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The Blurred Lines between Cultural Authenticity and Staged Attractions in Indigenous Tourism

By Ellen Rugh CREST Program & Research Intern, Fall 2017

As I stepped out of my canoe onto the banks of the Rio Napo, the gritty river sand squished under the weight of my hiking boots. I had boarded the rickety boat from the small launch in Tena, Ecuador, where a child of no more than 10 years old approached me as a waiter. She dropped her *Dora the Explorer* bookbag at my feet and from inside, revealed a 6-foot anaconda that had been coiled on her back. Its mouth was taped shut with Scotch tape. She asked if I wanted to take a picture with the snake on my shoulders. A tempting offer – for just a dollar, I could prove my fearlessness as a true Amazonian woman to my friends back at home. My disgust and fear of snakes eventually prevailed; as I hopped in my arriving canoe, I gave her a dollar but politely passed on the serpent.

After just a short ride up river, I disembarked at Puerto Mishuallí and made my way up the steep banks, where the sandy river meets the thick rainforest vegetation. Our group was headed for one of quaint Napu-Kichwa villages that dot the Mishuallí region to learn more about the indigenous way of life.

When we arrived at the village, we were immediately routed into the closest hut. There, we watched as a group of women demonstrated a traditional dance. They stood in front of us waving their arms robotically—the blank gaze and detachment on their face spoke a thousand words. Aesthetically, most of the women appeared to be dressed in semi-authentic attire, while a few wore costumes complete with coconut-shell bras and jaggedly cut leopard printed sarongs, a tawdry throwback to the Flintstones. After the dance, we left the hut and across the way, I noticed a “shaman” puffing smoke from his wood-tipped cigarillo into the face of a tourist, as he whacked his legs, arms, and back with palm fronds. After the ritual, I watched the smiling, satisfied tourist head toward the gift shop to check out the tribal blowguns and trinkets for sale.

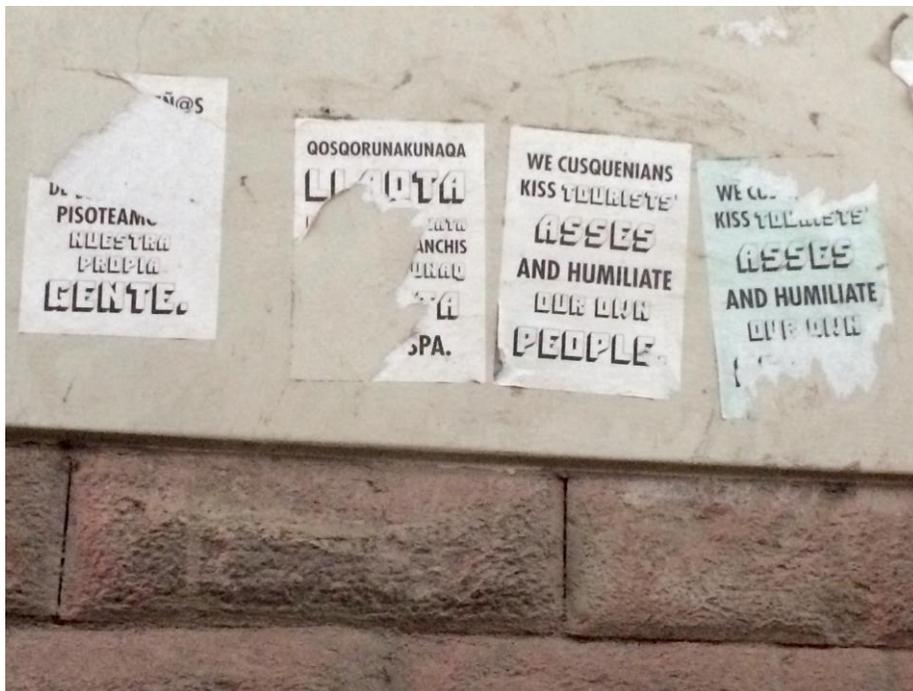
My mind could barely comprehend the entire scene. Sure, this community was starkly different from my daily lifestyle, but what I was expecting to be a representation of traditional living instead felt diluted into a kitschy, Disney’s Epcot-style stereotype.

