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Que Piense la Gente del Ecoturismo?

Yo hablé con la gente de Monteverde y Las Juntas sobre los efectos de ecoturismo. La gente de Monteverde habla sobre ambos los beneficios y los problemas de ecoturismo. Yo aprendí que la gente de Las Juntas saben los beneficios de ecoturismo pero mucho gente no saben los problemas de ecoturismo. Yo aprendí que quien tiene el acceso para un comunidad de ecoturismo cambia los efectos de ese ecoturismo.

I. Introduction

Costa Rica's largest and fastest growing industry is tourism (Whelan, 1991: 56). The tourists who visit Costa Rica commonly come from the United States of America and Europe (McLaren, 1998: 45). Within Costa Rica's tourism industry is a popular and promising subset of tourism known as ecotourism.

Ecotourism is defined as:

Environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural feature—both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations (Stern et al, 2003: 323).

This definition describes, of course, an ideal ecotourism; ecotourism in practice strives to achieve this ideal or face unsustainability resulting from environmental damage (which decreases the desirability of ecotourists to visit such a site) and/or significant negative local social change (Stern et al, 2003: 323; Faulkenberry et al, 2000: 94). Thus, since the social and environmental impacts of tourism increase as the amount of tourists increase, (Smith, 1989: 15), ecotourism is fundamentally at risk of becoming unsustainable if it is overdeveloped. Besides the temptation and risk of overdevelopment (expansion beyond the carrying capacity) (Whelan, 1991: 11), ecotourism emanates benefits and drawbacks for hosting communities, which affect their attainment of the standards of ideal ecotourism.

Using case-studies of ecotourism in communities along the Piedras Blancas and the Corcovado National Parks in Costa Rica, Stern et al's (2003) essay details the benefits and drawbacks of ecotourism.

In ideal circumstances, the benefits of include:

Local economic benefits (e.g. employment, improved infrastructure, increased business for local stores) while also maintaining ecological resource integrity through low-impact, non-consumptive resource use....[Ecotourism] provides a financial return per hectare competitive with current land uses...[and] financially supports protected areas. [Also,] ecotourism serves as a spin-off for other [local] businesses (Stern et al, 2003: 323).

However, Stern et al (2003: 324) found that often ecotourism does not provide widespread economic benefits and little ecotourism revenue reaches local people. Ecotourism in Costa Rica is an unstable income source because it is highly seasonal. Even where ecotourism does not overdevelop, it contributes “to the disintegration of local communities’ social and cultural structures” because it makes a commodity out of culture and brings rapid changes that erode community cohesion (Stern et al, 2003: 324, 325). Additionally, uncontrolled tourism in general can create “psychological frustration and despair of the lower middle class” (Faulkenberry et al, 2000: 94) and local hostility against tourists (Peck and Lepie, 1989: 216).

Weinberg et al’s (2002) case study of ecotourism in Monteverde, Costa Rica reaches many of the same conclusions as Stern et al (2003). In Monteverde the growth of the ecotourism industry created jobs, improved the standard of living, increased the training of skilled employers, and spread of “conservationist ethic” (Stern et al, 2003: 374). Yet, as the tourism industry grew so did property value, urbanization, waste, traffic, noise, septic problems, pollution, drug use, and the loss of traditional customs and values; Stern et al (2003: 374) attribute the majority of these problems to overdevelopment, or “growth without control”. The negative impact of ecotourism in Monteverde is partly the result of increased investment coming from outside the community, and thus weak local autonomy (Weinberg et al, 2001: 375).

As described above, the effects of ecotourism on Monteverde and other communities is well documented. However, what is not as well documented is how members of a community hosting ecotourism, and members of a community without established ecotourism, perceive the benefits and drawbacks of the ecotourism industry. Specifically, it is important to record find out who perceives ecotourism as beneficial, and who perceives it as negative to better sculpt an ecotourism industry that benefits everyone. Thus, when a community or developer is considering establishing an ecotourism industry, it is important to understand how local community perceives ecotourism, to understand if that community of capable of sustainable ecotourism.

