Community Organization Indicators

The BriBri of Costa Rica are a well-organized community with a successful ecotourism project. The community exercised complete sovereignty in running the project. Access to the project was limited to riverboats operated by indigenous guides, which gave the BriBri control over rates of tourist visitation. In terms of benefit sharing, visitors deposit their payments in a common bank account so no money was exchanged in the village. These payments are used to pay the salaries of those involved in the ecotourism project, including the women who cook for visitors and the tour guides. However, though the money is not explicitly distributed throughout the community, those involved in the project purchase supplies from other community members so benefits are shared among the village. The organized management of both the project at the site and the financial aspects can serve as a prototype for other communities trying to develop ecotourism projects. In terms of economic diversification, the BriBri do not rely solely on their ecotourism project for sustainable development. They also have cacao agroforestry systems as well as artisan crafts, either sold to tourists coming to the village or, like the Teribe and Ngobe Buglé, transported to local markets in popular tourist destinations such as Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica and Bocas del Toro, Panama.

Environmental Indicators

The success of the ecotourism project has improved the community’s conservation ethic, as they recognize that local biodiversity draws tourists to their community. Bernarda Morales, member of the group ESTIBRAUPA, which runs the project, is quoted in Eco-Exchange, the newsletter of the Rainforest Alliance: "we take better care of nature now then [sic] before because we didn’t know that what we have has a lot of value" (Rainforest Alliance, 2003). A carrying capacity has not yet been established; however, like the Teribe, the BriBri have an advantage in calculating carrying capacity in that they can control the number and timing of visitors to their community. Experiential environmental edu-

cation for visitors occurs in such minimum-impact activities as cacao demonstrations, swimming in the river, and hiking through the rainforest.

Macro-Institutional Indicators

One unique aspect of the BriBri project is the presence of the regional organization ANAI, which serves as a clearinghouse for information and facilitates the visits of ecotourists to the project. The service ANAI provides to this and 13 other ecotourism projects in the Talamanca region of Costa Rica is fundamental to the success of the project. The marketing strategy provided by ANAI gives the BriBri project an advantage that the Panamanian projects, lacking an umbrella NGO, do not have. Proceeds secured by ANAI, acting as a third-party tour operator, are turned over as donations to the communities.

In terms of infrastructure, as mentioned above the BriBri have a lodge erected explicitly for the use of their ecotourism project as well as several boats for bringing tourists upriver. The only questionable aspect of infrastructure is the quality of the drinking water.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations revolve around three aspects: goal-setting, facilitating and establishing partnerships, and monitoring and feedback. The first step in establishing sustainable management of ecotourism projects should be goal-setting, followed by partnerships and monitoring. Some projects we visited already have successfully implemented aspects of goal-setting, while falling short in others. More focus should be placed on forming partnerships and monitoring and evaluation for the projects already well-established to ensure their sustainability into the future.

Goal Setting

Integrate community and regional development priorities: Ecotourism projects should integrate broad community and regional development priorities, rather than focus exclusively on conservation and environmental protection strategies (McLaren, 1998). The WTO emphasizes generating greater awareness among public authorities, the private sector, the civil society, and consumers regarding ecotourism’s capacity to contribute to biodiversity and cultural conservation and the improve-
ment of standards of living in those areas. Fournier (2002) also recommends an integrated ecotourism management program for the region that takes into consideration the varying status of communities that are attempting to develop ecotourism.

Establish and Implement a regional tourism development strategy: The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has recommended that the Panamanian government establish a regional tourism development strategy for the Bocas region (IDB, 2002). The task for this development plan should presumably fall to IPAT, which governs the promotion of tourism nationally. However, non-governmental organizations, such as the Nature Conservancy and ANCON, should also work together to create a vision for tourism development in the region. Goals for this vision should focus on establishing the type and extent of tourism appropriate for each sub-region, from mountain villages such as Boquete to the archipelago of Bocas del Toro, and the small indigenous and creole communities. Ensure community sovereignty in management of the project: Communities and organizations controlling local ecotourism projects should define a limited number of stakeholders and lay out how their specific goals can be met (Brandion & Marginis, 1996; Brunner et al., 2002). Most of the communities we visited appeared to exercise sovereignty over their various projects. However, drafting a business and management plan incorporating current conditions may be a valuable tool in ensuring continued success of the project into the future. These business plans should include the following aspects:

