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ECOTOURISM COSTA RICA – THE IMPACTS ON THREE GUIDES

It is hard to deny that ecotourism has benefited the nation of Costa Rica in a great number of ways.

The ecotourism boom began in the mid-1980s and really took off in the 1990s with 800,000 foreigners visiting the Central American nation in 1995, 1.03 million in 1999 and an astounding 2.34 million in 2012, the last year for which there are accurate statistics. Those high 2012 numbers generated \$2.4 billion USD in income for Costa Rica.

For tourists coming to Costa Rica, nearly half put their money into ecotourism activities such as hiking, **bird** and **wildlife watching**, seeing the country's vast **array of flowers** or visiting rural communities.



Birdwatching in the Savegre Watershed

Ecotourism has helped Costa Rican economic growth to chug along at a healthy 4.7% per year on average since the early 1990s. As of 1999, the tourism economy brings more foreign money into Costa Rica than bananas, pineapples and coffee exports combined. Since 2010 tourism has been more than 5.5% of Costa Rica's entire GDP. Costa Rica has a diversified economy, relatively low-crime, political stability, a high literacy rate and a life expectancy matching the most economically developed of nations.

The environmental benefit has likewise been real. Costa Rica rates fifth in the world on the Environmental Performance Index and brags an impressive 25% of its land under some sort of protective status. "Revenue retention" programs makes sure entrance fees to parks go to benefit those parks. Contracts with local communities have allowed restaurants, arts and crafts shops and employment generating attractions to flourish. Indigenous communities have found the ecotourism can help them **keep legal title to their land** while ensuring that many of their traditional practices can thrive.

(when visiting Costa Rica you can be sure to make your dollars have the most positive impact possible by supporting businesses certified under the **Certification for Sustainable Tourism Program**)

(While you are a tourist in Costa Rica, use Windows applications on any device through **CloudDesktopOnline.com** and collaborate through **CloudAppsPortal.com** .)



The Quetzal. Thousands of people come to Costa Rica each year just to see this rare bird.

But beyond the numbers, how has the ecotourism boom affected the quality of life of individual Costa Ricans who work in that economy? I interviewed three guides I met while traveling around the country in December 2013.

Here is what they had to say.

(NOTE: Interviews were conducted in Spanish and translation done by myself. Any and all mistakes are entirely my fault)

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Rosa Fernandez, Guayabo



“When I started my work as a guide in 2000 I had no idea what I was getting into. I was just moved by my own strong interest to explain to people

visiting this archaeological site that is here that these are not just stones.

Before being a guide I sold souvenirs outside the **Guayabo National Monument** leather goods with the designs of petroglyphs,

monoliths, flora and fauna and I always explained to people buying something about the meaning of the designs and hence people increasingly asked more and more about the features of the place so I trained as a guide.

At that time did not charge for my tour but as my knowledge grew people started to tip that and that motivated me even more. I saw the guiding as a source job to help my family because in my town there are not many options for employment – especially for women – other than farm work and that is not well paid.

I've always been interested in flora and fauna and to talk about it is just wonderful. I can leave a positive message about nature conservation. Part of my goal is to discuss and engage about the environmental part of pre-Columbian history so it is definitely the perfect mix.

I always say that guava, for example, is a complete package offering culture and nature. For indigenous people the forest was the pharmacy, grocery store and a natural school. And for me whenever I learn about the natural history of an individual species there is always something miraculous to be found.

I love to share with people and I have learned a lot with my visitors about their way of thinking and customs. I learn a little of their countries and about their contact with nature. Talking about our indigenous societies delights me as it certainly represent our true identity and national origin. I emphasize this, in my tours with children from the schools who visit us. Usually I close my tours with this sentence " A people without history is like a tree without roots, a people without being reminded of thier history dies. "



Rosa Fernandez, my excellent guide to Guayabo National Monument.

Costa Rican tourism is one of the most important sources of income. Field guides like me are general guides who have more opportunity for economic growth. Speaking other languages makes your chances higher. It's hard to support a family on a part-time job but I like what I do so I am selling some souvenirs also to make it work.

