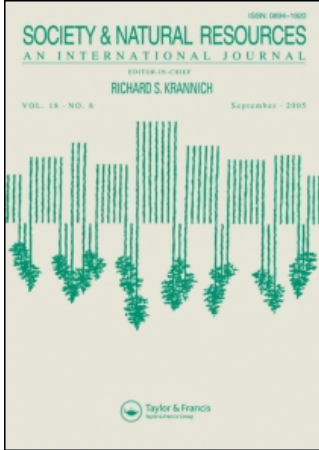


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Society & Natural Resources An International Journal

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713667234>

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Online Publication Date: 01 April 2002

To cite this Article: Weinberg, Adam, Bellows, Story and Ekster, Dara (2002)
'Sustaining Ecotourism: Insights and Implications from Two Successful Case
Studies', Society & Natural Resources, 15:4, 371 - 380

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/089419202753570846

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/089419202753570846>

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Insights and Applications

Sustaining Ecotourism: Insights and Implications from Two Successful Case Studies

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We draw on field research from Costa Rica and New Zealand to examine the potential for sustaining ecotourism projects over time. We find that successful ecotourism projects exist in a paradoxical or dialectical system with internal dynamics that tend to speed up the rate of tourism production. This poses a number of ecological, economic, and social problems. In general, the problems are known to local communities and public officials. The challenges are also technologically fixable and economically viable. The obstacles are political. The communities exist in larger political systems that lack the capacity to control economic action. In other words, the political process is not capable of keeping the economic system in check.

Keywords Costa Rica, development, ecotourism, environment, sustainable development, tourism, New Zealand

Ecotourism is entering its second phase of development. In the initial phase, scholars and practitioners made cogent arguments for ecotourism as a viable form of sustainable community development. They also entered into the usual debates over definitions, guiding principles, and initial steps (e.g., Gould 1999; Fennell 1999; Wearing and Neil 1999; Scheyvens and Purdie 1999; Boo 1990). Clearly, we are beyond this phase. We no longer need calls for ecotourism, as it is the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry (Amaro 1999). Furthermore, we no longer need to question if it can work, because we have cases of it working (Gould 1998; 1999; Wilkinson 1997; Weaver 1992; Singh and Singh 1999; Stabler 1997).

What is less clear is how ecotourism projects will change over time. In our earlier work, we noted that most attempts at sustainable community development move

Received 14 March 2001; accepted 14 May 2001.

The authors thank Allan Schnaiberg for his comments on earlier drafts. We also thank Ken Gould for both encouraging this research project and for igniting our interest in ecotourism with his provocative research. We also acknowledge the Keck Foundation for generously funding the research.

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back to a business-as-usual model within a very short period of time (Weinberg et al. 2000). We also noted that this has more to do with politics than either the technical feasibility of sustainable development or market opportunities for sustainable products and services. Thus, the vexing question for us is the following: Can ecotourism projects be sustained over time without devolving back into tourism, which others have forcefully argued is neither ecologically sustainable or true community development (Trousdale 2001; Scheyvens and Purdie 1999).

Research Design

We present field work from ecotourism projects in Kaikoura, New Zealand, and Monteverde, Costa Rica. These cases were selected because of their successes in ecotourism. The researchers each lived in one of the communities for a period of 10 weeks during the summer of 2000. A semistructured interview format was the primary means for gathering information. During these interviews, questions were asked regarding the interviewee's involvement with ecotourism in the community, its perceived failures and successes, his or her perceived history of ecotourism in the area, and his or her comparison of the ecotourism projects in the area to other ecotourism destinations. Additionally, a set of 11 criteria for a successful ecotourism project, developed by Scheyvens and Purdie (1999), was used to enable the interviewees to evaluate the projects. Approximately 30 of these interviews were conducted. Interviewees included owners/managers, workers, government officials, property owners, and community members.

In addition to the semistructured interviews, considerable amounts of time were spent talking informally with tourists, community residents, and others involved with ecotourism and tourism operations in the communities. General research about the communities' histories was also carried out throughout the 10 weeks in the field.

