

Forest-based ecotourism in Costa Rica as a driver for positive social and environmental development

A. Bien

Ecotourism can be a major force in promoting forest conservation.



The success of ecotourism in Costa Rica is due in part to the country's biological diversity and range of habitats

Ecotourism has led the way in the growth of Costa Rican tourism since the 1980s, significantly changing the country's economy and outlook for development. The term "ecotourism" refers to responsible tourism in which tourists are in direct personal contact with nature and the local culture, learn about them and have a net positive environmental and social impact (see Box). Ecotourism can be practised in any type of natural environment, but in Costa Rica much of it depends on and benefits from the country's various types of forest, and can thus be considered "forest ecotourism".

Costa Rica's tourist industry came into existence primarily with the development of ecotourism. Subsequently, it has diversified into many categories such as adventure tourism, rural community tourism, health tourism and conventional sun-and-sand tourism. These activities tend to boost one another, given that a foreign tourist normally spends ten days in the country and practises activities associated with three to five of the

various types of tourism. The country's tourist industry is now mature and diversified, receiving 2 million visitors each year (as compared with the country's 4.5 million inhabitants) and encompassing a whole range of sectors and activities, with a wide distribution of income (ICT, 2009a, 2009b). Tourism provides 22 to 25 percent of the country's foreign currency and 7 percent of its gross domestic product (Banco Central de Costa Rica, 2008, 2010). It is estimated that up to 53 percent of income from tourism may be attributable to ecotourism and related activities (ICT, 2009a).

The success of ecotourism in Costa Rica depends in part on certain natural attributes and cultural characteristics of the country, such as its biological diversity and range of habitats, combined with more than 100 years of sci-

Definition of ecotourism

Costa Rica's National Chamber of Ecotourism (CANAECO, n.d.) defines ecotourism as follows:

Ecotourism is a specialized section of responsible tourism, which promotes and supports nature conservation and cultural values of destinations, it interprets them for the customer, supports the socio-economic improvement of the local communities, and seeks to sensitize and satisfy customers, in an ethical manner. It maintains its activities with a design and a scale appropriate to the surroundings, and offers to its customers a direct and personal contact with nature and the local culture.

Amos Bien is the founder and President of Rara Avis Rainforest Lodge and Reserve, San José, Costa Rica.

entific research, a substantial national education system, a strong network of protected areas and a body of biologists and naturalists with the interest and ability to communicate their knowledge to other people (Bien, 2002). Moreover, Costa Rica, unlike its neighbours, does not have a history of war and violence. Although the country has less biodiversity, a narrower range of habitats and far fewer cultural resources than almost all of its neighbouring Latin American countries, creative, innovative entrepreneurial approaches have combined with historical factors to help Costa Rica situate itself as one of the world's prime ecotourism destinations (Programa Estado de la Nación, 2007).

Approximately 14 percent of the country's area is in State-owned protected areas, mostly national parks and biological reserves. At least another 12 percent is privately owned land in other categories of government-declared protected areas in which private ownership is

tolerated or encouraged (forest reserves, wildlife refuges, protected zones and private nature reserves) (SINAC, 2010; SIREFOR, 2010; Jiménez, 2003). Perhaps 4 percent is privately owned forest land outside official protected areas. Nearly all overnight tourism is on private land, as national parks and biological reserves do not generally provide lodging.

BIRTH OF COSTA RICAN ECOTOURISM

The transformation of Costa Rica into an ecotourism destination owes much to study-abroad programmes in biology and natural sciences which took foreign students to forested areas. Starting in the 1960s and 1970s, hundreds of biology students from the United States of America went to Costa Rica to study tropical ecology with the Organization for Tropical Studies (OTS) at the La Selva Biological Station and the Tropical Science Center's Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve. The students from these and similar programmes encouraged others to learn about the country's beauty, peacefulness and environmental attributes; they and their friends

and families became the main clientele for nature-based tourism in the 1980s (Laarman, 1986). In the early 1980s, some biologists trained by OTS, both Costa Rican and foreign, recognized the market potential and realized that nature tourism could be an important tool for forest conservation and for reducing the rural poverty that often led to deforestation. OTS graduates trained the first guides for the Monteverde reserve and many nature tour operators. Other biologists set up ecolodges and private reserves such as Rara Avis, founded in 1983.

