

# Ecotourism in costa rica essay sample

[Environment](#), [Ecology](#)



Ecological tourism, usually shortened to ecotourism, is a form of tourism which aims to be ecologically and socially conscious. Generally speaking, ecotourism focuses on local culture, wilderness adventures, volunteering, personal growth, and learning new ways to live on the planet; typically involving travel to destinations where the flora, fauna, and cultural heritage are the primary attractions.

Responsible ecotourism includes programs that minimize the adverse effects of traditional tourism on the natural environment, and enhance the cultural integrity of local people. Therefore, in addition to evaluating environmental and cultural factors, initiatives by hospitality providers to promote recycling, energy efficiency, water reuse, and the creation of economic opportunities for local communities are an integral part of ecotourism.

Ecotourism is currently the fastest growing sector of the world's largest service industry, tourism. While environmentalists are weighing the pros and cons of ecotourism, many developing nations are looking to cash in on the growing demand for this new trend in travel. The poor nations of Central America, with its cloud forests, active volcanoes, and wide variety of flora and fauna, appear ideally situated to take advantage of the growing demand for ecotourism with Costa Rica leading the pack.

While many Third World nations are focusing on rapid industrialization and urbanization, Costa Rica has turned to ecotourism as its key to economic development. Although a small country about the size of West Virginia, Costa Rica has incredible biodiversity with scenic beaches, lush rain forest, impressive volcanoes, and exotic wildlife. The nation's tourist industry brings

in about 1 million visitors annually and generates approximately \$1 billion a year, making it Costa Rica's second largest source of income after silicon chip production. (Dulude, 2000).

Some of the main reasons for this development in Costa Rica is its biodiversity, proximity to United States, its political stability and standard of life. Costa Rica's incredible biodiversity offers foreigners a glimpse at mountains and volcanoes, as well as beaches and rainforests, all located within a relatively small region. Costa Rica's diverse flora and fauna are protected in 24 national parks, covering 21% of the country's territory (28% if the nation's Indian reserves are included). (Dulude, 2000).

Costa Rica's proximity to the United States gives its tourist industry a clear advantage over the ecotourism adventures offered in Africa and Asia. Since the United States is the number one "tourist exporter" with American travelers making up approximately 20% of the world tourism market, Costa Rica's access to the North American market is a considerable advantage. The U. S. contributes nearly 49% of Costa Rica's foreign visitors with another 9% traveling down from Canada and Mexico.

Another advantage of Costa Rica's tourism industry is the nation's relatively high standard of living when compared with the majority of developing nations. (Weaver, 1998, 83). Known as the Switzerland of Central America because of its high growth rates, economic stability, and low crime rates, Costa Rica enjoys a per capita GDP of \$6, 700, literacy rate of 95%, and female life expectancy of nearly 79 years. Thus, Costa Rica offers a look at a

way of life distinct from the modernized world, while allowing tourists to largely avoid the sad realities of poverty in the Third World.

The environmental benefits of ecotourism development in Costa Rica have been far reaching. Since 1963 when the first environmental protection reserve was created, Costa Rica's conservation initiatives have expanded to include 70 protected areas or national parks covering 21% of the nation's territory, as well as the creation of Costa Rica's National Park Service in 1970. (Weaver, 1998, 87).

It can be deduced that this incredible increase in the area marked for conservation would not have been possible without the economic incentives of ecotourism. As locals were relocated and logging industries shut down, Costa Ricans were able to turn to the tourism industry for employment. This would not have been possible if Costa Rica had adhered to former protectionist measures that tended to wall off protected areas from the public. (Garen, 2000, 223). Besides offering an economic incentive for conservation, ecotourism has benefited Costa Rica's environment in several other ways.

Without the market demand and political support for environmental protectionism, currently protected areas may have fallen to the demands of farming, logging, or mining industries long ago. (Egan, 2001). Besides the revenue brought in by tourism, protected nature areas also generate income through environmentally sound pharmaceutical research and the sustainable harvest of food products. (Weaver, 1998, 25). For instance, the previously mentioned EARTH research institution has been researching the production

of possible banana byproducts such as banana paper made from the generally discarded banana stalk.