II. Methodology

Over a two week period, I interviewed 19 people on their perception of ecotourism’s social effects. Eleven of those interviewed were residents of Las Juntas, a rural town on the road to Monteverde with a few fledgling tourism businesses. Tourists attractions in Las Juntas include nearby ruins of what was once

the largest gold mine in the country, as well as a watershed containing over 130 species of birds (Silvio, personal interview, 5/31/05). Seven interview subjects were employees in Monteverde’s ecotourism industry, of those, four have moved there for permanent employment, two stayed and worked in Monteverde occasionally, and one was born, raised, and is employed in Monteverde. In both Monteverde and Las Juntas I sought a cross-section of the socio-economic diversity existing within each community for comparative purposes. Additionally, I interviewed one tour guide, a resident of San Jose who has worked in the tourism industry for over 20 years across the country.

In my interviews with the residents of Las Juntas, I asked about the interviewee’s employment, and whether he/she wants an increase of tourism in Las Juntas. I asked how he/she thought Las Juntas would change if more tourists came and probed about what possible negative or positive effects tourism might have on Las Juntas. To individuals who were actively promoting tourism in Las Juntas, I asked about how they imagined the ideal tourism industry in Las Juntas and why that was their ideal.

When I interviewed people in Monteverde, I asked about the interviewee’s occupation, and how long he/she has lived in Monteverde. I asked about what changes in Monteverde he/she noticed since moving there, and probed for the positive and negative changes. I also asked about what aspects of tourism in Monteverde he/she would like to see changed, and the obstacles to that change. Additionally, I asked if he/she had ever witnessed locals act hostilely toward tourists. During my interview with the tour guide, I asked about the benefits and drawbacks of tourism in general, and if she had ever witnessed a Costa Rican act hostilely toward tourists.

III. Results

Below is a summary of the interviews with residents of Las Juntas and the county of Abangares. I have provided all names that were available. Age was determined subjectively as either child (preteen and younger), young adult (teen to mid twenties), adult (late twenties to sixties), or elderly (seventy or older). Also listed are the dates of each interview. The benefits and drawbacks listed are the interviewee’s list of expected benefits and drawbacks if tourism were to expand in Las Juntas.

Name	Date	Occupation	Age/Sex	Benefits	Drawbacks
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N/A	5/26	Miner	Adult/M	Commerce	None
N/A	5/26	Miner	Young Adult/M	Commerce, seeing foreigners in town	None
Daurin	5/26	Fruit Stand Owner	Young Adult/M	Commerce, Beautification of Las Juntas	None
Salazar-Rodriguez	5/26	Bar Owner	Adult/M	Commerce, Education (English)	None
José Chan	5/26	General Store Owner	Elderly/M	Commerce, Sharing of Culture, Education-English	None
Joaquin	5/26	Retiree & Volunter forest conserver	Adult/M	Commerce, Conservation, decrease in polluting practices, development, American dollar	Local tourists litter but Foreign tourists do not.
N/A	5/27	Student	Child/M	“No Sé...”	“No Sé...”
Oscar Castillo	5/30	Minister of County MINAE (an environmental agency)	Adult	Commerce, Conservation	Lower Class tourists litter Wealthier tourists do not, Drugs w/ certain types of tourists
Carlos Fonseca	6/1	Local tourist agent	Adult/M	Commerce	If tourism business is kept small, then there are no drawbacks, but drugs, prostitution, other crimes and a change of pace occur with more tourists
Eliette Montoya	5/30	Local tourist agent	Adult/F	Commerce	Same as Carlos’s
Don Silvio	5/31	Hotel Owner	Adult/M	Commerce, Conservation	No drawbacks from Birdwatching tourists, but other tourists bring drugs

