990, a Chinese family purchased a cocoa estate house and started a hunting lodge. An Italian photographer arrived in 1993 and bought the house from the Chinese owner. This was then converted into a 12-bedroom hotel. According to the online Rough Guide, 2003, the Mount Plaisir hotel was known as the “best hotel in Trinidad.” Built by a local Grand Riviere man, the Le Grand Almandier hotel was established in 1996. In 1999, a locally owned guest house, McEachnie’s Haven opened. The French-owned Acajou Hotel was opened in 2004. So why were all these hotels built? The main reason was the arrival of nesting turtles. Although the leatherback turtle was scarcely seen on the Grande Riviere Beach in the 1970s, there was an upsurge of turtle visits during the 1980s and 1990s. Camping under the almond trees adjacent to the river during the 1980s and 1990s, I personally witnessed the increase in nesting turtles on this stretch. The increase in the number of the animal arriving to nest raised environmental awareness at the local, national, regional, and international levels.

With this new situation in mind, the villagers of Grande Riviere began to change their attitudes towards the leatherback turtle. Capitalizing on the increase in nesting turtles, the government, via the Ministry of Tourism, and the villagers in the Grande Riviere community saw an opportunity to encourage and expand tourism in the area. In light of the fact that the leatherback turtle could serve to enhance the potential of Grande Riviere, Matelot on the north coast, and Matura and Manzanilla on the east coast, BHP Billiton, a petroleum company, and the Ministry of Tourism partnered and saw the need to establish the “Turtle Village Trust”. The impacts of tourism in the area were immediately realized. Tourism brought with it a new source of employment, greater connections and cooperation with international organizations, initiation of new social and economic institutions, advances in exposure to the outside world, and increased interaction with domestic and foreign tourists. The jobs now available were not so centered on “bell hops” and “chambermaid” positions. Apart from regular governmental “roadwork, “villagers found themselves involved in certain sectors, including building construction, carpentry, cabinetry, masonry, landscaping, tour guiding, hospitality work, catering, cooking, and bar work. Once more, Grande Riviere became a busy little village, alive with entrepreneurial activity. “King Cocoa” died and was, for the most part, buried. The excitement of a new dawn fell upon the villagers; they had something to live for.

### 28.8 Involvement with local, regional, and international systems

As far as the incorporation into international systems is concerned, the villagers of Grande Riviere stood to benefit from greater interaction between themselves and other environmental groups from sister villages of the Turtle Village Trust, members of the Wildlife Section of the Department of Forestry, the Caribbean Regional Environmental Programme...
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(CREPP), volunteers from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), students from Glasgow University who were surveying the area, and other national, regional, and international individuals engaged in training and environmental education.

28.9 Economic behaviour

In terms of the social and economic impacts, villagers received new inspiration and new purpose with tourism as the main economic driver in the village. The construction of new hotels and guest houses with local ownership improved employment opportunities for the villagers.

Coupled with this was the formation and implementation of the local tour guide association, Grande Riviere Tour Guide Association (GRTGA), and the Grande Riviere Tourist Development Organization (GRTDO). Although Grande Riviere has a village council, the aforementioned organizations are of more importance to the development of the area. Nevertheless, there are other organizations along the Atlantic stretch of beach that work in tandem to preserve the leatherback turtle. These are as follows:

- Nature Seekers
- the Matura to Matelot (M2M) Network
- the Fishing Pond Turtle Conservation Group
- SOS (Save our Sea Turtles) Tobago.

28.10 Interaction with the outside world

Without question, the arrival of more turtles on the beach served as the main attraction, a selling point for tourists, which invariably allowed greater interaction with outsiders. Turtle watching season begins March 1 and culminates on August 31 every year (Trinidad and Tobago 2015). The figures described below give an idea of the number of domestic and foreign tourists who visit Grande Riviere during this period annually to participate in turtle watching. The quantity of beach permits sold indicate the number of people who visited: 5,998 were sold in 2002, and 4,164 were sold in 2003. In those two years, Mt. Plaisir Hotel sold 2,819 tickets and Le Grand Almandier Hotel sold 1,088. Note that 6,255 tickets were sold at the Turtle Village Trust Visitor Orientation Centre because organizations, church groups, clubs, and random carloads and busloads of individuals could arrive at the visitor’s to buy tickets on any given night during turtle watching season. A permit is required to enter the beach at night during the season. Paid tour guides must accompany groups of visitors on the beach.

