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Up against the wall: ecotourism, development, and social justice in Costa Rica

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Nearly one-quarter of Costa Rica's export earnings derive from an expanding tourist sector, one that is increasingly diversified in a mix of tourist niches. Ecotourism is the fastest growing niche and its promises are featured in a range of sites and practices, including the largest multinational hospitality and hotel corporations. These companies promote a vision of sustainability that relies on expanding consumption of 'environmental' amenities through profit-driven global corporations – a vision that is, to some, antithetical to the very meaning of ecotourism. Our study explores the historical evolution of tourist development in Costa Rica, specifically large-scale coastal development, as a means for national development. Amid pressures to attract foreign direct investment in a neoliberal era, Costa Rica has struggled to maintain its developmentalism, which includes social welfare, environmental protection, and public goods, including coastal preservation and public access. We argue Costa Rica's simultaneous protection of coastlines and public access and the promotion of large-scale private investment by global real estate and hospitality industries exposes contradictory ethical paradigms of developmentalism, one rooted in the principle of inclusion and the other in exclusion. We highlight these contradictions in two events in order to raise questions about development, ethics, and inclusion.

Keywords: Ecotourism; development; Costa Rica; social justice; sustainability

Introduction

Nearly one-quarter of Costa Rica's export earnings derive from an expanding tourist sector, one that is increasingly diversified in a mix of tourist niches. Ecotourism is the fastest growing of these niches, and its promises are featured in a range of sites and practices, including the brochures of the largest multinational hospitality and hotel corporations. In this marketing, these large-scale companies promote a vision of sustainability that relies on expanding consumption of 'environmental' amenities through profit-driven global corporations – a vision that is, to some, antithetical to the very meaning of ecotourism.

The marketing of ecotourism appeals to a contemporary sentiment among some higher income tourists to lighten their ecological footprint while vacationing in the tropics. While a considerable literature identifies the ecological costs associated with the corporate-consumer model of ecotourism, less attention has been given to its effects on the social fabric and lived experiences of communities that sustain these eco-resorts (see Honey 1999 and Hunt et al. 2015 for two notable exceptions). We aim to draw more attention to this line of inquiry, which emphasizes social justice in raising questions about the often separate dimensions of social equity and sustainable development typically implied in the term ecotourism. To do so, we weave together different

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strands of analysis, including the examination of forces of neoliberalism external and internal to Costa Rica and the role of scale in understanding ecotourism.

Our study briefly explores the historical evolution of tourist development in Costa Rica, specifically large-scale coastal development, as a means for national development. Amid pressures to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) in a neoliberal era, Costa Rica has struggled to maintain its modern approach to developmentalism, which includes a strong sense of social welfare, environmental protection, and public goods, including a high standard for coastal preservation and public access to coastlines. The imperative to attract FDI and foreign exchange reserves converged with Costa Rica's conservation agenda to promote investment in ecotourism, generating a robust tourist economy including the kind of large-scale tourism development – a corporate-owned eco-reserve resort – we explore in the Guanacaste region.

We argue that Costa Rica's simultaneous protection of coastlines and public access and the promotion of large-scale private investment by global real estate and hospitality industries in this region expose contradictory ethical paradigms of developmentalism, one rooted in the principle of inclusion and the other in exclusion. In our analysis, the physical and symbolic manifestation of the intersection of these two agendas and their contradictions is the wall of the private resort on the public beach. We highlight these contradictions in two events – one ordinary, the other extraordinary – that happened at the same location – where the wall of the private, corporate-owned and marketed eco-reserve meets the public beach – in order to raise questions about development, ethics, and inclusion.

Debates and controversies in defining ecotourism

Scholarship on ecotourism and the ecotourism industry reveals a general lack of agreement on a uniform definition of ecotourism (Honey 1999; Duffy 2002; Gould and Lewis 2009; Simpson 2009; Fennell 2015). Gould and Lewis (2009) argue that 'ecotourism' is a contested label based on how the term is defined, and how its defined requirements are operationalized. One of the earliest definitions proposed by Hector Lascurain in 1983 suggested that ecotourism should involve the study and admiration of 'relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas ... as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas' (cited in Fennell 2015, 9). In this sense, Lascurain conceptualized ecotourism as not simply a niche market in the global economy but rather as a set of principles engaged in by the tourists themselves. Honey (1999, 2008) proposes a more expansive framework, outlining seven conditions for ecotourism: involves travel to natural destinations, minimizes impact, builds environmental awareness, provides direct financial benefits for conservation, provides financial benefits and empowerment for local people, respects local culture, and supports human rights and democratic movements. Notably, Honey identifies benefits to the local communities as a necessary component of 'real ecotourism' (2008). The International Ecotourism Society broadly defines ecotourism as 'responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of the local people' (cited in Koens, Dieperink, and Miranda 2009, 1225), or what we call sustainable development and social equity. While there is still no consensus on one definition of ecotourism, the literature reveals a central concern with addressing cultural and ecological sustainability and conservation (Fennell 2015). The implementation of ecotourism, and its use in marketing and promotion within the tourism industry, raises different, but related, kinds of questions and concerns.