Every individual interviewed in Las Juntas, except the young boy, wanted more tourists in Las Juntas and mentioned increased commerce as at least one of the benefits. Three individuals mentioned increased conservation as a benefit, two mentions education in English, two mentioned seeing foreigners in town, and one mentioned beautification of the town. Six of the interviewed individuals listed above named no drawbacks to tourism. The other five individuals mentioned drawbacks, three listed increased crime (including drugs) and two listed litter; however, each individual who mentioned drawbacks also mentioned that those drawbacks are avoidable. The two tourist agents agree that if more than about 200 tourists came each year, Las Juntas would suffer from increased drugs, crime, and pace of life; “With more people, tourism leaves your hand”, said Carlos (personal interview, 6/1/05). The volunteer forest conserver finds tourism increases litter only if the tourists are not foreign, because locals tend to have less appreciation for their environment, as compared to foreign tourists who travel to enjoy Costa Rica’s environment (Joaquin, personal interview, 5/26/05). Similarly, the MINAE minister opines that richer tourists are less likely to litter (Castillo, 5/30/05); this opinion figures with that of the volunteer forest conserver, because foreign tourists can be reasonably expected to be wealthy because they can afford to

travel, usually from the USA or Europe. Both the MINAE minister and the hotel owner agree that many foreign tourists bring a demand for drugs, especially marijuana, and thus tourists not interested in drugs (“Birdwatchers are good people”-Silvio, personal interview, 5/31.05) should be sought and ideally 4,000 a year should come to his reserve.

Below is a chart of summarizing the answers my questions to a few people in Monteverde. Each question listed in the chart below corresponds to a same question asked in my Las Juntas interviews, however, under the sections “Benefits” and “Drawbacks” refer to the interviewee’s perceptions about changes in Monteverde during the time they’ve lived there. Also included below is a section on the number of years each interviewee has lived in Monteverde, and the interviewee’s opinion on whether the road to Monteverde should be paved, an issue of local debate and relevant to Monteverde’s future success.

Two people interviewed in Costa Rica were American nationals, the rest were born in Costa Rica.

Name	Date	Occupation	Age/Sex	Years	Benefits	Drawbacks	Pave?
Joshue	5/28	Clerk	Young Adult/M	Entire life	Commerce, Education (English)	Loss of Customs, drugs, change of pace	N/A
Marcos	5/28	Coffee Shop Employee	Young Adult/M	6 months	Commerce, Conservation	None	No
Lizzy	5/28	Butterfly Garden Employee	Young Adult/F	3 months, from USA	Commerce, conservation	Drugs, crime, overdevelopment	No
N/A	5/28	Coffee Shop Employee	Young Adult/F	18 months, from USA	Commerce, conservation	Drugs, crime, overdevelopment	No
N/A	5/28	Public Tourist Service Employee	Adult/M	12 Years	Commerce	Crime, Loss of customs, change of pace	Yes
N/A	5/29	Monteverde Park Employee	Adult/M	10 Years	Commerce, conservation	Change of pace	Yes
Carlos Mafaro	5/29	Electrician	Adult/M	Occasionally, when working in town	Commerce, conservation, meeting tourists	Larger hotels harm environment	N/A

Similar to the benefits the interviewees in Las Juntas expect with tourism, everyone interviewed in Monteverde mentioned increased commerce as a benefit. Five of seven interviewees said increased conservation was a benefit to ecotourism in Monteverde. One individual mentioned increased education, specifically referencing education in English, and one individual mentioned spending time with tourists as a benefit.