Two Case Studies of Successful Ecotourism

Monteverde, Costa Rica

Monteverde is one of the largest private reserves in the world and constitutes a significant part of the protection of Costa Rican forests. It is a vast system of private reserves, which receive no government assistance. It contains three small towns: Santa Elena, Cerro Plano, and Monteverde. We refer to this as the Monteverde zone. Within these 7 km² are the two original reserves—the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve and the Children's Eternal Rainforest—as well as the myriad of peripheral industries that have propagated around them with the tourism boom, such as the Reserva Sendero Tranquilo, Santa Elena Forest Reserve, Butterfly Garden, Orchid Garden, Ecological Farm, Canopy Tour, Original Canopy Tour, Sky Walk and Sky Trek, the local art cooperative, a coffee company, and the Monteverde Cheese Factory. There are also a multitude of restaurants and hotels, some attached to private homes, while others are eco-lodges and upscale hotels.

Before the second half of the 20th century, Monteverde's residents primarily practiced subsistence farming. In 1949 a group of American Quakers (from Alabama) who were trying to escape the draft moved to Monteverde, because Costa Rica had recently abolished its army. Hence, they found a community in accord with their pacifist ethics. In an effort to create a cash economy in addition to the previously existent subsistence farming economy, the Quakers began a dairy cooperative

and a cheese factory, as well as creating an electric power plant and their own telephone lines. They took 1000 of 3500 acres, set them aside as a watershed to own collectively, and called this area the Eternal Forest. For the cheese factory, the Quakers created an incentive system so that local and regional milk producers had shares of stock in the company, resulting in wealth being more evenly distributed. An excellent relationship emerged between the Quakers and the already existing local community.

In the 1960s, research biologists came to study the ecological treasures of the Eternal Forest. Quickly, they recognized the hazards deforestation, and purchased an adjacent tract of land, which, with assistance from the Tropical Science Center, became known as the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve (MCFR). In the 1970s, local people started training themselves to become field guides. In 1977, the first hotel, Hotel de Montaña, was built to accommodate this early form of ecotourism.

In 1986, community members created the Monteverde Conservation League in order to protect land outside the reserve. Shortly after the creation of the league, a member gave a lecture in Sweden to a group of schoolchildren. The children were fascinated and decided to raise money to contribute to the preservation effort. Quickly this grew to an international effort. Eventually, people from over 40 countries raised money for what became an international children's rainforest campaign. Within 3 to 4 years, 70,000–80,000 acres to the east of the Monteverde Reserve were purchased. This land was dedicated to the children who had supported its creation, as the Bosque Eterno de los Niños, or the Children's Eternal Rainforest. It is administered by the Monteverde Conservation League, under the mission statement, "To conserve, preserve, and rehabilitate tropical ecosystems and their biodiversity."

Things really began to change when the ecotourism "boom," as Monteverde residents refer to it, began in 1989. The economy and community changed rapidly. One lifetime resident of Monteverde stated, "The activity of the cheese factory began to change. The farms were no longer farms of cows, but rather farms of hotels, or horse rentals, or simply conserved areas." In this boom time from 1989 to 1993, tourism exploded, and the economy shifted from agriculture to tourism.

More recently, other reserves and conservation projects have proliferated around the two original reserves. There are two field stations in the Children's Eternal Rainforest: San Gerardo and Poco Sol. Because of their remoteness, they are used mainly by researchers and tourists who want a back-country experience. But the league does focus on conservation, not tourism, having a rather low annual visitation of 500 people, managing the limits to back-country tourists. The Santa Elena Forest Reserve is owned and maintained by the Santa Elena high school, and the reserve helps to fund courses in environmental education, biology, language, and tourism. CASEM is the local art cooperative, and the Monteverde Cheese Factory makes cheeses and other dairy products that are sold all over Costa Rica, and even exported to Panama and Nicaragua. Both of these are part of the Santa Elena Cooperative, which also includes Monteverde Coffee. Even the cheese factory, whose main focus is the production of dairy products, offers tours of the factory, a viewing room, and has a small shop where ice cream, milkshakes, and other products, such as t-shirts and hats, can be bought.

