



Sustainable Ecotourism Development in Central America and the Caribbean: Review of Debates and Conceptual Reformulation

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Abstract

Tourism is one of the world's largest economic sectors. Ecotourism is its fastest growing component (United Nations World Tourism Organization 2007), and a promising strategy for sustainable development. Rural Central America and the Caribbean are in need of sustainable development and contain promising ecotourism sites. Despite their empirical importance and potential, tourism and ecotourism as research topics present several difficulties. This article surveys recent tourism and ecotourism scholarship and pays special attention to other recent literature reviews that contribute to that scholarship. It offers a three-dimensional view of sustainable ecotourism development based on ecological integrity, economic viability, and social justice. Our common conception of ecotourism needs to broaden. It is typically presented as one of many distinct alternatives to mass tourism such as cultural, historical, and agro-tourism. It is more fruitful to view alternative tourisms as synergistic components of a sustainable tourism ensemble. The article explores consequences of neglecting any of the three sustainability dimensions. It concludes by summarizing the article's contributions to the practice and analysis of sustainable ecotourism development.

Introduction: A Challenging and Nascent Research Topic

It is worth beginning with four general observations on the topic of tourism, and more specifically ecotourism in the Central American and Caribbean region. The topic presents several challenges to quality research progress. First, there are comments from colleagues such as 'You study tourism? In the Caribbean?!' Although tourism is one of the world's largest economic sectors (United Nations World Tourism Organization 2007), social scientists often perceive it as 'shallow and frivolous', and have been slow to accept it as a legitimate component of development alongside such things as industry, agriculture, and professional services (Stronza 2001, 277). Tourism's illegitimacy as a scholarly inquiry is related to the common view of tourism itself as pleasure and escapism, the dualistic opposite of the day-to-day real world of hard work (Hughes 1995).

Caribbean tourism in particular suffers this fate, despite that fact that it is more important there than virtually anywhere (Kingsbury and Klak 2005; Central America is less stigmatized because it is less associated with beaches). Given the economic importance of tourism for dozens of countries and millions of people, it is imperative to take tourism seriously and analyze it no less critically and theoretically than what are considered more legitimate topics and places. I suggest that vestiges of tourism's perceived illegitimacy have hampered critical research and analysis.

Second, most of the key concepts, such as sustainable development, ecotourism, alternative tourism, and community participation, are chaotic (Lake and Hanson 2000). That is, their uses imply or signify a great range of things, to the point where nearly anything can be deemed sustainable ecotourism (Fennell 2003). Chaotic concepts can be like motherhood and apple pie in that they face no opposition: in current debates no one advocates unsustainable tourism or development. This conceptual fluidity contrasts with the analytical precision to which social science aspires.

Third, the literature is vast but eclectic, as are the evaluations of ecotourism on the ground. For example, the case studies included in World Tourism Organization's two volumes on good practices in sustainable tourism (United Nations World Tourism Organization 2000, 2001) were selected by their governments. How they compare across national contexts is difficult to ascertain. Furthermore, the case study descriptions are sketchy and of variable length. The volumes lead the reader to appreciate the importance of community involvement in all aspects of sustainable ecotourism development, a theme that this article later emphasizes. The reader comes away understanding much less about the constraints, challenges, and potential for replication. Even the authors of one of the more thorough and critical books on alternatives to mass tourism admit that 'the study of the forms of new tourism is still in its infancy' (Mowforth and Munt 2003, 94).

Fourth, most providers of tourism opportunities themselves strive to differentiate their products from the negative images of conventional, mass, or unsustainable tourism. A good portion of this differentiation is pure marketing with little basis in sustainable practices on the ground (Butcher 2003; Mowforth and Munt 2003). Additionally, information disseminated about tourism, more than most other industries, tends to blur the line between advertisement and analysis. Because tourism is more likely to be directly experienced than, say, manufacturing or mining, personal and evaluative comments may be indistinguishable. It is not always possible to know whether or not someone writing about a particular ecolodge has a vested interest in that operation. Furthermore, so-called sustainable tourism may in reality make a larger ecological footprint and provide fewer local benefits than conventional mass tourism. For example, tourism that is purportedly sustainable, if it involves long flights

for short stays, contributes large amounts of greenhouse gasses and has a high leakage rate (i.e. the share of tourist spending that does not reach the host society). The result of 'eco' word-play and misperceptions of tourism impacts is a field of study greatly in need of more analytical clarity.