Ecotourism is framed as a form of low-impact travel, greener and more sustainable than other forms of mass tourism. While the label of ecotourism places 'this form of tourism in an ideological niche' with an identity that stands in 'conscious opposition to mass tourism' (Weaver 2001, 107), Weaver (2001) and Simpson (2009) argue ecotourism can better be understood as simply a

variant of mass tourism. Weaver identifies the characteristics of mass tourism as ‘large-scale, externally controlled, high leakage,¹ and concentrated in high-density tourist [areas]’ (2001, 107) and claims ecotourism can be traced within this same frame. Similarly, Simpson contends the ‘concept of ecotourism has been largely hijacked by the tourism industry’ in an attempt to exploit a growing ‘green’ market (2009, 224).

Weaver (2001, 106) conceptualizes ecotourism as a continuum from ‘soft’ to ‘hard’, with most ecotourism being engaged in a ‘soft’ form, which looks very similar, if not identical, to mass tourism. He argues ‘hard’ ecotourism is extremely rare and involves ‘small number[s] of environmentally aware participants who embark on relatively long specialized trips’ with expectations of few, if any, amenities or services. These ecotourists actively engage with the natural environment in a form of ‘enhancement sustainability’, meaning they intend to improve the condition of the environment through volunteer work, for example. Soft ecotourism, on the other hand, involves larger numbers of people who take short trips as part of larger, multi-purpose trips. These ecotourists expect services and amenities and rely on interpretation from guides as an engagement process with the environment. This is a more passive approach, what Weaver calls ‘steady-state sustainability’, meaning ‘leaving an area in the same condition as when they arrived’ as opposed to actively ‘improving the condition of the physical environment through donations and volunteer activity’ (2001, 106).² Weaver concludes that there is a type of symbiotic relationship between soft ecotourism and mass tourism in that each benefits from the other, as ‘mass tourism indirectly supports protected areas, through the revenues generated from mass tourists’ engaging in soft ecotourism’ (110). Honey, despite her optimistic hopes for the ecotourism industry, echoes this sentiment, asserting ‘real ecotourism is indeed rare and usually imperfect’ (2008, 32). Duffy (2002) suggests most ecotourists replicate the same problems they are supposed to replace and ‘just like mass tourists, [ecotourists] are motivated by self-indulgence; for them, their travel acts as a marker of social position, which separates them from conventional tourists’ (2002, 46).

In addition to sustainability, a central component of ecotourism is the promotion of social equity. One of the tensions within ecotourism is the issue of cultural commodification in which the very culture of the local community can become a commodity for sale (Simpson 2009). Iveniuk (2006) contends local people themselves become ‘aesthetic labourers’ for consumption, there to meet the needs and, more importantly, the expectations of ecotourists, rather than beneficiaries of or partners empowered through tourist development.

The notion of high-value ecotourism, versus high-volume, suggests that scale can matter (CREST 2014). High-volume is similar to mass tourism in its orientation toward facilitating a large number of tourist experiences, with little emphasis on engagement or connection with local communities and people. High-value, by contrast, is marked by activities or experiences that engage tourists with local people or communities in ways that facilitate engagement or learning, and allow local communities to accrue the benefits of tourist development.

For our purposes, we view tourism as encompassing a range of practices, some of which might be understood as constituting conventional, consumer-based, high-volume, high-value, and/or eco-friendly tourism. As the above review makes clear, there is no one defining threshold for ‘ecotourism’, yet the term clearly is meant to signal attention to the consequences for the environment, broadly conceived, and to the well-being of local people. We suggest that it is this latter point – dimensions of social equity and justice – that are likely to be least prioritized across all the forms of tourist development. Further, as the appeal of being ‘green’ grows for both tourists and tourist companies, the range of activities and types of development considered or marketed as ecotourism also grow. As multinational corporations increasingly market luxury, all-inclusive large-scale chain resorts as eco-friendly, pursuing a strategy that some might call

greenwashing, ecotourism blurs with mass tourism in ways that raise questions about the role of local communities in tourist development, and particularly ecotourism, and who benefits.

Ecotourism and social equity

Most scholars agree that, under the right conditions, ecotourism has the potential for delivering a wide range of social and economic benefits (Stem et al. 2003; Stronza 2008; Horton 2009). Locally, ecotourism can provide benefits in the form of increased income and employment opportunities (Hunt et al. 2015), improved infrastructure, improved community organization, and increased business and revenue for local stores ‘while also maintaining ecological resource integrity through low-impact non-consumptive resource use’ (Stem et al. 2003, 323). In addition to the direct and indirect economic benefits, ecotourism can also work to preserve the existing environment through revenue generated from park entrance fees (Stem et al. 2003; Koens, Dieperink, and Miranda 2009) as well as build environmental awareness (Horton 2009; Hunt et al. 2015).