Ecuador is not the only country facing the challenges of these cultural theme parks and staged experiences. In Peru, women and children hover around tourist hotspots, dressed in traditional garb while carrying baby alpacas, charging tourists for a picture that they can hang on their mantle back home. Indigenous communities throughout the world – the Aborigines of Australia, the Maori of New Zealand, and more – have raised concerns regarding cultural exploitation in the tourism industry.

But indigenous tourism represents a complex, multifaceted issue.

On the positive side, when tourists are introduced to an indigenous culture, they bring the potential for economic growth and employment to remote communities. Tourists' dollars stay within the community, rather than going to large, multinational travel and hospitality corporations that don't serve the local people. Indigenous tourism can also promote cultural preservation, as the sparked interest by international travelers allows for traditional cultures to thrive in instances where they might have otherwise faded into our rapidly homogenizing society.

The real issues arise when unregulated, irresponsible indigenous tourism practices detract, and even harm, the local people and culture. By one definition, "indigenous tourism refers to tourism activities in which indigenous people are directly involved either through control and/or by having their culture serve as the essence of the attraction." Simply through syntax, we can see a fundamental concern that often times indigenous tourism is an "attraction" of which the local community is not necessarily in control.¹



Street Flyers in Cusco, Peru: "WE CUSQUENIANS KISS TOURISTS' ASSES AND HUMILIATE OUR OWN PEOPLE"

So what can we do to ensure we make responsible decisions when engaging in indigenous tourism? For such a complex issue, my advice is simple—awareness and advocacy.

The World Indigenous Tourism Alliance (WINTA), an Indigenous-led global network, is working to strengthen regulations on this type of tourism. In 2012, with support from the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), WINTA released the Larrakia Declaration. This declaration, 20 years in the making, applies the fundamentals of the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* within the tourism sector. It seeks to promote equitable partnerships among governments, the tourism industry, and indigenous people; to respect the traditional laws, lands, customs, and heritages of indigenous communities; and to support sustainable, responsible, and successful tourism practices.³

As advocates, we must support those who are fighting to implement responsible practices within the indigenous tourism industry. And as travelers, we must become aware of the fine lines that exist between authentic, educational experiences that support the local indigenous people, and exploitative, cultural commoditization. (For guidance, please read “8 Smart Traveler Tips for Indigenous Tourism” at the end of this essay.)

It has taken me four years to fully digest my experience at Mishuallí, Ecuador, and even still, I find difficulty coming to an accurate conclusion about my emotions. Each instance of indigenous tourism provides its own level of unique motivations and complexities that are impossible to define by steadfast rules. The purpose of this essay is neither to draw concrete boundaries, nor to condemn those who have ever participated in these types of staged cultural attractions, as I am admittedly included in this demographic. However, I believe that through awareness and advocacy, we can better opt for authentic traditional experiences that benefit both ourselves and the indigenous people.

8 Smart Traveler Tips for Indigenous Tourism:

1. Research Ahead of Time: Before you depart, take time to learn about local customs, traditions, and social protocols.
2. Speak Like a Local: Try to learn a few words in the local language. Even if you’re not perfect at it, this can help foster meaningful connections with the local community and its people.
3. Respect Differences: Experience and respect the diversity of every destination. Be open-minded to others’ unique history, religion, societal norms, music, art and cuisine.
4. Respect Privacy: Always ask before taking photographs of other people and respect their wishes if they decline.
5. Support Local Economies: Buy locally made goods and handcrafts.
6. Barter Smart: While bartering is common in many cultures, remember to respect livelihoods of local vendors and artisans by paying a fair price.
7. Buy Authentic: Be aware of the cultural and intellectual property rights of indigenous communities. Try to avoid buying items that may be counterfeit.
8. Learn from a Local: Hire local guides with in-depth knowledge of the area.³

¹ Pacific Asia Travel Association. (2014) Indigenous Tourism & Human Rights In Asia & the Pacific Region: Review, Analysis, & Checklists. p. 7. <http://www.winta.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/PATA-Checklist.pdf>

² World Indigenous Tourism Alliance. (2012) The Larrakia Declaration. <http://www.winta.org/the-larrakia-declaration/>

³ United Nations World Tourism Organization. (2017) Tips for a Responsible Traveller. <http://cf.cdn.unwto.org/sites/all/files/docpdf/tipsforresponsibletraveller25-01.pdf>