

Certifying Sustainability: The Efficacy of Costa Rica's Certification for Sustainable Tourism

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Abstract

This paper puts forth a critique of Costa Rica's Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) Program, which serves as a means for businesses within Costa Rica's burgeoning tourism industry to gain recognition for the level of sustainability in their policies and practices. A brief history of the concept of sustainable tourism is outlined, contrasting its practices with those of large-scale commercial tourism. This serves as a segue into the in-depth analysis of Costa Rica's CST, using the program's four major areas of tourism impact (physical-biological parameters, infrastructure and services, the external client, and the socio-economic environment) as a frame of reference. The CST program has been heralded by many of its proponents as a model certification scheme for sustainable tourism, and has been used as a template from which many subsequent regional and international schemes have been developed. It is argued in this paper that although the program serves as a valid starting point for certification, there are several structural inadequacies that need to be addressed in order to better align the principles of the program with the fundamental notions of sustainable tourism, which include societal and ecological well-being. This argument is based on a combination of primary sources, including policy documents and manuals from the Costa Rican Tourism Institute, the World Tourism Organization, UNEP, and the Rainforest Alliance, as well as previously conducted scholarly research on the topic of sustainable tourism. Suggestions are posited which call for re-visiting the conceptual paradigm upon which the certification program is based, paying close attention to the empowerment of civil society, the treatment of cultural representations, and social-environmental relationships.

Tourism: A modern industrial behemoth

In the modern era, tourism has emerged as the world's largest and most far-reaching industry, with a staggering economic effect on all of us. As an industry, it supports at least 215 million jobs world-wide and makes up 6% of global gross national profit (McMinn 135). Not only does tourism reign as the world's largest industry, it also shares the distinction as the world's fastest growing industry. In 2004, there were 760 million international tourist arrivals according to the World Tourism Organization. Tourism as an industry has grown over 25% in the past 10 years, and according to the WTO publication

World Tourism Vision 2020 this number will swell to 1.56 billion by 2020, more than doubling over the next 15-year time span. In the 25 years from 1995-2020, the industry is expected to grow at an average rate of 4.1%. In its infancy, tourism was viewed as a uniquely beneficial industry, with very little thought given to the possible negative consequences. More recently, it has been recognized that tourism has a variety of significant impacts on both macro and micro levels, and these impacts are just as likely to be detrimental as they are beneficial.

Recognition of the issue of sustainability

Even in the public eye, there has been an ever-growing and evolving awareness of the environment and humanity's role as the earth's steward. In American popular culture, environmental awareness first gained a foothold in 1962 with the publication of Rachel Carson's influential book on the dangers of synthetic pesticides, Silent Spring. This awareness has snowballed into the present, and we need only look to Al Gore's highly visible work and subsequent Nobel Peace Prize to verify that questions of environmental ethics are at the core of our new, green-tinted *zeitgeist* that is taking shape and is willing to finally address the many issues at hand.

One of the main ideological tenets of environmental consciousness is the notion of sustainability in terms of development. This notion of sustainability was first raised by the environmentalist/conservationist movement which was spurned by Carson's influential work, but in terms of policy formulation only reached widespread recognition with the publication of Our Common Future in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development. This publication, more widely referred to as the Brundtland report, presented the most widely used definition of sustainable development: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (43). Five years after the release of the Brundtland report, sustainable development served as the focal point of the UN Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992; this solidified the awareness of the need for sustainability goals to be incorporated into international development policy. The Rio Earth Summit also gave birth to the UN Commission for Sustainable Development, which meets annually to ensure that the goals of the 1992 summit are continually pursued. More recently the UN Millennium Declaration of 2000 spurned the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), which list environmental sustainability as one of the most critical goals of international development.

It was during the time period of the 1980s and 1990s that the notion of sustainability began to be considered throughout the tourism industry as a whole. This occurred despite the fact that the Brundtland report completely fails to mention the tourism industry in its discussion of sustainable development (Wall 485). The ideals that pertain to sustainability were first applied to the tourism industry by Mexican architect by the name of Héctor

Ceballos-Lascuráin. In 1983, while heading the Mexican conservation NGO PRONATURA, he coined the term “ecotourism” to describe his vision of tourism as a way to positively influence environmental conservation and economic development (Jamal, Borges and Stronza 147). The sustainable tourism movement expanded; and we have rapidly seen, in just the past 25 years, sustainable tourism principles being embraced and adapted in all corners of the globe. Many would now agree with the director of the Costa Rica CST program, Barry Roberts, who has asserted: “Tourism in the 21st century will be sustainable, or it simply won’t be- at all” (*Costa Rica*).

Sustainable tourism or ecotourism? It depends on who you ask...

From the beginning, there has been a degree of skepticism and confusion surrounding the idea of sustainable tourism. This is in great part due to the yet to be resolved issue of terminology and nomenclature, as various terms such as ecotourism, nature tourism, sustainable tourism, alternative tourism, and the like are utilized without a clear cut meaning. This ambiguity and confusion regarding terminology has led to the debate surrounding sustainable tourism to be characterized as “patchy, disjointed, and often flawed with false assumptions and arguments” (Liu 459).

