

Nature Travel and Rainforests

Gene Cope

Environmental Conservation Tourism Association (ECTA)

ABSTRACT

Many countries needing hard currency for their treasuries sell their rainforest timber to foreign interests. Due to this practice, rainforests in developing Central and South American countries are disappearing at an alarming rate. These forests also contain undiscovered natural resources as well as unique nature and cultural travel destinations. Large numbers of today's tourists will pay well to visit these attractions. The Environmental Conservation Tourism Association (ECTA) proposes developing tourism attractions as a viable alternative to destructive logging. Income from this kind of tourism can flourish for many years and generate additional income from other tourist related businesses while saving the resource. Large scale extractive logging on the other hand offers a one time payment and the destruction of the resource. However, countries can develop nature and cultural tourism and also harvest rainforest timber if sustainable development logging, which is being employed in Costa Rica, is practiced. Both of these developmental approaches will preserve the natural resource while creating revenues.

Certainly in today's fast moving world, change is inevitable. The judgmental environmental elitists who say all developmental utilization of natural resources must STOP will fail. The major reason for that failure is that society cannot police each person's actions even when laws are placed on the books. There are not enough police officers or resources in the world to enforce all of the laws.

Fortunately, there may be another more workable approach. Why not provide compatible economic development options which minimize negative impacts on resources? More often than not, this tactic is much more persuasive than obstructionism. The Environmental Conservation Tourism Association (ECTA) believes in educating people about the principles of sustainable development. Sustainable development is development with the minimum amount of negative impact, and can result in economic benefits while preserving natural resources for current and future generations. For years ECTA members have been involved in encouraging the practice of sustainably developed natural and cultural-oriented travel through active participation in the World Congress on Tourism for the Environment.

Before proceeding, here are some important statistics on recent developments in the tourism business that ultimately create linkages between tourism and the environment.

The World Resources Institute reports that overall tourism is increasing at an annual rate of four per cent, while nature travel is increasing at an annual rate of 10-30%. Chemonics, a consulting firm, reports that 7 million U.S. travelers are willing to pay \$2,000 to

Some travel analysts feel that this nature sensitive travel trend is not a fad, but is indeed a definite trend that may be the style of travel in the 21st century.

\$3,000 for a nature-based travel experience. The U.S. Travel Data Center predicts that 43 million Americans are likely to do nature-oriented travel in the next 3 years. And finally, some travel analysts feel that this nature sensitive travel trend is not a fad, but is indeed a definite trend that may be the style of travel in the 21st century.

With these facts in mind, it does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that one of the hottest ecosystem destinations for these zoologists, botanist, bird watcher groups who want up-close nature experiences is...tropical rain forests.

The flora and fauna of rainforest ecosystems are what attract many of these groups and their tourist dollars. Unfortunately, big money interests are attracted to these same ecosystems, but for quite different reasons. The beautiful, exotic hardwoods found in many virgin rainforests are much sought after and considered extremely valuable. These woods of many beautiful hues and colors come from over 700 species. Interest in cutting this timber comes at a time when the developing countries owning the rainforests are already clearing land for food production to feed an expanding population. Hence, a logging program that accelerates this process by the use of modern machinery, including the construction of roads for timber transportation, and offers jobs and hard currency for government coffers, is very attractive. This type of development is so attractive that rainforests in developing Central and South American countries are disappearing at an alarming rate.

If the obstructionist argument of STOP is proposed by the developed world countries, the proponents face being told to mind their own business. After all, most countries of the developed world stripped their own forests and are still logging those forests for capital gain. So why can't we do that and become rich too? If you want the rainforests saved, pay us for them.

Often, "the quick fix"—short term economic gain—is chosen at the expense of irreparable ecological damage. Some examples of this damage include lost cures for diseases, decreased biodiversity, and unproductive wastelands as more land is cleared and destroyed.