These four challenges prompt the present article, which draws more from recent reviews of ecotourism research than from case studies. This serves to increase the literature represented. It is also useful to compare and contrast the earlier reviews for the way that they characterize the field, its shortcomings and promising directions. In addition, rather than eclectically sampling from research on the huge variety of ecotourism examples across the region, I draw brief examples primarily from three contexts: (i) Costa Rica, often deemed the model for sustainable ecotourism; (ii) the well-known Monarch Butterfly Reserve in the mountains of central Mexico (not in Central America, but representative of large-scale ecotourism development trends in the region and shaped by the North American Free Trade Agreement's environmental component); and (iii) the Eastern Caribbean country of Dominica, the self-proclaimed 'Nature Island'. In all three contexts, there is an acute need for sustainable development, including viable rural livelihoods, community participation, and environmental stewardship. At the same time, the examples provide a diversity of regional experiences.

A Three-Legged Stool for Sustainable Ecotourism Development

Sustainable development is often depicted as balancing on three equally important legs, namely the environment, the economy and society (or social well-being). Dawe and Ryan (2003, 1459) reject this metaphor, arguing that 'the environment must be considered at a different, more significant level than either the economy or our social well-being because it is the source of both these necessities to humanity.' I too reject the metaphor, but principally because its four components are uncritically overgeneralized. 'The economy', for example, is discussed in Western culture as if it actually exists as a separate and organic entity that has its own needs. Popular discourse adds another problem when it prioritizes 'growth', which is so often repeated that everyone understands that it means economic growth, not any other kind. In this sense, Dawe and Ryan rightfully critique placing the economy (or its growth) and the environment on equal footing.

The sustainable tourism literature also frequently invokes some aspects of the economic, the social and the environmental as the three priorities (e.g. Duval 2004). A typical definition of sustainable tourism is that 'which is economically viable but does not destroy the resources on which the future of tourism will depend, notably the physical environment and the social fabric of the host community' (Swarbrooke 1999, 13). Note



Fig. 1. This cobbled-together home to a family, who are Kalinago (Caribs), native to Dominica, suggests the need for cash income in order to maintain and upgrade the living space. The residents do have potable water, but the blue in-flow line on the right is inadequately protected. Note also that the right part of the wall of the house is, ironically, patched with a recycled campaign poster from the Labour Party, which is currently in power (photo by author).

that in definitions such as this one, as Saarinen (2006, 1132) explains, 'the objective and driving force is to sustain tourism and its resource base for the future needs of the industry.' In other words, the environment and the host community become concerns not in their own right, but because their destruction would mean an end to tourism. Note also that this conceptualization suggests a negative relationship, in that positive tourism growth brings harmful impacts on the environment and host community. Therefore, although definitions like Swarbrooke's make social and environmental issues more important than in a purely economic assessment, economic issues take precedent. They deserve stronger repudiation than was leveled at conceptions of sustainable development above.

Taking account of these criticisms, I advance a three-dimensional view of sustainable ecotourism development based on the more precise priorities of ecological integrity, economic viability, and social justice. The metaphor of a three-legged stool suggests that each dimension is given equal weight, relies on the other dimensions for sustainability to be achieved, and must be similarly strong if the stool is to remain upright (i.e. is sustainable). Additionally, the word 'development' is explicitly included (Figure 1). This is to recognize that in most rural areas of Central America and the Caribbean that are potential ecotourism sites, communities and residents are in need of greater income and better livelihoods (Ashley et al. 2001). It also is intended to suggest that, to be sustainable, ecotourism cannot stand alone, because that would reproduce the region's age-old over-reliance on too few products and external markets

(Timms 2006). Instead, ecotourism must be part of integrated regional development. The multifaceted form of alternative tourism described in the next section is consistent with integrated regional development (Barkin 2003b; Dobson 1999).

Each of the three dimensions of sustainable ecotourism development can be further described. Ecological integrity includes environmental health, protection, restoration, and stewardship. Economic viability refers to economic security, at the firm, community, and even national levels. A supportive government ('enabling' in World Bank terms) is crucial to local success. Fiscally desperate governments cannot provide adequate infrastructure, and are more likely to pursue large-scale tourism and other development projects that undermine ecotourism (e.g. Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica 2006). Social justice means social welfare and inclusion. It also includes cultural interaction and mutual respect. Note the cultural learning opportunity that tourism represents, as 'the single largest peaceful movement of people across cultural boundaries in the history of the world' (Lett 1989 quoted in Stronza 2001, 264). These social components, although rather nebulous, are important enough to be included in the International Ecotourism Society's principles (2007). In contrast to Swarbrooke's definition of sustainable tourism, the three dimensions of sustainability advocated here are not in mutual conflict. In other words, sustainable ecotourism is simultaneously economically viable, positive for the host and visitor community, and contributes to environmental conservation (Wall 1997). Rather than trading off the three dimensions against one another, the idea is to appreciate, and work to enhance, the mutually reinforcing benefits the three can have.