One of the basic dilemmas of the research of sustainable tourism is how to conceptually distinguish between ecotourism and sustainable tourism, the two monikers which are most frequently utilized in the discourse and literature. As previously stated, ecotourism was the first of these two terms to be widely used. In Jamal, Borges and Stronza, the authors present a table of eight different definitions given for ecotourism, covering a 20 year span from 1983-2003 (152). In all of these definitions, there is a concern for the minimal impact on the natural environment, a concern for the economic impact of the ecotourism activity and finally a concern for the social and/or cultural impact on the host population.

For many scholars and professionals in the field, sustainable tourism takes on a different meaning from ecotourism. The most widely held assumptions concerning the difference between sustainable tourism and ecotourism are that sustainable tourism as a minimum must meet the definition of sustainable development that was posited in *Our Common Future*, namely to be an activity that will be able to be practiced by future generations without handicaps or limitations due to the actions of the current generation, whereas ecotourism should meet the above definition and in addition include some type of interpretive experience of the local ecology (where this facet is not necessary for the conceptualization of sustainable tourism). Although there is an apparent consistency of the factors which help to form the eight aforementioned definitions of ecotourism, many researchers have drawn the distinction between ecotourism and sustainable tourism based on the consideration of the socio-cultural impact of tourism. For example, Tepelus and Cordoba claim that tourism recognition schemes can shift their terminology

from ecotourism to sustainable tourism only when there is a prevalence and salience of socio-cultural factors in the scheme (139).

Despite the fact that there seems to be discontinuity in the definition of sustainable tourism and ecotourism, a substantial movement towards uniformity has begun to take place and continues to evolve. To review what is possibly the most agreed upon definition of the two terms see the Mohonk Agreement, which is a guideline for certification programs in ecotourism and sustainable tourism. As you will find, this agreement follows the notion of ecotourism as being a form of sustainable tourism which includes a separate, interpretive experience of natural ecology areas as mentioned above. For the purpose of my analysis of the CST program, I will be drawing from the vast pool of defining characteristics of sustainable tourism that currently exist in the literature and various policy documents such as the Mohonk Agreement. The goal of my analysis is to find out whether or not the Costa Rican CST program has taken into consideration what these documents purport to be the most important and significant principles of sustainable tourism.

The evolving need to certify tourism as sustainable

With the advent of sustainable tourism, it has become increasingly evident that it constitutes a novel and exploitable market sector, and a rapidly growing one at that. Increasingly, the term sustainable tourism is used by countries and corporations alike in order to differentiate their tourism product from mass tourism and convey the image of an ethically and morally sound tourism business (Lansing and DeVries 77). It has been apparent from the start the need to determine what constitutes sustainable tourism and to devise a certification scheme that will be able to validate and legitimize claims of sustainable tourism.

The practice of “greenwashing,” or making false and exaggerated claims about a product’s or business’ environmental friendliness, was first implemented during the environmentally conscious period of the 1970s, when modern consumers again became aware of the environmental/ecological circumstances of their consumption choices. Since then, greenwashing has been adopted by seemingly every industry as a way to appeal to our inherent “conservation and solidarity seeking commodity culture” (Bryant and Goodman 349), regardless as to whether or not the product being advertised has a legitimate basis to its claims of being eco-friendly. Over the course of the past few decades, the tourism industry has seen a milieu of differing certification schemes devised in order to counter this deceptive practice of greenwashing. Claims of “green” environmental friendliness can be even more difficult to verify in tourism, owing to “the intangible, perishable, inseparable, and heterogeneous nature of their products” (Buckley and Font 3). Tourism’s response has been substantial: the certification and ecolabelling programs in the tourism industry alone now number well over 250 (Conroy 104), with at least 60 of these residing in Europe (Hamele 189).

Over the course of the previous decade, many major international organizations have taken the lead in calling for ecolabelling/certification programs for sustainable tourism, as well as undertaking efforts to create a world-wide universal certification scheme. In 1998, the United Nations Environment Program published a comprehensive report titled *Ecolabels in the Tourism Industry*, the first comprehensive report on tourism ecolabels (Font 198). Then in November of 2000, the Institute for Policy Studies and the Ford Foundation sponsored the first ever international ecotourism and sustainable tourism certification workshop in Mohonk, New York. In partnership with the Rainforest Alliance, they drafted a two-tier framework for certification programs titled *Mohonk Agreement: Proposal for an International Certification Program for Sustainable Tourism and Ecotourism*. This proposal was the first to set an international framework for the development of sustainable and eco tourism certification programs, and remains a guiding principle in their formulation. By 2005, the international push had coalesced in the joint effort published by UNEP and the World Tourism Organization titled *Making Tourism More Sustainable: a Guide for Policy Makers*. The publication “defines what sustainability means in tourism, what are the effective approaches for developing strategies and policies for more sustainable tourism, and the tools that would make the policies work on the ground” (*Making Tourism IV*). This publication also contains 10 detailed case studies from around the world, showing the diverse ways that certification programs for sustainable tourism have taken shape in harmony with the local populace.