Increased crime, including drugs, was cited by four of seven people as a drawback experienced in Monteverde as tourism increased. A female coffee shop employee (who wished to remain anonymous)

spoke of a bank robbery three months prior that left nine dead (personal interview, 5/28/05). She said that wealth in Monteverde (specifically US denomination) had increased faster than local security, making the banks and homes of Monteverde the perfect targets for criminals. Ironically, another employee in the same coffee shop spoke of the low crime rate, and trusting nature of Monteverde, he said, “In fact, my car windows are down right now, and I’m not concerned” (Marcos, personal interview, 5/28/05). Three interviewees mentioned overdevelopment issues, including septic issues, and uncontrolled growth that harms the environment. Three other individuals mentioned an increased pace of life in Monteverde, two of those also listed loss of traditional customs as a drawback. Three of seven people did not want the road paved, explaining that if the road to Monteverde were paved, more tourists would come, but would visit for less time (leaving less money behind per person) and that poorer people could afford to come (and poorer people are more likely to litter, and spend less money per person. Two interviewed people in Monteverde offered no comment on the road. The public tourist service employee wants the road paved to bring more tourists, and the Monteverde park employee wants the road paved because the current road is destructive to his car. Each interviewee in Monteverde claimed to have never witnessed a local act with hostility toward a tourist.

In my interview with our group’s tour guide Dee, who has worked in tourism for 22 years and as a guide for 12 years, she explained the Costa Rica’s parks have improved over that time because of increased tourism. She also explained that the increased commerce from tourism has significantly helped to people of Costa Rica. Another improvement in Costa Rica that she attributes to tourism is an increased awareness and respect for nature, brought about by the necessity to preserve and education about nature for ecotourism. When asked about the negative effects of tourism on the country, she listed increased drug trade and use, and increased prostitution, especially child prostitution. She believes that it is impossible for a tourism industry to exist without these drawbacks. She claims that within her 22 years of work within Costa Rica’s tourism industry she has never seen a Costa Rica act with hostility toward a tourist, and her explanation for this is that “it is the part of Costa Rican culture to be welcoming” (personal, interview, 5/3/05).

IV. Discussion

The discussion of my results will begin with an examination of patterns found within the collected data and my conclusions about those patterns. After my initial discussion I will self-critically examine my conclusions by focusing on methodological flaws. Firstly, those in Las Juntas with lower socio-economic status (i.e. miners, fruit stand owner) listed no negative effects of tourism, while the Las Juntas residents with higher socio-economic status (i.e. tourism agents, hotel owner, MINAE minister) listed several possible drawbacks to the tourism industry. I conclude that those with lower socio-economic status are less aware of the drawbacks of tourism because they are more concerned with improving their socio-economic status because “Tourism jobs are the best jobs” (Salazar-Rodriguez in personal interview, 5/26/05). Those with higher socio-economic status could list drawbacks, but also mentioned how those drawbacks could be avoided. The greater awareness of drawbacks by those with higher socio-economic status also suggests that they have more communication with tourism communities, and that the increase commerce of tourism is only worthwhile to them if it’s negative effects are strategically mitigated.

Every individual interviewed in Las Juntas (except the boy) mentioned increased commerce as a benefit to tourism, and every individual interviewed in Monteverde mentioned increased commerce as a benefit to the growth of their tourism industry, suggesting that the people of Las Juntas’ perception of increased commerce as a benefit to tourism is a real benefit. Likewise, two people interviewed in Las Juntas listed conservation as a benefit to tourism, and most of the people interviewed in Monteverde listed conservation as an experienced benefit, confirming Stern et al’s (2003: 374) finding that ecotourism has spread a “conservationist ethic” in Monteverde. Education, specifically the acquisition of the English language was cited as an expected benefit by two interviewees in Las Juntas and as an actual benefit by one interviewee in Monteverde. Given my personal experience of communicating in English during my seven interviews, I find that the tourism industry does increase fluency in English, by necessity. One interviewee, the fruit stand owner, perceives an increased beautification of Las Juntas as one effect of tourism, however, no interviewees in Monteverde spoke of increased beautification, thus increased beautification is not an actual effect of tourism. Likewise, the “sharing of culture”, listed by the general store owner (José Chan, personal interview, 5/26/05) as an expected benefit, is reversed according to the clerk interviewed in Monteverde; “it is like our culture is being exploited, the children imitate American trends and see our traditions only as something to be sold to tourists” (Joshue, personal interview,