The vision of sustainable ecotourism development advocated here clearly extends from certain assumptions, preferences, priorities, and critiques with respect to debates in the broader field of development studies. This vantage point should be made explicit, however briefly. Priority here is toward small-scale farming, organic agriculture, local artisanry, local control, and broad-based community involvement in local alternative tourism. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of this vision is the preference for small-scale, localized, organic farming (Ikerd 2005). Many argue to the contrary, that genetically modified agriculture with its petrochemical inputs and modern technologies is more productive and therefore holds more potential for sustainable living in both the Global North and South (e.g. Tweeten 1999).

The precise meaning of 'more productive' is at issue (Rosset 1999). Industrial agriculture does produce higher yields per unit of land, but it is at the expense of biodiversity, water quality, soil retention, and soil health, all of which sustainability values. Furthermore, industrial agriculture's productivity requires increasingly expensive and polluting non-renewable, petroleum-based fertilizer, herbicides, and pesticides. If productivity is defined as unit of energy output per unit of energy input, then indigenous

and organic systems compare favorably (Netting 1993; Pimentel et al. 2005). Another concern is that the petrochemical inputs must be imported by most Central American and Caribbean countries. They therefore consume the scarce foreign-exchange earnings generated by tourism and other exports, and add to the region's perennial trade imbalance and dependency (Potter et al. 2004).

Relatedly, it is worth considering the views of Eastern Caribbean people who have lived and worked in the Global North and then return to their homelands. Pulsipher has conversed with returning emigrants for more than three decades about their experiences; they 'report that overall the quality of life on their home islands actually exceeds that of the far more materially endowed societies where they have been working, because island life is enhanced by strong community and family support and by the healthful and beautiful island environments' (Pulsipher and Holderfield 2006, 302). Notably, visitors from the Global North that participate in sustainable ecotourism activities in the Eastern Caribbean not only admire the quality of life, but also in some cases are inspired to attempt to emulate it back home.

Drawing together the main points of this section, it appears that Fennell's (2003, 25) definition approaches the present one:

Ecotourism is a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism that focuses primarily on experiencing and learning about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive, and locally oriented (control, benefits, and scale). It typically occurs in natural areas, and should contribute to the conservation or preservation of such areas.

Clearly, this is a tall order but moving in the direction of sustainability requires it. The Green Globe 21 sustainable tourism certification system is compatible with the present definition. It annually reassesses the practices and progress of businesses, sites and countries, and requires additional steps each year toward greater sustainability (Green Globe 2006).

Mass Tourism versus Alternative Tourism

It is useful to contrast the typical features of mass and alternative forms of tourism in the Central American and Caribbean region. The former is typically beach- and/or shopping-focused, dominated by large global chains and franchises, and set to North Atlantic standards of comfort and overconsumption; it often centers on culturally isolated resorts or cruise ships (Conway 2002; Mowforth and Munt 2003). The Mexican and Caribbean island mass tourist sector is much larger than that of Central America. It is highly globalized, has high leakage rates averaging over 50%, and depends on imports for food, beverages, and equipment, most of which come from large-scale, nonlocal (if not US) suppliers (Jules 2005; Momsen 1998; Torres and Momsen 2004). Mass tourism in the



Fig. 2. A cruise ship docked for an afternoon at St. John's, the capital of Antigua and Barbuda. The increasing scale of cruise ships requires costly expansion of berths, and creates a striking juxtaposition against the modestly scaled townscape (photo by author).

wider Caribbean region tends to form enclaves. Cancun, on Mexico's Caribbean coast, epitomizes this economic as well as cultural separateness. It is an extravagant and overbuilt mass tourism 'Gringolandia' according to locals, surrounded by unserved squatter settlements and, further out, rural poverty. Cancun features 'jet ski "jungle" tours in the lagoon mangroves, Maya waiters dressed in "authentic" Mexican garb, restaurant-caged tigers, and the aptly named "Crococun" crocodile park, among an almost endless list of subscribed spectacles – all neatly packaged expressly for the American mass tourist' (Torres and Momsen 2005, 316). In Jamaica, similarly, the contrast between resorts and their surroundings are stark. Hotel construction acts as a migratory magnet for desperate workers: 'Slums or parasitic communities are increasing with every major new investment in a hotel . . . Those who are able to find legitimate work have difficulty finding housing, proper schooling, or health care services' (Tufton 2005).