Horton (2009) challenges the assertion that ecotourism can provide economic benefits to local communities while promoting environmental conservation. Instead, Horton suggests ecotourism reproduces ‘preexisting patterns of stratification’, perpetuating ‘historical economic inequalities and further disempower[ing] local peoples’ (2009, 104). High rates of leakage may prevent a large portion of revenue generated from ecotourism to reach local communities (Stem et al. 2003; Simpson 2009). Additionally, the influx of tourists can lead to a disintegration of cultural and social ties within families and the community (Duffy 2002; Stem et al. 2003; Koens, Dieperink, and Miranda 2009).

‘Successful’ ecotourism can also negatively impact the local environment with increases in solid waste, disturbances to natural habitats, and trail erosion (Stem et al. 2003; Gould and Lewis 2009) as well as sewage issues (Koens, Dieperink, and Miranda 2009). Increases in scale in ecotourism can fuel increased demand for development of facilities and amenities in ways that resemble mass tourism (Weaver 2001; Simpson 2009). This drive to expand can then undermine the sustainability goals of ecotourism and increase the likelihood for more direct disturbances to local communities, wildlife, and ecosystems (Duffy 2002; Gould and Lewis 2009).

Despite many of the structural issues associated with ecotourism, the idea of ecotourism as a viable development strategy has generated tremendous excitement throughout Latin America (Roberts and Thanos 2003). Costa Rica, in particular, has become the poster child for ecotourism and sustainable development in Latin America (Honey 2008). This can be attributed to the highly successful experience of increased tourism in Costa Rica since the late 1980s. The strategy was so successful, in fact, that ecotourism is now the greatest source of foreign capital in Costa Rica, surpassing traditional exports such as coffee and bananas (Minca and Linda 2000; Iveniuk 2006; Honey 2008). But when success is measured in terms of economic exchange, relationships of environmental and social exploitation, particularly within local communities, are often de-emphasized or simply overlooked.

Communities and ecotourism

The literature on local communities generally reflects the conclusion that local involvement in decision-making is a necessary component for ‘successful’ ecotourism initiatives, with the needs and interests of local communities having priority (Van Tassell and Daniel 2006). However, Roberts and Thanos contend ‘local people continue to feel excluded from key decisions regarding protected areas in Central America’ and ‘are often among the last to be consulted about new protection initiatives’ in particular (2003, 83). Indeed, Honey (2008) notes that tens of

millions of indigenous peoples have been forcibly expelled from their lands in the process of making protected zones, effectively creating ‘conservation refugees’. She contends these people ‘are largely invisible [and] often live in squalid conditions around protected areas’ (Honey 2008, 98). This practice devalues the input and lives of indigenous communities that, in fact, may have maintained the forests as a component of their subsistence and survival for generations. Particularly when protected zones are also sites of tourist development designed for generating revenue, dynamics of power and inequality – globally and locally – may shape these processes in contradictory ways.

Even where local communities may play a small role in the decision-making, Honey (2008) argues most indigenous peoples maintain a ‘comparative disadvantage’ when dealing with national governments and international capital, as large ecotourism companies too often package ‘local people as smiling and welcoming faces for international visitors’, ultimately serving the interests of local and global elites (Duffy 2002, 103). Due to the power and influence of foreign investment, indigenous and non-elite local peoples are largely absent in early stages of decision-making related to tourist or ecotourist development, and over time their labor value is extracted as they are virtually transformed from ‘dignified loggers or fishermen ... into busboys’ (Homero Aridjis, cited in Roberts and Thanos 2003, 86).

For many of these reasons, Campbell (1999) argues that more inclusive participation of communities only addresses part of the challenge of building successful, socially just ecotourism. She suggests governmental oversight and regulation is also required if real benefits are going to be absorbed into local communities investing in ecotourism. This suggests that any benefits to the local community stemming from ecotourism will be limited, at best, ‘in the absence of formalized planning and intervention’ (1999, 534).

As private investment interests fund most tourist and ecotourist development, and as these increasingly are large-scale and foreign-owned, national and regional governments are challenged to oversee and ensure that local communities are benefiting from these activities. In order to make ecotourism a more sustainable development strategy, Honey (2008), echoing Campbell (1999), argues that regulations are imperative to enable local communities to get footing before transnational giants come in and eliminate existing local enterprises. The commitments of governments, and elites more generally, to this approach is further complicated by the increased pressures on less-developed countries to generate FDI and foreign exchange, and to comply with the terms of trade prioritized by dominant elites under neoliberal globalization. We now turn to Costa Rica, to explore how this small Central American country has grappled with the challenges of tourism as a national development strategy and to consider some of the ethical questions about development that our case in Guanacaste reveals.