- institutional strength and personnel: describe the institutions and qualifications of the people who will be working on the ecotourism staff;
- financial background of the institution: provide three years of financial history on the organization;
- goals of the ecotourism program: list specific milestones and a timeframe for the program including income and distribution of funds over five years;
- strategic plan: list methods to achieve goals;
- financial projections: provide a spreadsheet with monthly expenditures and income for the first year, quarterly for the second year, and annually for years 3-5. Provide an extremely detailed list of all costs, broken into line item categories;
- market: carefully describe the clients that are to be part of the ecotourism program;

marketing strategy: describe all methods of marketing and why they are to be used, and

market niche: describe the industry trends and competition. Describe the unique qualities of the organization or project and the natural and cultural features of the area that will make the ecotourism project competitive. (Barker, 1996: pp. 257-258)

Diversify economic base: Nearly all the communities visited had some kind of artesan wares for sale, such as pineapple fiber bags (Ngile-Bigle), wooden carvings, and traditional weapons (Teribe). Along with showcasing the culture and handiwork of the indigenous groups, these products diversified each community’s economic base. Relying strictly on ecotourism for sustainable economic development is volatile because it is based on the international markets for tourism and the current state of the global economy globally. Many sustainable development alternatives may be incorporated into locally-based ecotourism projects. Agroforestry systems, such as cacao production, are a prime example of local sustainable agriculture. Artesian crafts can be sold in markets outside the community, such as those found in the town of Bocas del Toro, while visitors to a village may see a demonstration of the techniques and methods used to make these products. Other options include markets for ecosystem services, such as carbon sequestration, and harvesting of non-timber forest products for sale, such as the MONSEELA orchid project.

Increase opportunities for international marketing and promotion of ecotourism destinations (WTO, 2002b): One of the major drawbacks for the Panamanian groups was the lack of a marketing strategy. The local ANCON office in Bocas del Toro provides information regarding ecotourism projects if a tourist inquires about opportunities on the mainland. The recently established Pacific Ecotourism Network in the South Pacific is one example of a successful regional marketing effort. European travel agencies can use the network to plan a range of activities for an ecotourism itinerary (Sooenlai et al., 1996). Few examples exist worldwide of multinational ecotourism organizations providing support or visibility for ecotourism projects. TNC has the unique opportunity to pursue the establishment of a network of Central American ecotourism projects simply by establishing an informative web page.
Environmental education: Ensure that tour operators are uniformly equipped to provide quality accurate information to tourists regarding the local ecosystems and cultures (Fouquet, 2002). This aspect of enhancing ecotourism projects could be addressed through the training and capacity-building workshops carried out by either IPAT or TNC in Panama, or ANAI in Costa Rica.

Partnerships

Coordination extension workshops: TNC and IPAT should coordinate extension workshops specialized to each community’s level of organization and facilitate community training. IPAT currently will provide capacity building and training workshops to community groups who qualify. They have already held a training session with the Teribe. If TNC works with IPAT to incorporate their goals and standards for ecotourism into IPAT’s currently existing program, the training and capacity building processes could be streamlined. In order for an ecotourism project to be successful, one of the primary tasks should be to ensure that the concepts of “sustainability” and “ecotourism” are well-defined and understood by the members of local communities involved in the planning and execution of the projects, instead of merely being rhetoric. These concepts should be then presented to the community at large to educate villagers to the benefits of sustainable development instead of deforestation.