28.11 Environmental awareness

Although the villagers in Grande Riviere have declared that they are not eating the turtles anymore, there are some isolated cases where poachers still capture one or two turtles for meat. Nevertheless, villagers now have increased environmental awareness about the need to preserve the turtles, especially when they come up to lay. The Grande Riviere community is now engaged in and committed to the protection of the turtles. Many jobs in Grande Riviere depend on the survival of the turtles. Of great importance is the fact that the young villagers are now intensely involved in the tourism business that has stemmed from the surge in turtle arrivals. It is abundantly clear that the reason for the arrival of domestic and foreign tourists to Grande Riviere is the nesting of the leatherback turtle.
28.12 Discussion and conclusion

After the fall of the cocoa industry, the tourism industry slowly began to take hold in the village. As an engaged community of just 334 people, Grande Riviere with the assistance of local, national, regional, and international organizations made a valiant effort to save the leatherback turtle. This effort by village residents through an engaged community was with a view towards luring tourists to the area. Thanks to the increased environmental awareness and cooperation at the local, national, regional, and international levels, the leatherback turtle in Grande Riviere has made a wonderful comeback, with hundreds of turtles returning to lay their eggs every night during the March to August period on the Grande Riviere Beach.

But nature has a way of doing things in Grande Riviere that sometimes does not bode well for the turtles. Feral dogs are sometimes seen digging up nests to get to the eggs. During the day, when hatchlings are scurrying down to the sea they are scooped up by frigate birds and gobbled up by vultures commonly referred to as “corbeau” (Carthartes aura). These vultures that peruse this beach know exactly when to arrive. In recent years there were hundreds of turtles that came up to lay on this short stretch of beach. With limited space, there were so many turtles that came up to lay that many incubating nests were dug up and destroyed. And then the river seems to “own” the beach. There are times when the river will come rushing down the beach, destroying everything in its path, including the nests with eggs (BBC News 2012). Even the hotels are threatened. A few young men who walk the beach during the day will pick up hatchlings and keep them “safe” until nighttime for release into the ocean. Because nature’s law is of “survival of the fittest,” whether this is good or bad no one knows. The lights of the village and hotel illumination tend to attract hatchlings to the wrong direction. Many hatchlings have been picked up on Hosang Street, where the bigger hotel is located. The hotel is thus forced to turn down its lighting system.

Today, the villagers and other supporting governmental and non-governmental agencies have decreed the non-consumption of the meat of the leatherback turtle. This might be the order of the day but there are people who still poach the leatherback and other turtles from time to time. Many jobs in Grande Riviere now depend on the presence of the leatherback turtle. This research sought to furnish historical and ethnographic data with respect to community engagement in the saving of the leatherback turtle. There is no doubt that community engagement involved in saving the leatherback turtle created a scenario for increased employment in the village. However, the GRTGA is the primary mover in the work of saving the turtles. The Grande Riviere Village Council supports the effort, but it is the younger members who are mostly active in tour guiding when tourists come to see the turtles. With such responsibility of imparting knowledge to visitors, tour guides need to be properly trained. Their training must not be piecemeal. Some of the local tour guides still have problems with the ability to pronounce certain words, phrases, syntax, and transference of scientific knowledge. Management of the beach between 6:00 pm and 6:00 am poses another problem. Many of the workers who do this “job” are volunteers. The village of Grande Riviere would have suffocated economically if steps were not taken to engage the community in saving itself. The leatherback turtle is at the centre of the economy of Grande Riviere. But all is not well.

My visit to Grande Riviere during August 2019 revealed that all the hotels were vacant. The hotel business is not booming as in former years. The turtles have not been showing up since July 2019. Without turtles on the beach at night, there is literally an avalanche of non-occupancy. It is well-known that an unsold room is the most perishable of all assets. At the
close of any business day, the revenue from an unsold room plus other miscellaneous hotel sales, had the room been occupied, are lost forever.

