

Exploring Ecotourism and Sustainability in Costa Rica

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

Korynne Kalen

Thesis Advisor

Dr. William Price

Ball State University

Muncie, IN

June 13, 2020

Expected Date of Graduation

May 2020

Abstract

Costa Rica has become well-known for *ecotourism*, a type of tourism geared toward sustainability by reducing its impact on and giving back to the host community. The concept has gained popularity among international tourism markets, and many companies and businesses in Costa Rica have used the term *ecotourism* to refer to their practices, while their actions may not reflect the sustainability that ecotourism requires. In this thesis, I explore examples of tourism and ecotourism in Costa Rica, analyzing them based on their environmental, economic, and social impacts, to determine whether the current practice of ecotourism in the country is sustainable.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. William Price for supervising my thesis project. His advice and direction were extremely helpful during this process, and I greatly enjoyed working with and learning from him.

I would like to thank Dr. Amy Livingstone for aiding me in exploring ideas for my thesis topic and for her reassuring guidance.

I would like to thank my parents for being sources of support and encouragement through a thesis project in the midst of a pandemic

Process Analysis Statement

The idea for this project arose after I spent time analyzing what is important to me. I took an Anthropology course during my summer study abroad in Costa Rica in 2019 that allowed me to rethink the phenomenon of tourism and its authenticity, as well as analyze its impacts. Dr. Price's GEOG 261 Introduction to Sustainable Tourism course also allowed me to better understand the impacts of tourism and wonder whether there are ways to participate in tourism sustainably. I am passionate about the environment and about travel, and I wanted to take the opportunity that the thesis project presented to learn more about tourism's impacts and analyze the term *ecotourism* in the context of Costa Rica.

Throughout my research process, I changed the direction of my paper a few times. I decided to organize my thesis centering around the three different spheres of sustainability in the context of ecotourism in Costa Rica, including an introduction, an overview of Costa Rica tourism, a description of the three spheres and examples of them, a further analysis, and a conclusion. Further researching sustainability, I frequently came across three specific spheres that were utilized in studies to analyze a practice or business's sustainability: environmental, economic, and social spheres. Because this model is so widely used to analyze sustainability and is recognized and used by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), I decided to analyze ecotourism in Costa Rica through these three spheres. Thus, I divided my main chapter, Chapter III, into subsections for each sphere. I chose this method over other options, such as having a separate chapter for each sphere, because I wanted to maintain this format of organization while recognizing that I was just brushing the surface in each sphere; providing examples and analyzing them. I felt overwhelmed at the prospect of three chapters, one devoted

to each sphere, because I wanted my thesis to be a more fluid response to data I found rather than a full in-depth analysis covering all the bases.

A challenge I faced was keeping my thoughts organized while rooting through so many sources and sorting through so much information. In the end, an annotated bibliography was my best friend in determining what to include and keeping track of what information came from what source.

The thesis process itself was a big challenge for me. I realized quickly how much my perfectionism got in the way of my ability to sit down and work on the project; I harbored a fear that nothing I wrote would be good enough. With the curve ball of COVID-19, focusing when I needed to was difficult, and days with empty schedules hurt rather than helped. However, when I sat down to do the work, it was not as difficult as my brain made it out to be. Working on the thesis was an exercise of time-management as well as learning how to work with myself on such a large project. I discovered some new fears, but also some abilities. I did not know I had it in me to create a project like this one, and completing it is a wonderful affirmation.

Dr. Price was an extremely helpful advisor, allowing me room where needed but offering excellent suggestions and advice along the way. Especially helpful was his reassuring me that it is normal to stress about a thesis, and I was not alone in that emotion.

This stress was also resolved after I got the ball rolling. I was so overwhelmed by the amount of work I perceived, but once I just committed to doing the work in the moment, I was able to get closer to the finish line, and once it was over, I was proud of what I accomplished.

Chapter I

Introduction: Tourism, Ecotourism, and Sustainability

Renowned for ecotourism and efforts in conservation, Costa Rica is a popular destination for tourists who aim to travel sustainably. In an increasingly globalized world, tourism continues to grow, and is “one of the fastest growing economic activities” as well as “one of the largest items in the world’s foreign trade” (Mathieson and Wall 1982, p. 1); though written nearly 40 years ago, these words are as true today, with 1.4 billion international tourists generating \$1.7 trillion in 2018 (UNWTO 2019). The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO 2020) defines tourism as:

A social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. These people are called visitors (which may be either tourists or excursionists; residents or non-residents) and tourism has to do with their activities, some of which involve tourism expenditure.

Tourism’s rapid development has been accompanied by a call to evaluate what its effects might be on the world if not effectively monitored. Annual growth rates of international tourist arrivals in excess of 5% in recent years have raised questions about the tourism system’s sustainability.

Garnering over 3 million tourists in 2019 (Costa Rica News 2020), Costa Rica faces the impacts of tourism that threaten its environment, economy, and society. Ecotourism, if practiced correctly, or with sustainability in mind, gives Costa Rica the opportunity for future empowerment and for putting people above corporations. Costa Rica has frequently been branded as the face of ecotourism and is known for the product internationally (Honey 2008). However, is the ecotourism that takes place in Costa Rica sustainable, or does it lack the consciousness and facets that a sustainable system must possess?

Mathieson and Wall (1982) explain that because tourism is a very person-based phenomenon, composed of so many facets and layers, it is difficult to understand what impacts come from tourism and which develop on their own. With such a large and complicated system that impacts so many different spheres of economic, social, and environmental life, it is important to proceed with caution when considering the expansion of tourism. Consciousness toward sustainability in tourism is vital to allow all parties to benefit moving forward and not just favor a continuation of inequality.

Sustainability is defined by the ability to keep something at a certain level: to sustain something is to give support to, continue, hold up. A universal definition for sustainable development was agreed upon in the Brundtland report in 1987, which stated that “humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Sustainable development is a widely used concept that applies well to tourism. Keeping sustainability in mind is the best way to plan for the future, as one keeps the capacity of society, economy, and environment conditions in mind. So, companies, operators, and any stakeholders “are being sustainable if they don’t hurt the ecosystem services and if they allow for society’s quality of life not to decrease” (YouMatter 2020). Sustainability in development can also be a way to analyze future steps ethically and allow freedom to a system. Purvis et al. (2019, p. 684) write

the core elements of ‘eco-development’ are described as the meeting of ‘essential human needs’, participation, environmental considerations, and the unifying principle of ‘self-reliance’, understood as not just freedom from the structural dependence on other nations, but freedom for the individual from the pressures of political powers or transnational corporations.

Sustainability has frequently been portrayed as an intersection of three different factors, or a three-pillar system: social, economic, and environmental. The concept is also frequently

represented through three intersecting circles, at the center of which is sustainability (Purvis et al. 2019). When one is creating a system, or engaging in tourism, each of these factors should be considered: what is the social, economic, and environmental impact? These three factors have become a standard used in tourism studies, as set by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). There is no certain point of origin for the three aspects, but the concept seems to be a merging of ideas that has come together to form this idea of sustainability over time (Purvis et al. 2019). The UNWTO (2020) offers guidelines for sustainable tourism practices on their website:

Sustainable tourism should 1) Make optimal use of environmental resources that constitute a key element in tourism development, maintaining essential ecological processes and helping to conserve natural heritage and biodiversity. 2) Respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance. 3) Ensure viable, long-term economic operations, providing socio-economic benefits to all stakeholders that are fairly distributed, including stable employment and income-earning opportunities and social services to host communities, and contributing to poverty alleviation.

When each of these factors is carefully considered in the context of a place, it results in a more sustainable solution for tourism that works together with the host community. This process entails consistent analysis of a system and requires responsibility and honesty. Almeyda et al. (2010, p. 804) write “sustainable tourism stresses the importance of continual monitoring of any tourism plan.”