Establish an NGO similar to ANAI to work in Panama: ANAI’s role as an information clearinghouse, marketing machine, and tour operator could be replicated in Panama with a similar, regionally organized NGO. The overhead costs in terms of monetary support, personnel, and infrastructure may currently be too overwhelming to pursue. The majority of tourism occurring in Bocas del Toro presently is concentrated in the archipelago. In order to promote inland tourism, having existing, sustainably-minded tour operators extend their services to ecotourism inland may be an option. A private tour operator may be more profit-driven and prone to exceeding carrying capacity, however, than an NGO. Therefore, coordination with the regional office of ANCON may be a more realistic approach. ANCON now operates a profit-generating tour service in Bocas. The current policy regarding travel and tourism inland is to tell if specifically asked. Through the synchronization of marketing through ANCON, already regarded as a source for eco-friendly tourism excursions in this region, linkages between the tourist markets on Bocas and the potential inland markets may be established. In the future, an NGO should be established to promote tourism in the highlands. This NGO could also focus on increasing cross-border coordination with ANAI and linking ecotourism markets between Costa Rica and Panama. Puerto Viejo and Bocas del Toro are obvious choices for cities in which to base NGO activities given their high levels of tourism and developed infrastructure.

Promote information exchanges in community-based ecotourism: In order to facilitate the exchange of information regarding successes and failures of ecotourism projects in this region, an information clearinghouse should be established (WTO, 2002b). Given the ubiquitous nature of Internet access today, by creating a website for exchanging experiences from ecotourism projects throughout Central America, different groups can learn from each other. TNC can provide technical support.

Coordinate among projects, researchers, and research institutions: By bringing researchers into the communities, different perspectives on management of the ecotourism projects may help to improve the ecological sustainability of the project and the community. The School for Field Studies (www.fieldstudies.org) is one example of an institution that offers participatory research in developing areas (Barker, 1996). Universities and research institutions may also be interested in conducting research in communities with ecotourism projects.

Monitoring

Set up monitoring and evaluation protocols: The sustainability of community-based ecotourism projects can be evaluated with surveys of community members. Indicators of both sustainable community development and conservation should be considered. Community development indicators could be social, socio-economic, environmental, or political (Fouquet, 2002). Social indicators used by Fouquet (2002) to evaluate ecotourism projects in Baja California, Mexico included societal cohesion, importance of the project for the region, sovereignty in the management of the project, and commitment to the project. Socio-economic indicators included benefits and benefits-sharing within the community. Environmental indicators included awareness of the impacts from ecotourism and the need for measures such as carrying capacities. Political indicators evaluated coordination of governmental, non-governmental, and academic institutions that influence tourism and development. Indicators of economic, psychological, social, and political empowerment can also be used to monitor and evalu-
ate the sustainability of community development in ecotourism (Schevyns, 1999).

As projects become established, an appraisal process can help identify where problems lie (Brunner & Clark, 1997). Because political, ecological, and social change occurs over time, frequent reassessment of the project is necessary to determine if it still fulfills the goals identified at its inception. As resources are limited, an appraisal process can help determine where improvements in resource allocation can be made. Assessments of visitor impacts should be monitored (Farrell & Marion, 2001). Monitoring allows projects to adapt to changing circumstances when a project is no longer serving its goals and must be terminated. Criteria should be established to determine when a project should be terminated (Clark & Ashton, 1999). Reasons to terminate projects might include extreme cases of the pitfalls listed above. There must be a process established to identify when termination is necessary, and how to do it.

CONCLUSION: THE SUSTAINABILITY OF ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism has promise as a means to promote sustainable development and rural empowerment. If managed and monitored by well-organized communities, ecotourism can generate revenue while protecting biodiversity from more destructive forms of development. Although its appropriate implementation must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, ecotourism is often in the common interest of local, national, and international stakeholders. Overall, the prospects for ecotourism development in Bocas del Toro, ecotourism in Bocas del Toro is the successful prototype for ecotourism that exists across the border in Costa Rica in the Bribri community. The sustainability, and a regional network of ecotourism projects remain a development of ecotourism in Bocas del Toro is a regional goal. This network of ecotourism and help train local communities developing ecotourism projects. Adapting ongoing evaluation, monitoring, and adjustment for each individual project is important for any organization working on sustainable development for this region.