There are also educational activities such as the Ecological Farm, Butterfly Garden, and Orchid Garden, and adventure activities, in which you walk, climb, or fly on cables through the rainforest. Some of these include the Canopy Tour, Aerial Adventures, and SkyWalk and Sky Trek.

The Ecological Farm is one of the most inspirational projects in Monteverde. Created in 1993, it originally was a coffee, banana, and vegetable farm belonging to

Jorge Rodriguez and his family. With the passing of years, his children decided to look for other types of work because the farm was no longer productive. He and his children started by opening some trails because a study had determined that there were several bird species on the land. They reforested other lands, and what began as an experiment has now become a booming business. One of Jorge's sons, Elvin, is the manager of the project. Coffee and bananas are still grown, alongside a trail system. It is a unique place, and these two business ventures coexist with two waterfalls, more than 150 bird species, as well as sloths, porcupines, white-faced monkeys, toucans, and coatimundis.

Clearly, ecotourism has been growing exponentially. In 1972, there were less than 100 visitors to the MCFR. In 1999, nearly 60,000 visitors entered the reserve. This is an exponential curve that reached a plateau in the mid 1990s around the 50,000 mark, and many people think this is only because the reserve created a cap, limiting the number of people allowed in at one time. The actual number of visitors to the Monteverde zone is probably higher than this, because of the several other ecotourism projects in the area. Because of this drastic rise in tourism, workers were obviously needed to fill positions in the emerging restaurants, hotels, and other related businesses.

Thus, ecotourism has brought varied positive changes, including more jobs and incomes leading to an improved standard of living; better and more varied services; a conservationist ethic; better training; the start of recycling; and a bilingual population.

However, the growth of ecotourism is also presenting challenges. The development is creating urbanization, which has brought a loss of the small-town, community feeling as well as a loss of customs and values; contamination in terms of waste, traffic, and overall noise level (largely due to motorcycles, but also the many cars and trucks); septic system problems; drastically increased land prices; pollution; drug usage; concerns that the culture is changing; uncontrolled population and consequent construction growth leading to an overall disorganized urban growth; unemployment in the low season (May–November); and increasing social inequality.

Talking about these issues, one long-term community member stated:

Everyone works, and people don't have time anymore. People began to develop without control, and made houses and hotels in any and every location. Problems with waste and water began. I would say the worst has been the growth without control, without waiting for it or knowing. . . . Sometimes I've said it's like a little San Jose, with all of the problems—of water, of trash, of traffic, of population.

Another community leader commented, "A lot of the people who worked in the cheese factory began to leave to work in hotels, and so more people from outside were brought in to work. The idea of a small town community, of friendships and relationships changed."

In addition to social problems, the rapid growth is a problem creating ecological problems. The head of a local cooperative commented:

Because the population is concentrated, more waste is produced, growth is very rapid—a growth that is more rapid than the capacity for the community to organize itself to resolve the problems of what to do with dirty waters, with cans and plastics and with so many things here. We have more

contamination in the small rivers here, and more people want to come and live near here.

However, the biggest challenges are political. The money to fund projects is coming from outside the community, with a large percentage from the United States. With this outside investment comes pressure to increase tourism to ensure that these new ventures are profitable. This shifts both the program emphasis and the redevelopment timetables. One local activist summarized the new economy as, "It's all green marketing." Another ecotourist operator commented that increasingly, "Eco comes from economics not ecology."

Local groups have fought to retain some control, but as one local activist summarized, "The government won't let us, they said it was illegal to have a district board here in order to get the political power to stay here." Later in the interview she said, "There is a great lack of government policy, and a great need for more participatory decision making, with local institutions and on the national level, in order to address the main problems we're facing."