Ecotourism, on a definition-level, is intended to denote sustainable tourism that is future-minded, focused in natural areas and on conservation, all while promoting wellbeing and benefit of local communities (Almeyda et al. 2010). This definition, however, is often overlooked, as multinational corporations and experiences directed toward mass tourists use the term ecotourism to refer to any nature-based tourism, or to come off as practicing sustainability while

the reality is much less so. Because of this discrepancy in practice and theory, there is no consensus over the definition, nor is it likely that there exists a perfect version or practice of the concept (Braun et al. 2015). This vagueness, as well as the companies that seek the label to attract business, has caused a discrepancy in defining and identifying true ecotourism. Braun et al. (2015, p. 358) write:

Critics argue that what counts as eco-tourism – 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.

Similarly, there are different levels of ecotourism. Braun et al. (2015) explain that there is a continuum, conceptualized by Weaver (2001), that exists between soft and hard. Soft ecotourism resembles mass tourism in that it involves larger numbers of tourists taking shorter trips who “expect services and amenities and rely on interpretation from guides as an engagement process with the environment” (Braun et al 2015, p. 353). It is defined by Weaver, as quoted by Braun et al., as a “more passive approach,” referred to as “‘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’” (p. 353), which is what ‘hard’ ecotourists would be more likely to do. Soft ecotourists take the easy road and indirectly support protected areas, but they are less likely to know the impacts of their actions.

In this thesis, I examine tourism and ecotourism in Costa Rica to determine whether the phenomenon of ecotourism is sustainable in its present state. Because of the complexities of defining ecotourism, in this thesis, *ecotourism* or *ecotourist* will mean anyone that believes they are practicing ecotourism or any company/operator/business that is branded as such. This way, I can evaluate the current state of tourism in Costa Rica and analyze where there exists room for

improvement, as well as whether the principles of *ecotourism* are practiced. To investigate whether the form of ecotourism that manifests in Costa Rica is sustainable, I consider sustainability to be what ethically empowers the economic, social, and environmental spheres and is future-minded.

In this thesis I will provide an overview of tourism in Costa Rica, provide examples of ecotourism in Costa Rica, and analyze whether they fit into the sustainable model, and then examine where Costa Rica might improve in sustainability. Throughout the paper I review literature, analyze policy, and recount personal experience from my travels in order to dive into the question of whether ecotourism in Costa Rica is sustainable.

Chapter II

Overview of Tourism in Costa Rica

Costa Rica is a widely known tourist destination, but before it was on many tourists' bucket list, it was a rural farming state. How did the country grow to reach its present level of fame? To analyze ecotourism in Costa Rica, we must first understand the history of tourism in Costa Rica. In this chapter, I explore the rise of tourism in Costa Rica and provide an overview of tourism in the country.

History and Development of Tourism in Costa Rica

Costa Rica's history is rich with transformations as a result of tourism, especially in the latter part of the 20th century. Tourism, alongside foreign investment, skyrocketed after President Arias was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 (Honey 2008). With an emphasis in ecotourism, environmentalism has become a prized part of Costa Rican identity,

whether on a local or national level. While once little known to the world, and a haven for natural wonders and off-the-beaten-path travelers, Costa Rica is now on the desired destination list of many tourists and is renowned for its conservation efforts. At the frontline is its national parks system, with many visitors prizing visits to these locations. However, its national reputation for peace after abolishing its army and a high standard of living have helped to put Costa Rica on the map for international tourists (Honey 2008).

While promoting ecotourism in the country, the Costa Rican government has historically favored overdevelopment and large companies, many privatizing shorelines and creating large resorts that were indistinguishable from any other resorts. Foreign investors had the knowledge and money to play off the market for 'ecotourism,' though those who lived locally were denied the access that should have benefitted them (Horton 2009).

Through the 1960s and 1970s, domestic tourism was high and most foreign tourists were also from Central America. In the 1980s, Costa Rica began to invest in tourism, which included allocating more money to the budget for the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT), which taxed hotels and airline tickets (Honey 2008). In the 1980s, a shift occurred, and visitors began to come in larger numbers from North America and Europe. Foreign investment increased, and USAID, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) all tried to get a stake.

Money was loaned to Costa Rica, but under the condition that they supported the United States' war in Nicaragua, as well as "privatization of government businesses and industries, promotion of exports and foreign investment, and cutting of funds for national parks, the ICT, and other public institutions" (Honey 2008, p. 162). This imposed change allowed foreign investors to capitalize and caused Costa Rica to place less emphasis on its parks and institutions, and more on exports. Costa Rica quickly became more globalized, and with "legislation [passed

in 1984] to provide investment incentives for hotels, air and sea transportation companies, car rental agencies, and travel agencies” (Honey 2008, p. 162), it was well on its way to becoming a large international tourist destination with little to gain from small ecotourism interests.

Contradictions came in the form of the government pursuing “a two-track policy supporting both ecotourism projects and large conventional urban hotels, beach resorts, and cruise ships” (p. 164).

Trends like these are what allowed large multinational companies to invest in Costa Rica. Braun et al. (2015, p. 358) state that: “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.” Behind these changes were incentives to unite tourism and environmentalism, as noted by Braun et al. (2015, p. 358):

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.

Costa Rica indeed took advantage of this opportunity, but as seen earlier, and largely due to outside influence, it continued to favor foreign investment and multinational corporations.

Though the roots for ecotourism are established, Costa Rica’s display of environmentalism and advertising of ecotourism may not be enough to guarantee a sustainable future.

Tourism in Costa Rica continues to grow, hitting over a million tourists in 2000 (Braun et al. 2015) and reaching over 3 million in 2019 (Costa Rica News 2020). The number of tourists increased by 4.1% from 2018 to 2019, which is higher than the global growth of 4% and United

States tourist growth of 2%. Air travel was important for tourists, as the international airports had around 2.4 million arrivals during 2019, and around 1.28 million of the international air arrivals were US citizens (Costa Rica News 2020). Costa Rica is still on the rise today, and is a favorite visited spot of many people with whom I have personally spoken.

Costa Rica draws in millions of people per year largely due to its plethora of pristine natural landscapes, volcanoes, beaches, and attractions. There were many destinations that are popular with tourists that I did not visit during my trip. Perhaps the most well-known national park is Manuel Antonio. Situated in Puntarenas, it harbors beaches and forests as well as wildlife. It is also home to hotels and beach resorts. The most well-known wonder my group did have the chance to visit was the Arenal Volcano in La Fortuna, Alajuela. Until recently it was one of the most active volcanoes in Costa Rica. Another well-known and largely visited volcano is the Irazú Volcano, which is the tallest active volcano in Costa Rica, reaching 3,342 meters (almost 11,000 feet). In Rincón de la Vieja National Park, the volcano that carries its namesake is visited by those hiking a trail that climbs all the way to the top (Law 2020).

Among volcanoes are other natural attractions and national parks. La Paz Waterfall Gardens features a towering waterfall and a large range of wildlife. Braulio Carrillo National Park, just outside San José, offers many mountains, waterfalls, volcanoes, and plentiful wildlife. Monteverde is renowned for being a cloud forest, with unique landscape and plants, and is popular with those wanting to be immersed in nature but still want the comfort of an organized hike. The Osa Peninsula and Corcovado National Park features beaches popular to surfers, snorkelers, and fishers. Tortuguero National Park is considered “off the beaten path” and is popular with surfers and tourists who want to get away to a relatively undisturbed area. It is home to many nesting turtles. Other popular beach towns include Tamarindo, Jaco, Mal País and

Santa Teresa, and Dominical. The capitol, San José, features a beautiful National Theater that is popular with tourists. It was built in the 1890s and built by European artisans who were imported specifically to design the building (Law 2020). The National Stadium of Costa Rica is another important feature of San José, and a few classmates and I had the chance to see a game of fútbol in the city.

