Understanding Stakeholders’ Values and Concerns: The Path of the Tapir Biological Corridor, Costa Rica

by Georgia Basso, MESc 2008

Introduction

Real estate development booms are occurring in rural regions across the globe. Although development is typically promoted as a means of invigorating rural economies, local landowners often feel a sense of loss, fear and helplessness in its wake (Slattery 2003, Walker and Fortmann 2003). Rampant development is a pressing issue in Costa Rica’s Path of the Tapir Biological Corridor (PTBC), where government enforcement is weak and wealthy developers have an immense amount of power. Both local and foreign landowners express concern with the social and environmental effects of real estate development in this region. This research examines landowners’ values and responses to real estate development in the PTBC. The paper concludes by suggesting strategies that could be used to uphold common values and influence the course of development in the corridor.

Study area

The Path of the Tapir Biological Corridor is one of Central America’s most diverse regions (Photograph 1). Stretching for 50 km along Costa Rica’s central-southern Pacific Coast (Figure 1), the PTBC connects the Osa Peninsula and the watershed of the Golfo Dulce to the south, with the Los Santos Forest Reserve and Talamanca mountain range to the north (Redondo-Brenes 2007, Rodríguez 2000). The PTBC is formally recognized as a component of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, an initiative to create a biological bridge between North and South America (Ewing 2005).

The broad goal of the PTBC is “to capture social and economic benefits from the sustainable management of the region’s resources” (Newcomer 2002). The original idea for its establishment emerged in 1987 when a small group of community members met to discuss conservation on private lands. After this initial meeting, larger groups met and discussed connecting agriculture, tourism and conservation in an economically viable way. In 1994, the PTBC was formally established to coordinate these efforts (Newcomer 2002). The Asociación de Amigos de la Naturaleza (ASANA) is the grassroots conservation organization that formalized and continues to administer the PTBC initiative.

Newcomer (2002) identified three groups that participated in the early stages of the PTBC: community organizations (including local, national and international NGOs), key local individuals and government agencies. In recent years, real estate developers and foreign landowners have emerged from “key individual” roles and grown into their own broader participant groups. The influx of real estate developers and foreign landowners has caused a major demographic shift, from a majority of Costa Ricans owning large parcels in the corridor’s Georgia Basso holds a BS in Entomology and Applied Ecology with concentrations in wildlife conservation and art from the University of Delaware. Prior her arrival at the Yale F&ES, Georgia spent two years in the Central Valley of California working as an endangered species biologist for California State University Stanislaus, Endangered Species Recovery Program (ESRP), leading invertebrate research projects and developing the outreach program. Georgia will continue working on land conservation and strategic cross-sector collaboration through corporate social responsibility initiatives.
early days to a heavy presence of North Americans owning second homes on smaller parcels today (Photograph 2). According to Newcomer (2002) understanding stakeholders’ perspectives is especially important as changes in land use and perspectives with regard to the environment will affect the fate of the corridor.

**Methods**

A total of 52 Costa Ricans and 47 foreigners participated in this study between May and August 2007, either through interviews, surveys or both. Individuals represented all five participant groups (e.g., Costa Rican landowners, community organizations, government agencies, real estate developers and foreign landowners). Data collection took place in 14 communities within the corridor (CoopeSilencio, Hatillo, Playa Guapil, Laguna, Plataneo, Dominical, Escaleras, Playa Hermosa, San Josecito, Uvita, Ojochal, San Buenaventura, Coronado and Tres Ríos) and in government offices in San José and Cortés. Participants were questioned on broad...
topics including land and land tenure, accessibility of information resources and perceptions of real estate development and ecological conditions in the corridor. In addition to surveys and open-ended interviews, the results of this study are also based on ethnographic field notes and comprehensive literature reviews. Ethnographic notes were taken during community meetings including zoning planning and ASANA board and general member meetings. The literature review included previous research, local newspapers, magazines and web sites.

Results

While most Costa Rican respondents have owned their land for over 20 years, the influx of foreign landowners seems to be relatively recent, with most foreigners interviewed having lived in the corridor for less than ten years. Within the sample, the corridor’s largest landowners were American real estate developers followed by owners of private wildlife refuges (both Costa Ricans and foreigners) followed by rural Costa Rican families with large plots (more than 50 ha). Most foreign homeowners in the corridor owned less than 2 ha of land.

Diverse PTBC landowners shared some key values (Table 1). As defined by Clark (2002) a value is simply a desired object or situation. The majority of foreigners and Costa Ricans said that they valued the corridor’s natural environment. Foreigners reported living among Costa Ricans as their second most important value.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values stated</th>
<th># of Costa Ricans who stated the value</th>
<th># of foreigners who stated the value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>23 (85%)</td>
<td>28 (88%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed, peaceful lifestyle</td>
<td>9 (33%)</td>
<td>10 (31%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>4 (14%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open space</td>
<td>3 (11%)</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living among Costa Ricans</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>14 (44%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom from US gov’t regulation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8 (25%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is relevant to note because without specific plans to uphold this value, development in rural landscapes tends to push out local people (Photograph 3).

In addition to values, landowner’s shared common concerns. Seventy one percent of the landowners expressed serious concern with current real estate development in the corridor (Figure 2), but their reasons vary (Table 2).

Generally, Costa Ricans were more worried about the short term effects of development while foreigners tended to focus on longer term effects. Environmental destruction was the most frequently mentioned concern among both groups. The second main concern of Costa Rican landowners was being pushed off their land and out of the corridor. The third most common reaction to development among Costa Ricans was the positive response that development provides good jobs. Foreigners’ main concerns were the lack of regulation and real estate developers’ viewing the corridor solely as a business pursuit (Photograph 4).