Costa Rica’s answer: the CST

The small isthmus of Costa Rica has a long history of conservation and respect of its abundant physical resources. Despite its diminutive stature, Costa Rica packs a powerful punch in terms of ecological resources. The country covers only 0.03% of the world’s total surface area (it is often compared to the size of West Virginia), but contains an amazingly disproportionate wealth of biodiversity: approximately 6% of the known species in the world can be found inside its borders. Aware of the significance of this national treasure, Costa Rica, in a movement that gained root in the 1970s (Honey 134), has now managed to create over 100 protected areas, covering 28% of its lands (Hartshorn 287). This unparalleled level of natural conservation, along with the status of being the most stable democracy in Central America (Costa Rica abolished their state military in 1948), helped to position Costa Rica for its overnight transformation into one of the most sought-after ecodestinations in the world.

As Central America was nursing its wounds of recent civil wars and mass tourism began its return to the region, two events occurred that helped to propel tiny Costa Rica into the international spotlight. In 1987, then (and current) President Oscar Arias was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his Central American Peace Plan. Three years later, Costa Rica had a phenomenal

showing at the 1990 World Cup. Suddenly, “the paradoxical existence of an ‘ecological paradise’ with no army, a Nobel-winning president, and a superb national park system became big world news” (Bien 136).

By 1993, the world’s tourists had fallen in love with Costa Rica, and tourism surpassed once-dominant agricultural exports such as coffee and bananas to become the most significant income producer for the country. The statistics make it clear: in the year 2006, Costa Rica received over 1.65 million tourists, with an economic impact somewhere in the range of 1.67 billion dollars. By the year 2000, over \$600 million was received specifically for ecotourism and other nature-based attractions (Bien 146).

Around the same time that tourism became the leading industry in Costa Rica, it became obvious the need for a program to certify and qualify the many tourism businesses that were riding the coattails of the ecotourism boom. Numerous tourism establishments at the time were making “eco” claims, but were practicing anything but eco-friendliness. In 1995, two officials at the *Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT)*, the tourism governing and policy-making body of the Costa Rican government, began to tinker with the notion of a national certification system for sustainable tourism. By 1997, their idea had spawned the first edition of the ICT’s Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST), a national voluntary certification program for lodging establishments. 10 years later, the program has certified 84 hotels and maintains a backlog of applicants (*Costa Rica*). Currently, the ICT is supposedly implementing a CST program for tour operators, but this has been observed as only mentioned in the literature (Honey; Tepelus and Cordoba), as there is no information available on the particulars of this program on the ICT website.

The CST program is administered by the Costa Rican ICT to all national lodging establishments regardless of their size or location. It is completely voluntary, and there is no conscription fee to apply or join; in fact, the only prerequisite for participation is to fill out an application form, which can be done through the ICT website. The program seeks to certify the level of sustainability of the lodging establishment through its assessment tool, which measures the business’ performance in four major areas of development. These are the four areas in question, as explained on the ICT website:

1. **Physical-biological parameters:**
evaluates the interaction between the company and its surrounding natural habitat.
2. **Infrastructure and services:**
evaluates the management policies and the operational systems within the company and its infrastructure.
3. **External clients:**
evaluates the interaction of the company with its clients in terms of how

much it allows and invites the client to be an active contributor to the company's policies of sustainability.

4. **Socio-economic environment:**

evaluates the interaction of the company with the local communities and the population in general.

In order to assess the practices of the business, the ICT's evaluation tool includes 160 different questions pertaining to these four major areas, covering the wide array of activities and policies that shape its overall sustainability level. The questions are given a weight of 1-3 as a multiplying factor in figuring the final score in order to give priority to certain critical areas of compliance. The initial evaluation is free of charge, with subsequent annual evaluations costing a "nominal fee". The evaluation of the hotel is conducted by an independent arm of the Costa Rica National Accreditation Commission in order to insure objectivity in scoring. Through the assessment, the hotel is given a score of 1 to 5 in each of the four major areas of sustainability. At the base end, a score of 1 means that the company "has taken the first step in the process of sustainability" for that area. The top score of 5 signifies an "outstanding" level of sustainability (*Costa Rica*). The hotel is then awarded a "green leaf" award of between one to five green leaves. The number of green leaves awarded will be equal to the lowest score obtained by a business in any one of the four areas of assessment. Therefore, if a hotel has an outstanding level of sustainability (a score of 5) in its infrastructure, but scores a 1 in the biological parameters, the hotel will only receive one green leaf. By using this scoring method, it is expected that the business will strive to comply with the model of sustainability in all four areas with equal consideration and importance.