Costa Rica: background and development ideals

Costa Rica is often described as a nation having the ‘happiest people on Earth’,³ who enjoy a longer life expectancy than many people in developed countries, and are lauded for progressive environmental protections and labor practices – all while having no national military since 1948. In fact, the choice to demilitarize was justified for the potential benefits that would result from investing in social goods rather than in militarization. While by no means perfect, how a middle-income country such as Costa Rica achieves such high levels of social and environmental well-being offers a powerful narrative for engaging critical development studies. At the same time, Costa Rica’s challenges reveal important dimensions of the struggle to develop ethically – to prioritize the social, economic, and environmental well-being of people – in an era dominated by neoliberal globalization. We first present a brief history of Costa Rica’s social welfare approach to development and then move on to discuss our case, ecotourism in Guanacaste,

highlighting how exploring ecotourism in Costa Rica illuminates the ethical tensions of tourism as a strategy for economic, environmental, and social development.

A review of Costa Rica's modern history suggests that there are longstanding tensions about national, economic and social development and its levels of engagement with external powers (such as the United States and multinational corporations). Post-WWII events increased pressures on less-developed countries to 'open' to FDI and expand export markets as a means toward modernization and economic development. This also created opportunities for new leaders in Costa Rican politics to emerge, leaders who spoke passionately about prioritizing the well-being of Costa Rican people over the economic interests of foreigners. Former President Jose Figueres-Ferrer, the leading figure of modern Costa Rican politics who famously abolished the national army in 1948, argued in an essay in *New Leader* (1953), 'Foreign ownership of a large segment of a country's economy or territory constitutes "economic occupation". This is no wild fancy. I know. I am a citizen of a "banana republic"'.

Such positions, often reductionistically labeled 'nationalism', were then, and remain now, extremely controversial in the eyes of US elites, in particular. During the cold war, in Costa Rica and the rest of the developing world, it was often unclear what US elites feared more, communism or forms of 'nationalism' or democratic socialism which might hurt US corporate investments abroad (Longley 1997; Klein 2007, 570). In this sense, Costa Rican exceptionalism today includes a track record in maintaining many public agencies and nationalized industries (at least partially resisting or forcing compromises with the neoliberal privatization agendas of domestic and foreign elites) without jeopardizing its close ties with the USA. In short, Costa Rica has been one of the slowest nations in Latin America to privatize its public sectors and to liberalize its economy (Chamberlain 2007; Clark 2011).

As President, Figueres challenged power relations between foreign powers and his government, which is perhaps best illustrated in his re-negotiation of a United Fruit Company (UFCO) contract to better benefit Costa Rican workers and Costa Rica. This unusual feat in Latin America was only made possible by an extremely deft balancing act of accommodation and resistance to US hegemony, mixed with impeccable anti-communist credentials, a history of democratic stability and cordial relations with the USA (Longley 1997). During the period of UFCO contract re-negotiations, Figueres argued, 'We did not try to kill the goose which lays the golden eggs, rather we say to it that she laid them here in our nest' (Figueres-Ferrer 1953, 131). More broadly, Figueres' leadership represented two important attributes of modern Costa Rican governance: first, it was a pushing back against the development agenda of Western elites, who tended to neglect and reproduce structures of dominance while blaming culture – in this case Costa Rican culture – for poverty and underdevelopment (see Longley 1997, 167–168). Second, it signaled the rise of a particular developmentalist approach in Costa Rica that would engage and accommodate powerful global interests to a point, but would simultaneously chart a path to domestically invest in building a strong social democratic state, including dissolving the military to do so.

Since the 1940s, Costa Rica has embraced a social welfare state model and adopted incremental reforms over the years which, compared to other nations in the region, have prioritized the well-being of the poor and the middle class, while protecting the environment as a public good. Early in his political career in the 1980s, former Costa Rican President Oscar Arias Sanchez exemplified this approach as he said, 'Development cannot be neutral. We are committed to the poor'.

In many ways, these efforts have been successful: in policy, all Costa Ricans have rights to universal education and health care, resulting in the lowest infant mortality rate and highest average life expectancy (78.5 years) in Latin America, and indeed, a life expectancy greater than some developed countries such as the USA. Further, according to Gallup's World Poll,

Costa Ricans remain among the happiest people on earth, even greater than Denmark or Sweden. Remarkably they achieve this with a quarter of the resources and income of their Scandinavian counterparts. Over one-quarter of the country is protected in national parks and about 80% of their energy comes from the renewable resource of hydroelectricity (Kane 2014). A remarkably high percentage of food exports are fair trade and organic certified. While not without problems, the social safety net policies and programs generally have enabled greater access to education and health care and created the foundation for a stable social democracy with progressive environmental and labor policies.

And yet, the hegemony of neoliberal globalization has not left contemporary Costa Rica untouched. Leaders, such as Arias, have grappled with balancing national social development efforts amidst external pressures to increasingly liberalize the economy and state institutions.

The country's post World War II development model – emphasizing food self-sufficiency, financial and technical support to small and medium-size farmers, import-substitution industries and trade with other Central American countries – led to a steady rise in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and a relatively equitable distribution of income. However, an overreliance on the export of coffee yielded an economic crisis when coffee and other commodity prices fell and oil prices rose in the 1970s. (Hansen-Kuhn 1993)

At the time, Hansen-Kuhn notes that Costa Rica had one of the highest levels of debt per capita in the world, with debt-service payments to commercial banks taking up 60% of export earnings (1993). This forced a crisis for the government who was committed to its system of social and civil services with limited and declining revenues. After suspending debt payments and losing access to commercial loans, Costa Rica became the first country in Central America to undergo a period of structural adjustments beginning in the early 1980s.