Cruise ships too are not well integrated into regional economies (Figure 2). The vast majority of expenditures on cruises go to the cruise lines with only a small portion distributed between the various ports of call (Pattullo 1996). One study of cruise ships docking in Dominica found that nearly half of the passengers never leave the ship, while another quarter return to the ship by lunch without spending any money

Table 1. Modifiers used to describe alternative tourisms.

| | | |
|-------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| Academic | Eco- | New |
| Adventure | Ecological | Organic |
| Agro- | Educational | People-to-people |
| Anthro- | Environmentally friendly | Pro-poor |
| Appropriate | Ethical | Responsible |
| Archaeo- | Ethnic | Safari |
| Birding | Fair trade | Scientific |
| Bottom-up | Green | Soft |
| Contact | Heritage | Sustainable |
| Cottage | Historical | Trekking |
| Community | Indigenous | Wilderness |
| Cultural | Nature | Wildlife |

(Tourtellot 2003). Those passengers that do take an island tour tend to choose those contracted with the cruise ship, thereby leaking more tourist spending and disadvantaging smaller operators. The conclusion of one long-term study of cruise tourism in the Eastern Caribbean is that, rather than bridging the cultural divide, it 'is creating an ever-wider chasm between the tourist and the islander and contributing to misperceptions and disappointments on the part of both hosts and guests' (Pulsipher and Holderfield 2006, 299).

Furthermore, the environmental impacts of both large-scale resort and cruise tourism are often severe (Conway 2002; Johnson 2002; Jules 2005). Both the practice and the scholarship associated with conventional tourism have responded to growing concerns about social, economic, and ecological impacts. Following the Brundtland Report (United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), research and practice widely adopted the terminology of and an interest in 'sustainable tourism' (Saarinen 2006). The question of how an industry that has been based on overconsumption can fully transform itself; however, leads some analysts to suggest that 'sustainable tourism' is an oxymoron (Conway 2002).

Alternative tourisms tend to contrast with mass tourism on all the above dimensions. The scale is smaller and a greater share of inputs is local. Tourists tend to be more physically active and interact more with the local culture on its own terms. Expanding on a list by Mowforth and Munt (2003), the following table, of terms that are used to describe alternative forms of tourism, is indicative rather than exhaustive. Table 1 captures the recent proliferation of alternative tourisms that researchers often feel compelled to differentiate from one another. This article takes the opposite approach. It argues that both the conceptualization and the practice of alternative tourisms suggest that they are best viewed as ensembles rather than discrete types.

An important commonality of these alternative tourisms is that ‘they share, in varying degrees, a concern for “development” and take account of the environmental, economic and socio-cultural impacts of tourism’ (Mowforth and Munt 2003, 94). We again see a semblance of the three-legged stool, although the concern about ‘impacts’ suggests that tourism creates more problems than positive contributions.

The dichotomy between mass and alternative tourisms is valuable as a heuristic. It defines the ends of a conceptual continuum against which real-world examples can be assessed. It is important to keep in mind that empirical reality usually falls short of a definitional ideal type. Real tourism developments, whether professedly alternative or not, fall somewhere between the two extremes. Furthermore, a case can be made that the two types of tourism have things to teach each other: mass tourism needs to learn how to operate more sustainably, and alternative tourism needs to learn how to better market its product, reach customers, and generate earnings (Hawkes and Kwortnik 2006).

The various forms of alternative tourism in Table 1 are best conceptualized and operationalized as an interconnected cluster, not as a buffet from which to pick and choose. In fact, alternative tourism experiences on the ground regularly integrate many of these themes (Fennell 2003). One is rarely doing just one – say agro-tourism – without some of the others – e.g. community, historical, green or bottom-up tourism (Hawkes and Kwortnik 2006). As an illustration, a pro-poor tourism project in St. Lucia is described by one group of researchers as being ‘able to use traditional skills, in cooking, farming, fishing, artistic expression, craft production, or communication, skills that poor people typically possess’ (Ashley et al. 2001). Indeed, most definitions of ecotourism include cultural activities, as well as local community interactions and contributions (Bjork 2000; Weaver 2004). To encompass the integrated nature of many of the activities in Table 1, I refer to a concept of Community-Historical-Organic-Indigenous-Cultural-Ecological tourism, or by the acronym CHOICE tourism. CHOICE tourism encompasses ecotourism as well as other types of activities that are more inclusive, culturally rich and sustainable than mass tourism. Fennell (2003) is thinking along similar lines when he puts forth the concept of ACE tourism (adventure, culture, ecotourism). CHOICE tourism goes further by incorporating a greater range of complementary activities (Figure 3).