Costa Rica's tourism revolves around nature. Though many tourists come for a typical Caribbean experience, many also venture inland into the vast rainforests to witness volcanoes, waterfalls, and wildlife.

Overview of Costa Rica

Costa Rica is a country with incredibly rich natural diversity, so there is no wonder why it attracts millions of tourists each year. From white, brown, and black sand beaches, to its volcanoes, pastures, plantations and rain forests, Costa Rica is home to four mountain ranges and animals from monkeys to macaws to quetzals (I was lucky enough to witness one of the rare quetzals myself). Visitors frequent Manuel Antonio to walk down the beach and in the park in hopes to see a few monkeys. Other sought-after activities include horseback riding, wildlife observing, scuba diving, and canopy tours. Costa Rica has an extensive national parks system, but ironically has a high deforestation rate. Helmuth (2000, p. 3) writes that Costa Rica is “both blessed and burdened with prime natural reserves within a rapidly developing world.”

Costa Rica is home to seven provinces, which are all named after their capitals, besides Guanacaste with a capital of Liberia (see Figure 1). They include Guanacaste, Alajuela, Heredia, San José, Cartago, Puntarenas, and Limón. Cartago was home to the first capital of Costa Rica; San José is now the capital, and fittingly so, as it is where much business, technology, and cultural activity is focused. On a map, Cartago and San José are central, Alajuela and Heredia

border San José on the north. Alajuela is known for fertile lands and a mild climate and produces a large amount of Costa Rica's coffee and fruit. The capital of Heredia has come to be known as the City of Flowers. Its land also highly fertile. On the north Pacific coast is the Guanacaste region, which is rich in culture and ranching history. Puntarenas, covering much of the southern coast, looks out onto the Pacific. It boasts beautiful and slightly less developed beaches. Limón has the most access to the Atlantic Ocean and is home to the majority of Afro-Costa Ricans, who are descendants of Jamaicans that traveled to work on the railroad in the late 19th century. Some Native Americans also call Limón their home in a southern region (Helmuth 2000).



Figure 1. Map of Costa Rica. The country is divided into seven provinces: Guanacaste, Alajuela, Heredia, San José, Cartago, Puntarenas, and Limón. (Central Intelligence Agency, 1991).

The indigenous presence in Costa Rica is often a dismissed one, since there are no archeological structures to marvel at as in other Central American countries; however, the preservation and understanding of natives' history is also due to the lack of archeological study and preservation of artifacts. These were results of prolonged rainy seasons, as well as a deep-rooted marginalization of indigenous people. Records date back to as early as 12,000 b.c.e, and many Native Americans still live in Costa Rica. When the Spaniards arrived, the indigenous groups fought back. They were subjected to disease and enslaved by the Spanish, but Spanish numbers diminished as well, which led to Cartago being the only Spanish settlement until the 1600s. This made Spanish rule difficult to enforce, so Costa Rica's inhabitants worked their own land, which eventually resulted in a heavily agricultural industry (Helmuth 2000). Though Costa Rica now largely profits from tourism, the agriculture sector is still the livelihood of many Costa Ricans.

Impressions of Costa Rica

During my time in Costa Rica, we stayed in the provinces of Alajuela, Puntarenas, and San José. I was surprised to find how many farms there were; my vision of Costa Rica as endless beaches and rainforest was challenged the moment we took our first drive. It was an excellent preface to my expectations being contradicted. I took two courses, one that was an Anthropology course about indigenous tourism, the other a Spanish class about Costa Rican culture and history. Taking the Anthropology course completely changed my understanding of tourism and how it works, especially in the context of tourist interactions with indigenous presentation and identity. I also learned about ecotourism and that tourism had many more impacts than I previously thought. I began to analyze my desire to travel, what the implications were, and if there were ways to do it more sustainably. I wanted to know more about the contradictions I found in what

businesses and operators say they want to achieve, versus what they practice. I wanted to uncover the ironies of tourism and learn more about the place I made my home for a month during the summer of 2019.

Costa Rica is distinct, because it leads the way in conservation, while also falling victim to corporations, resorts, cruises, and more, that can cause damage to the environment, economy, and community. I witnessed the difference in the Costa Rica that is branded to tourists and actual local life, as I compared my experiences in resort-like hotels with my homestays. Costa Rica was a very rural and farming-based state, and much of it still is, but what is seen as *authentic* Costa Rica by outsiders is beachscapes, sun, and margaritas, even though a very small fraction of Costa Rica is actually beach. I heard locals' perspectives on tourism and the US (which received surprisingly glowing reviews from my host families), even though they struggled sometimes with the seasonal and unstable aspect of tourism jobs.

Experiencing Costa Rica as itself (or, maybe the closest I could come, being a foreigner) gave me insight into the lack of honesty in the tourism industry and how experiences are sold. Because I had witnessed authenticity, and experienced friendship with real locals, I understood the value in what *authenticity* and how important being ethical was in tourism. Ecotourism, if practiced sustainably, has the potential to benefit all parties and also allows for our humanness to show through. Something in tourism I have never liked, is that it creates a staging of identity; while there is a certain extent to which this cannot be escaped, if ecotourism is approached as humane and sustainable, it allows people to empower each other rather than to just seek personal gain.

Chapter III

Is Ecotourism Sustainable in Costa Rica?

In her seminal book *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development*, Martha Honey (2008) calls Costa Rica “ecotourism’s poster child,” although this is likely due to the country’s own marketing tactics and less so the practices of most tourist visitors and companies. There seems to be a disparity between the country’s intentions on the surface and its actual practices, including widespread presence of large multinational corporations and a lack of sufficient protection of natural areas. Also, because of the wide usage of the term *ecotourism* in Costa Rica, it can be interpreted and technically practiced by nearly anyone. The vague openness of the term works to Costa Rica’s advantage, allowing it to brand itself the face of ecotourism, while in reality it resembles more of a nature tourism without necessarily upholding the sustainability principles of ecotourism. Though tourism is now the main sector of the economy in Costa Rica (Sánchez-Azofeifa et al. 2003), the associated contradictions suggest that there is still work to be done to make ecotourism a beneficial rather than detrimental system in Costa Rica. This chapter explores examples of environmental, economic, and social impacts of ecotourism to determine whether ecotourism is sustainable in Costa Rica.

Environmental Sphere

Conservation areas of Costa Rica are common destinations for ecotourists who want to participate in the conservation of nature while still enjoying it. Costa Rica has gained international attention for designating 25% of its land within conservation areas (Sánchez-Azofeifa et al. 2003), but the physical isolation of national parks and conserved areas make up a scattered system, and a Level-2 classification offers little protection. Level-1 protected areas, at a higher priority, are more isolated from one another, which creates a lack of biological corridors;

this classification includes national parks and biological reserves and provides absolute protection. A Level-2 classification denotes areas like forest reserves and wildlife refuges. Regulations regarding land cover change in a Level-2 area are more relaxed, meaning they could be more subject to interference from outside forces, and the land that they cover is subject to change (Sánchez-Azofeifa et al. 2003).

One of the biggest issues with Costa Rica's land conservation system is the lack of biological corridors, which means that the physical gaps between conserved areas do not properly allow for movement of species. This distance and lack of connectivity prevents gene flow and promotes a lack of diversity within species that can endanger populations. Without proper gene flow, plant and animal species are also in danger of extinction (Sánchez-Azofeifa et al. 2003). Restricted movement is also problematic for animals that require large habitats. This is why biological corridors are so vital; they allow species to continue thriving and have the space needed to keep up genetic diversity and survival.