Adjustments throughout the 1980s involved the implementation of typical austerity measures and the promotion of tourism and non-traditional agricultural and industrial exports through subsidies and reduced duties and taxes. These generally reduced governmental revenue, putting increased pressure on existing social services and programs, while opening up Costa Rica's economy for increased foreign investment and intervention. This early effect of the debt crisis removed Costa Rica's social democratic elite from development decisions and began to place greater development authority in transnational market and financial institutions. This was also exemplified in the small but significant debt for nature swaps in which Costa Rica was an early participant.

Under the strong influence of large international banks, as well as the effects of structural adjustment programs under the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and US Agency for International Development, the debt crisis entrenched an export-oriented development agenda that included tourism as a key alternative to generate export earnings outside agriculture and coffee. Together, the early initiatives to preserve the tropical biodiversity in Costa Rica, alongside the efforts to diversify export earnings through tourism, set Costa Rica's path to become both an innovator and a pawn in the global ecotourism market in the decades that followed.

The tourism sector

During this period of export-oriented structural adjustment, tourism was prioritized as an avenue in which to generate revenue through FDI and foreign exchange. Foreign tourism began to grow rapidly in 1985, and by 1999 Costa Rica had one million visitors annually. Just 5 years later, in 2004, almost 1.5 million tourists generated \$1.3 billion in revenue, or 7% of gross domestic product (Molina and Palmer 2007, 159). Costa Rica hosted over 2.3 million international visitors in 2012, outpacing most of its Latin American and Caribbean neighbors (World Bank 2014).⁴ A

recent survey of 23,000 international travelers from 26 countries ranked Costa Rica as the #1 most recommended travel destination in the world (Dyer 2014).

At the same time, neoliberal policies, exacerbating inequality around the world, have made high-end tourism very lucrative. In fact, revenues for luxury hotels (charging an average of \$405 a night for a room) grew 70% worldwide between 2001 and 2005 (Klein 2007, 496). These trends set the stage for the type of investments many multinational corporations have sought in Costa Rica.

Tourism as a strategy for development involved creating a business-friendly environment for attracting FDI into the sector. Costa Rica's peaceful, relatively stable society offered a comparative advantage regionally for fostering the growth of both foreign visitors and investment. As former President Oscar Arias said during the 1980s, 'peace is essential. If you want to increase investment, both national as well as foreign, without peace no one is going to invest. If you want to bring tourism, who is going to come to a country where there is a civil war?' (Richards 1988). In early 2014, Costa Rica ranked #1 in a Regional Security Index⁵ as the safest country for foreign travelers as well as the safest country *for business investments* in all of Latin America (FTI 2014).

The efforts to build a robust tourist sector dovetailed with new and prior initiatives to preserve the unique biodiversity and beauty of Costa Rica (as in the debt-for-nature swaps). Amidst rising concerns about deforestation and pressures to grow the economy in the 1980s and 1990s, Costa Rica developed a national park system and created coastline protections that could both preserve public environmental goods and access, and generate tourist revenue. Rather than see tourism and environmentalism as conflicting endeavors, Costa Rica embraced the development of a niche market of ecotourism that had the potential to link tourism and economic development with the country's existing strengths – stability, environmental beauty and ideals, and comfort – while maintaining inclusive ideals and practices toward public goods.

Ecotourism mushroomed as tourists – mostly from higher income countries – sought to lighten their ecological footprint while vacationing and as national policies encouraged more eco-friendly development and practices (including green certification systems and preservation codes). As we discuss above, ecotourism is a concept used to describe a wide range of practices and philosophies in Costa Rica. In general, ecotourism suggests some attention to the prevention of or minimization of the effects of consumer-based tourism on the environment. Critics argue that what counts as ecotourism – as opposed to conventional tourism – has widened over time as more hospitality industry stakeholders seek to be associated with a green image that has market appeal – but little substance – to tourists' desires to identify as green without sacrificing any comforts.

Over time, as tourism generally grew, it became an integral part of Costa Rica's economic development strategy. The foreign exchange and investment that it brought created more pressure to expand the sector in the 2000s, challenging other, longstanding priorities such as maintaining inclusive public access to coastlines and pushing back on unfair trade relationships. The controversial effects of these pressures can be seen at the national and regional levels. For example, after winning re-election in 2006, Arias strongly pushed for the Central American Free Trade Act, using questionable tactics to ensure its passage in a bitterly divisive national referendum campaign in 2007. Similarly, tax breaks and exceptions for multinational corporations building tourist infrastructure in the Guanacaste region – despite tax laws and policies that protect public goods – have reduced revenues to fund the social welfare programs at the heart of Costa Rican developmentalism. This occurs at the very time when the effects of neoliberal globalization locally – such as the decrease in real wages accompanied by rising costs – create a greater need for these social services.