Kaikoura, New Zealand

Kaikoura is on the east coast of New Zealand's South Island, approximately 2 hours north of Christchurch. This community of roughly 3000 residents is one of the world's most popular spots for ocean-based ecotourism. Just outside of Kaikoura, the floor of the Pacific plunges, creating a nutrient rich habitat for sperm whales, dusky dolphins, and fur seals.

In the late 1980s, Kaikoura developed an ecotourism industry. The original idea came from a government employee who went around to local impoverished communities seeking to find local resources that could be used. In Kaikoura people talked about natural resources. With the help of a U.S. marine biologist, the community developed ideas for ecotourism.

These ideas were implemented with the help of extralocal tour companies. They quickly moved to develop three different whale watching companies, two dolphin watch/swim companies, and numerous seal-based companies. These projects created opportunities for local entrepreneurs, who developed secondary industries of motels, hostels and bed and breakfasts (B&Bs), restaurants, cafés, bars, and a plethora of tourist and craft shops. The success of these projects led to further ecotourism development, including a shark dive company, a pelagic bird watch company, and a cave tour.

The results are impressive. Unemployment is down to 3%. Most people talk about the economy with confidence. One local politician commented:

Back in 1988/89 with the change in government, there were big changes, and the whole New Zealand economy was in a bad state, and we had something like 200 people here on the railway, 30 or 40 running our telephone service, and you could just about say our town was a government town. There was fishing and farming, but not very much else, so once the government turned around and restructured all these things, we ended up with something like 300 people on the dole, with no work.

This economic development came alongside ecological protection. From the start, the Department of Conservation (a national government organization)

controlled almost all of the activities in Kaikoura. Under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1978, it was required to issue permits for all activities that affect the marine mammals, which accounts for almost all of the ecotourism activity in Kaikoura. Furthermore, the early ecotourism companies worked hard to protect local resources and the culture. For example, Whale Watch provided funds for education, conservation, and some of the infrastructural needs in the community. Finally, the development based on ecological value raised local consciousness. One community member commented. "It's made us in Kaikoura all very, very aware of how precious all the environment is and what we've got to do to keep all these things up and running."

Over the last 3 years, Kaikoura has entered a new period. With 900,000 visitors a year, two threats have emerged.

The first type of threat is social. Many of Kaikoura's older residents we interviewed noted that the town is losing the small, tight community feel. Increasingly, they feel uncomfortable in the town as older establishments are replaced with different types of restaurants and shops that cater to higher end tourists. One person commented: "Congestion happens. West End gets congested, with traffic, like nowhere to park for the locals. It's like all brand new boats and brand new cars, and all the local people get pissed off that they can't park there, yet we're paying for it—things like that." Another person questioned, "How do you measure your success? In this day and age, you measure it in terms of economics. And we all know that economics—the eventual outcome of economic build [pause] or whatever you call it is social destruction."

The second type of threat is ecological, as the sewerage, water, transportation, and solid waste disposal systems are inadequate to service the visitors coming to Kaikoura each year. One local activist commented, "Whale Watch and Dolphin Encounter let you swim with the seals, that's exciting and out there and international, but when you come to talk about sewerage and waste and water supplies, it's like, who wants to know... You know, that doesn't hit the headlines in London. They don't give a *** about that kind of stuff."

The community is aware of these threats. Working with local universities, researchers, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) they are also aware of the possible solutions to these problems. However, they are struggling to retain the political control needed to shape ecotourism and to distribute the benefits. First, the tour operators are under pressure to compete in a tight market for ecotourism customers. They need to increase revenues through expansion while keeping costs under control. They are openly fighting anything that will force them to raise prices or to make large investments in facets of the enterprise that neither draw new customers nor enhance customer experience.

Second, the community lacks the financial and political capacity to deal with these issues. While the economy has grown, the population has not. Thus, the small group of existing taxpayers cannot afford to pay for massive infrastructure improvements, causing economic and political problems. Kaikoura needs to find creative solutions. However, the Kaikoura council has very few people to actually run the council. The Kaikoura District Councilors are making large decisions—decisions for which they have never been trained. While the complaints come in, they try to ignore them and do what they see best for the community. In many cases, however, they simply do not have the experience to manage that which they are managing.