The international demand for nature-based tourism, which had begun with OTS students and researchers, was strengthened by articles in the mainstream press by journalists covering the Central American wars who were stationed in neutral Costa Rica throughout the 1980s. The Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Costa Rican President Oscar Arias in 1987 reinforced the image of a peaceful country that has had no military since 1948.

Some tour operators and hoteliers who had established businesses earlier in other market segments, such as the river rafting specialists Costa Rica Expeditions, moved towards accommodating the growing demand for nature-based tourism. In the late 1980s, Costa Rican entrepreneurs such as the Chacón family, who had set up fishing and recreation camps in the 1960s for Costa Ricans, began to receive international tourists interested in the country's unusual habitats and natural history. They realized that with the help of biologists they could interpret the environment and attract more international tourism.

TOURISM IN SUPPORT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Although the first nature tourists to Costa Rica visited existing sites established for other purposes, the initial focus of ecotourism entrepreneurs in Costa Rica was on demonstrating that the sustainable use of forests for tourism would generate more income than clearing them

Guiding by trained biologists who can interpret the environment attracts tourists and helps make nature tourism an important tool for forest conservation



for livestock rearing and agriculture. Before the boom in tourism, the price of forest land was much lower than that of farmland, whereas today, in ecotourism zones such as Sarapiquí, Monteverde, La Fortuna and the Osa Peninsula, land with old-growth forest cover and tourism potential is worth more than deforested land. Moreover, the involvement of local communities in ecotourism activities has been influential in changing their attitudes towards forests. Rural inhabitants now often see forests as potential wealth rather than impediments to development. Consequently, many of these people are now active conservationists.

Twenty years ago, “improving” a property meant clearing it of forest. Traditionally, and up to 1995, the law awarded the holders of uncultivated land the right to register their ownership after ten years of continuous, unchallenged possession, as long as “improvements” could be demonstrated. Since 1995, however, a new forestry law requires owners to demonstrate that they have protected all forested land on the property. The forestry law also recognizes ecotourism as an activity to be encouraged on privately owned forested land. Both modifications to the law were directly promoted by ecotourism entrepreneurs and the owners of private nature reserves.

These groups formed two associations to exercise political pressure. The first, the Costa Rican Network of Private Nature Reserves (Red Costarricense de Reservas Naturales Privadas), has had a major influence on the country’s forest policies since 1995, especially with regard to payment for ecosystem services and the importance of avoided deforestation to mitigate climate change. It acts as a counterweight to the timber sector’s influence on policy; both represent the private forest sector, but from diametrically opposed positions. Today the forest conservation sector, concerned with private and ecotourism reserves, probably has more economic weight in Costa Rica than the timber sector.

The second association, the National Chamber of Ecotourism (Cámara Nacional de Ecoturismo, CANAECO) was founded in 2003, with a political sphere of influence focused more on the tourism sector and the Costa Rican Tourism Board (Instituto Costarricense de Turismo, ICT). CANAECO works to maintain Costa Rica’s position as a prime ecotourism destination and to ensure that conventional tourism development is based on the principles of sustainability – and also to ensure that the expansion of all-inclusive mass tourism and the growth of housing developments disguised as tourism do not threaten the country’s reputation and role as a destination for nature-based tourism. To enhance the country’s image and improve environmental performance, CANAECO has launched a programme in association with the National Fund for Forestry Financing (Fondo de Financiamiento Forestal, FONAFIFO) to reduce carbon emissions from the country’s tourist industry.

Nearly all investment in private nature reserves and ecolodges is from the private sector. While the government is highly supportive of these efforts in principle and has facilitated the promotion of certified businesses and access to international fora, there is no mechanism for direct government support except through payment for environmental services of forests supporting conservation in private reserves. These payments can help improve the finances of an ecotourism operation, but they are far from the sort of capital required for construction and start-up costs.