Though these gaps remain between conservation areas in the country, Moran et al. (2019) have proposed a plan to connect the conserved areas within Costa Rica by reforesting connecting corridors. Because of low population density and relatively low distance between the protected areas within the plan, the reforestation would have little effect on human populations, while allowing species to thrive and travel effectively. Because ecotourism frequently centers around nature, its preservation is of utmost importance if Costa Rica hopes to continue a sustainable path. If tourists are coming to conserved areas, it is important that the areas still functionally work for the wildlife and to reduce the environmental impact of tourism. Likely, the reforestation of corridors between conserved areas will allow ecotourism to flourish, as it provides a protection for the very nature that ecotourists hope to experience.

With these taken into consideration, what kind of impact do visitors have on these conservation areas? A study done in different protected areas in Belize and Costa Rica shows that even though tourists may have good intentions, their frequent visitation to protected areas may actually cause harm to those areas (Farrell and Marion 2001). Data was collected from the most visited areas and trails from each area to assess visitor impact. The most cited impacts were soil erosion, exposed roots, litter, trail widening, and damage to vegetation and trees. These are relatively common with frequently visited natural areas but show a lack of care taken by visitors and room for more management to guide visitors in good practices. Some of the parks surveyed had artificial walkways to prevent erosion and trampling. Interviews in Farrell and Marion's study (2001) with those managing the conservation areas revealed that the biggest problem was a lack of resources and sufficient funding to properly protect the natural areas. The parks and conservation areas that had the least amount of visitor impact were those who had sufficient funds, borders, and well-established facilities that allowed for more effective conservation. If Costa Rica invested more in its conservation areas, the vitality and preservation of nature would flourish even more and allow for a more sustainable practice of ecotourism.

Pursuing sightings of wildlife is a popular attraction to Costa Rica for tourists, especially those interested in nature tourism, which are often conflated with ecotourists. Costa Rica contains over 5% of the world's biodiversity (World Animal Protection 2019), and so many travel far and wide to witness it, in hopes of spotting sloths, macaws, monkeys, and toucans. However, in recent years, Costa Rica has been facing the issue of tourists taking selfies with animals. Selfies are fine when visitors keep a safe distance from animals, but unfortunately, many sanctuaries allow tourists to directly interact with the animals, even hold them, just to use them as a prop in a selfie. Holding, hugging, or inappropriately interacting with animals can put

them, and humans, in danger, and the Stop Animal Selfies campaign recently launched by Costa Rica hopes to educate people about these risks and discourage tourists from taking the photos and venues from allowing them to do so (World Animal Protection 2019). This phenomenon also raises an interesting point; at what point does wildlife just become a prop to an exotic experience? Wildlife should be enjoyed from afar; keeping distance is part of respecting nature. This phenomenon separates humans from nature, in a way, since the animal is seen as a symbol for the experience rather than appreciated for the bit of life that it represents.

It is possible that this sentiment is present in nature tours as well. It draws the visitor's attention to the exotic, and after all, that is what they are there to see. However, the selling of the tour commodifies the experience of nature, whereas a self-guided tour, for example, might include more self-integration with surroundings. On a tour that my classmates and I took, our attention was drawn to the sensational; colorful birds in the trees, new types of plants, and a towering ceiba tree (see Figure 2). I was fascinated by all of the different types of flora and fauna I saw, and the history and background that the guide provided were valuable and interesting, but I wondered whether I would have still noticed all of the things that were sensationalized on a self-guided tour - and maybe even have respected and appreciated them more.



Figure 2. The ceiba is one of the tallest types of trees in Costa Rica. This tree was one of the features of our hike highlighted by the tour guide, accompanied with an indigenous legend and a healthy dose of sensationalism. (photo taken by author)

While Costa Rica has set a relatively good example in its conservation efforts, the riskiness and lack of permanent protection is reason for concern. The parks and conserved areas are not the only areas at risk. Cortés et al. (2010) show that its coral reefs are at risk as well, exposed to tourist harm. Human contact with reefs, frequent during tourist excursions, has

accelerated the rate of demise and has contributed to coral reef bleaching and destruction as a result of kicking and trampling of reefs while diving or snorkeling. Exploring coral reefs draws many ecotourists due to its natural appeal, so more exposure to human contact puts the reefs at risk. Costa Rica's government only recently passed a decree to aid in preserving coral reefs and protecting them by law (AFP 2019). The decree intends to encourage restoration of coral reefs, and the creation of artificial reefs. Coral reefs absorb most shock from waves and protect land and the people who live on it from natural disasters. For this reason, alongside the importance of preserving and protecting biodiversity, it is important to protect the reefs under law. Though the decree did not exist before the summer of 2019, that the Costa Rican government is taking steps to protect these biomes is an important step in sustainability and reducing the environmental impact of tourism.

Though multinational corporations, resorts, and cruises are major culprits and sources of the large amount of economic leakage, lack of local economic benefit, and environmental detriment, even those trying to reduce their impact based on an ecotourist definition demonstrate some of the contradictory motives found between ecotourism and profit. I stayed in an *eco-lodge* during my study-abroad experience in Costa Rica, a term for a hotel that strives to adhere to the principles of ecotourism (Almeyda et al. 2010). It shares certain characteristics with hotels, such as providing a comfortable environment for guests and still appealing to many different types of tourists, but the intentions and principles are different. Even with their adherence to sustainable principles, eco-lodges, because of growing amounts of ecotourism, could potentially lead to overdevelopment and cause environmental and social impacts in the areas they inhabit.

In my visit to Costa Rica, we had the opportunity to stay in an eco-lodge. Upon arrival, the owner spoke to us about his love for the environment and conservation. He mentioned his

efforts to rebuild an ecosystem on the land that had been completely razed before his purchase, developing it into a rainforest with plentiful wildlife, a private beach, and a natural spring for swimming, along with sustainably-furnished eco-lodge and an encouragement to save electricity advertised in each bedroom. The eco-lodge boasts a plethora of wildlife barely an arm's length away, thanks to the rebuilt ecosystem, and an impeccable view of the sea (see Figures 3 and 4), and maybe even toucans in the morning if you are lucky.

Despite the eco-facade presented by this environmentally-friendly lodge, one of the workers informed us that, in response to reviews, the owner had decided to construct a swimming pool, which would set them back years in terms of sustainability. This, coupled with other suspicious factors, such as the burgers and fries offered to guests as an alternative to the local cuisine, showed less of a passion for conservation and sustainability, and more of a tendency to cater to higher-income travelers looking to feel better about their impact, who still end up wanting swimming pools as an amenity. There exists a conflict between prioritization of economic gain and sustainable development, even though underlying intentions may be good.

Braun et al. (2015, p. 353-354) write,

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.



Figure 3. A view from our eco-lodge on the Pacific coast of Costa Rica, with a view of Marino Ballena park. The piece of land jutting out into the ocean was thought to look like a whale's tail, so the park was named Marino Ballena, or marine whale. (photo taken by author).



Figure 4. A view from the balcony of our eco-lodge on the Pacific coast. The eco-lodge featured a private beach, as well as a freshwater spring for swimming. (photo taken by author).

Though any type of lodging may have its unsustainable side, *eco-lodges* are a unique opportunity to practice ecotourism. They are a sustainable alternative to traditional hotels that, though they may claim to support sustainable causes and even partner national park systems (Almeyda et al. 2010), represent a greater economic stratification and can have a grave impact on their surroundings. Eco-lodges offer a way for tourists to travel (somewhat) sustainably and give back to the communities where they reside.