Is sustainable tourism inherently flawed? The contradiction of sustainability and industry

We now have a general idea of the priority that has been given to the issue of sustainability in the tourism industry both world-wide and locally in the case of Costa Rica. In the meantime, many critics have argued that the idea of a sustainable tourism is flawed and unattainable due to the many structural characteristics of the tourism industry, and furthermore that the idea of certifying sustainability is an unattainable farce. In revisiting the statistics aforementioned, it is plain to see that tourism is growing at an exponential rate. With the impact of over one and a half billion tourists, how could the industry sustain such an explosive increase in volume, yet still manage to decrease the negative effect of this impact in ecological, cultural, and socio-economic terms? This fact alone is enough for basing arguments as to the potential for a "sustainable" growth of such magnitude.

Of the many tourist destinations of the world that are currently popular with ecotourism travelers, Costa Rica provides a particularly interesting context in which to examine the industry's effects. With its abundance of natural resources, hundreds of protected conservation areas, countless beaches situated on two different oceans, awe-inspiring mountains, and lush rain forests, there exist varying physical parameters that not only act as an agent of tourism, but are also acted upon by tourists in multiple ways. In recent years, many researchers have undertaken the examination of the multitude of ways that tourism interacts with the four parameters of the CST program mentioned above: physical-biological parameters, infrastructure and services, the external client, and the socio-economic environment. I will utilize this data to compare some of the known issues at hand with the purported goals of the CST program in order to gauge its overall efficacy. I want to know if the CST is able to promote a tourism which avoids this seemingly inherent contradiction between industry and sustainability, and in which areas of assessment it may need to adjust its certification criteria in order to be better-aligned with the overall goals of sustainable tourism.

Physical-Biological Parameters

On the macro level, one of the most persistent criticisms of the idea of tourism as a sustainable industry is its reliability on all forms of mass transport in order to function, from rental cars to taxis, from Airbus jumbo jets to the Trans-Siberian Railway. Overall, the tourism industry is estimated to account for 5% of global anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, with 90% of this total being transportation emissions (*Making Tourism* 13). Especially taxing on the environment is aviation: it contributes up to 3.5% of global anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, with the majority coming from civil aviation (*Making Tourism* 13). In an attempt to quantify the overall environmental impact of a vacation and thereby determine its level of sustainability, while taking into account both the aviation and local impact components, a novel approach has recently been taken by several researchers.

To determine the overall sustainability of a vacation to Costa Rica from Miami, Florida, Hunter and Shaw called for the use of the "ecological footprint" (EF) measurement system as a tool for the quantification of the environmental impact of the tourist. The ecological footprint analysis was developed by William Rees and Mathis Wackernagel in the early 1990s as a way to measure "the area of biologically productive land and sea required to produce the renewable resources this population (in question) consumes and assimilate the waste it generates, using prevailing technology" (Wackernagel, *et al.* 104). The EF, then, is a way to quantify the degree to which humans' actions and practices stay within the regenerative capacity of the earth.¹ Hunter and Shaw

¹ Further recent examples of using the EF to measure tourism impacts can be found in Gossling *et al.*; Li and Yang; and Patterson *et al.* "Beyond More" and "Adaptive Environmental".

argue that the EF measurement can serve as a reliable indicator of sustainability in relation to tourism.

In order to prove their point, they present their calculations of the EF scores for a typical two week stay in Costa Rica, flying out of Miami. For the purpose of their study, Hunter and Shaw utilized a combination of statistical data from the World Wildlife Fund as well as their own calculations concerning the EF generated by air travel and consumption patterns while on vacation. They further assumed that during the period of time spent at the destination country the visitor's ecological footprint would be equitable to that of the locals, i.e. the tourist would be "doing as the natives do." What they found was that by taking a two week trip to Costa Rica from Miami, the average American tourist had an extremely minimal positive net effect on their demand on the earth's natural resources in comparison to not having gone at all. When compared to other hypothetical vacations, such as a 12 day trip from Australia to New Zealand, the Costa Rica example fared much better, having over 90% less of an impact on the environment. Furthermore, when they calculated the impact of a tourist in Costa Rica who stayed for three weeks, they achieved a negative net EF value; this signifies that by taking the vacation, the American who stays for an extended period of time, and lives like the locals, will actually have a negative net effect on the environment compared to having stayed at home and continued consuming as an American. The results of this study show that depending on consumption patterns while in the host country, tourism travel to Costa Rica may be considered as sustainable by the standards of the EF, and for longer stays, may even have a negative net effect on the environment.

Costa Rica possesses one of the most extensive conservation systems in the Americas, with approximately 28% of its land protected in conservation areas (Hartshorn 287). This is achieved through the combination of over 100 publicly-held conservation areas (Hartshorn 287) and hundreds of smaller, privately-owned reserves (Langholz and Lassoie). These conservation areas serve as an asset to the country in many ways: not only do they serve to protect Costa Rica's distinction as a having an abundant wealth of biodiversity, they also serve as one of the country's economic engines, the *raison d'être* for the droves of ecotourists that arrive by the thousands each day. Many have questioned whether this intimate relationship with the tourism industry is mutually beneficial or whether it is lopsided and benefits the industry at the expense of the physical environment.

