Evaluating Ecotourism: Principles, challenges and achievements from Tambopata, Peru

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Presentation outline

• What is the nature of tropical rainforest?

• What are the threats to the biome?

• Can we conserve the biome through ecotourism?
  - case study from Tambopata in Peru (South America)

• Conclusions
Tropical rainforest

• evergreen and water-loving in character, at least 30m high, rich in thick-stemmed lianes and epiphytes

_Schimper_ (1903)
High diversity

- TRF harbours over 50% world’s species on 7% land area
- Western Ecuador: 1030 woody plant species on 80 ha
- British Isles: 1380 woody plants in total
‘The hands of people are inflicting more damage on the rainforests in a matter of years than the entire forces of nature have done over geological time scales’

• agents of destruction are:

  - commercial logging
  - animal pasture
  - re-settlement schemes
  - development projects
  - indigenous agriculture
  - commercial agriculture
• ecological understanding at the landscape level can inform conservation management within the tropics

But …

• we need to progress from polarised debates concerning protection versus use, nature versus people

• biodiversity protection occurs in social space

• we need to promote sustainable use of biodiversity as a competitive form of land use
Characteristics of ecotourism

1) Travel to a natural area
2) Minimize visitor impact
3) Involve local populations
4) Promote conservation through environmental and cultural education of tourists
5) Feed economic profit into local environmental protection
6) Maintain financial benefits in the local community to ensure social and economic improvement

Conservation through ecotourism? envisages direct + positive links between conservation and local cultures/incomes
Case study

• in SE Peru the Andes foothills meet the W Amazon creating a hotspot of biodiversity

• protected area dating back to 1990, but since 2000:
  - Bahuaja-Sonene National Park (BSNP): 1.1 mill ha
  - Tambopata National Reserve (TNR): 274,690 ha

• these shelter 1300 species birds, 200 species mammals and ~10,000 species plants
• increasing visitors prompted rise in no. of eco-lodges along the Madre de Dios & Tambopata Rivers:

- 1990: 3 lodges
- 2007: 37 lodges
Rainforest Expeditions (RFE) is a private ecotourism company established in 1992

established by two Peruvian conservationists

aims:

‘to combine tourism with environmental education, research and local sustainable development to support the conservation of the areas in which the company operates’

http://vimeo.com/27020547
Approximate location of Posada Amazonas Lodge:
on the Tambopata River, 25km SSW of Puerto Maldonado
30 room lodge with minimal ecological footprint (1.5 ha)

- constructed from local materials (selectively felled timber, palm fronds)
• number of visitors to the lodge each year is around 7,500 amassing almost 16,000 overnight stays

• visitors from:
  - North America (40%)
  - UK (15%)
  - Germany (15%)
  - Canada (10%)
  - Australia (10%)
  - Holland (5%)
  - Other (5%)

• activities nature based but some expansion into adventure and health

(Kurt Holle pers. comm. 2011)
• lodge owned by Ese’eja Native Community of Infierno and operated in partnership with RFE

• a legal contract was signed by RFE and the community in 1996 producing a democratically elected 10 member Ecotourism Committee

• this 20 year contract guarantees:
  - 60% profits from lodge go to local community
  - decision-making split equally amongst the two partners

• in 2016 the lodge will be passed in its entirety to the local community
• community residents trained to occupy all lodge positions

• nearly all staff working in the lodge are from the Native Community

• apart from guides, each employee works at the lodge for 2 years before passing on the position to another community member

• today around 60 of approx. 180 families of the community are involved in the venture: guides, lodge workers and managers, suppliers
• low impact educational tours are conducted

• tourist-to-guide ratio is 10:1 to minimize impact on environment and wildlife

• guides are a mix of Peruvian naturalists and locals from the Ese’eja community, having taken up apprenticeships
• contract between RFE and the Ese’eja Community involves community responsibility for conservation

• prohibits hunting of wildlife considered a tourism resource: jaguar, otters, harpy eagles, macaws

• community committed not to hunt or cut forest in areas designated for ecotourism

• community project to manage populations of blue and yellow, green-winged and scarlet macaws on the their land
Evaluating ecotourism

- Profits from lodge operation, wages from lodge employment are invested in the community.

- In 2007, profits paid from lodge to community were approximately US$148,000.

- 3/4 divided among community members and remainder used for school construction and investment in education.

- To 2010 average annual growth of the economic impact of the lodge in the community was 17%.
• local community empowered in tourism venture from the beginning

• community expresses and accepts responsibility in the venture: educated to make informed decisions

• investment made in formation of human and institutional capital through community capacity building

• conscientious community environmental protection: passing of authority to local community: fusion knowledge

• interpretive programmes to develop visitor awareness of environment and conservation
but

- there needs to be community consensus in terms of desired evolution (what of heterogeneous communities?)
  - some internal conflicts due to ethnic differences
  - women more limited than men in terms of economic opportunities

- need to minimise economic leakage from community and income disparities between families

- need to avoid commodification of culture
Overall ...

• how does ecotourism rate against ecological protection?

• how does ecotourism cope in a recession?

• what of ecotourism’s global carbon footprint?

• what is the potential for ecotourism to prepare communities to plan a sustainable future for themselves?

• what are the possible knock-on effects of ecotourism in encouraging other anthropogenic land use changes?
  - road construction
  - colonization
  - selective logging
  - agriculture
  - hunting
  - gold mining
Conclusions

• cautiously optimistic that ecotourism at Posada Amazonas is helping to *protect* local rainforest, while meeting the *socio-economic needs* of the Ese’ eja Comm.

• need to progress from the ‘standard’ model of ecotourism

• ecotourism must act as a springboard for critical thinking, local decision-making and sustainability