

*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 in Costa Rica

The Issue

Ecotourism is currently the fastest growing sector of the world's largest service industry, tourism. While environmentalists are weighing the pros and cons of ecotourism, many developing nations are looking to cash in on the growing demand for this new trend in travel. The poor nations of Central America, with its cloud forests, active volcanoes, and wide variety of flora and fauna, appear ideally situated to take advantage of the growing demand for ecotourism with Costa Rica leading the pack. Although Costa Rica has been lauded for its development of a lucrative, yet environmentally friendly, ecotourism industry, economists and environmentalists alike debate whether or not an economy centered around tourism can be sustained. The idea behind ecotourism is to preserve a nation's natural resources while profiting from them. However, in this quest for profits, some nations, including Costa Rica, have allowed their ecotourism industry to become ecologically damaging. By allowing unlimited numbers of tourists into protected areas and encouraging the construction of high-rise hotels and resorts over small-scale tourism development, ecotourism industries, such as Costa Rica's, could be on the path to self-destruction.

Introduction

Although ecotravel appears to be a flawless way to preserve our world's most precious resources while bringing jobs to the developing world, many still debate the long-term sustainability of ecotourism. These debates over the environmental, economic, and cultural benefits and drawbacks of ecotourism take center stage in Costa Rica, one of the world's leading ecotourism providers. In recent years Costa Rica has developed one of the world's most successful ecotourism industries and has been praised for its attention to conservation. However, although the small Central American nation began its ecotourism industry with small scale development and attention to conservation, some environmentalists worry that as profits have grown, environmental protection has become a secondary consideration. Therefore, while Costa Rica's tourism industry undoubtedly has been economically lucrative, its continued benefits to the environment are questionable. In this manner, a look at the successes and failures of Costa Rica's ecotourism industry can lend insight into similar struggles taking place throughout the Third World, as nations attempt to produce rapid economic growth without sacrificing their natural resources and cultures.

What is Ecotourism?

Although there are several competing definitions of ecotourism, a commonly accepted explanation is it is "**purposeful travel to natural areas to understand the culture and natural history of the environment; taking care not to alter the integrity of the ecosystem; producing economic opportunities that make the conservation of natural resources beneficial to local people.**" (Garen, 2000, 221). Under this definition, ecotravel could range from a day-trip to a wildlife preserve to a week camping in a

rainforest. (McLauren, 1998, 97). Because ecotravel can encompass such a wide variety of activities, the potential for corruption and deception in the form of the "Greenwashing" of environmentally damaging travel services, is considerable. As environmentalist Deborah McLauren describes it; at its best, ecotourism can help protect a delicate ecosystem while providing economic benefits to locals, and at its worst ecotravel can be, "environmentally destructive, economically exploitative, and culturally insensitive "greenwashed" travel." (McLauren, 1998, 98). For instance, in some brochures and websites a high-rise, high maintenance hotel can appear as "eco-friendly" as a small, low-waste lodge.