Drawing in part from dictionary definitions and from alternative tourism case studies, the following elaborations on each of the six component terms of this acronym provide a sense of the activities, principles, themes, and orientation that they suggest. Many of the components of these definitions are obvious, but others extend the concepts in ways that incorporate various additional, positive and engaging dimensions of alternative tourism. They should also suggest ways that CHOICE tourism can be a fundamental part of integrated regional development by



Fig. 3. Visitors to a Kalinago (Carib) home in Dominica learn traditional ways of making kitchen utensils out of calabash gourds. For their work, the hosts obtain much-needed cash income. Both guests and locals enjoy a day of cultural exchange (photo by author).

promoting healthy local farming, land and diets, artisanry, professional skills development, employment diversification, and community solidarity and pride.

Community: a group of people living in the same locality or having common interests (e.g. the local and visitor); sharing, participation, and fellowship; people and things living and interacting with one another in a specific region; people-to-people interactions; the local or the regional; communing with people as well as nature; for example, tourists living in a Guatemalan village for a month to learn Spanish and about local customs.

Historical: people and events of the past in the same present places; heritage; trajectories from the past; ways that the past shapes the present; changes over time; for example, visits to preserved and restored colonial towns in Central America or sugar plantations in the Caribbean.

Organic: food raised without drugs, hormones, or synthetic chemicals; activities that are simple, healthful, and close to nature; having properties associated with living organisms; constituting an integral part of a whole; fundamental; for example, a stay at a fully organic and carbon-neutral ecolodge in Panama.

Indigenous: originating, living, or occurring naturally in an area or environment; geographically specific; intrinsic; existing, born or produced in a land or region; autochthonous; endemic; native; forming an essential element; for example, travel seeking out both indigenous peoples and endemic fauna and flora in the Yucatán Peninsula.

Cultural: the ideas and ways of certain people; the shared knowledge and values of a society; relating to culture or cultivation of plants and animals; intercultural exchange; for example, agricultural tourists visiting the Mennonite communities in Belize to learn their way of life and farming.

Ecological: learning about nature; natural health and systems; the relations between all living things and the conditions that surround them; reducing one's footprint; for example, a hands-on experience for a student group at an organic farm cooperative in Nicaragua.

The acronym CHOICE, too, reflects some of the ideals of alternative tourism with respect to the interests of both visitors and locals:

CHOICE: comprised of options and variety; preferable and of high quality. CHOICE also serves to highlight the crucial need for meaningful local agency, democratic participation, and community empowerment in sustainable tourism. This is not to naively assume that local communities automatically have such powers in the context of globalization, neoliberal policy, and centralized states, but rather to recognize that they are a requirement of sustainability (definitions were retrieved on 17 April 2007 from <http://www.answers.com>).

Comparing these elaborations with the terms in Table 1 suggests much overlap; CHOICE tourism is broadly represented of alternative forms of tourism. The academic or educational component is not explicitly represented in the acronym, but such richly local, diverse, active, and people-oriented tourism cannot help but be educational (Weaver 2004).

Interestingly, the Internet already references choice tourism sites, destinations, locations, operations, lodges, partners, routes, areas, and regions, as in this example: 'No wonder the island [of Mauritius] has earned international recognition as a choice tourism destination for its welcoming and genuine hospitality, scenic splendour and world class hotels.' Extravagant lodging, of course, is not a component of CHOICE tourism, which is by definition ecologically sustainable and compatible with the local culture.

Having presented a conceptualization of sustainable ecotourism development, the article next examines some of the challenges that result on operationalization. As Saethorsdottir (2004, 548) suggests: 'Is it possible to be economically feasible, culturally aware, and ecologically sustainable at the same time? And what are the conflicts that occur between these three aspects of sustainability?' Each of the next three sections focuses on situations in which one of the three dimensions is notably neglected. General terms such as tourism and ecotourism are used here to denote business operations, whereas more specific terms such as tourism research and analysis refer to scholarship.

Neglect of the Ecological

In both the business and study of tourism, the economic dimension has traditionally been a higher priority than either the ecological or the social.

Like corporate culture as a whole, tourism business culture has only recently begun to conceptualize and publicize an interest in the 'triple bottom line' (Sklair 2001). Research has been similarly narrow. Farrell and Twining-Ward's (2004) review of tourism literature notes the limited attention that researchers have paid to ecological science, and thus to the application of ecological science to the study of tourism contexts. This gap partly reflects disciplinary boundaries, whereby tourism researchers are usually disconnected from ecology and environmental science. Economic growth continues to be a virtually unscrutinized priority for the industry. New questions have recently arisen about social and environmental limits on growth, and how these might be overcome (Saarinen 2006). In this sense, tourism follows society as a whole, whereby sustainable development is often operationalized as a way to sustain economic development (Uhl 2004).