ENGAGING LOCAL PEOPLE IN TOURISM AND CONSERVATION

While ecotourism matured according to its own business model, farming and indigenous communities became interested in ecotourism as an alternative or a supplement to their often marginal sources of income. They formed organizations, cooperatives and associations

to promote rural community tourism, including ecotourism, in local forests. The activities of these groups succeeded in positioning community-based rural tourism as the fourth segment of the priority tourism market for the country, achieving a market penetration of 5 percent in 2009 (ICT, 2009a). For example, the Central American Association for Economy, Health and Environment (ACEPESA), the National Network of Ecotourism Cooperatives (COOPRENA) and the Costa Rican Association of Community-Based Rural Tourism (ACTUAR) publish a guide to rural community tourism, organize an annual rural community tourism fair and promote the groups’ activities for the domestic tourism market and foreign tour operators.

Effective training and cooperative marketing by these organizations have been indispensable in helping many rural families, cooperatives and communities achieve the necessary quality of service and economies of scale to enter the tourism market without abandoning their traditional agricultural or fishing activities or accruing excessive debt. In the most successful instances, these initiatives have helped to improve the communities’ income and their appreciation, understanding and conservation of natural resources, especially those associated with forests. An unexpected positive effect of the growth of rural tourism and ecotourism in Costa Rica has been in motivating young people to continue their formal education and to return to their home towns to work in tourism or conservation, rather than migrating to the capital (Programa Estado de la Nación, 2007).

At the root of ecotourism’s rise to economic importance is the fact that Costa Rica now has hundreds of private nature reserves, in many of which tourism helps finance conservation (Aldermn, 1990; Langholz, 1996; Langholz, Lassoie and Schelhas, 2000). Such conservation areas, in addition to the State-owned protected



Private nature reserves help conserve habitats (partly through financing from tourism), improving protection of wildlife: a tourist encounters a tapir at Rara Avis Rainforest Lodge and Reserve, Costa Rica

areas, constitute important biological corridors that help maintain the existence and distribution of major populations of plant and animal wildlife. With greater conservation of habitats, there is greater protection of forest wildlife. Where rural inhabitants previously saw wild animals only as potential hunting prey, they now appreciate them for their intrinsic value, even beyond the economic value assigned by tourism – as can be seen in the rehabilitation of the population of macaws in the Puerto Jimenez community on the Osa Peninsula (Guittar, Dear and Vaughan, 2009) and of quetzals in the Cerro de la Muerte area (Sugaya, 2006).

CONCLUSIONS

Some of the lessons learned in almost 30 years of ecotourism in Costa Rica can be applied to other destinations. The main point is that ecotourism is a commercial activity, so it must be profitable. If it is not profitable, all its social, environmental and economic impacts will be negative, whereas a profitable business can balance the inevitable negative impacts with positive ones.

All tourism consumes water, electri-

city, fossil fuels and other resources, as well as producing solid waste, sewage and greenhouse gas emissions. Poorly implemented tourism can also lead to increases in prostitution, drug use and slum creation, while damaging cultural and natural resources. However when properly implemented, tourism can minimize the inevitable consumption of resources and waste, while creating genuine positive impacts on cultural heritage (such as reinforcing living cultures or conserving historical and archaeological patrimony) and enhancing the conservation of biodiversity and natural protected areas. These positive impacts can be sustained in time and allocated sufficient economic resources only if the tourism activity is also sustainable as a successful and profitable business, irrespective of size.

Organizations and governments that promote ecotourism and community tourism can apply this lesson by providing the business tools and capacity building necessary for success – in areas such as bookkeeping, reservation management, hygiene and client services. Another lesson is that training must always be recognized as an investment. In particular, the training required to produce excellent guides is a key to successful ecotourism. Finally, the security of the country can be an important contributing factor.

Ecotourism is not a panacea for all the challenges of development and poverty alleviation. Some individuals and entire communities have become indebted and impoverished when a government or organization has encouraged them to abandon their traditional activities in favour of tourism. Many business and marketing skills are needed to achieve success; developing these skills takes time and needs working capital while the market becomes established and the ancillary services required for tourism are developed. Patience and realistic expectations are required.

Furthermore, the ecotourism market is dynamic and requires ongoing development of the product, which in turn requires creativity and innovation. Joint marketing of medium- and small-scale initiatives can help to meet the challenges of increased competition from other countries, high costs and the demand for sophistication. The need for cooperation in marketing and for capacity building for businesses and communities leads to the conclusion that although competition may come from outside the country, internal competitiveness needs to be boosted, through perseverance, ethical practices and authentic products (Báez, 2003).

