

*Reading from, The Pros and Cons of Ecotourism in Costa Rica by Julie Dasenbrock at <http://www.american.edu/TED/costa-rica-tourism.htm>

Ecotourism and the Environment – Environmental Benefits

While the success of any ecotourism venture relies on the condition of a nation's ecosystem, some environmentalists believe that the economic benefits ecotourism are not sufficient motivation for true environmental conservation. For instance, while Eva Garen believes that the ideals behind ecotourism are laudable, she claims in the end ecotourism does more harm than good. (Garen, 2000, 222). Deborah McLauren offers a more radical critique of ecotourism, arguing that ecotravel is an oxymoron since travel, at its base, is detrimental to the environment. She cites the fossil fuels used and pollution that jet airplanes emit as evidence that international travel and environmental protection are mutually exclusive by their very nature. (McLauren, 1998, 97-98). However, despite its inadequacies, ecotourism offers one of the most environmentally friendly travel opportunities available, and perhaps should not be discarded so quickly. Claims that air travel accelerates global warming will not stop a traveler's desire to explore the world, and a trip to a rain forest in Costa Rica is overall much more environmentally sound than a week stay at a 4,000 room beach resort in Cancun. Thus, while it is important to identify the environmentally harmful aspects of ecotourism development, the industry should not be disregarded outright as a valid means of environmental protection.

Environmental Benefits

The environmental benefits of ecotourism development in Costa Rica have been far reaching. Since 1963 when the first environmental protection reserve was created, Costa Rica's conservation initiatives have expanded to include 70 protected areas or national parks covering 21% of the nation's territory, as well as the creation of Costa Rica's National Park Service in 1970. (Weaver, 1998, 87). It can be deduced that this incredible increase in the area marked for conservation would not have been possible without the economic incentives of ecotourism. As locals were relocated and logging industries shut down, Costa Ricans were able to turn to the tourism industry for employment. This would not have been possible if Costa Rica had adhered to former protectionist measures that tended to wall off protected areas from the public. (Garen, 2000, 223). Besides offering an economic incentive for conservation, ecotourism has benefited Costa Rica's environment in several other ways, detailed below.

- **Alternative to Environmentally Damaging Industries** - Without the market demand and political support for environmental protectionism, currently protected areas may have fallen to the demands of farming, logging, or mining industries long ago. (Egan, 2001). Besides the revenue brought in by tourism, protected nature areas also generate income through environmentally sound pharmaceutical research and the sustainable harvest of food products. (Weaver, 1998, 25). For instance, the previously mentioned EARTH research institution has been researching the production of possible banana byproducts such as banana paper made from the generally discarded banana stalk. Also, in 1991 the U.S.-based pharmaceutical firm Merck & Co made a deal with Costa Rica's National Biodiversity Institute (INBio) to carry out pharmaceutical research and development in Costa Rica's rainforests. The most interesting thing about this alliance is that INBio is primarily concerned with conservation and their contract with Merck requires that 50% of any royalties from the discovery of new

medicines go to Costa Rica's National Park Fund. (Reid, <http://students.washington.edu/radin/costa.htm>, 2001).

- **Encourages Individual Conservation Efforts** - One of the main aspects of ecotourism that differentiates it from a day at the beach is that it educates as well as entertains travelers. By experiencing first hand the beauty of the Monteverde Cloud Forest or the majesty of a Red Macaw, tourists may return home wanting to do more to help protect the environment. Informed tour guides and educational pamphlets can incite tourists to become environmentalists, thereby promoting conservation efforts worldwide. (Weaver, 1998, 24).
- **Encourages Small Scale Infrastructure Construction** - One of the main benefits of ecotourism is that it brings in foreign exchange without the polluting factories and exploitative manufacturing companies that are spreading throughout the Third World. Instead, the infrastructure demands of an ecotourism industry primarily include the construction of small scale hotels and transportation systems. By and large, Costa Rica has been careful to encourage small-scale development over the construction of high-rise luxury hotels, thereby maintaining a healthy balance between expanding its tourism industry and protecting its natural resources. (Egan, 2001). For instance, some architects, such as D.L. Andersen, have begun to specialize in the type of environmentally sensitive construction of small lodges ideal for ecotourism. One of Andersen's designs is the Lapa Rios Resort located on Costa Rica's Pacific coast. To ensure that the resort has as little negative impact as possible on the surrounding environs, Andersen took into account waste management and utilities, as well as the actual building design. Construction of the Lapa Rios Resort necessitated the removal of only one tree, and the completed resort consists of only a main lodge and 14 private bungalows. (Fennell, 1999, 235).