It is in this debate that the conservationists, preservationists, naturalists, and now the nature and cultural tourists find themselves. However, of most importance to ECTA is that the tourists are not obstructionists but can argue options armed with important tourist dollars. Equally persuasive is the fact that, if handled in a sustainably developed mode, nature and cultural tourism is not a one shot destructive extraction but a long-term fast growing economic opportunity.

As many of you must know, too much tourism can also be damaging to the environment and to cultures. ECTA feels that it is inevi-

However, of most importance to ECTA is that the tourists are not obstructionists but can argue options armed with important tourist dollars.

table that even environmentally sensitive travel to wild and isolated places will result in some changes. However, through careful evaluation and management, the related impacts, the negative aspects, can be minimized and often turned into positives.

It also has to be noted that if the logging is done judiciously, both it and nature travel can exist simultaneously. ECTA believes that developing and expanding nature travel tourism is a viable alternative to destructive, extractive logging. When the trees are shipped out, the economic benefits to the country are gone forever. Non-sustainable logging strips and destroys the country's timber resource, while there are thousands of tourists that will willingly pay to look at and photograph these giant trees. This could allow species and economic benefits to thrive for future generations. What is often left unnoticed is that many indigenous people depend on these forest habitats for food and shelter. When the rainforest gets destroyed, they are left without support systems and become endangered themselves. What will the government be able to do for them?

By preserving the rainforests for nature and cultural tourism, the income generated from tourist transport, housing, feeding, souvenir purchases, and other tourism related businesses can be created, expanded, and may flourish for years to come. These economic benefits would be of value to the urban communities as well as the jungle villages and would build a stronger national economy.

Now that the argument of this paper has been stated, it seems appropriate to look at two current case studies.

SURINAME

Suriname is a small country, slightly larger than the U.S. state of Georgia, with a population of 438,000. It is located on the northeastern coast of South America. Formerly a Dutch colony, known as Dutch Guyana, Suriname became independent in November 1975. The 1980s and 1990s have been very turbulent politically and economically. The turbulence has made Suriname a very poor country, desperate for hard currency.

Many developing world countries are economically stressed with growing populations that are struggling to get the necessary food to survive and have no sophisticated job skills. Their leaders are searching for short-term quick sources of hard currency that also offer jobs for their people. Often the easiest option is to sell off natural resources, as seems to be the case in Suriname.

In an effort to bring their sizable deficit under control, the current government invited Asian logging firms to bid on the rights to cut 12 million acres (forty per cent of the country's area) of virgin rainforest. Three companies, two of which are Indonesian,

ECTA feels that it is inevitable that even environmentally sensitive travel to wild and isolated places will result in some changes. However, through careful evaluation and management, the related impacts, the negative aspects can be minimized and often turned into positives.

Suri-Atlantic and Mitra Usaha Sejati Abadi (Musa) and one of which is Malaysian, Berjaya Group Berhad, are offering US\$3 per acre annually for logging rights to these millions of rainforest acres in the middle of the country (U.S. logging rights in the Pacific Northwest cost ten times that).

Musa Group has already obtained 375,000 acres on the outskirts of Paramaribo and is currently logging it. Reports seem to confirm every fear of the environmentalists. Musa has cut 150 foot wide roads suspected to be clear-cuts, taxes are being avoided, bribes are reportedly being offered, and contract restrictions are being ignored. The Dutch government, the U.S. Ambassador, the World Resources Institute, Conservation International, and the Inter-American Development Bank are all concerned and trying to work out a more reasonable solution. One of the possible options being proposed to Suriname is an extensive tourism development program focused on the unique nature, cultural, and wilderness destinations.

It is with this set of dynamic factors that ECTA entered the equation last year. Surinam Airways and its affiliate Movement for Ecotourism in Suriname (METS) invited ECTA to visit their newly developed nature and cultural destinations. METS hoped that ECTA's report would help moderate the government's rush toward foreign contracts to extensively log their lush rainforests. A team of eleven ECTA specialists traveled by small planes and dugouts, deep into the rainforests to visit Bush Negro and Amerindian villages. They experienced cultural dances, partook in Shaman (Witch Doctor) rituals and reveled in fantastically diverse jungle flora and fauna. Before departing the team met in Paramaribo, the capitol, with the press, the U.S. ambassador, and a member of Suriname's Parliament to present ECTA's views.