I've been learning English for three years and that has helped me a lot since I can tend to foreigners who visit us and do tours to other companies as Explornatura but I need more practice, learning a second language has not been easy for me, but that depends on me to have a better job prospects.

Being a guide is my passion so as far as I can see I will stay doing this or in a field related to tourism.”

~ ~ ~

Gustavo Vega, San Jose



“My relationship with the ecotourism industry is crucial because in addition to transporting customers to their

destinations during the trip I work to provide information about what they are seeing and experiencing. Costa Rica is a country with great variety of flora and fauna that make the landscape a wonderful thing to admire.



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Gustavo Vega at La Selva Biological Research Station

“Our training as guides made us aware of the cultural diversity of our country. During the tours I conduct daily to various destinations I have time to admire and appreciate what we possess as a nation. It has helped to make me more proud of my country.

“The tourism sector continues to be the country's second economic input and many families like mine benefit from a reliable, decent job. Over the past few

years working in this sector I've come to really enjoy my job and I plan to continue in this profession.”

~ ~ ~

Rodolfo Alvarado, La Selva Biological Research Station



“My work is quite interesting because despite working in a biological station I help develop the natural history program for incoming tourists. That program makes for a unique type of tourism where visitors who come from a wide range of interests and knowledge get what they are looking for. Just like with students from universities, each tourist group is different and that makes each experience richer for the visitor.

*For many years my dad and brothers worked in areas related to nature (Organization for Tropical Studies and **La Selva Bio Station**) so I grew up in a situation conducive to having good taste for nature and the environment.*



Crossing the Rio Puerto Viejo at La Selva Biological Research Station

My job requires constant learning. I spend my work days with experts from all different fields of natural science which keeps me to keep in touch with the people who generate the information so we guides are able to have new and first hand scientific information.

In my case most tourism generates income in my family. But economy is not the only positive part. For the families of Costa Rica there is importance in sustainability. Tourism generates conservation and conservation generates tourism.

I would like to continue in the field of tourism but in a more aggressive form that allows me to give back to the environment with an environmental

education program directed to the communities where I help develop ecotourism.”

WORK WITH JIM

Things Aren't All Rosy However

Still, it is dangerous to be pollyanish about Costa Rica. Ecotourism hasn't solved all the issues facing the nation and has actually caused a number of new problems like child sex-trafficking, destructive coastal developments, sewage treatment problems as well as challenges with the sheer number of people coming to the country – and of course there are always those who want to take advantage of the tourism for short-term profit via overdevelopment.

Also, despite the impressive numbers listed above, not everyone has benefited from this tourism economy. Many communities complain that they have simply been left out of the tourist boom. Others note that the tourism economy has actually disrupted small economies and resulted in lower paying service sector jobs for people who were previously more gainfully employed.



Human-watching in the Savegre Watershed. Don't mess it up....

Costa Rica's unemployment rate also remains stubbornly high. Costa Rican macro-economic policies stifle local businesses under a burden of high taxes and over-regulation while dishing out tax and regulatory benefits galore to multinational corporations. Without altering those policies that benefit the elite at the expense of the majority Costa Rican poverty numbers will continue to stagnate no matter how well the tourism economy chugs along.

Environmentally it has to be said that many of Costa Rica's national parks are suffering visitor over-capacity, deforestation still occurs at alarming rates in some areas and Costa Rica is one of the largest pesticide and chemical fertilizers in Latin America.



Braulio-Carillo National Park

Ecotourism Costa Rica: Don't Mess It Up

So yes. There is work to do. But the fact that Costa Rica had the wisdom to abolish its army in 1948 and stands out as the most stable democracy in Latin America attests to a bright future.

Costa Rica aims to be the first carbon neutral country by 2021. Citizens plant millions of trees a year. Tens of thousands of Costa Ricans have had their quality of life improved through ecotourism and still more need to be included in the benefits of that economy. If they aren't included Costa Rica's grand experiment will prove only a marginal success if not a failure.

If managed correctly, Costa Rica can hold on to its status as one of the top ecotourism destinations in the world.

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Sources:

- Weaver, D.B. (1996) [1998]. Ecotourism in the Less Developed World. London: Cab International. p. 52.