Recent happenings have eroded the inclusive intentions of tourist development as a national development strategy for Costa Rica. Developments in Guanacaste particularly reveal the contradictions of contemporary consumer-corporate tourism more generally.

Development in Guanacaste, Costa Rica

Guanacaste Province, one of seven in Costa Rica, is located in the northwest Pacific region and contains some of the most beautiful and desirable coastlines in the country. The weather in Guanacaste is generally drier, with more average days of sun per year than any other region. Tourism as a national development strategy finds form in Guanacaste as the region is heavily marketed as a sun-and-sand-style vacation place in the tropics.

As tourism to Costa Rica has increased over the last two decades, Guanacaste has shifted from a ranch and agricultural economy to one highly developed for international tourism, particularly its coastal zone. In particular, 'coastal tourism in recent years has grown largely on the model of the all-inclusive resort', evidenced by the over 100 four and five-star all-inclusive branded resorts (The Center for Responsible Travel [CREST] 2014, 8). The Center for Responsible Travel suggests that this particular form of recent tourist development in Guanacaste is significant as 'resort tourism is heavily dependent on the North American market for investors, developers, and consumers' (CREST 2010, 53).

All-inclusive branded resorts tend to be large-scale and high-volume with a focus on providing luxury accommodations and services, including spa treatments, on-site golf courses, and gourmet meals and alcohol, and are very expensive. These target higher income foreign tourists, as most local people cannot afford all-inclusive resorts. Indeed, rising costs have made Guanacaste inaccessible for most Costa Rican tourists (CREST 2014, 76).

These developments are not without controversy, as reflected in an interview with Mariano Figueres Olsen, one of former President Jose Figueres' sons and Director of Intelligence Services under President Luis Guillermo Solís. Figueres locates these specific kinds of development as resulting from imbalanced trade arrangements and globalization (Eddy and Dreiling 2012):

And now globalization and the free trade agreement bombard us with 5 star hotels from multinational companies, where Costa Ricans cannot add any value at all at the beaches or at the mountains. They come in with all-included packages, so the locals can't see any benefit at all and, on top of that, these hotel chains come in and do whatever they want, they have no measure in corrupting whoever they have to corrupt, buying whoever they have to buy, to get the permissions to destroy our nature, which makes future tourism absolutely unsustainable. Our tourism shouldn't be 5 star hotels.

Figueres, and critics like him, see these changes as an enormous threat to the Costa Rican middle class that has both reflected and constituted the foundation of the country's economic and social development. Despite the widely repeated national sense of Costa Rica as a middle-class society, inequality has been on the rise for many years. In 2011, 22% of Costa Ricans lived in poverty and 6.3% of households lived in 'extreme poverty', with trends in Guanacaste closely resembling these national trends (CREST 2014, 9). While poverty has generally decreased nationally over the last decade, 'the gap between rich and poor in Costa Rica is the highest it has been in more than two decades' (CREST 2014, 8) with the country ranking 68 on the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s Inequality-Adjusted Human Development Index (UNDP 2013). Moreover, recent findings reveal that Guanacaste Province '... has the highest level of unemployment in the country, thus raising further doubts that large, all-inclusive branded resorts are generating sustainable livelihoods' (CREST 2014, 8).

Indeed, as tourist development has skyrocketed, issues of social equity and sustainability have largely been sidelined. Two events in the summer of 2012 brought some of these contradictions of recent tourist development to the fore, as two of the authors, Braun and Dreiling, visited the Guanacaste region, staying in the small fishing town of Brasilito. These two events – one ordinary, the other extraordinary – pushed us to consider the social dynamics of a large-scale ecotourist real estate and vacation development on people of surrounding communities, many of whom serve this major eco-resort with their labor, merchandise, or services.

Brasilito is a small fishing town that sits between two major, albeit different, tourist developments at Playa Conchal and Playa Flamingo. South of Brasilito is a large-scale, corporate eco-reserve development that includes an all-inclusive, five-star hotel, and golf course, along with real estate properties within the reserve that lies proximate to Playa Conchal. North of Brasilito is Playa Flamingo, where a series of higher end tourist hotels largely cater to North American tourists. The curve of the coastline and its rock cliffs separate Playa Brasilito from Playa Flamingo, such that neither are in view of each other or easily accessible by foot or ATV. This adds to a sense of Playa Flamingo being ‘over there’, or out of reach from Brasilito.

In contrast, Playa Conchal is approximately one mile south of Brasilito and easily accessible via stretches of dirt and sand. The corporate-owned and marketed eco-reserve, Reserva Conchal, and eco-resort hotel, specifically, jut up against this beach, making their site as proximate to the coastline as possible. Costa Rican laws protecting coastlines have prevented developments such as these from building right on the beach, in part to preserve their environmental integrity and to protect inclusive public access. That being said, the resort has built a concrete wall along its perimeter to the beach, with a guarded entry point to the reserve and beach. The eco-resort clearly benefits from providing their high-end tourists privileged access to the beach, considered one of the most beautiful in Costa Rica.

