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Nature Travel and Tropical Forests

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NATURE TRAVEL AND TROPICAL FORESTS

by

Jan G. Laarman and Patrick B. Durst

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Our plane was bound from Miami to Guayaquil. Across the aisle sat Frank, a young natural history guide who works for a travel agency on Park Avenue. Walking down the aisle to chat with Frank were a number of other passengers, most of them little gray-haired ladies over age 55. Some were wearing tennis shoes; most were eagerly anticipating their first visit to Ecuador; all were parting with several thousand dollars for the experience.

First they would tour the Galapagos Islands and hear a lecture or two on Darwin, the Beagle, and the evolution of species. Then they would return to the mainland to visit a mid-elevation biological station known for its variety of birdlife. In the Andean highlands they would take a few days to tour colonial Quito and shop in an Indian market. Finally they would drive eastward and descend through narrow mountain passes into the upper Amazon Basin. There they would leave their vans at the little frontier town of Misahuallí to float in motorized canoes 50 kilometers down the Napo River. Along the wide and swift Napo they would see Indian settlements, a profusion of birds, goldminers panning the river sands, and riverine rainforest. Their quarters at a jungle lodge down the river would feature palm-thatched roofs, running water, great meals and coffee, and an abundance of cockroaches.

As the previous narrative might suggest, nature travel to destinations in the developing world is becoming big business. The obvious example is game viewing in East Africa, especially in countries like Kenya and Tanzania. People also come from

continents away to see the mountain gorillas of Rwanda. Numerous trekking expeditions head for Nepal or Peru, while the truly adventurous choose Tibet or Bhutan. One can sign up to explore volcanoes and turtle beaches in Costa Rica, or to study nature photography and plant identification in Trinidad. Each member of a Harvard expedition to Borneo will pay \$5,000 to sleep in a hammock and see birds with one of Asia's top ornithologists. Another expedition will make a walking tour of the caves and canyons of Israel, where nights are spent sleeping under the stars.

The preceding are but a few examples among hundreds. Those of us living in North America, western Europe, and other industrialized regions are in quest of new experiences. Nature travel to international destinations, particularly travel which promises adventure, is part of that phenomenon. Between 1960 and 1980 the number of U.S. passports obtained for pleasure and personal reasons tripled. In the same period, U.S. annual spending on overseas travel leaped from \$2.6 billion to \$16.5 billion.

Those with the wealth to afford it already have seen the California redwoods, the Everglades, New York, and maybe Paris. Now they want to walk through a piece of the tropical rainforest, perhaps before it disappears. Some seek personal bonding and good times in the company of a small group traveling to an off-beat location. Others are independent devotees of butterflies, mushrooms, or orchids who go around the world to indulge their

passions. Still others are students and teachers, such as biology classes taking field trips to living tropical laboratories.

Viewed as economic enterprise, nature travel to the tropics fits well with major new initiatives to protect biological diversity, and to find nonconsumptive uses that generate economic returns. Recently the U.S. Congress amended the Foreign Assistance Act, directing the Agency for International Development (AID) to commit a specified level of funding for the protection of biological diversity in developing countries. Objectives are to support training and education that will help conserve diversity, to ensure that AID policies do not inadvertently endanger wildlife, and to deny assistance for actions which invade or degrade protected areas.

The challenge is to find ways of making the conservation of biological diversity compatible with economic growth. Some countries possess limited natural endowments of timber, or have nearly depleted what endowments they once had. Their strategies to raise revenue from wildlands depend on selling something other than timber. One private biological station in the tropics is selling shares of stock under the slogan "rainforest conservation for profit." Besides its potential economic contribution, international nature conservation and associated tourism may be a force for peace, a proposition eloquently advanced by several intellectuals and conservation leaders.

Does nature travel lead to appropriate socioeconomic development? What are the growth prospects for this line of enterprise? What is the connection with forestry and forest practice? These are the principal questions we consider in this article. We use occasional illustrations from first-hand visits to Ecuador, Costa Rica, Thailand, and Philippines--four countries with possible futures in nature-oriented tourism. Due to the critical shortage of supporting research on this topic, we qualify that many observations are preliminary and conclusions tentative.

Hard and Soft

The concept of nature tourism is one in which the traveler is drawn to a destination because of his or her interest in one or more features of that destination's natural history. The visit combines education, recreation, and often adventure.

Nature tourism has "hard" and "soft" dimensions in two senses. The first hard-soft distinction refers to whether the interest in natural history is dedicated or casual. Dedicated natural history is the kind practiced by ornithologists, botanists, geologists, foresters, and other professional specialists. This is the "hard" version of natural history travel, sometimes called "scientific tourism." The Galapagos Islands of Ecuador attract among their visitors a segment of "scientific tourists," even though others are visiting the Galapagos mainly because it is a well-known place on worldwide tourist maps.