In a study done in the Nicoya Peninsula, the Punta Islita eco-lodge embodies many of the characteristics and principles of ecotourism (Almeyda et al. 2010). The lodge maintains an active effort to invest in the community and conserve the environment by reforestation and preserving natural areas, as well as create community infrastructure and programs for locals such as art education, gender pay equality, and offering employment opportunities. The lodge adheres to all three principles of sustainability, promoting social, economic, and environmental growth. However, even with all its effort, visitors of the eco-lodge who were surveyed, ranked responsibility, sustainability, local arts and crafts, lower than they ranked the aesthetic value, natural beauty, and friendliness of the staff. The visitors of the lodge were not necessarily seeking a place to stay that was responsible, but rather, naturally beautiful and pleasant.

This example raises an interesting point, because as discussed in Braun et al. (2015), the ‘hard’ ecotourists are fewer in number to the ‘soft’ ecotourists, who usually are seeking an experience where they can observe nature. In this way, the Punta Islita eco-lodge caters to those desires, when in reality it fulfills the criteria for hard and soft ecotourism. However, its biggest market is those ‘soft’ ecotourists or even other types of tourists acknowledging it for its aesthetic beauty. Does this mean there is not as much of an external demand for ecotourism as there may seem? Has ecotourism been reduced to being nature tourism?

Regardless, if Costa Rica hopes to benefit its citizens and empower them socially and economically, while conserving the environment, eco-lodges like the Punta Islita lodge are vital to this empowerment, whether there is a specifically niche demand. Punta Islita's allocation of funds to benefit the local community shows promise for growth and collaboration, which are ideal for any business, but especially vital in a market that is so reliant on tourism.

Economic Sphere

Tourism is a very important market in Costa Rica, supporting much of its job force and contributing significantly to its GDP. The WTTC 2018 report of Travel & Tourism in Costa Rica details that the direct contribution of Travel & Tourism in 2017 was 5% of all GDP, and the total contribution was 12.9% of GDP. Direct GDP refers to the internal spending, or total spending on Travel & Tourism, and government internal spending. Its total contribution takes into account wider impacts, or indirect and induced impacts: indirect contribution includes jobs supported by Travel & Tourism, and induced contribution includes GDP and jobs influenced by those employed indirectly and directly by the Travel & Tourism industry. Travel & Tourism's direct contribution to employment in 2017 was 5.1% of all employment, supporting 104,500 jobs. Total contribution to employment, which includes jobs indirectly supported by tourism, made up 12.5% of all employment in 2017. This number is projected to increase to 14.6% of total employment by 2028. Costa Rica's development, as well as the importance of tourism to its economy, are evident in these statistics.

In their classic book on tourism impacts, Mathieson and Wall (1982) write that researchers' immense focus on the economic sphere, likely due to its knack for measurability, has caused a deficit in the study of the social and environmental spheres. Indeed, government, corporate, and academic research continues to prioritize understanding and promoting the

economic benefits associated with tourism. Despite the fact that it is readily measurable, the economics of tourism is unique because tourism is an invisible export industry. Mathieson and Wall (1982, p. 38) state that “it is one of the few industries in which the consumer actually collects the service personally from the place where it is produced.” This means that no direct freight costs are incurred, besides when transportation facilities are owned by the destination.

Tourism as a system has its ups and downs. It has many economic perks, but normally less for locals and more so for those running the resorts, cruise lines, and other corporations.

According to Horton (2009, p. 98), small-scale ecotourism,

on the Osa Peninsula, however, an important degree of economic control has shifted toward North Americans and Europeans, who, in a pattern that extends across Costa Rica, control substantial portions of the peninsula's coastal, ocean-view, and forested land in private reserves that average 440 hectares (COBRUDES, 1997). Built upon the environmental protection measures of the 1970s, ecotourism has further reinforced the trend toward increasingly limited and externally controlled local access to land and natural resources.

Businesspeople interviewed in Horton's (2009) study felt exploited by foreigners, since they controlled the land and allowed locals little wage-earning opportunity. While others may be more small-scale and have shifted power and opportunity into local hands, examples of locations such as the Osa Peninsula show that it is not universal. Economically, the power and payment is often in the hands of foreigners. This outcome has resulted in loss of land control from locals, as well as their access to resources. Land value doubled every year and real estate prices skyrocketed on the Osa Peninsula, and thus locals had less and less participation in the land that was once under their control.

On the bright side, ecotourism jobs, at least in the Osa Peninsula, provided high wages, usually when they required training and high skill levels. However, “during the high season work hours may be long, with cooks, for example, reporting shifts of 12 hours or more, while during

the rainy, low season a number of the eco-lodges temporarily lay off employees” (Horton 2009, p. 98). This statement highlights a hidden reality of tourism employment; while generated job numbers may be high, the statistics obscure that many are low paying, highly seasonal, and subject to external market fluctuations. The instability of work is a gamble and makes working in ecotourism risky, even though it is meant to empower local communities economically.

Koens et al. (2009) describe some of the economic impacts of a few different regions of Costa Rica. In Monteverde, a high amount of money collected from tourist spending stays in the region. Handicrafts that are sold are also produced in the region, keeping the wealth in the local economy; tourism has been able to diversify the economy as a result. In the Manuel Antonio region, on the other hand, there is little local ownership of tourist facilities, which results in a lot of economic leakage, with money quickly leaving the country. There are few handicrafts produced in the region, and the links between tourism and other sectors of the economy are not very strong. Additionally, both regions undergo inflation, which makes it more difficult for locals to have access to what they need. In Tortuguero, package tours are popular, so a lot of money is made outside of the region, and locals do not get much share. However, tourism has given opportunity to local guides and brought more wealth into the local economy. These are just a few examples of how tourism impacts the economy in Costa Rica. How much wealth stays in the economy is largely dependent on how involved the locals are in its generation.

In a study of Monteverde, a popular tourist destination, tourism has resulted in food insecurity for many locals (Himmelgreen et al. 2012). With a local economy almost entirely devoted to tourism, and half of all households having at least one person working in tourism, it has become primarily dependent on this type of unreliable and often seasonal work to make a living. On top of that, because market owners cater to tourists’ ‘exotic’ tastes and little food

comes from local sources, prices have gone up. Often, these marketplaces are the only source of food for families, since the economy has shifted away from agriculture, and with inflation, often locals cannot afford to eat. Of those surveyed in the study, around 73% of households were classified as being food insecure (Himmelgreen et al. 2012). This food insecurity was also found to be linked to anxiety and depression, as well as diseases like diabetes and hypertension. Even the mere presence of tourism, regardless of tourist intentions, has negatively affected local communities and access to basic needs.

The Costa Rican economy heavily relies on tourism as its primary source of income, meaning that people are constantly confronted with it every day. Himmelgreen et al. (2012, p. 359) reported that in Monteverde, about 50% of families surveyed were “involved in the tourism economy.” On top of that, even more do work that interacts with tourism: agriculture, road work, etc. This results in a large dependency on tourism, as well as a frequent interaction with the tourist economy. As tourism is subject to decline from external and unpredictable forces--as illustrated by the current pandemic--over-reliance on tourism is dangerous.

I recognized this high level of awareness of tourism in my study abroad experience as well; during my visit with my first homestay, I met three family members related to my host family who worked in tourism. Two were fluent in English, complemented by their frequent interaction with English-speaking tourists. One conveyed the message to me that sometimes the most lucrative and accessible jobs possible are in the tourism industry because of its prevalence. That being said, tourism jobs are often seasonal and suffer with rise and fall in tourist flow. Therefore, not only is there a risky over-reliance on tourism jobs and employees, but many households have at least some interaction with the tourism system in Costa Rica. With tourism incorporated into the daily life of so many families, social attitudes and behaviors are bound to

change. From my observations, tourism is somewhat glorified as a great and necessary job market, but also a source of frustration due to its intense seasonality and lack of dependability.