Jorge Rivera claims that tourism has helped to "promote the creation of about 75,000 acres of private reserves owned mostly by hotels" (335). The study by Langholz and Lassoie of private land reserves in Costa Rica shed light on this dimension of the relationship between tourism and conservation. In their research, they uncovered that at the time, the number of private reserves in Costa Rica to be approximately 250, with 211 of these being directly identified by the study (314). Their results showed that a large number of these

private reserves were owned and operated by hotels and lodges, and that around 60% of the reserves in their research sample reported the reserve being used for ecotourism 'sometimes' or 'often' (317). From these results, one may surmise that the tourism industry is indeed aiding in the creation of conservation areas. However, the question at hand is whether or not the use of conservation areas by ecotourists is having a micro-level negative effect on the environment, thereby negating the premise of sustainable tourism.

Weinberg, Bellows and Ekster conducted a study of sustainable tourism in Monteverde, which they cite as being "one of the largest private reserves in the world, and constitutes a significant part of the protection of Costa Rican forests" (372). Among the findings of their interviews with local stakeholders, themes of ecological problems surfaced, centered on the impact of increased waste. The two interviewees cited in their study mention "problems with waste and water" as well as "problems with what to do with dirty waters" and "more contamination in the small rivers here" (374-5). The researchers conclude that the ecotourism business in Monteverde exists as what they call an "ecotourism treadmill" in which the introduction of market-driven principles into the small ecotourism-based local economy serve to exponentially grow the industry, eventually focusing on the desires of the extralocal companies that own the businesses, and marginalizing the locals' interests (379). In this way, they theorize that ecotourism will eventually revert to a form of mass tourism.

Farrell and Marion studied the impacts of ecotourism visitors at five different protected areas in Costa Rica, as well as three others in Belize, another Central American ecotourism hotspot. They deployed both qualitative interviews with the managers of the conservation areas as well as quantitative measures to determine the impact of trails and other high-use areas within the study site. Their study showed the most prevalent impacts of ecotourist use to be exposed soil (erosion), vegetative cover (canopy) loss, and damage to trees (218). Another one of the key issues discussed by the managers in the interviews was the impact on wildlife, such as feeding, disturbing, and harassing native animals. At Manuel Antonio Park, on the Pacific Ocean, they measured the vegetative cover loss to be 91% and the exposed soil to be 71% at the picnic areas used by tourists.

This obvious ecological impact of visitors to Manuel Antonio contradicts the findings of a study by Cottrell *et al.* that measured the perspectives of tourists to Manuel Antonio Park. In extensive interviewing with tourists visiting Manuel Antonio, the study showed that tourists were overwhelmingly sensitive to issues of sustainability. When asked whether the ecological, cultural, or economical dimension of sustainability was the most important, the majority chose the ecological dimension. The tourists were also asked to rank their perception of the most negative effects of tourism on the site, and they chose "pollution of environment, water and air" and "loss of rare plants and animals" as the most apparent negative consequences (Cottrell *et al.* 421).

These findings illustrate a major issue that the CST program has attempted to address: the apparent disconnect between tourists' actions and their perceptions. The scoring criteria not only include many items concerning the mitigation of ecological effects of the hotel through the management, but also concern several items which place emphasis on educating the client about the sustainability practices of the establishment while also conditioning the facilities so that the guest is constantly encouraged to participate. While it is clear that tourists in Costa Rica are aware of sustainability issues and the effect of their actions on the environment, it is yet unclear whether this translates into sustainable behaviors and practices.

Infrastructure and Services

The CST program of Costa Rica places much emphasis on the tourist's impact on the local infrastructure and services when measuring sustainability. As many tourists to Costa Rica may observe, the country's infrastructure is currently in need of severe upgrades in many areas, namely roads, water services, waste management, and a lack of public servants such as police and emergency medical workers. Without even considering the impact of the tourism industry, the Costa Rican population continues to grow rapidly, and may face "serious future problems due to its population structure and rate of increase" (Foy and Daly as cited in Becker 127). When we add to this the explosive and rather poorly regulated growth from tourism, it becomes obviously imperative that in order for Costa Rica follow a model of sustainability in its growth, the infrastructure must be expanded and improved. On one end of the spectrum is the "*Ecodesarrollo Papagayo*" (Ecodevelopment Papagayo) located on the end of the Nicoya Peninsula on Costa Rica's Pacific shore, which initially was to contain 1,144 homes, 6,270 condo units, and 6,584 hotel rooms. Although it has been scaled down since its inception, it will place a huge demand on the local infrastructure as well as the ecological carrying capacity (McLaren; Mowforth and Munt).