Also, in 1991 the U. S.-based pharmaceutical firm Merck & Co made a deal with Costa Rica's National Biodiversity Institute (INBio) to carry out pharmaceutical research and development in Costa Rica's rainforests. The most interesting thing about this alliance is that INBio is primarily concerned with conservation and their contract with Merck requires that 50% of any royalties from the discovery of new medicines go to Costa Rica's National Park Fund.

One of the main aspects of ecotourism that differentiates it from a day at the beach is that it educates as well as entertains travelers. By experiencing first hand the beauty of the Monteverde Cloud Forest or the majesty of a Red Macaw, tourists may return home wanting to do more to help protect the environment. Informed tour guides and educational pamphlets can incite tourists to become environmentalists, thereby promoting conservation efforts worldwide. (Weaver, 1998, 24).

One of the main benefits of ecotourism is that it brings in foreign exchange without the polluting factories and exploitative manufacturing companies that are spreading throughout the Third World. Instead, the infrastructure demands of an ecotourism industry primarily include the construction of small scale hotels and transportation systems. By and large, Costa Rica has been careful to encourage small-scale development over the construction of high-rise luxury hotels, thereby maintaining a healthy balance between

expanding its tourism industry and protecting its natural resources. (Egan, 2001).

For instance, some architects, such as D. L. Andersen, have begun to specialize in the type of environmentally sensitive construction of small lodges ideal for ecotourism. One of Andersen's designs is the Lapa Rios Resort located on Costa Rica's Pacific coast. To ensure that the resort has as little negative impact as possible on the surrounding environs, Andersen took into account waste management and utilities, as well as the actual building design. Construction of the Lapa Rios Resort necessitated the removal of only one tree, and the completed resort consists of only a main lodge and 14 private bungalows. (Fennell, 1999, 235).

The expansion of ecotourism has undeniably boosted Costa Rica's overall economic development with tourism revenues last year totaling \$1. 1 billion – an incredible figure for such a small nation. (State Department, 2001).

Ecotourism has brought employment opportunities to often previously disadvantaged rural populations, and a significant amount of the industry remains in the form of small scale projects that can be funded by locals.

Currently, 75% of all licensed tour agencies are owned by Costa Ricans and 85% of all of Costa Rica's hotels have fewer than 50 rooms. (Weaver, 1998, 84-85). Besides these general economic benefits to local communities and the Costa Rican economy in general, ecotourism has contributed to the nation's financial well-being in other manners. For example, although the Papagayo Project may be criticized by environmentalists, continuing

development of the resort area is bringing in a lot of foreign investment and creating thousands of jobs for Costa Ricans.

An often overlooked benefit of tourism development in the Third World is that tourism is an excellent vehicle for transferring income from wealthy nations and persons to the poorer sectors of society. Ecotourism is especially effective in this transfer since travelers often venture into remote, economically-disadvantaged regions. The majority of ecotourists have above average income profiles and are willing to pay higher park entrance fees as well as make donations to conservation efforts. (Weaver, 1998, 23, 98). For example, a study of visitors to Costa Rica's Monteverde Cloud Forest found that foreign visitors are willing to pay an average of \$118 to ensure that the park is adequately protected. (Fennell, 1999, 172).

This extra amount that foreign visitors are willing to pay could be collected in the form of an environmental tax on non-citizen ecotourists rather than a voluntary donation. While most tourism is an exchange between the world's wealthier nations, ecotourism has the potential to increase travel to the developing world. Since tourism is a relatively barrier free trade commodity it can be a more effective means of transferring income from the modernized world than other forms of foreign investment, such as export-processing zones, in which profits are largely repatriated.

Ecotourism in Costa Rica has helped diversify the national economy, which previously depended upon the exportation of a few agricultural products, namely coffee, bananas, meat, and sugar, for 65% of its exports. Like many countries in Central America, Costa Rica's small internal market and scarcity

of raw materials make industrialization a slow and difficult process without much room for expansion. (Chant, 1992, 89-90).