Without exception, the entire ECTA group thought that Suriname had been blessed with precious, irreplaceable gifts from Mother Nature (Smithsonian representatives estimate 256 species of butterflies, 675 species of birds, and unknown quantities of medicinal plants inhabit these rainforests). ECTA pointed out that many people from around the world would be anxious and eager to have an up-close, non-destructive experience in the rainforests along with indigenous cultures. ECTA proposed that if Suriname opted for sustainable tourism development, the country's environmental, cultural, and economic sectors could reap in creating financial gain while creating great good will with travelers worldwide.

ECTA followed up with a complete report of its findings which was presented to Surinam Airways and the U.S. State Department who had great interest in the situation and actively supported the use of the rainforests for nature travel.

In an effort to bring their sizable deficit under control, the Suriname government invited Asian logging firms to bid on the rights to cut 12 million acres (forty per cent of the country's area) of virgin rainforest.

COSTA RICA

The situation is quite different in Costa Rica. The country has a more stable political and economic situation. It is recognized by the world for its rainforest conservation and its experience in nature tourism. But recently, the pressure to log these wildernesses has increased, again causing concern in the international environmental community. Some see this development as a potential threat to the ecosystem as well as to the extensive tourism business.

Logging is occurring now, but with significant differences. Richard Donovan, formerly from Minnesota, is attacking these threats by applying sustainable development principles to logging operations in Costa Rica.

His work was highlighted in a recent World of Audubon special on PBS entitled "Hope for the Tropics." Mr. Donovan is working with local logging companies to teach forestry techniques that minimize waste and damage to the overall habitat as well as to other trees left standing, while timber extraction is being done. Here are some of the principles he is promoting:

- Discourage slash and burn techniques.
- Cut only selected mature trees.
- Cut so the tree will not injure less mature trees as it falls.
- Cut trees that will not destroy the forest canopy and allow too much sunlight to enter and kill deep shade-loving plants.
- Avoid removing habitat of threatened or endangered species.
- Train farmers to reforest using nursery grown trees.
- Train loggers to keep the forest ecosystem alive and healthy.
- Encourage loggers to plan for long-term profits.

So far, very positive results from his efforts have been documented. Some of the earlier slash and burn practitioners are now nursery men, growing replacement seedling trees for reforestation. Breeding sites of rare bird and other threatened species are being saved, the rainforests are surviving, nature travel is still flourishing, and all affected economic and environmental sectors seem to be benefiting.

ECTA fully endorses this example of sustainable development problem solving, using principles of compromise, conservation, and innovation to address compelling environmental and developmental issues. We think that negative-impact forestry in wilderness areas will permit Costa Rica's nature and cultural tourism to continue for years to come. The Costa Rican approach to rainforest logging could and should be implemented in other countries with similar dilemmas. ECTA will do everything possible to encourage the wider use of this type of cooperative approach to environmental and wilderness experience tourism.

GENE COPE

Gene Cope's involvement in nature and cultural tourism ranges from serving as a Senior Scientific Advisor at UNEP in Jamaica and Kenya to being a Fisheries/Environmental Management Specialist in the National Marine Fisheries Service. His experience culminated in 1994 with the organization and incorporation of the non-profit organization, the Environmental Conservation Tourism Association (ECTA). In addition, ECTA has hosted speakers from the Nepalese Department of Tourism, USAfrica Airways, George Washington University Program of Tourism and of Hospitality Management, South Africa Travel Association, American Central Corporation (TACA, LACSA, NICA, COPA, and Aviateca), and Steppingstones Environmental Tours.

Gene Cope, 1239 New Jersey Ave., NW, Washington, D.C. 20001, Tel: (202) 720-5546, Fax:(202) 690-2592, ectainfo@aol.com