Increasingly, the council finds itself at odds with business interests. However, it lacks political power. One local community leader commented:

The council, particularly with the Resource Management Act and stuff like that—they spend so much money, and when they get applications to do things, if they apply to the council to develop, and if they're big business interests, and the council doesn't approve it, the businesses are in a position, with their wealth, to go through to the environmental courts and get lawyers in and that. And the council sort of demonstrated that it's prepared to do some things that it doesn't agree to, but with other things, it bends a bit. They know that they don't really want it to happen, and they know that the public doesn't really want it to happen. But they know that if they fight it, they just haven't got the resources and the money to do the whole thing—to fight right to the end. So if anyone had a really big business, they wouldn't have to push for that long.

Consistent with the Costa Rica project, we note the following processes:

1. The original idea came from the outside (in both cases a combination of the national government and the United States) while based on indigenous knowledge.
2. In the early years, the ecotourism was socially and ecologically beneficial in that old destructive ways with low wages were replaced with better jobs that protected the environment.
3. These early successes brought in more extralocal business, which in turn displaced local people culturally, geographically, and economically. As one person commented, "They [outsiders and government] basically stole the business from us."
4. These extralocal businesses made big investments, which they are trying to recoup by exerting pressure to open up the communities to more ecotourism.
5. The increase is bringing negative effects, which the locals lack the political power to either address or stop.

From Technique to Politics: Overcoming False Assumptions

Our case studies question the validity of some of the assumptions that implicitly run through the sustainable community development literature:

False Assumption 1: People are not aware of the problems. In both cases, people in the local communities are clearly aware of the problems of sustaining both the social and ecological benefits of ecotourism.

False Assumption 2: To the extent that the problems are recognized, they are not addressed because they lack the technical capability. In these cases, the technical fixes are known and available.

False Assumption 3: Sustainable community development projects are not market feasible. In both cases, there was a market-feasible model for sustainable community development.

Consistent with our earlier work, we note the emergence of an "ecotourism treadmill," where there is a kind of paradoxical or dialectical system (Schnaiberg 1980; Schnaiberg and Gould 1994; Schnaiberg et al. 1996; Weinberg et al. 2000) with internal dynamics that tend to speed up the rate of tourism production.

Ultimately, the problems are known, fixable, and economically viable. The obstacles are political. The communities exist in larger political systems that lack the capacity to control economic action. In other words, the political process is not capable of keeping the economic system in check. This is most clear in recent battles in Monteverde.

In 1988, people from various organizations in Monteverde met to work together and create a vision of what they wanted the community to be like in the year 2020, appropriately naming the organization that came from this meeting “2020.” This group set out to create an organization that would organize the rest of the organizations—hotels, guides, reserves, the cheese factory—to retain the “eco” part of the “tourism.” Despite early support, 2020 fell apart after a few years. The head of the Santa Elena Cooperative commented, “We worked for 5 or 6 years to build the ideal community, and this was the gold time of tourism. People said that they didn’t want to think of the future, that we would just have to build and people will come, and we would all be rich and happy.” In our interviews, we noted that people really did not believe this. Rather, they believed it was the best they could hope for.

This pessimism has been borne out over a new controversy about a road to be paved. It would link Monteverde to the Interamerican Highway, which is now a 2-hour descent from Monteverde with the current unpaved road. Locals recognize the problems as threefold: First, there is already too much traffic, and the dust kicked up by the road in the dry season is so intense that it causes health problems, especially breathing problems for the local children. Second, it will change the nature of tourism industry, away from ecotourism and toward mass tourism. Many people feel that the current road itself weeds out ecotourists from mass tourists. Ecotourists are more willing to make the difficult drive up the rocky mountain road, in order to visit its many ecological treasures. Third, ecotourists will lose interest in Monteverde because neither the forest nor the species that live here will exist if overdevelopment and overuse continue.