Both the practice and the study of ecotourism are of course more recent subfields of tourism. Ecotourism links strongly to concepts of sustainability and therefore has engaged ecological issues more than tourism as a whole. Some ecotourism projects are integrated with conservation nongovernmental organizations, protected lands, and waters, or debt-for-nature swaps (Gutman 2003). However, economic priorities, or 'sustainable profit' as Wheeler (1996, 384) describes it, continue to dominate for larger-scale operations in the ecotourism and adventure tourism industry. Ecotourism research embraces ecological and social sustainability more than ecotourism business does, but there is still more work to be done. A survey of peer-reviewed journal articles by Agrawal and Redford (2006) suggests that ecotourism studies need to apply ecological science more rigorously. For example, studies tend to present data collected in a single season that cannot speak to temporal trends. In addition, while the finding that local residents have a conservation ethic is compatible with ecological sustainability, it says nothing about biodiversity or conservation on the ground. Agrawal and Redford (2006) also suggest that ecotourism studies need to be clearer and more modest as to the contribution that particular suggested ecological measures make, or are not capable of making, to a broader understanding of ecosystem change. A single census of breeding birds, for example, is but one snapshot indicator of local biodiversity.

Butler (1992) argues that alternative tourism is actually an early stage of mass tourism that, if it is particularly attractive to tourists and not strictly controlled, will lead to unsustainable growth and change. Costa Rica is worth considering against this proposition. 'At every tourism meeting, Costa Rica is a power to behold,' says Megan Epler Wood, president of The International Ecotourism Society (quoted in Hamilton 2002). Such power can lead to overdevelopment. Costa Rica's most famous and exemplary site, the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve, seems to have developed sustainably, in part by restricting visitation numbers and further

growth (Aylward et al. 1996). But countrywide, ecological conditions are deteriorating as ecotourism becomes a larger and larger enterprise. Mowforth and Munt's (2003) review of research on Costa Rica's tourism development projects since the 1990s suggests that the country is not a sustainable ecotourism model. Concerns arise over a number of issues common to ecotourism development throughout the region when it is imposed from the top down and prioritizes economic growth to the neglect of community and ecology. In Costa Rica, these include the construction of very large-scale tourism complexes, including hotels with golf courses in semiarid regions, the severe degradation of hydrologic systems, the massive clearing of rainforest (particularly high in the 1980s) outside the quarter of the country that is protected, and the displacement of locals in favor of touristic access to natural areas. The suggestion is that foreign debt pressures and the global free-trade paradigm have pushed the Costa Rican government toward catering to large-scale foreign investors and short-term economic expedience. If Costa Rica, with its relatively high level of social development and more democratic accountability, has succumbed to these external economic pressures, the prospects of sustainable development elsewhere in the Global South must be considered more daunting.

Neglect of the Economic

Many scholars advocating alternative tourism unite around a rejection of mass tourism and its economic prioritization (Butcher 2003). In so doing, researchers fail to adequately incorporate economic viability into their conceptions of sustainability (Weaver 2004). Even one of the most rigorous analyses of research on ecotourism and sustainable development falls short on the economic dimension. Writing for the Wildlife Conservation Society, Agrawal and Redford (2006) evaluate studies according to how well they measure ecotourism's impacts on biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation. These two factors are undoubtedly crucial but are not enough. Sustainable ecotourism development requires a broader positive economic impact than simply reducing poverty. For example, if local poverty falls but ecolodges fail as businesses, there is no sustainable development. The three-legged stool also requires respectful and inclusive social and cultural relations, as discussed further below.

For Wheeller (1991, 1992), alternative tourism is a dead end as an economic enterprise. It will never generate sufficient income because of the insufficient number of ecotourists spending insufficiently in their host countries. I include this rather dated critique to note that, despite the proliferation of ecotourism lodges and studies since, it remains an outstanding concern (Butcher 2003; Weaver 2001). A major challenge is that ecolodges cannot get too big (over 15 rooms by one measure), or else they are no longer perceived as ecotourism (Hamilton 2002). However, this limit on ecolodge size can be positive for the host community

if it is discouraged from overrelying on any particular ecododge for income. CHOICE tourism is useful here. It encourages the host community to diversify its sustainable activities (e.g. growing, demonstrating, and selling organic foods; hosting tourists in homes, schools, and cultural and artisanal events; restoring and presenting local historical and ecological features; learning about local birds and guiding birders through ecologically healthy habitats). Note that many of these ecologically sustainable activities expand local opportunities to earn income, not only from foreign tourists, but also from other local and export markets.