The tourism sector in Grande Riviere is struggling at the moment. The hotel parking lots are empty. For all wants and purposes, the village looks dead. The doors of the Visitor Orientation Centre are closed. The lack of tourists and the associated stress in making a living could be the reason why one craftsperson yelled at me to not take any pictures of the structure where she and her children resided. She squats in a makeshift structure built around a huge almond tree on the beach at the end of Hosang Street. How she was allowed to occupy that location on the beach is still a big question. Apparently she was very angry that I did not choose to buy a piece of handicraft from her. She even threatened to destroy my camera if I dared take a photograph. Seeing her demeanour, and sensing her hostility, I calmly walked away. One hotelier informed me that some of the Afro-Trinidadian villagers of Grande Riviere are prejudiced. They do not like or prefer people of Indo-Trinidadian origin. The age-old suspicions of the villagers of Grande Riviere are alive and well. To me, it was a bit unsettling to learn this “fact,” since almost 40% of the population of Trinidad consists of people of South Asian origin. Hopefully what I learnt after speaking with a custodian at another hotel was just a rumour.

According to Bissettar (2000 pp. 1), “Electoral outcomes have reflected ethnic cleavages.” The residents of Grande Riviere are predominantly of African descent. These Afro-Trinidadians vote mainly for the People’s National Movement (PNM), which is acclaimed as the political party comprised mainly of Afro-Trinidadians. It would not be careless to add that the United National Congress (UNC), the opposition party, has Indo-Trinidadians members as the majority. According to Birth (1999), it is a well-known fact that Indo-Trinidadians are more future-oriented and thriftier, while Afro-Trinidadians are more concerned with instant gratification. The generational “animosity” (Coomansingh 2010) that exists between these two ethnicities does not augur well for the development of domestic tourism in Grande Riviere. Attitudes must change.

I was informed that despite the loss of room sales and the apparent downturn in the economy of the village, Grande Riviere will “survive” because an illegal and “underground economy” is thriving in the village. To describe this economy, and to say exactly what it involves, requires deeper and riskier research. Due to socio-economic upheavals and political unrest in neighbouring Venezuela, which is just seven miles away across the Gulf of Paria, Trinidad has had an huge influx of Venezuelans. This migration started about five years ago. There are claims that over 40,000 Venezuelans now reside in Trinidad (Hamilton 2019). In some way or the other, the migration of these people has affected every sector of Trinidad, Grande Riviere included.

Why have the turtles stopped coming to nest so early in the season? The reasons for this requires serious biological, coastal, geological, and climatological research. Could it be that climate change is interfering with the turtles in terms of food sources, water temperatures, and beach sand temperatures? Deeper studies into the plight of the leatherback turtle must be entertained for satisfying answers to the questions asked. And perchance the turtles fail to return in the droves recorded, what effect will this have on the village of Grande Riviere? What other strategy will the community have to implement to augment and/or sustain the economy of Grande Riviere? Nevertheless, there is a ray of hope on the horizon that cocoa production is hopefully making a comeback, but to what extent?

According to Leon Granger, chief executive officer of the CDCTTL, the International Cocoa Organization (ICCO), of which Trinidad and Tobago is a member, has given the
Grande Riviere, Trinidad
country the status that is world recognized as 100% fine/flavour for its cocoa beans. He further added that when we travel to cocoa conferences worldwide we are “worshipped” as the
country that has given the world the *Trinitario* variety, born and bred right here in Trinidad.
Granger said that the cocoa farmers of Trinidad and Tobago have been grouped into 18 clus-
ters. Grande Riviere is one of the clusters. Leroy Peters, one of the winners in the ICA, is
the head of the Grande Riviere cluster. Leroy has future plans to increase cocoa production
through cocoa rehabilitation, but more importantly to generate value-added activities such
as the making of quality chocolate.

An article in the *Trinidad Guardian* newspaper concerning Trinidad and Tobago’s success
at the ICA indicated that the CDCTTL is assiduously working to connect cocoa producers
of Trinidad and Tobago to international markets. Such markets will include chocolatiers,
chocolate makers, and cocoa buyers. By making these connections, cocoa farmers will stand
to benefit from linkages to markets around the world. The judges of the ICA described the
chocolate from Trinidad and Tobago as having some unique and fruity flavours, combined
with a little acidity. Whether the cocoa industry that once prospered in Grande Riviere will
rise again to take the village out of its economic morass is yet to be seen. Grande Riviere
can only hope.

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