Thus, residents provide a clear narrative about how the road threatens to change Monteverde more than ever before. People also recognize the ecological impacts, as more tourists will also increase the problems with black and gray waters, with drinking water, and with general waste. The director of the Monteverde Institute expressed great concern in this respect:

I think we’re really at a threshold here, where soon the negative impacts are going to overwhelm conservation. . . . There are pressures to develop land in this critical habitat, and now we see farms being gridded, and divided into lots, and this will affect conservation. It is hard for people from this region to buy land to build a house . . . locals are being displaced from the area.

However, people believe that no matter how much local opposition exists, eventually the road will happen. They cite three reasons. First, history suggests as much. Second, they see large foreign interest, which includes the cruise ships that dock in Puntarenas, as well as the various resorts that have been build or are being built not far from Puntarenas: Marriott, Sheraton, and the Spanish hotel giant Melía. They all want access to Monteverde for day trips for their clients. Third, the government supports the paving. As a number of local people noted, the federal government is really pushing for foreign investment. These investors are promoting mass tourism, driven by large resorts and hotel chains.

Many people have raised the idea of Monteverde becoming its own municipality, as one strategy to combat the road. This form of local political control would make it feasible to develop a zoning plan, which will be necessary to manage all of the tourism impacts. It would also give the power to shape the actual paving of the road to the local community, thereby reducing the impact of a distant decision made by politicians, influenced by monied interests. However, the municipality of Puntarenas does not want to lose Monteverde, due to the tax revenue it receives from Monteverde. Ironically, despite being 2 hours down the mountain, Puntarenas sends inspectors to regulate *extremely* rarely. Thus, people have built hotels and restaurants on bad ground and next to river beds, and feel free to dispose of their waste however they please because there is no enforcement.

Conclusion: Ecotourism Treadmills

We are not the first people to note that ecotourism leaves footprints in the host community (Honey 1999; Honey and Park 1999; Amaro 1999; McLaren 1998). Furthermore, our cases are clearly only briefly noted here. However, we do believe that our fieldwork from successful cases suggests that ecotourism, like most sustainable community development initiatives, develops a treadmill with developments somewhat along the following lines:

1. Indigenous information provides a partial base for ecotourism opportunities.
2. This may need to be supplemented by exogenous capital/organizers, to provide housing or recreational increments to the local ecosystem.
3. To create effective demand by (eco)tourists, though, these local bodies need to market their ecotourist opportunities, typically involving the use of third parties outside the local area.
4. Once this gets started, two processes seem to emerge: (a) The extralocals operating in the ecotourism setting often get motivated to maximize the use of their facilities, and seek more tourists; (b) the extralocal body marketing the local ecotourism seeks to draw more tourists by broader promotion of the area, and in the process typically uses broader facilities to attract more tourists.
5. These latter factors seem to generate and maintain a kind of ecotourism growth machine.
6. The central paradox is that the locals are aware of the costs of this approach, yet increasingly get displaced by extralocals who have “moved in” to grow their local companies, and extralocals in the travel promotion industry who want to “move out” to draw in ever more tourists.
7. In effect, local “ecotourism” is mismatched to the extralocal “tourism machines.” The nature of the footprints makes it difficult to prevent ecotourism from slowly being transformed back into mass production tourism, which community development theorists have argued is destructive for communities.

Why does this matter? We believe it shifts the fundamental question for sustainable community development practitioners. As the book review editor of *Society & Natural Resources*, a multitude of books cross my desk dealing with sustainable development. Many of these books address how we can “get the market right” and/or develop “sustainable” technology. This is consistent with my experiences serving on a taskforce for President Clinton’s Council on Sustainable Development

(PCSD). We believe this focus fails to truly address the issue/matter at hand. Our cases suggest that the challenges to ecotourism are neither technical or economic, but rather political. Ecotourism's fate depends not so much on globalization or technology, but rather on the development of strong democratic systems of governance in the host country. We need to develop models not for getting the ecology or market right, but rather for getting the politics right.

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