In all four countries we visited, nature-based attractions are a part of general-interest tourism. "Soft" natural history travel mixes nature-oriented visits with other visits that feature combinations of beaches, deep sea fishing, shopping, culture, history, nightlife, culinary pursuits, and other attractions.

The second hard-soft distinction refers to the physical rigor of the experience. Will the visitor have to walk miles into undeveloped backlands, sleep in a camp or crude shelter, and tolerate primitive sanitary conditions? Or will the visitor stay in high-quality accommodations, eat in good restaurants, and be conveyed in comfortable transport? Some of the "hard" tourism from the standpoint of dedication to natural history falls into the "soft" category from the standpoint of physical rigor. In many cases, the inverse is also true.

Rationale

Compared with business travel, family travel, and all pleasure travel, nature travel is a small but increasing part of tourism in the developing countries. One tour operator in Costa Rica guesses that his country draws eight thousand nature-oriented visitors annually, while another guesses thirty thousand. Varying estimates of this sort call attention to the problems of defining a nature-oriented traveler, and to the desirability of having a reliable data base to make the analysis. A similar statement applies for Ecuador, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Spokespersons in all four countries identify roughly similar reasons why nature-oriented travel should be encouraged. They contend that it is a subjectively wholesome kind of tourism, attracting desirable types of visitors. They also maintain that nature travel directs economic activity to remote communities, not concentrating all the spending in Guayaquil, San Jose, Bangkok, and Manila. Thirdly, they argue that certain dedicated types of nature travel are more tolerant of primitive facilities and infrastructure (i.e., bad roads and inferior lodging) than are other forms of tourism. Thus, the volume of nature travel can increase immediately without necessarily depending upon expensive capital improvements—at least, in the short run.

An additional factor is the assumption that natural history tourists may remain in the country for more days than visitors who come for other forms of tourism. Conservation leaders cite the economic benefits of nature tourism in supporting funding of parks, forest reserves, and wildlife refuges. Finally, international nature tourism calls attention to threats to wildlands, increasing political pressures for their correction.

While Ecuador, Costa Rica, Thailand, and the Philippines all have lovely beaches, few big and modern beach hotels have developed through the present time. Because of expensive air fares combined with the present relatively modest scale of beach tourism, many tour operators doubt that they can effectively compete for the "fun-and-sun" tourist against competitors like Hawaii, Mexico, Jamaica, the Bahamas, and the like. In comparison, they view the true natural history tourist as

belonging to a market which is relatively price-inelastic. That is, an inveterate birder may not wince at paying several thousand dollars for the opportunity to add 20 or 30 new species to a life list.

The preceding statements are to be regarded as hypotheses which need further definition and testing. They represent personal opinions of some of the persons most closely connected with nature travel, containing understandable biases favorable to that segment.

Growth Constraints

Nature travel in most parts of the developing world is still in its infancy. Local tour operators, and several conservation leaders, readily list unexploited opportunities that might have near-term potential. Their suggestions cover specific new traveler routes, or specific new tourist services, which they think would be attractive and profitable.

Despite this potential, growth of nature travel likely will be constrained by relatively low social carrying capacity. The nature-oriented tourist may perceive crowding as a problem, not tolerating large groups of other nature-oriented tourists. Crowding could limit growth possibilities much more quickly and severely than most tour operators presently acknowledge. The problem will be exacerbated as domestic tourists, made aware of their resource heritage through environmental education, begin visiting their own national parks and forests in larger numbers.

Several other constraints affect growth prospects. On the demand side the most frequently cited obstacle is lack of tourism marketing and promotion. Spokespersons in the private sectors argue that governments fail to recognize the economic contribution of tourism, and consequently do not budget nearly enough on tourism research and promotion. In the four countries visited tourism is consistently among the top five industries which earn foreign exchange. In this respect tourism easily outranks wood products, for example.

On the supply side, among the most frequently mentioned problems is forest protection. The long-run viability of nature travel depends on saving critical parts of the wildlands resource. Yet several sites which would have been suitable for nature tourism have been ruined by dynamite fishing, poaching and overhunting, encroachment by forest squatters, illegal logging, and conversion to commercial agriculture and mineral exploration.

Another problem is the shortage of infrastructure. The wide range in price and quality of facilities in the capital cities largely disappears in the rural provinces of greatest importance for nature tourism. A few sites can be served directly from these major cities, an advantage of small countries like Costa Rica and Ecuador. However, all four countries are deficient in the number and standards of air strips, hotels, restaurants, and bathrooms in the provinces. This problem is particularly limiting for the "soft" variety of nature travel, which is thought by many to be the largest part of the market.