In the study by Weinberg *et al.*, it was found that ecotourism had impacted the community of Monteverde in a positive way by offering better and more varied services to the local community. This was in lieu of the aforementioned negative impact on the physical environment through the overstressing of its waste management infrastructure. Weinberg and colleagues also discuss how Monteverde is debating one of the fundamental issues facing many rural tourist destinations in Costa Rica: the construction of a paved road to their community from the Interamerican Highway. This would provide a direct and 100% paved link to the fragile ecosystem from all points of entry for tourists: the major airports of San José and Liberia, and the cruise-ship port of Puntarenas. As it stands, many of the remote wilderness areas (including Monteverde) that are a favorite of ecotourists are not easy to access: there are many unpaved roads, river fording, steep ascents and descents and narrow, one-lane mountain trails that have to be overcome. This has acted as a natural

filter to limit the number of tourists that visit many such areas; it “weeds out the weak.” The government, as well as some local groups, demands that the paving will provide an array of direct benefits to the populations, both economic and social. However, many fear that this very expansion of infrastructure will serve as a detriment to the communities in many ways. Weinberg *et al.* asserts that the paving of the road will change the industry to a mass tourism product, which will undoubtedly negate the idea of sustainable tourism. In the case of what Deborah McLaren deems “the paving of paradise”, this type of infrastructure improvement may deter the sustainable development of tourism by rapidly multiplying the number of visitors and initiating a shift from locally based ecotourism towards mass tourism, which Weinberg *et al.* call the “ecotourism treadmill.”

Although the CST evaluation calls for participating businesses to enable the local community in many ways, it still seems to ignore the issue of civil society building and empowering local people to have political control of the community. The article by Weinberg and colleagues explains the lack of enforcement on the part of the Puntarenas municipality, to which Monteverde pertains. Residents of Monteverde have desired to have their own municipality status, which would give them the ability to develop a master zoning plan and shape the direction of tourism development. The inability to self-govern and the incompetence of the Puntarenas government has led to “hotels and restaurants on bad ground and next to river beds...free to dispose of their waste however they please because there is no enforcement” (Weinberg *et al.* 379).

This same theme of empowering local stakeholders can be seen in Lisa Campbell’s work done in Ostional, Costa Rica. Over the course of two years, qualitative interviews were conducted to gauge local resident’s opinions of the effects that tourism was having on their community. Campbell found that the locals of Ostional were mostly unaware of the specific opportunities for employment or investment that the tourism industry offers, but are also willing to work in “anything” that tourism can provide. The unawareness points to an inability of locals to shape the direction of tourism in the community, which is exacerbated by the minimal government intervention in local tourism (549). This is possibly the most fundamental infrastructure issue facing sustainable tourism development in Costa Rica. If the absence of local governance structures inhibits communities from influencing the development of their lands and the structure of their local economy, sustainable tourism cannot be a possibility.

External Clients

Sustainable tourism has been frequently cited as a way to mold the consumption patterns of the industrial North in a way that will contribute to the conservation and sustainable use of resources in the South (Medina). A major area of sustainability in tourism according to the CST program is the relationship that the tourism industry has with the external client, the tourist

itself. Ten percent of the questions in the sustainability measurement tool used by the CST pertain to the ways in which the tourism business work to educate the client on the concept of sustainability and ways in which the business complies with the concept. Indeed, the WTO definition of sustainable tourism calls for raising the awareness of the client of sustainability issues and promoting sustainable tourism practices (*Making Tourism* 11). The Mohonk Agreement of 2000, which was an international proposal for the framework and principles of certification in sustainable tourism and ecotourism, omits this principle in its definition of sustainable tourism. According to the Mohonk Agreement, only the certification of ecotourism should include a “focus on personal experiences of nature to lead to greater understanding and appreciation” as well as an “interpretation and environmental awareness of nature, local society, and culture.”

In the review of ecotourism definitions given in Jamal, Borges and Stronza, the four most recent (and most cited) definitions include the need to “educate the traveler” or “establish an environmental conscience through the understanding of nature”. The authors recognize the importance of educating the client and having a transformative experience, but view certification programs in sustainable tourism as taking the wrong direction. They argue that voluntary certification programs such as the CST are

“Driven by global, profit-driven, neo-liberal policies, (and) advocate self-regulation and objective measures that do poor justice to intangible cultural aspects and relationships with Nature. Ecotourism and related certification programs tend to: (1) associate visitor experience to education, learning and ‘appreciation’ (modernity’s rational values) rather than to interpretive and existential meaning-making; (2) be less than attentive to the cultural transformations that may be occurring as resident relationships to the natural environment become commodified through ecotourism development; and (3) employ scientific management and resource managerialism that can further fragment human ecological relationships” (Jamal *et al.* 168-9).

To the investigators, certification schemes in sustainable tourism, due to their structural limitations, commoditize and objectify nature to the degree that it is no longer possible for the external client to have a legitimate and genuine ecological experience on a personal level. Their entire experience in ecotourism (as well as efforts to educate the tourist by certification schemes) tends to ignore the interpretive and transcendental experiences that should be the focus of their journey.