Social Sphere

As well as environmental and economic impacts, tourism has numerous social impacts. Ecotourism is intended to empower communities and leave a positive effect on locals rather than a negative one (Almeyda et al. 2010). Mathieson and Wall (1982) write that the contact between two groups with different cultures and their subsequent changes is the most widely studied aspect of social change that occurs due to tourism. Tourism puts groups of people that would not usually interact into contact with one another, and each group undergoes cultural change. Tourism can also modify a niche ecological aspect of the host society or cause a process of change and adaptation in the host society, which are two aspects that are less studied in the field but could still be subject to tourist influence. Because sociality is so fluid and dynamic, it is difficult to quantify how much change occurs because of tourism and how much is naturally occurring change within the host society (Mathieson and Wall 1982). Because of this, it is possible to attempt to analyze the social impacts of ecotourism, although it may not ever be possible to ascertain the origin of every change, whether caused by tourism or not.

Social impacts of ecotourism vary depending on location and the type of tourist/local interaction. In areas like Tortuguero, where package tours are common, there is limited contact between the visitor and the local, although tourism's contribution to development has improved education, infrastructure, and medical facilities. An alienation can also take place as locals become more and more reliant on tourism jobs; tourism and associated immigration has been linked to the diminishing of community organization. In Manuel Antonio, cultural disintegration

has even been perceived. However, tourism has also supported local culture in places where tourists interact more with locals, as in the Monteverde region (Koens et al. 2009).

Stocker (2007) describes an example of social change in Costa Rica as a result of tourism that occurred within a population of indigenous people. In the past, the Nambu  suffered from lack of job availability, as well as racism and prejudice from other locals. Utilizing the growing demand for tourism to their advantage, they found a way to market their identities as a means for empowerment while also gaining revenue. Nambu  women began to perform dances for visitors to create a tourist experience that would earn them money, as well as allow them to overcome some of the local racist attitudes. Tourism opened up jobs for the dancers, but also created jobs for taxi drivers who drove the women to and from their location, and for women who would make their dresses. Tourism not only had beneficial social impacts on these people, it also impacted them economically by providing new job opportunities.

Interestingly, the dance they performed was not a traditional, indigenous dance, but instead the Baile Tipico, or ‘typical dance,’ that is standard to Costa Rica (Stocker 2007). Likely, the tourists would perceive this as a traditional indigenous dance, regardless of its origin. According to the *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology* (Barnard and Spencer 1995, p. 829), tourists seek an authentic experience that is also exotic. This search for authenticity also creates ‘staged authenticity,’ which can “lead to a cultural renaissance of native traditions, to a renewal of ethnic consciousness, and even to the invention of new traditions and new identities.” In the context of “staged authenticity,” tourists are presented with aspects of culture that they “expect to see” rather than attributes inherent to the culture. Cultural traits are modified to what is most appealing to the consumer.

In this situation, the local Nambué women have created new traditions and transformed identity while also strengthening it in a way, presenting the fabricated tradition as a phenomenon perceived as “authentic” by the tourist. In this way, both parties benefit, but in different ways. Barnard and Spencer (1995, p. 829) state that tourism connotes an interaction between strangers who act for personal gain on either end, and since the relationship is not a lasting one, their “transactions... [are] open to mutual attempts at manipulation for short-term gains (a situation often defined as being cheated or exploited).” This is not to say that every tourist-local interaction is exploitative, but that can often be a result, as each side is acting on his/her own personal interest and intends to gain something from the other. Sometimes that presents itself in the form of the tourist seeking an authentic experience, and the local seeking to provide something that can be perceived as “authentic” by a foreigner.

While the market for dancing for these native women may be a preservation of identity and culture, it is also the essentialism of indigenous culture transformed into a commodity for the tourist. On the surface, this may appear as a type of sustainable ecotourism because of its ability to connect tourists with the local, as well as provide economic benefits. Tourism does benefit the community by providing job opportunities, which fulfills the economic sphere of sustainability; however, due to the nature of the performances, the relationship between tourist and local is merely one of a transaction rather than a genuine effort to connect with and empower indigenous people of the community and learn something new.

I witnessed some of this same essentialism firsthand while in Costa Rica. On an excursion through a hotel we stayed at, we attended a “cultural experience” presented by indigenous people. Our professors wanted us to engage and try to understand the experience, observe and ask questions. What we encountered was a presentation of indigenous identity

designed for a tourist eye. We sat around a smoldering fire pit under the straw roof of a large hut: we were offered traditional herbs and drinks to try, we shot a bow, and we passed around “traditional” garb. The women giving the presentation were wearing clothing made from grass and leaves and wore no shoes, while the man collecting money for painted souvenirs (see Figure 5) wore everyday clothing and sandals. One of my professors asked one of the women if they live near the hotel. In fact, they did not live near the hotel at all; they lived in a town further north, where they lived in regular housing as opposed to the hut we were sitting in, and had trouble accessing education, healthcare and more due to their indigenous identities. Not only was this presentation not a representation of their daily life, it may have been a hard-to-come-by and rare employment option.



Figure 5. Handcrafted souvenirs hung on the walls of the structure in which we witnessed the ‘indigenous experience’ provided through our hotel. (photo taken by author)

The commodification of identity was obvious during the experience. The crafts were hand-created, although some of the materials may not have come directly from the earth as was implied. Indigenous customs, clothing and lifestyle were sensationalized and turned into a product for the viewer; only the women were dressed in traditional garb. These aspects of the presentation showed that the experience was the result of a commodification of culture for a tourist eye. Indigenism had been reduced to a souvenir one could whisk home in his pocket, to

later hang on a shelf, reminiscent of an encounter with the *other*. Because we expect this to be the representation of indigenous identity, that is what is sold to us, because it is profitable. The reduction of culture to physical objects allows us to continue seeing other cultures, especially indigenous ones, as something other than ourselves, when really, ecotourism in its best practice would allow the visitor to learn how similar she is to the people she visits.

This aspect of tourist relationship to the local, as well as the presentation of indigenous identity, are complicated ideas that delve into anthropology and sociology. Grasping every implication is near impossible due to the complex nature of humanity and culture, but most important remains respecting humanity and acting ethically. Asking people questions and engaging authentically with locals are ways that *ecotourists* can actively learn and engage with host communities. Also, volunteer work and other acts that aim to benefit locals are *ecotourist* activities that are very sustainable. It uplifts both groups and creates greater opportunity for growth in the future.

Chapter IV

Analysis

At the basis of ecotourism should exist the concept of constant self-evaluation. Sustainability is not a one-time phenomenon but a continuous process in which governments, companies, and individuals participate in self-assessment and are future-minded and ethical. This thesis addresses the question of whether ecotourism in Costa Rica in its present state is sustainable. Human error and imperfection are inherent, and bleeds into human creation. The concept of sustainability is man-made, as is whatever system humans create to comply with these

principles. However, actualized sustainability can be attained, and while no system can ever be perfect, it can certainly strive to be sustainable.

As we have seen, ecotourism itself is not perfect. In fact, far from perfect. Though idealist in nature and sustainable in intention, its actual practice tends to be watered down and untrue to ecotourism's principles. Not exclusively in Costa Rica, it has been used as a branding tool for companies to encourage nature tourism but still be able to practice harmful habits, and used as a label for tourists who want to explore nature but may still want to remain comfortable and lack the consciousness that ecotourism requires. In ecotourism, there exists the tension between how it is used and what it wants to be. Ideally, those practicing ecotourism will act intentionally and carefully, keeping their social, economic, and environmental impacts in mind and seeking to benefit destinations. Unfortunately, right now, ecotourism is often not being practiced in this way. Companies often take an easy and more lucrative route that does not require taking the pillars into consideration, and many 'ecotourists' are just seeking an exotic vacation.