Governments may not see it that way. Certainly, the many governments in the Global South whose policy priorities are shaped by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund do not see sufficient economic growth emanating from CHOICE tourism (Conway 2004). These financially desperate governments advocate attracting foreign investors including large, premiere hotel chains (e.g. Government of the Commonwealth of Dominica 2006). Weaver's (2004) take on Dominica government policy, for example, is that both its limited commitment to ecotourism and its contradictory pursuit of large-scale and environmentally damaging development are motivated by expediency. Even from a vantage point that is fully committed to the smaller-scale of CHOICE tourism; however, the question remains as to whether it can generate enough decent employment relative to the great need for it in rural Central America and the Caribbean (Hawkes and Kwortnik 2006).

Butcher's (2003) critique of alternative tourism is also relevant here. He argues that the 'new moral tourism turns away from development itself' (Butcher 2003, 133). He means that advocates have sought to conceptualize an alternative tourism form that embodies the antithesis of the worst excesses of mass tourism, and indeed overconsumptive Western lifestyles. This alternative tourism is about nature and community, but it neglects the real need for significant new income earning opportunities throughout the Global South. The critics themselves can be seen as immoral. While living overconsumptive lifestyles that are short on community and natural experiences, they attempt to impose standards on other people and places, and thereby deny tourism hosts their economic rewards and tourists their holiday pleasures. In contrast, the three-legged stool metaphor for sustainable ecotourism does not neglect the need for economic vitality by overemphasizing social or environmental issues.

Neglect of the Social

An overemphasis of the ecological dimension of ecotourism can create social discord. Too often ecological sustainability is operationalized through the creation of land and marine reserves where generations of locals have previously harvested natural resources. Not surprisingly,



Fig. 4. Local indigenous people, mestizo guides and tourist police, and foreign tourists mix behind a roadblock that locals have set up on the way to the Maya Biosphere Reserve at Tikal, Guatemala. At issue is access to the park's resources and the disappearance to two locals who illegally entered the park to harvest marketable flowers. One of the protest signs reads 'National Parks are not the best way to sustain the forest, and it belongs to everyone. Involve us, the communities' (photo by author).

controversy frequently arises over why such areas are now off limits to residents seeking to make ends meet so that foreign visitors can experience untouched nature (Figure 4). Many locals do not see the benefits of such an arrangement, while clearly feeling the impacts of their displacement. Governments regularly undertake publicity campaigns to convince citizens that tourism helps them. In these circumstances, ecotourism can be seen 'as a new form of ecological imperialism in which western cultural values override local cultural values and thereby oppose the principles of sustainability' (Mowforth and Munt 2003, 104). Such arrangements may not only pit locals against tourists from the Global North, but also can divide people along class lines. Environmentalism in the form of set-asides tends to be a middle class pursuit, in both the Global North and South. These difficult social dynamics suggest a broader research need to better understand how tourism interactions and experiences influence the extent and ways that both hosts and visitors become engaged with sustainability (Lee and Moscardo 2005; Stronza 2001).

Honey's (1999) study of ecotourism operations in several countries indicates that direct benefit to local communities is the component of sustainability most likely to be missing. Similarly, data analysis in another of the few comparative studies of ecotourism sustainability revealed that 'local community participation is paramount for the success of an ecotourism project' (Kruger 2005, 596). But even when tourism attempts to explicitly incorporate local communities there are many challenges. Blackstock (2005) cautions that the idea of community participation

must go beyond lip service. Too often, studies underappreciate that communities are class heterogeneous. Community interests are also typically overwhelmed by the power, influence, and prestige of outside tourism capital.

As an illustration, Pugh's (2005) study of the politics behind the creation of the Soufriere marine reserve in St. Lucia reveals how tourism can trump fishing, even after an award-winning community consensus-building process. Fishing and fisher people are widely perceived as backward and unuseful. They were excluded from certain zones while the quantity of divers was not limited, and hotels were effectively free to pollute the sea and emit sediment onto coral reefs. Later, disgruntled fisher people felt the need to exploit electoral politics and physical threats to obtain a better deal for themselves. Pugh's work demonstrates the need to pay closer attention to the community itself and its relationships with outside interests, residents' views of tourism and other income opportunities, decision-making, planning, and how empowerment is operationalized. Importantly, empowerment must include a real local option to reject tourism development if community members feel it is not in their interests (Butcher 2003).