5/28/05). Joshue, a young adult born in Monteverde, has seen traditions and customs weakened, rather than strengthened by increased tourism, and he clearly defined this as a drawback when he expressed his “concern for the next generation”. In summation, increased commerce, conservation and education in English are reported as expected benefits in Las Juntas and actual benefits in Monteverde whereas increased beautification and sharing of culture are only expected benefits in Las Juntas, and do not exist in Monteverde.

While six of eleven people interviewed in Las Juntas expect no drawbacks to tourism, the five that did listed drugs, crime, change of pace, and litter. No one in Monteverde complained of increased litter, in fact, Marcos, a coffee shop employee explained that if the Monteverde residents see a tourist litter, they lecture him and he becomes “the hated tourist” (personal interview, 5/28/05). The lack of littering by tourists in Monteverde corresponds with Joaquin and Castillo’s claim that lower class/local tourists litter more, because Monteverde is only accessible by wealthy tourists (this notion will be further elaborated below in the discussion of the road to Monteverde). As discussed earlier, I received contradictory comments about the crime rate in Monteverde but three out of seven interviewed in Monteverde did list increased crime as a drawback, suggesting that crime is an actual drawback. Three interviewees in Las Juntas mentioned increased use and sale of drugs, especially marijuana as an avoidable drawback to tourism, and each specifically cited Monteverde as an example. Three interviewees in Monteverde spoke of increased drug use and sales as a growing drawback because many of the tourists visiting Monteverde expect marijuana to be available. Joshue elaborated on this drawback by explaining that the children in Monteverde are increasingly using marijuana because they see Americans using it and emulate all American behavior they witness (Joshue, personal interview, 5/28/05). Ironically, though the increased use of marijuana when mentioned as a drawback by three of seven interviewees in Monteverde, local tourism businesses indirectly promote and profit from the marijuana trade by selling paraphernalia (the Monteverde park gift shop offers an assortment of bongs and bowls, many featuring illustrations of marijuana leaves). Thus while increased marijuana use and sale in Monteverde is perceived as a drawback by some, others in the town, including well established and pivotal tourism sites (i.e. the Monteverde private reserve) enable and profit from the marijuana trade. Three interviewees in Monteverde claimed that the pace of life there has gotten much faster since tourism came; what was once a small slow town has been forced to adapt to temporal demands of tourists, and this change is perceived

as a drawback. This was a drawback noted by only two interviewees in Las Juntas, the couple of tourist agents. All of the expected drawbacks spoken of in Las Juntas were grounded in actual drawbacks occurring in Monteverde; however there were a few drawbacks noted by interviewees in Monteverde, namely loss of traditions (as discussed above) and overdevelopment, which were not mentioned during any of my interviews in Las Juntas. Three interviewees in Monteverde confirmed the findings of Stern et al (2003: 374) by speaking of septic problems, water issues, and environmental damage caused by uncontrolled building, a consequences of Monteverde's tourism industry expanding at an unsustainable rate. I submit that while the middle and upper class residents of the Las Juntas area that I interviewed were aware of some drawbacks to tourism, they did not speak of overdevelopment or loss of tradition because issues likely receive less publicity than drugs and crime rates.