On the inside of the wall, hotel residents have access to large swimming pools carved into an expansive open plaza dotted with lounge chairs for relaxing and sunbathing, with high-end restaurants and shops, including massage and spa services, in nearby buildings on the opposite end of the plaza. Tourists step out of the reserve onto the white sand beach, met with a sign warning them, in English, that they are now out of the eco-reserve and all interactions with local vendors are at their own risk:

Please be advised that the vendors located on the public beach in front of our resort are not associated in any way to Reserva Conchal. We cannot guarantee or assure you on the legality, authenticity, genuineness or honesty of any of these merchants and any and all transactions with them are at your sole risk. Bear in mind that several of these misrepresent themselves as resort agents and they, in general terms, lack insurance coverage, legal representation, and/or proper government permits for their activities.

The simultaneous protection of coastlines and public access and the promotion of large-scale private investment by global real estate and hospitality industries exposes contradictory ethical paradigms, one rooted in the principle of inclusion and the other in exclusion. In order to highlight these contradictions and to raise questions about development, ethics, and inclusion, we turn now to two events that represent the physical and symbolic manifestation of the intersection of these two agendas, events that take place where the wall of the private, corporate-owned, and marketed eco-reserve resort meets the public beach.

The first event is the daily movement of people and money from the local town of Brasilito to the eco-resort. Each day dozens of ATVs, horses, and people on foot pulling wagons, carrying jewelry, food, massage tables, and other goods, migrate over one mile along the public beach to the walls of the eco-resort. Mid-way, select entrepreneurs broker encounters between tourists and a variety of sellers of services, tours, and goods.

The eco-resort becomes a major focal point of economic activity, even if the sellers’ presence is only tolerated at the margins of the physical boundary of the resort. The people from the village selling goods must migrate to this wall, but not beyond it, with the hopes of an economic exchange. As most economic activity associated with the tourists at this resort occurs within its walls, not in the neighboring community of Brasilito, brokers try to draw out and negotiate economic interactions at the edge of the resort as tourists cross onto the public beach. In this way, ordinary people try to gain access to monies and opportunities associated with economic development projects, such as the resort, that are built in ways to exclude them.

In the second event, the 7.6 earthquake that shook Costa Rica in August 2012 also exposed a rift between public and private spaces on the pristine coastline. In the context of this natural disaster, dozens of local merchants – who, as noted above, routinely trek over a mile on the public beach to access the private beach entrance to the eco-resort to sell their wares and services – were shaken violently by the temblor. Fears of a tsunami quickly followed and people fled from beaches for cover from the possibility of strong, high waves oncoming. One informant reported wondering, amidst the panic, would the resort guards let him and others cross the wall into the plaza of the resort to gain shelter? The resort's security checkpoint at the wall was known to be very strict so ultimately he and other local residents did not try or even imagine they would be welcome to seek temporary shelter beyond the wall into the open plaza of the resort. Instead, he described people fleeing the beach, trying to get hold of the small trees on the beach's edge to gain their footing 'up against the wall'. While the beach may in fact have been a safer place than under the hotel buildings in the circumstances of an earthquake, fears of a tsunami – fears widely felt and discussed in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake – pushed him and others to seek escape from the ocean and beach. Yet, their access off the beach and to higher ground was blocked by the resort's expansive and exclusive development along the edge of the beach. The scale of the resort and its long concrete wall surrounding it created a perimeter that 'sandwiched' locals between their fears of tsunami waves and the exclusive boundaries of the resort for tourists.

We do not know for certain if the corporate owners, or the security guards working on their behalf, would not have allowed local people to seek shelter beyond the wall in the resort. While we were not able to confirm this, we were able to confirm that most local people did not try and we suggest this is possibly the more important point. The ordinary, everyday experience of exclusion is perhaps most notably codified in the language of the sign at the entrance to the beach that portrays local people as illegitimate merchants embodying potential risks to tourists in contrast to the safety of the resort and its services. This ordinary experience of exclusion shapes local people's perceptions and responses in an emergency, including their sense of where they might legitimately seek shelter.

Ultimately, this incident reveals how the private development of public resources creates lived contradictions and borders that establish and reinforce social exclusions (even in times of crisis). The private development of an exclusive eco-resort, while creating a market for private wares and services on a public beach, also walls in the high-income tourists from the social lives of those who live in the community, counter to the principles of social equity and community empowerment.

The all-inclusive resort is premised on being the exclusive seller of services, similar to a 'cruise ship' model (CREST 2014) whereby all products are packaged, managed, and sold within the tourist site in order to control the tourist experience and, of course, to capture the resulting profits. Creating skepticism and fear about what lies outside the resort – such as the warning sign at the gated entry to the beach – further entrenches notions of exclusivity and difference in ways that alienate local people and communities in order to promote economic benefits for corporate owners. These notions tragically spill over, however, into other dimensions of social experience as evidenced by the earthquake incident. Amidst a crisis, even a basic need such as shelter becomes reserved for those eligible through their economic relation to the resort as purchaser or provider of resort services.