As a component of the 'triple bottom line', corporate social responsibility has become standard practice in global business. Critics see it as public relations rather than altruistic corporate behavior (Sklair 2001). In international tourism, where profit margins tend to be narrow, additional questions arise as to how far corporate social responsibility can extend beyond relatively superficial practices such as codes of conduct, the showcasing of an individual adopt-a-farmer, and community outreach (Mowforth and Munt 2003; Timms 2006).

A critical discussion of sustainability in the case of the monarch butterfly reserve by three social and environmental activists reveals some deep concerns, particularly social ones (Barkin 2003a, 2005; Mader 2005, 2007; Madrid 2005). In 1986, the Mexican government decreed that a 62-m² area of *ejido* and indigenous community land would be a nature reserve, off-limits to the harvesting of timber and other resources. Critics claim that authorities paternalistically imposed the reserve without consulting the local communities. Furthermore, it encroached on and displaced locals from their traditional land-based livelihoods and ecosystem stewardship. By restricting legal livelihoods, it has forced them to illegally overexploit the monarch's host forests. Even greater threats to the forests come from the 'mafia-style, organized, well-equipped wood-cutting groups linked to the timber-processing industry and furniture producers' (Brenner and Job 2006, 15–16). As a result of heightened local demands for income and outside demands for lumber, forest cover has degraded faster since the creation of the reserve than when the 56 local *ejidos* and other local landowners had legal access to the trees (Brower et al. 2002).

Furthermore, the tourism industry associated with the Monarch Reserve has been overreliant on outside contractors to the detriment of local communities. Problems include a high leakage rate and minimal local employment. Locals out-migrate to earn a living and to support families left behind through remittances. The tourism-contracting arrangement has also encouraged a debilitating competitive intercommunity struggle despite over a quarter million tourists annually, making it Mexico's most visited protected area. There has been little support for, and even bureaucratic obstacles in the way of, locals creating small tourist businesses. Furthermore, authorities have made no integrated regional development effort that would link ecotourism to diversified and complementary activities, including agro-forestry, artisanal activities, and infrastructural development.

Facing pressure from international environmental groups as the butterflies' forest disappears, the Mexican government in 2000 expanded the reserve to 217 m². *Ejid*os and other local landowners are now to be compensated for losing their rights to harvest timber through grant funding by the Packard Foundation. However, questions arise as to whether the compensation measures up to the timber's value and how secure grant funding is over time (Zebich-Knos forthcoming 2008).

All of these problems are explained by larger ones in the broader political economy. They include an undermining of *ejido* and indigenous community solidarity, resource control, and ecological stewardship, and growing economic polarization, between the powerful relatively few benefiting from neoliberal development and the majority of Mexicans (Barkin 2005; Gwynne and Kay 2004; Mader 2005; Madrid 2005; Torres and Momsen 2005).

Conclusion

This article has advocated a three-dimensional view of sustainable ecotourism development by giving equal weighting to ecological integrity, economic viability, and social justice. It has also explored some of the consequences of neglecting any of these three sustainability dimensions.

The article has further argued that the various types of alternative tourism should be considered complementary, overlapping and synergistic components of sustainable local tourism ensembles. To capture this idea, I offer the concept of Community-Historical-Organic-Indigenous-Cultural-Ecological tourism, or CHOICE tourism. CHOICE tourism encompasses ecotourism as well as other types of activities that are more inclusive, culturally rich and sustainable than mass tourism. CHOICE tourism can also contribute to integrated regional development by promoting healthy local farming, land and diets, artisanry, professional skills development, employment diversification, and community solidarity and pride (Potter et al. 2004).

As the literature reviewed in this article suggests, sustainable CHOICE tourism development is exceedingly difficult to achieve. Central American and Caribbean countries are ill-prepared for the challenge. They are saddled by trade dependency, foreign debt, economic weakness, and long-term and even heightened vulnerabilities (Pantojas-García and Klak 2004). Pressures on governments to choose unsustainable short-term development options therefore abound. The rural areas of Central America and the Caribbean themselves are in great need of better incomes and more secure livelihoods (Gwynne and Kay 2004).

Like sustainability more broadly, however, sustainable CHOICE tourism development should be seen as a goal toward which to purposefully commit, take action, and make incremental progress (Weaver 2004). The two inter-connected conceptualizations of the three-legged stool of sustainable ecotourism development and CHOICE tourism are contributions to a framework for practitioners to assess their operations and for researchers to evaluate ecotourism in context.

Short Biography

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Note

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