In an article by Bryant and Goodman, an informative outline is given of the historical events which have led to our commoditization of nature and the rain forest, what they refer to as “Edenic myth-making in the conservation-seeking commodity culture.” This presentation of nature as a commodity to

tourism clients can be seen in marketing strategies of many ecotourism businesses in Costa Rica. They make a grand attempt to represent Costa Rica as a type of Garden of Eden, a lush, tropical paradise beyond compare. A visit to the home page of the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT) immediately yields animations of butterflies, orchids, parrots, and the institute's clever slogan: "Costa Rica: no artificial ingredients." Bryant and Goodman argue that alternative consumption (consumption of goods believed to be more environmentally or socially just than conventional goods) is intrinsically tied to the historical fantasies of what has been called "the ecological other," as well as political strategizing to "save the rainforest." Gossling makes a strong case for the presence of this commercialized and commoditized idea of nature that tourists have when visiting tropical locations such as Costa Rica. "This image of paradise is embedded in a built environment, consisting of modern facilities, swimming pools, bars, and restaurants, complemented by elements of distraction such as professional entertainment" (*Human-Environmental Relations*, 547). He contends that the tourism industry markets tropical environments to clients by transforming landscapes and cultures into products and commodities. I tend to agree with this analysis by Gossling; it seems that as long as these commoditized notions of nature continue to dominate the Northern idealization of ecotourism, external clients will continue to be sent the wrong messages concerning the meaning of their experience and its incorporation of local culture, all the while missing the more spiritual and interpretive educational experience that should strive to be the focus of a sustainable tourism product.

Social and Cultural Impacts

With the advent of sustainable tourism, much emphasis was initially placed on the impact of the tourism industry on the biophysical ecology. As of late, the emphasis has switched to encompass not only this biocentric view but also a more anthropocentric view of sustainability, focusing on the effect of tourism on the social and cultural structures of the host residents. Since the beginning of scholarly research concerning tourism, it has been apparent that there are various social and cultural effects associated with the industry. One of the most commonly cited early works in this field was done by R.W. Butler in 1974. Butler theorized that the magnitude of social effects associated with tourism would increase in direct relation to the number of visitors. Butler also posited that these impacts would reflect the degrees of difference in wealth, language, and race between hosts and guests.

One of the most widely held criticisms of tourism's social effects is the commoditization of the host culture that happens in a similar fashion to the commoditization of the ecology as explained above. This happens not only as a result of the marketing strategies employed that glorify the cultural "other", but is also occurring due to the host culture's own adoption of the commoditization paradigm in order to sell their cultural tourism product. As early as the 1970's,

important case studies shed light on these effects, among them Margaret Swain's exposition of her study of the Kuna indigenous peoples that inhabit the *Islas San Blas* off of Panama's south Caribbean shore. Since then, Swain has brought to attention that the indigenous inhabitants of the island were not only managing and controlling the local tourism business, they were also acting as agents in the commoditization of their own culture. In her analysis, she invokes Dean MacCannell's observation that a culture that begins to actively sell itself as a cultural attraction can no longer evolve naturally, for wholesale cultural changes would need to be considered in terms of maintaining these commercialized external representations.

This concept must be taken into consideration when formulating a certification system for sustainable tourism. The Mohonk Agreement called for "minimal impact on and presentation of local culture" to be considered when formulating ecotourism, but this "minimal impact" concept does not make it into the agreement's less stringent set of criteria for sustainable tourism. The Costa Rican CST program seems to follow along the reasoning of the Mohonk agreement in this regard; instead of promoting a minimal impact on and presentation of local culture, it rather encourages the presentation and commoditization of culture with such scoring criteria as "The hotel publicizes and promotes cultural activities and expressions" and "The promotion of the hotel integrates cultural elements from the local region and communities" (*Costa Rica*). With this call for the mass marketing of tourism, Costa Rica is calling for a commoditization of its culture as a marketable product, and runs the risk of devolving its cultural expressions, encouraging cultural homogenization, and in effect undermining one of the foundations of their successful tourism industry. It is far more beneficial and prudent to promote the preservation of local culture on a wholesale level and to put the decision making power in the hands of the local stakeholders and indigenous groups when formulating these policies.

Another aspect of the social impact of tourism that must be addressed in greater detail by the Costa Rican CST program is the issue of gender equity and female empowerment. As a Roman Catholic country with a very patriarchic societal order, Costa Rica can at times adopt a somewhat *machista* mindset. There is a prevalent societal tendency to objectify the female gender, as well as to assign females submissive domestic roles. This practice of inequitable gender roles within a society can be magnified and exacerbated by the presence of the tourism industry. It has been found that societal gender roles will be transferred to and maintained within the tourism industry's labor structures and cultural commoditization practices (Kinnaird and Hall; Swain). However, the tourism industry can serve to empower females at the micro level, with the financial leverage of their earned incomes affording more power in household decisions, better opportunities for business ownership, and heightened levels of autonomy (Gentry; Sinclair).