Ecotourism certifications, primarily the *Certificación para la Sostenibilidad Turística*/Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST), aim to reduce the amount of 'greenwashing,' or false claiming to be eco-friendly/ecotourist that occurs. Established by the ICT (Costa Rican Tourism Institute), it certifies businesses for free if they comply with standards. CST auto-evaluates businesses based on management, economic and cultural impact, environmental impact, and specific indicators (CST 2019). Almeyda et al. (2010, p. 805) writes,

Ecotourism will have the best chance of maintaining responsible actions when backed by clear consistent standards. The Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) developed in Costa Rica, a good example of such a system, monitors a variety of social and environmental impacts including emissions, conservation and protection of fauna and flora, and cultural and economic impacts.

The CST has certified hundreds of hotels, tour operators, and even parks, rating them at 5 different levels based on how they scored on the certification (CST 2019). However, the CST has “been criticized for overlooking smaller businesses and failing to protect the environment and local communities within its promotion of ecotourism” (Ingham 2018). Because the certification is free and comes out of taxes, larger ecotourist businesses often benefit much more than small businesses, who are not “adequately notified about the CST option,” though still paying for it (Ingham 2018). Thus, bigger businesses are still winning out. Because more return likely comes back to the government as a result of favoring larger businesses, it makes sense that they are the ones who come out with certifications; however, investing in smaller businesses is very important in order to localize funds and grow already-existing communities.

One issue with room for improvement is a misalignment of intentions of operators and law. While praised for environmental and social consciousness, many ecotourism operators in Costa Rica “were not significant players in raising environmental awareness among communities, and that legal restrictions were more influential than tourism in reducing deforestation and illegal hunting” (Honey 2008, p. 89). In a study of communities surrounding the locations of ecotour operators, it was found that “ecotourism will stand a greater chance of positively influencing conservation and development in Costa Rica ‘if tourism operators demonstrate a firm commitment to seriously embrace and advanced conservation strategies and ensure meaningful local involvement’” (Honey 2008, p. 89). Here, operators were using the term ecotourism to brand their product but lacked the characteristics and intentions that would actually make it so. Though laws and regulations caused them to act with conservation in mind, it was out of necessity rather than a desire to practice truly sustainable tourism. Investing in the

local and practicing active conservation will ensure a sustainable future path, as well as create many more benefits as a result of business success.

Costa Rica leads the way in conservation in many ways. Even with its complicated history with deforestation rates and land laws, it still attempts to preserve 25% of its land under law. From examining its approach to the environmental impacts that tourism has, Costa Rica seems to do well in terms of environmental sustainability. As a whole, it protects reefs, animals, and areas under law. Because ecotourists often opt for conservation areas and parks, their visits are integral to preservation by providing funds that can go towards their protection. Costa Rica also aims to be carbon-neutral by 2050 (Climate Action Tracker 2020). “The strategies include electrifying the public transport system, energy efficiency measures in industry, transport (incl. freight), and buildings sectors, and improved farming practices and measures in the waste and agriculture sectors” (Climate Action Tracker 2020). If Costa Rica follows through, it would result in being compatible with a “Paris Agreement compatible range,” which means it would be capable of holding off warming below 2°C and limiting it to 1.5°C. Personally, the country’s up-and-coming reputation for sustainability was one of the reasons I wanted to visit. Costa Rica’s stride toward sustainable development draws eco-conscious tourists and showcases its dedication to the environment and the future.

Perhaps a good way to increase effectiveness of the conservation that has room for improvement on a management end (Farrell and Marion, 2001) would be to increase prices. Since many travelers to Costa Rica likely have money to spare, extra funds from their end could allow for proper management of parks and help reduce human impact on lands and habitats. More funds and protection from the government would also aid in this sustainable consideration. Also, the lack of ecological corridors poses a potential threat to the environment, so these funds

from visitors could be utilized to form corridors to connect already existing parks with sub-corridors, fulfilling the vision of Moran et al. (2019).

That Costa Rica leads the world in conservation tactics and attempts to reduce environmental impact is something to be celebrated. Though not perfect, it certainly aims to provide protection over its lands and utilizes ecotourism to achieve that end. However, there is still the conflict of favoring large businesses and multinational corporations over the small and local (Braun et al. 2015), those which often need the most support. Not only do large hotels, resorts and cruises pose threats to the environment by dumping sewage and damaging coral reefs, they also cause a lot of economic leakage in which the wealth earned does not go back to the local economy, but instead returns to the hometown and hands of whoever happens to be in charge of the mass tourist outlet (Koens et al. 2009).

The best way for tourists to benefit local economies is likely to stay at accommodations that are smaller and more community-ingrained and participate in local tours as opposed to those offered by multinational hotels or resorts. This would ensure that the money returns to the community and does not leak out of the local economy to elsewhere, and that there are greater opportunities for local power and control (Horton 2009, p. 98). Or, to actively seek out accommodations that put energy and resources into the local economy and invest in infrastructure and employ locally (Almeyda et al. 2010), so funds return to the local community. For ecotourism to be sustainable, it must boost the economy in a way that benefits locals.

Social benefits are more difficult to perceive and identify. The Punta Islita lodge demonstrates an excellent model for community empowerment, as it has created a community-based foundation to accompany the hotel. They have a foundation rooted in investing in art education and community infrastructure (Almeyda et al. 2010). Punta Islita directly gives back to

the community, not only promoting positive tourism impact on the social sphere of local communities, but also allowing new opportunities for growth and learning for both tourist and local. The study also found that levels of alcoholism, drug addiction and prostitution had diminished after the community-based foundation had been established. It seems to have succeeded in uplifting the local community based on these results. Almeyda et al. (2010, p. 805) says that the lodge has “invested in the local communities through art education, micro-enterprise development, local workforce training and promotion, economic equality for women and children through handicraft production and general infrastructural improvements.” Because of its community empowerment, as well as its focus on reforestation and employing locally as well as investing economically in the local community, the Punta Islita lodge is likely as eco-tourist as a business could be. It serves as a great example and shows the benefits of putting effort back into the host community while also being able to host tourists.

Sustainability does not look like one thing. It shapeshifts and conforms to whatever system it hopes to improve. Sustainability is much more complex than just a signifier of moving forward using less plastic or being climate conscious. It entails planning for the future and allowing people and businesses to enrich each other. Tourism, a very people-based market and system, can have its detriments, as human actions have the potential to sustain a place or contribute to its demise.

Chapter V

Conclusion

Humans are imperfect beings. What we touch and what we create is never perfect. However, sustainable practices and focuses can help us get as close as possible to that ideal. At the core of sustainability is being ethical: acting with respect toward the environment, the economy, and the community. Costa Rica contains examples of places and people who act with these intentions, as well as those that do not. Ecotourism itself is not enough to create sustainability for the future, but rather a tool that is available for human use. As tourism is a well-established market in the world, if it should take place, finding out the most sustainable way forward ought to be the responsibility of anyone wishing to engage in tourism. Since tourism impacts so many sectors of life, acting with consciousness is of utmost importance.

Ecotourism, as-is in Costa Rica, is not yet at that point. There are still many companies that use the brand of ecotourism but do not practice its principles. The CST provides opportunities for places to publicize their ecotourist intentions, but some eco-lodges and other companies that are certified do not practice what they preach. Also, the CST overlooks many small businesses that could have even more potential for empowering social spheres and communities but do not have as much access to certification (Ingham 2018).