In Las Juntas I found two distinct schools-of-thought on how to mitigate the negative consequences of tourism in Monteverde among those Las Juntas residents aware of those drawbacks (namely, drugs, crime and change of pace). The two tourism agents, Carlos Fonseca and Eliette Montoya said that those problems could only be avoided if tourism is kept small-scale, around 200 people a year. Castillo and Silvio claimed ecotourism can exist with an unlimited number of tourists and without drawbacks provided that the proper tourists are targeted (e.g. non-drug users and respectful of the environment; "most people want to help...its not the number of people it's the type," (Oscar Castillo, personal interview, 5/30/05). I find that the reason for this division in mitigation strategy lies within the occupation of the interviewees. Don Silvio has invested millions of dollars into his hotel outside of Las Juntas, and envisions a future in which 4,000 people a year will visit it and its adjoining reserve. Because his hotel is located outside Las Juntas, it is supposable that it will have less cultural impact on Las Juntas, provided that the tourists bring no demand from drugs, while still expanding local commerce. Oscar Castillo, the county minister of MINAE, claims that ecotourism benefits the environment because it funds conservation, thus his occupation is more concerned with the ecological benefits of ecotourism, provided that drug use is kept minimal. The tour agents, however, are long-time residents of Las Juntas, and do not want to see any change save increased commerce.

The underlying theme in both of the above schools-of-thought is control of access. The issue is either which or how many tourists should be come. Similarly, in Monteverde, when I asked what locals wanted changed the only issue mentioned was whether or not the road to Monteverde should be paved.

Currently, the unpaved road is so rocky, not to mention curvaceous, that the 30 km trip from Las Juntas to Monteverde takes 2 hours. The condition of this road acts as a barrier, keeping poorer travelers out, and keeping those who come for at least the night (Marcos, personal interview, 5/28/05). Because “you need an expensive car just to get here” (Marcos, personal interview, 5/28/05) poorer tourists, who have less respect for the environment (according to Marcos, Castillo and Joaquin) are unable to venture to Monteverde. Likewise, because the drive to Monteverde takes so much time, the tourists who come must spend the night, and thus more money. These two issues were cited by three of the interviewed people in Monteverde who opposed paving the road. One individual, a public tourist service employee, explained that he wanted the road paved to increase tourism. Another interviewee, a Monteverde park employee, expressed a more individualistic opinion, “with the road the condition that it is now, I have to take my car to the mechanic, like, everyday” (Monteverde park employee, personal interview, 5/29/05). Interestingly, the three interviewees opposing the paving of the road were young adults, whereas the two in favor were adults. More research must be done to find any significance in this pattern.

Finally, no interviewees reported ever witnessing a local act of hostility toward a tourist. Herein lies what I perceive as one significant methodological flaw in my study. As an American tourist asking Costa Ricans about hostility toward tourists, in a tourist community, I was questioning the integrity of the welcome that community projects to tourists, and thus the very livelihood (“What is he, the tourist-liking police” Joshue said to a translator in Spanish during our English interview, 5/28/05). While it seems unlikely to me that no interviewees had ever seen an local act with hostility toward a tourist, one possible explanation for the lack of resentment lies within a short-lived tourism propaganda campaign from the late 1980’s. “Remember to smile and wave to the tourists” said commercials I saw on TV, and so me and my friends always smiled and waved to the tourists”, explained Joshue (personal interview, 5/28/05). Dee later elaborated that that campaign only lasted a few years because “after that, it was no longer necessary [to keep locals welcoming tourists]” (Dee, personal interview, 6/3/05). While the lasting effect of that tourism propaganda is unquantifiable, the effect of me, as a foreign tourist, asking questions about tourism certainly influenced my interviewees in unavoidable ways. For example, I cannot separate the weight of tourism’s expected benefits in Las Juntas, from the desire not to offend me, when asking people in Las Juntas if they want more tourists in their community. Furthermore, in my sampling process, I never spoke to any unemployed people in Las Juntas, or any people outside the tourism industry in Monteverde; also I

unintentionally overrepresented men in my sampling. Thus, my conclusions about who expects benefits and/or drawbacks from tourism, and what are the actual benefits and drawbacks of tourism as perceived by residents in an ecotourism community, and how drawback can be strategically mitigated are only tentative and exist only for exploratory purposes. My conclusions make for an interesting starting point for future research, which ought to be done with more control of sampling and researcher bias.

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