Costa Rica's experience has shown that ecotourism can be a major force in promoting natural resource conservation and respect for local communities. It can make a substantial contribution to reducing rural poverty and improving the rural population's level of formal education and its attitudes to natural resource conservation. However, like any complex economic activity, it requires capital, knowledge and patience. ♦



Bibliography

- Alderman, C.L.** 1990. *A study of the role of privately owned lands used for nature tourism, education and conservation*. Washington, DC, USA, Conservation International.
- Bález, A.** 2003. Costa Rica as a sustainable tourism destination. Presented at Best Education Think Tank III. Alajuela, Costa Rica, 8–11 July.
- Banco Central de Costa Rica.** 2008. *Inversión extranjera directa en Costa Rica 2007–2008 preliminar*. San José, Costa Rica. Available at: www.bccr.fi.cr
- Banco Central de Costa Rica.** 2010. *Informe mensual de coyuntura económica*. March. Available at: indicadoreseconomicos.bccr.fi.cr/indicadoreseconomicos
- Bien, A.** 2002. Environmental certification for tourism in Central America: CST and other programs. In M. Honey, ed. *Setting standards: the greening of the tourist industry*. New York, USA, Island Press.
- CANAECO.** n.d. *What is ecotourism?* Santo Domingo de Heredia, Costa Rica, Cámara Nacional de Ecoturismo. Available at: www.canaeco.org/english/index.php?page=ecoturismo
- Guittar, J.L., Dear, F. & Vaughan, C.** 2009. Scarlet macaw (*Ara macao*, Psittaciformes: Psittacidae) nest characteristics in the Osa Peninsula Conservation Area (ACOSA), Costa Rica. *International Journal of Tropical Biology and Conservation*, 57(1–2): 387–393. Available at: www.ots.ac.cr/tropiweb/intpages/vols/vol57-1-2.html
- ICT.** 2009a. *Encuesta aérea de no residentes, Aeropuerto Internacional Juan Santamaría*. San José, Costa Rica, Instituto Costarricense de Turismo.
- ICT.** 2009b. *Anuario Estadístico de Turismo*. San José, Costa Rica.
- Jiménez F., M.L.** 2003. *Estado de la diversidad biológica de los árboles y bosques en Costa Rica*. Forest Genetic Resources Working Paper 46. Rome, FAO. Available at: www.fao.org/docrep/007/j0601s/j0601s00.htm
- Laarman, J.G.** 1986. *Nature-oriented tourism in Costa Rica and Ecuador: diagnosis of research needs and project opportunities*. Raleigh, North Carolina, USA, North Carolina State University.
- Langholz, J.** 1996. Economics, objectives, and success of private nature reserves in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. *Conservation Biology*, 10(1): 271–280.
- Langholz, J., Lassoie, J. & Schelhas, J.** 2000. Incentives for biological conservation: Costa Rica's private wildlife refuge program. *Conservation Biology*, 14(6): 1735–1743.
- Programa Estado de la Nación.** 2007. Diversidad de destinos y desafíos del turismo en Costa Rica: los casos de Tamarindo y La Fortuna. In *Estado de la Nación 2007*, pp. 193–225. San José, Costa Rica. Available at www.estadonacion.or.cr/index.php/biblioteca-virtual/costa-rica/estado-de-la-nacion/aspectos-economicos/aportes-especiales/informe-xiii
- SINAC.** 2010. Sistema Nacional de Áreas Protegidas. Número y tamaño de ASPs terrestres y marinas, legalmente declaradas. San José, Costa Rica, Sistema Nacional de Áreas de Conservación. Available at: www.sinac.go.cr/planificacionasp.php
- SIREFOR.** 2010. Cobertura forestal de Costa Rica. San José, Costa Rica, Sistema de Información de Recursos Forestales. Available at: www.sirefor.go.cr/coberturaforestal.html
- Sugaya, S.** 2006. The link between cloud forest conservation and community benefit: the roles of resplendent quetzal (*Pharomachrus mocinno*) and aguacatillo (*Persea caerulea*). Bachelor's thesis, Oregon State University, Corvallis, Oregon, USA. Available at: ir.library.oregonstate.edu/jspui/bitstream/1957/3118/1/sugaya06.pdf ♦