

*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 Cost

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 Costs

While the environmental benefits of ecotourism are rather clear cut, the costs are much more subtle and sometimes difficult to detect. For that reason governments sponsoring ecotourism development must be vigilant in the protection of their national parks and meticulous in safeguarding against corruption. By and large Costa Rica has been responsible in the development of ecotourism, but there is room for improvement. (Lizano, 1997).

- **Visitor Overcapacity** - The number of tourists visiting Costa Rica has increased by at least 6% annually for the past several years. (State Department, 2001). While those invested in the ecotourism sector may celebrate such rapid growth, environmentalists worry that the nation's delicate ecosystem may not be able to withstand an unlimited flow of tourists. (Hicks, 2001). For instance, one of Costa Rica's most popular parks, Manuel Antonio, takes in an average of 1,000 visitors a day during the high season. The unregulated flow of tourists through the park has taken a toll on its plant and animal life, and as the wildlife has grown accustomed to humans local monkeys have been turned into garbage feeders. (Weaver, 1998, 95). Another problem is that, in their quest for the exotic, travelers are often attracted to the rarest animals and most vulnerable plant life. It is difficult for park managers to turn paying visitors away or refuse access to the most delicate parts of the forest when the demand is there and the profit-potential great. (Weaver, 1998, 25). For this reason, these tough decisions should be in the hands of Costa Rica's National Park Service Agency, and similar institutions in other countries, that are better able to look past short-term profit gain to what is best for their country in the long run.
- **Greenwashing** - Greenwashing refers to the marketing scheme of attaching a "green" label to travel services that do not technically classify as ecotourism. (Egan, 2001). As ecotourism has gotten more popular, greenwashing of luxury

hotels and tourist centers has become a greater problem that could tarnish Costa Rica's pristine environmental reputation. To protect against these pitfalls of ecotourism Costa Rica began the Certification of Sustainable Tourism program that aims at identifying the most environmentally friendly parks and resorts. However, some argue that lenient certification regulations have led to a sort of legitimized greenwashing of undeserving businesses in Costa Rica. For instance, large hotels can be certified with very little effort and without actively promoting conservation efforts. Simply by using biodegradable cleaning products, being careful of waste management, recycling, and avoiding pesticide use, a 500-room hotel can receive a similar rating to a small jungle lodge. (Lizano, 2001).

- **Profit over Protection** - Reporter Mark Dapin's experiences touring the natural wonders of Costa Rica reveal that where there are responsible tour companies, there also exist careless profit-seeking guides that can greatly undermine the conservation efforts necessary to sustainable ecotourism. Dapin's reckless tour guide, Juan, led his party on an exciting, yet environmentally damaging climb up the Arenal Volcano. Arenal is one of the most active volcanoes in Central America and has been erupting constantly for over 30 years. Scores of tourists come to watch the mountain spurt out fire and lava every clear evening. Most visitors view the Volcano from a distance, and are careful not to harm the surrounding plant and wildlife protected in parks and conservation areas. However, Dapin's "guide" broke into a reptile park - where he harassed a large tortoise by pushing its head into its shell and throwing rocks at it, bothered a collection of caged caymans (an alligator type species), and broke into a locked frog house containing poison-arrow frogs. (Dapin, London Times, April 21, 2001).

While a humorous anecdote, the reporter's story reveals a dangerous lack of enforcement of Costa Rica's protected areas, as well as the complete disrespect some of those involved in the ecotourism industry have for the animal and plant life from which they make their living. Although Juan represents only one reckless tour guide among many who are responsible in their work, his behavior supports the theory that ecotourism eventually brings about a commodization of a nation's wildlife. Instead of seeing an endangered turtle species as something to be protected, those working in the ecotourism market begin to see the animal only in terms of dollar signs. (Weaver, 1998,25). This phenomena represents a perversion of the principles of ecotourism that place protectionism before profits. The chief danger in the commodization of an eco-system is the emergence of Juan's who are willing to exploit their nation's natural treasures for economic gain. While there is no quantitative manner of showing that this phenomenon has taken place in Costa Rica, it is undoubtedly a threat.

- **Inadequate Enforcement** - Limited finances, inadequate local expertise, and corruption can all lead to lax enforcement of conservation efforts. (Weaver, 1998, 62). Often, developing nations do not have the resources to train the personnel necessary to efficiently regulate and protect a national park or wildlife preserve. For example, at Costa Rica's Tortuguero National Park, the Western Hemisphere's most important nesting ground for the endangered green turtle, is left to the protection of just 10 full-time employees. Poachers are a problem in this area and

the park has to recruit volunteers to help guard the beach during the nesting season. Another obstacle facing conservation efforts in Costa Rica is the fact that 44% of the 3.2 million acres marked for protection remain in the hands of their previous residents and owners. Logging in these areas is often hard to detect or prevent leading some to argue that Costa Rica's natural resources are protected only on paper. (Dulude, 2000).

- **Reliance on International Donors** - Also undercutting conservation efforts is Costa Rica's growing reliance on international donors. In 1992, for example, only 23% of Costa Rica's protected-area budget was government supplied. While international bodies are important in covering budget shortfalls, a dependence on foreign lenders and donors who may not understand Costa Rica's ecosystem can destabilize the government's control of its conservation efforts and lead to a lack of coordination in carrying out environmental policy. (Weaver, 1998, 96-97
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Ecotourism may be accelerating even faster than the tourism industry as a whole, leaving some environmentalists wondering if ecotourism development is being done carefully enough. (Fennell, 1999, 152). Eva Garen argues that most programs are created by elites and foreigners who pay more attention to profits than conservation and are not adequately analyzing an area's ecosystem before going ahead with development. (Garen, 2000, 228). However, before condemning a nation's entire ecotourism industry, it is important to distinguish between the problems that apply to actual ecotourism projects and the problems of travel service providers that deceive the public by mistakenly identifying themselves as ecotourism. (Weaver, 1998, 22). For instance, the problems facing Costa Rica's ecotourism industry stem chiefly from the latter, which largely can be eradicated by a stricter certification program. Therefore, discounting the environmental benefits of Costa Rica's ecotourism industry would be a mistake since the nation's conservation policies are far better than they would be with any other industry development.