One such way in which societal gender roles have actually served to empower women and enable economic autonomy in Costa Rica is the case of the Tur Casa program. As Nancy Shumaker explains, the Tur Casa program was a cooperative effort between a group of women that had been providing homestays for American tourists, while agencies kept most of the fees. These women instead chose to partner with the government, which at the time was promoting small business ownership for economic development, and formed the Tur Casa Association, short for *turismo casero*. By 1993, over 225 members offered 400 rooms for homestays throughout the entire country (Shumaker 479). Although this was seen to be a successful example of tourism having a positive economic benefit for women along with increased autonomy, Shumaker still cautioned further research to consider the historical gender division of labor when analyzing reasons for women entering this type of home stay business, as well as to consider the role of this type of program in changing the social fabric of Costa Rica. Since this research note from Shumaker was published in 1995, there has been virtually no mention of the program, and a search of academic and popular literature, as well as the internet, yields few clues as to the fate of this innovative program that has the ability to serve as a template for gender empowerment programs for Latin American tourist destinations.

In the case of the CST program and Costa Rica's strive to provide a sustainable tourism product, attention needs to be given to the issues that surface in the literature on gender's role in the tourism industry. This is namely the fact that although tourism has the power to provide economic benefits to the many females in the labor force, it also has the ability to further reinforce the inequitable gender roles that are held by society at large. The CST only has one gender related item among the scoring criteria survey: item 18.6, with a weight of 1 on a scale of 1-3, asks if "The hotel has established practical actions against sexual harassment and promotes equal opportunity for both genders." The CST must demand more than just a single, minimally-weighted scoring item among its criteria in order to properly address the issue of gender empowerment and how it affects social structures.

Economic Impacts

Despite the fact that some of our previous examples illustrate successful cases of the tourism industry creating opportunities for upward economic mobility, there exists a substantial structural deficiency in the appropriation of tourism profits. This structural deficiency is analogous in many ways to the macro-level effect of gender roles in the tourism industry. In the same way that inequitable gender roles are reinforced by tourism, the financial dependence of the Third World tourist destination is only reinforced and perpetuated by its role in the neocolonial economic structure of the tourist industry. It is widely argued that there is a significant amount of financial leakage in tourism to third world countries. It is estimated that over 50% of tourism revenue is never seen

in the destination country (Lansing and DeVries 282). This is mostly blamed on the power and resources that large multinational corporations have in relation to the smaller, locally owned tourism businesses in developing nations (Mowforth and Munt). The manner in which tourists from the industrialized world have managed to create tourism enclaves and resorts in virtually every corner of the third world can be seen as an extension of neocolonialism. From the perspective of the resident of the third world host country, the tourist comes to their land, consumes, creates waste, damages the ecosystem, and in many cases will never have any direct contact whatsoever with the local population. Barely any of their economic impact is felt in the community. And this all occurs for the sole purpose of maximizing the enjoyment and pleasure of the tourist. From this perspective, it becomes abundantly clear the need to restructure the way that the tourism industry impacts the local host economy. Also, special care must be given to not allow tourism to dominate rural economies, as it has been shown to recently bring a number of unintended negative consequences to Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula (Stem *et al.*).

In this light, the CST program does a well balanced and comprehensive job of including many questions in their scoring criteria concerning the economic impact of tourism. The scoring criterion contains a wide array of 17 items that measure both direct and indirect economic benefits. The main priorities on a direct, micro level are that 60% or more of the employees be local residents, that the administration of the hotel are Costa Ricans, and multiple provisions for staff training and education. Through stressing the training of employees, the CST helps to build social capital among employees which will enhance their chances of future job procurement and advancement. Studies have shown that this will be self-serving for the CST program, as managers with higher level of training in sustainability issues are much more likely to participate in the CST program in the case that they might become entrepreneurial (Rivera and De Leon). On a more macro level, the CST places priority on establishing business links with both locally based and national enterprises, encouraging hotels to buy local furniture and handicrafts for their rooms, purchase equipment, materials, and technology that is produced nationally, and engage in contractual relations with national micro-enterprises. These measures help to ensure that CST certified hotels do not contribute to the unsustainable "leakage effect" that plagues mass tourism, and likely occurs in many of the so-called "sustainable" businesses that adhere to other certification schemes.

Conclusion

As Costa Rica moves ahead in the 21st century, the agenda of sustainability is at the forefront of development efforts. As tourism will undoubtedly continue to reign as the nation's top enterprise and largest employer, it is imperative to infuse the industry with the principles of

sustainability. The Certification for Sustainable Tourism, initiated by the government in 1997, aims to do just that. While much research has examined this initiative since its birth, many questions remain unanswered. As Sharachchandra Lélé points out in a critique of sustainable development: “any discussion of sustainability must first answer the questions ‘What is to be sustained? For whom? How long?’” (614). As the literature suggests, these imperatives must be dealt with at the grassroots level in order to insure that Costa Rica’s sustainable tourism product does not fall prey to the “ecotourism treadmill” that Weinberg described, eventually reverting to unsustainable mass tourism. The government should consider offering a more attractive incentives package for participatory businesses in order to increase the enrollment levels, as well as a more active advertising program to promote the businesses that have strived to practice sustainable tourism. The sustainable tourism movement continues to grow in Costa Rica, and hopefully this will encourage more tourists who enter the country will take into consideration the variety of impacts of their experience. The survival of the nation’s ecology, society, culture, and economic structure may very well rely on it.

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