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

The number of tourists visiting Costa Rica has increased by at least 6% annually for the past several years. (State Department, 2001). While those invested in the ecotourism sector may celebrate such rapid growth, environmentalists worry that the nation's delicate ecosystem may not be able to withstand an unlimited flow of tourists. (Hicks, 2001). For instance, one of Costa Rica's most popular parks, Manuel Antonio, takes in an average of 1, 000 visitors a day during the high season. The unregulated flow of tourists through the park has taken a toll on its plant and animal life, and as the wildlife has grown accustomed to humans local monkeys have been turned into garbage feeders. (Weaver, 1998, 95).

Another problem is that, in their quest for the exotic, travelers are often attracted to the rarest animals and most vulnerable plant life. It is difficult for park managers to turn paying visitors away or refuse access to the most delicate parts of the forest when the demand is there and the profit-potential great. (Weaver, 1998, 25). For this reason, these tough decisions should be in the hands of Costa Rica's National Park Service Agency, and similar



institutions in other countries, that are better able to look past short-term profit gain to what is best for their country in the long run.

Greenwashing refers to the marketing scheme of attaching a “ green” label to travel services that do not technically classify as ecotourism. (Egan, 2001). As ecotourism has gotten more popular, greenwashing of luxury hotels and tourist centers has become a greater problem that could tarnish Costa Rica’s pristine environmental reputation. To protect against these pitfalls of ecotourism Costa Rica began the Certification of Sustainable Tourism program that aims at identifying the most environmentally friendly parks and resorts.

However, some argue that lenient certification regulations have led to a sort of legitimized greenwashing of undeserving businesses in Costa Rica. For instance, large hotels can be certified with very little effort and without actively promoting conservation efforts. Simply by using biodegradable cleaning products, being careful of waste management, recycling, and avoiding pesticide use, a 500-room hotel can receive a similar rating to a small jungle lodge. (Lizano, 2001).

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

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

Deforestation is a major problem facing Costa Rica today. One of the main reasons is the logging industry. 56% of Costa Rica's land is considered suitable for forestry (Public Policies and Deforestation in Costa Rica). Cutting down trees, extracting, and processing timber in Costa Rica is very wasteful. No valuable trees are left to provide seed sources for future regeneration and many valuable trees are damaged during the logging operations. Of the extracted timber only 54% reaches the factory, and of the timber that reaches the factory only 46% becomes the finished product. Which means only approximately 25% of the original tree is ever used as a product (Public Policies and Deforestation in Costa Rica).

The government has done little to encourage efficient use of forest resources. Low stumpage fees, the price which is paid to cut down a tree, encourage wasteful logging practices. It is cheaper for the logging companies to cut down more trees, than efficiently use the ones they have already cut down. The government has little control, little restrictions, and little authority over the logging industry.

They have not been restricting heavily because it helps Costa Rica's economy. Only recently have they realized that the Rain Forest is so valuable that they can make money by preserving it. Thousands of people come to explore their Rain Forests each year. Today, tourism is Costa Rica's number 1 industry. So now the government is trying to cut back on the logging industry by taxing the industry and putting taxes on each tree cut down.

Another reason and the largest reason for the deforestation of Costa Rica's rain forest is for agriculture and for pasture land. Costa Rica's total land covers about 5.2 million hectares, only about the size of West Virginia. 3 million hectares, 59% of country's total area is under agricultural production. Bananas, the number one export and most important crop, take up 8% of the cultivated land. The second most important crop, coffee, accounts for 22% of the cultivated land and 38% of Costa Rica's export earnings. Rice, sugar cane, and cocoa account for the other agricultural land area.

The other large part for the deforestation is for pasture land for cattle. The only type of cattle that can survive in Costa Rica is the Brahman from India. The Brahman are the only breed of cattle that are resistant to Costa Rican diseases and can stand the extreme climate. About 3 million people live in Costa Rica, and 2 million cattle graze the grassy slopes. That gives you an idea of the amount of land that needs to be allocated to grazing land.