**Discussion and conclusions**

The results of this study indicate that landowners share several key concerns and values including the corridor’s natural environment, peaceful lifestyle and local people. These values are not being upheld: development is pushing out both nature and Costa Ricans and rising cultural tensions undermine the relaxed, peaceful atmosphere. Moreover, continued environmental degradation and uncontrolled development could ultimately mean the loss of common ground among stakeholders whose shared interests are mainly nature-orientated. Drawing on existing shared values and strengthening trust networks could help landowners collectively address concerns like environmental destruction and Costa Rican emigration in a timely, effective manner (Clark 2002).

Converging values are an important component of trust building and the development of effective gatherings of people (Fukuyama 1995, Kumar et al. 1995). Collective action inspired by converging values started the corridor in the 1980s. Thereafter, collaboration among stakeholders has been a challenge due to factors including a lack of coordinated effort to identify shared goals and act to uphold common interests (Newcomer 2002). Geographic separation of communities further complicates the situation. However, several emerging conditions may facilitate greater communication.
and collaboration among corridor stakeholders. As roads and communication systems improve throughout the corridor, collective action and awareness of shared values may increase. Furthermore, important cross sector dialog has recently begun between local conservation leaders and large developers. Additionally, ASANA could successfully advance collective action on a broader scale. ASANA has a proven role as a communication facilitator among local and national organizations. They are a well-known, trusted and reputable organization within the corridor. Initiatives led by ASANA would most likely be well received. However, ASANA’s role as a communication facilitator has been limited due to inconsistent funding, high turnover of board and staff members and shifting conservation objectives. Funding and management stability would help ASANA utilize their strategic position to advance communication between stakeholder groups. Moreover, new PTBC residents bringing conservation values and experience could help increase local leadership and reduce pressure on ASANA directors to carry the load.

Collective action could help to address Costa Rican emigration. Local emigration is due to several factors including dramatic rise in land price, influx of foreigners and Costa Ricans’ desire for better living standards (A. Redondo-Brenes, pers. comm. July 2007). Both Costa Ricans and foreigners value locals’ presence and are concerned with the massive emigration, however little to no collective action upholds this value. The preservation of human diversity in the corridor will occur only if stakeholders recognize and intentionally plan to uphold their common interests. Land planning tools (e.g. certification systems, cooperatives, land trusts) can be cost effective means through which to promote shared values. Ghazoul (2007) writes, “….a broadening of conservation goals and approaches will be necessary in increasingly human-dominated landscapes.” In light of the

Table 2. Stakeholders’ responses to the question “Why do you feel as you do about real estate development in the corridor?” Total number of respondents: 29 Costa Ricans, 34 foreigners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th># of Costa Ricans who stated reason</th>
<th># of foreigners who stated reason</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental destruction</td>
<td>12 (46%)</td>
<td>18 (78%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ousting Costa Ricans from their land</td>
<td>10 (36%)</td>
<td>6 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps Costa Ricans economically</td>
<td>7 (23%)</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of rules</td>
<td>6 (19%)</td>
<td>13 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sole profit motives</td>
<td>4 (12%)</td>
<td>11 (36%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crowding</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>6 (17%)</td>
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corridor’s shifting demographics and increasing population, the suitability of innovative legal tools should be explored.

A real estate certification system is an example of a low cost, market driven tool that has strong potential to work well in the corridor. Investors and new residents are ecoconscious individuals with disposable income. A market niche for certified, sustainable products most likely exists. Additionally, the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT) has established a sustainable tourism certification program (CST) with growing participation (77 participating hotels and 13 travel agencies in 2007, with approximately 30 new hotels signed up for evaluation in 2008). Adding a new category certifying real estate developments would likely receive political support from ICT. Lastly, one of the largest real estate developers in the region has expressed interest in working with an advisory board to implement large-scale land conservation programs.

Costa Rica has experience implementing other certification systems for industry and tourism (Gentry 1998, Mora 2007). However certification systems are not without drawbacks. They often require strong institutions and some government support and may not address social and environmental issues to the extent that corridor landowners desire. Despite these and other weaknesses, a certification system may fit well with current corridor conditions and be used to uphold values like environmental integrity and economic opportunities for Costa Ricans. Voluntary conservation programs like certification can reduce regulatory burden, create more effective compliance, and encourage innovation by offering flexible alternatives to traditional command and control regulation (Steelman and Rivera 2006). While ASANA may not have the capacity to implement such a program, they could partner with other institutions to increase capacity. For example, the Rainforest Alliance has extensive experience implementing certification programs and partnering with grassroots organizations in Central America. A certification system could be designed to address many landowner concerns by including stipulations for sustainable development, local labor and equitable conditions—which are currently not closely monitored. A corridor certification system is not a panacea, but rather a tool which if used in conjunction with other tools in an atmosphere of collective action, could forward landowners’ common interests.

Currently, the decisions of a powerful few are affecting many social and environmental components in the PTBC region. It is not clear that the broader community is benefiting from or in agreement with these decisions. Ghazoul (2007) writes that cooperating groups are more likely to accept decisions that benefit the whole,
therefore conservation may best be advanced by reducing conflict and building trust among stakeholders. Identifying and upholding shared values are first steps in steering development in the PTBC in more sustainable, broadly accepted directions. In the formation of the PTBC, diverse community members displayed the ability to organize and work together toward commonly held objectives. It is this community-driven collaborative action on which the future of the corridor rests.

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References