Also largely missing are infrastructure and facilities at the destinations. This refers to visitor centers, interpretive materials, roads and trails, maps and signs, eating establishments, artisan shops, places for camping and picnics, and other developments. The park services and forest services which manage these areas do so with tiny budgets. Tour operators in some countries contend that the parks and reserves need many more personnel, roads and trails to get into the key areas, and a plan for private concessions and nearby services.

At the level of an individual tour enterprise, availability and quality of tour guides are perhaps the most important factors determining success or failure of nature tourism. The guide needs thorough training in natural history, although experience is often as important as formal training. Additionally, the guide should be at least bilingual, and should be competent in people management and interpersonal communications. Many if not most foreign natural history visitors are accompanied by their own guides. This irritates some local enterprises but pleases others, depending on their particular business relationships with the self-guided groups.

Just as the long-run viability of nature travel depends on protecting the wildlands, it also depends on protecting the tourists. Although infrequent, incidents in which foreign travelers are molested, robbed, or murdered leave a long-lasting impact on tourism. In some countries foreign travelers in rural areas are sometimes detained for questioning at military

checkpoints. Another problem is the lack of policing of the tourist industry to prevent some of the less reputable firms from exploiting visitors through inflated prices and inferior services.

Many tour operators and conservation leaders stress that natural history tourists should not be lured from the U.S. on the basis of exaggerated claims about the destination. The national parks and forest reserves of Ecuador, Costa Rica, Thailand, and the Philippines are not necessarily equivalent in purpose or function with Yellowstone or the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, and should not be advertised as such.

A contentious issue in tourism of all kinds is the matter of economic leakages. What proportion of tourist spending benefits the destination country, and what proportion remains with the source country? The answer depends on factors like the choice of international airline, choice of travel agency or broker, and the types of goods and services consumed by the traveler in the destination country. The smaller and less economically advanced is the destination country, the greater is the economic leakage to other countries. Another key factor is the degree to which government policy permits foreign participation in the economy.

The final area of constraints is interlocked with world economic and political forces. Pleasure travel depends on prosperity, since it is usually funded out of discretionary personal income. Economic depressions or recessions that hurt the middle and upper-middle income classes of the industrialized

countries also hurt foreign travel destinations. Foreign travel is quite sensitive to currency exchange rates, so that the mix of North Americans, Europeans, Japanese, Australians, and other travelers is constantly changing in response to purchasing power of their currencies.

Foreign travel of all types is sensitive to world news about terrorism and internal political strife. For many persons, Costa Rica seems a little too close to Nicaragua, and the Philippines has a few too many insurgents. These images of trouble or anticipated trouble may not be justified in reality, but potential visitors act on perceptions rather than fact. Some countries feel they receive unfair treatment in the news, but are at a loss to combat negative images except through counter publicity. This provides tidy sums of money for public relations agents in the U.S. and elsewhere, with sometimes only questionable returns for the sponsoring governments.

Implications for Forestry

Is nature tourism relevant to forestry? Is nature tourism worthwhile as a management objective? Our answers are affirmative, although we expect disagreement from some readers.

Nature tourism requires management of the natural resource, just as does production of timber commodities. It sometimes occurs outside of forests narrowly defined, but almost always occurs in wildlands broadly defined. It puts emphasis not only on the timber attributes of a property, but also on its wildlife, its beauty, and its ecological, educational, and scientific

significance. It directs attention not to management treatments over broad areas, but to management along travel corridors and at focal points. It requires professional attention not only by parks managers but also by foresters, since many areas for nature tourism are not within national parks. In these respects there is little difference from forest management for recreation in the U.S.

As suggested in previous sections, nature tourism is not without its problems. Only some wildlands truly have international attractiveness, and only some countries will be able to develop the supporting infrastructure to accommodate international nature travelers.

Moreover, international tourism suffers a negative stigma in various quarters, as evidenced by several disturbing accounts of its environmental and social costs. Both the environment and the social system can be overexploited in the service of nature tourism. Yet this is little different from the kinds of costs and trade-offs arising in most other enterprises based on natural resources, including those whose emphasis is commodity production. In some contexts, negative social changes would occur even in the absence of tourism. All too often, critics of tourism fail to recognize these points.

If nature tourism does have a future in the developing economies, a number of challenges are posed to foresters. New technical talents will be required, new training courses must be

designed, new policies must be proposed, and new attitudes must develop. Some of these changes will come slowly, but we feel the time is right to get started.

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