Grazing land that was once dense tropical rain forest. Can you really imagine 2 million cows? Sometimes cattle have been known to attack groups of American tourists innocently taking a walk.

Ecotravel may be accelerating even faster than the tourism industry as a whole, leaving some environmentalists wondering if ecotourism development is being done carefully enough. (Fennell, 1999, 152). Eva Garen argues that most programs are created by elites and foreigners who pay more attention to profits than conservation and are not adequately analyzing an area's ecosystem before going ahead with development. (Garen, 2000, 228).

However, before condemning a nation's entire ecotourism industry, it is important to distinguish between the problems that apply to actual ecotourism projects and the problems of travel service providers that deceive the public by mistakenly identifying themselves as ecotourism. (Weaver, 1998, 22). For instance, the problems facing Costa Rica's ecotourism industry stem chiefly from the latter, which largely can be eradicated by a stricter certification program. Therefore, discounting the environmental benefits of Costa Rica's ecotourism industry would be a mistake since the nation's conservation policies are far better than they would be with any other industry development.

It is estimated that only 30% of Costa Rica is covered by rain forest, compared with 56% of land that is suitable for forests. In 1989, it was also estimated that the rain forest has been cut down at the rate of 500 km<sup>2</sup> per year in Costa Rica alone since 1950. At this rate, the productive resources in the forest will be gone by the year 2016.

First, the loss of the forest disrupts the carbon cycle. The trees take up the carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and with other processes create carbohydrates, fats, and proteins which we need. When the trees are burned

or when they rot, they release the carbon as CO<sub>2</sub>. Since so many trees are being cut down, there is a great deal of carbon released into the air which causes an increase in the atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> concentration. The CO<sub>2</sub> is a huge contributor to the green house effect, and hence, global warming.

Second, there is soil erosion. The trees and vegetation hold the soil in place. There is only a thin top layer of soil and once the rainforest is cut down, there is no foundation and the soil is washed away with the rain. Finally, the most known about consequence is the extinction of species. People hear about it all the time at the zoo, on the news, and from animal activists. Deforestation is destroying organisms' habitats. The animals are forced to move into another area and end up dying because there is not enough resources or room for them to survive. The golden toad for example has not been seen for years and is presumed to be extinct.

The howler monkeys are forced to move and find a new area of the forest to live. They will eventually die from over population and not enough resources. Another example is the destruction of the coral reef. The coral reef is the most complex and variable marine community. An estimated 500 species of fish roam the reefs. Man's actions in Costa Rica and in other parts of the world have threatened the fragile ecological balance. Twenty years ago, a part of Costa Rica, Cahuita, had a magnificent coral-reef. Now most of it is dead because it is covered with silt deposited by mainland rivers.

The silt blocks the zooxanthellae, algae that support the reef by releasing oxygen into the coral tissues, of the sunlight it needs to proceed with photosynthesis and it also clogs the zooxanthellae's pores so the zooxanthellae

cannot breath. Thus the silt, which is created from deforestation, deprives the coral of the oxygen it needs to survive. Where does this silt come from? After an area of rainforest is deforested, there is nothing to hold the top-soil in place so it is carried downstream after heavy rains, and deposited in the ocean killing the coral reefs (Costa Rica Handbook). However, there are twelve major projects currently planned to try and help the coral-reefs.

The problems facing Costa Rica are pressuring the government and the world leaders to help preserve the remaining rainforest. The Costa Rican government has recently begun taking action to preserve the rainforest. A recent study suggests that the rate has decreased to 300 km<sup>2</sup> per year. This is the rate at which primary forests are being cut down. Primary rain forests are the original forests that have been growing for thousands of years. There has been an increase in the growth of secondary forests which is a good sign.

Secondary rain forests are the areas where the primary forest has been cut down and has regrown. So, the forests that were cut down years ago are beginning to grow back, and measures are being taken to protect the primary forests and the new secondary forests. Although a primary forest might be cut down in a short period of time, it takes hundreds of years for it to grow back to the way it was. The government and people of Costa Rica are beginning to understand this.