All things considered, Costa Rica is a front-runner in environmentalism, and ecotourism, though much change is needed to ensure that ecotourism infrastructure matches up with its values. Mass tourism will likely exist for a long time, but a national push for prioritizing ecotourism's principles could help draw people in that aim to benefit the place they go and not only gain from their experiences. Many examples of 'best practice' already exist: the Punta Islita

lodge demonstrates how to effectively create a positive environmental, economic and social impact and follows ecotourism principles (Almeyda et al. 2010), and the Stop Animal Selfies campaign shows how to spread awareness about potential threats (World Animal Protection 2019).

Ultimately, I believe that ecotourism must be a combination of the practice of the host, as well as the intention of the visitor. When both sides have good intentions, each has sustainability in mind and is more able to achieve it when they are both on the same page. The Punta Islita lodge facing destructive visitors with no respect for nature or local culture would suffer negative impacts. The Stop Animal Selfies campaign would be nothing without people behind it or people to listen. Ultimately, when people *and* businesses take the consequences of their actions into account, they will likely make decisions that are more sustainable when they realize how far their impact might reach.

The CST is a great start for ecotourists who want to travel sustainably, though it may not highlight smaller businesses. Its certification allows for some direction in what hotel, tour, or park to choose that is making conscious efforts in sustainable development. Its extensive list gives tourists many options to choose from that will help reduce their impact while traveling. The certification also has the valuable role of providing easy access to this information, rather than placing the responsibility for research with tourists. In my opinion, best practice for businesses is to seriously consider impacts of their development and act intentionally with regards to their surroundings. Respect and knowledge of the host community is of utmost importance, which is why I believe it is best to seek out businesses that are run locally, since the businesspeople likely already understand the surrounding area. If not local, businesspeople should aim to learn how to work alongside the host community and find ways to benefit them as

well, to ensure that their businesses leave a positive impact. Knowledge of conservation is also important, and conserving plant and animal life rather than causing its destruction is vital. Reforestation, proper waste management, and discouraging guests from getting in direct contact with animals are a few ways that businesses can protect the environment. Hiring employees locally and buying local goods also allows some of the wealth to return to the local economy.

In a world facing a pandemic and the threat of global warming, consciousness and sustainability are of utmost importance to set us up for a future that is safe and equitable for everyone. In tourism, ensuring that we are benefitting where we visit is a small thing that can make a big impact on people's lives and create a better future. Sustainability is important because it allows us to confront our actions and ask ourselves what we can do better, instead of becoming stuck inside a groove of what is easy or what benefits only us. Every human action has its consequences, and reevaluating tourism and how it is practiced allows us greater control over those actions and ensures that they have a positive effect on the world around us.

Bibliography

- AFP. (2019, June 9). *Costa Rica aprueba proteger sus corales*. LaPrensa. Retrieved from https://www.prensa.com/salud_y_ciencia/Costa-Rica-aprueba-proteger-corales_0_532296_7722.html
- Almeyda, A. M., Broadbent, E. N., Wyman, M. S., & Durham, W. H. (2010). Ecotourism impacts in the Nicoya peninsula, Costa Rica. *International Journal of Tourism Research*, 12(6), 803-819.
- Barnard, A., & Spencer, J. (2002). Tourism. *Encyclopedia of Social and Cultural Anthropology*. Taylor & Francis. 828-830.
- Braun, Y. A., Dreiling, M. C., Eddy, M. P., & Dominguez, D. M. (2015). Up against the wall: ecotourism, development, and social justice in Costa Rica. *Journal of Global Ethics*, 11(3), 351-365.
- Brundtland, G. H., Khalid, M., Agnelli, S., Al-Athel, S., & Chidzero, B. (1987). Our common future. *New York*.
- Central Intelligence Agency. (1991). Costa Rica. Retrieved from <https://loc.getarchive.net/media/costa-rica-1>
- CST. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.turismo-sostenible.co.cr/>
- Climate Action Tracker (2020). Costa Rica. Retrieved from <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/costa-rica/>
- COBRUDES (Consejo Bruqueño Para el Desarrollo Sostenible). (1997). *Diagnóstico socioeconómico de la región Brunca*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Cortés, J., Jiménez, C. E., Fonseca, A. C., & Alvarado, J. J. (2010). Status and conservation of

- coral reefs in Costa Rica. *Revista de Biología Tropical*, 58, 33-50.
- Costa Rica News (2020). "Tourism in Costa Rica Increased 4.1% in 2019. Retrieved from <https://thecostaricanews.com/tourism-in-costa-rica-increased-4-1-in-2019/>
- Farrell, T. A., & Marion, J. L. (2001). Identifying and assessing ecotourism visitor impacts at eight protected areas in Costa Rica and Belize. *Environmental Conservation*, 28(3), 215-225.
- Helmuth, C. (2000). *Culture and customs of Costa Rica*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Himmelgreen, D. A., Romero-Daza, N., Amador, E., & Pace, C. (2012). Tourism, economic insecurity, and nutritional health in rural Costa Rica: using syndemics theory to understand the impact of the globalizing economy at the local level. *Annals of Anthropological Practice*, 36(2), 346-364.
- Honey, M. (2008). *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?*. Island Press.
- Horton, L. R. (2009). Buying up nature: Economic and social impacts of Costa Rica's ecotourism boom. *Latin American Perspectives* 36.3: 93-107.
- Ingham, G. A. (2018, September 29). Policy Analysis: Redefining Costa Rica's Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) Program. *Medium*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/@grace4nature/policy-analysis-redefining-costa-ricas-certification-for-sustainable-tourism-cst-program-33c45f392872>
- Klein, N. (2007). *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. Macmillan.
- Koens, J. F., Dieperink, C., & Miranda, M. (2009). Ecotourism as a development strategy: experiences from Costa Rica. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 11(6), 1225.
- Law, L. (2020, May 4). "15 Top-Rated Tourist Attractions in Costa Rica." Planetware. Retrieved

from <https://www.planetware.com/tourist-attractions/costa-rica-crc.htm>

Moran, M. D., Monroe, A., & Stallcup, L. (2019). A proposal for practical and effective biological corridors to connect protected areas in northwest Costa Rica. *Nature Conservation*, 36, 113.

Mathieson, A., & Wall, G. (1982). *Tourism, Economic, Physical and Social Impacts*. Longman.

Purvis, B., Mao, Y., & Robinson, D. (2019). Three pillars of sustainability: in search of conceptual origins. *Sustainability Science*, 14(3), 681-695.

Sánchez-Azofeifa, G. A., Daily, G. C., Pfaff, A. S., & Busch, C. (2003). Integrity and isolation of Costa Rica's national parks and biological reserves: examining the dynamics of land-cover change. *Biological Conservation*, 109(1), 123-135.

Stocker, K. (2007). Identity as work: Changing job opportunities and indigenous identity in the transition to a tourist economy. *Anthropology of Work Review*, 28(2), 18-22.

UNWTO. 2020. Sustainable Development. <https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development>

_____. 2019. International Tourism Highlights, 2019 Edition. Retrieved from

<https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284421152>

Weaver, D. B. (2001). Ecotourism as mass tourism: Contradiction or reality? *Cornell hotel and restaurant administration quarterly*, 42(2), 104-112.

World Animal Protection. (2019). Costa Rica Urges Tourists not to Take Wildlife

Selfies. Retrieved from

<https://www.worldanimalprotection.org/news/costa-rica-urges-tourists-not-take-wildlife-selfies>

World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) (2018). Economic Impact 2018 Costa Rica.

Retrieved from <https://wtcc.org/Research/Economic-Impact>

YouMatter. (2020). What Is Sustainability? Retrieved from

<https://youmatter.world/en/definition/definitions-sustainability-definition-examples-principles/>