Conclusion

Tourism, proposed as a path toward greater economic development nationally, may actually contribute to contradictory conditions locally. In briefly juxtaposing a corporate branded eco-reserve

and ecotourist complex with the proximate small-scale, local Costa Rican coastal village, we seek to clarify their intertwined, yet divergent, experiences in the wake of contemporary strategies for regional socio-economic development in Guanacaste and Costa Rica more generally. Amid pressures to attract FDI in a neoliberal era, Costa Rica has struggled to maintain a high standard for coastal preservation and public access to coastlines. The imperative to attract FDI and foreign exchange reserves converged with Costa Rica's conservation agenda to promote investment in ecotourism as a national development strategy, generating, among other kinds of tourism, the kind of large-scale tourism found in these communities.

Multinational corporations, seeking exclusive access to pristine beaches or biodiverse tropics to build lucrative foreign markets, take advantage of opportunities to develop and expand within developing countries. As promoting green practices and protecting environmental resources are integrated into national development plans and prove profitable, industry elites seek to align with ecotourism. Despite the success of ecotourism more generally, or perhaps because of it, within this context multinational corporations can 'greenwash' their tourist development activities with sophisticated marketing strategies, blurring the differences between ecotourism and mass tourism.

State-facilitated tourist development simultaneously initiates a process of reorganizing resources in these coastal areas despite policies and laws that serve to protect inclusive access to coastlines and beaches. When tourist development centers around the high-volume, all-inclusive resort, it further ends up entrenching the reorganization of land and resources in the area toward the interests of capital and foreign elites, as it privileges the use of these spaces and resources to provide expensive, exclusive luxury vacations for foreign tourists over other local, inclusive uses.

Ecotourism is marketed as sustainable or different from the mainstream tourist model, and in some ways, there can be real and important differences. But, as the literature shows, there is enormous variation as to what constitutes sustainable practices or even ecotourism, and the distribution of the burdens and benefits of ecotourist development, like much of sustainable development, has not been equitable. While the real profits of tourist development – eco-friendly or otherwise – are accumulated by corporate developers, the real access to the benefits of development (in contrast to the benefits of beach access) is mediated by private investments that draw exclusionary boundaries, both real and symbolic, as demonstrated in our two events at the resort wall in Guanacaste. Conservation laws and principles of public access around coastal beaches, so central to Costa Rican developmentalism, offered a certain social democratic promise. Yet these protections belie the contradictions within strategies of green economic development, such as high-volume ecotourism, that allow both Costa Rican and foreign industry elites to exploit that promise by failing to prioritize questions of privilege, access, and equity (Crocker 2008).

Indeed, as described by a recent CREST (2014) study, another more sustainable model of development co-exists on the fringes of this zone. The Nosara and Sámara coastal communities have:

... managed to chart a different course, based on smaller scale, experiential tourism. This is high value – rather than high volume – tourism, which strives to hire and purchase locally, create authentic links to the local destination and surrounding natural and cultural attractions, and ensure that tourism dollars stay in and benefit the host community. (CREST 2014, 8)

Similarly, Hunt et al. (2015) find smaller scale ecotourism dominated by locally owned ecotourism lodges in Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula has been successful, providing many direct economic and social benefits to local communities. Mariano Figueres echoes this vision of more sustainable and equitable tourist development as rooted in the community and traditions of Costa Rica (Eddy and Dreiling 2012):

[Tourism] should be the little Costa Rican lodge, the Costa Rican family, the co-operativa, cooperativa, ... and the towns around that adding value and selling services and showing the real country.

As Honey (2008) notes, national and regional authorities in Guanacaste have the opportunity to make good on this promise through regulations that structure tourist development more ethically by limiting the interests of foreign capital and prioritizing social equity locally. Such state-facilitated tourism development could address the needs of and provide benefits to local communities, making good on the promise of ecotourist development as part of the national social democratic tradition of Costa Rican developmentalism.

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Notes

1. Leakage refers to the loss of benefits locally, such as through foreign-owned businesses or operators, airlines, and imported foods and beverages.
2. There is a growing literature on volunteer tourism that raises overlapping as well as different concerns. Due to space considerations, this literature is outside the scope of this article.
3. 'The New Economics Foundation has ranked Costa Rica first in both its Happy Planet Index, and as the "greenest" country in the world' (CREST 2014, 8).
4. The millions of tourists visiting each nation in 2012 are as follows (data are in millions of visitors): Costa Rica (2.3), Colombia (2.2), Guatemala (2.0), Jamaica (2.0), Panama (1.6), the Bahamas (1.4), El Salvador (1.3), Nicaragua (1.2), Honduras (0.9), the Cayman Islands (0.3), Haiti (0.3), and Belize (0.3) (World Bank). However, both the Dominican Republic (4.6) and Cuba (2.8) exceed the number of tourists visiting Costa Rica (World Bank), a pattern likely linked to their histories of immigration to the USA.
5. The Regional Security Index includes indicators such as homicides, cargo and warehouse theft, political and labor unrest, and riots and violent demonstrations.

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