



Press Perspectives

Identification and analysis of perspectives from the Media in relation to current tourism and residential development along Costa Rica's Pacific coast

FINAL REPORT

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ACRONYMS

CST: Certification of Sustainable Tourism

ICT: Costa Rican Tourist Board (Instituto Costarricense de Turismo)

CAFTA: Central American Free Trade Agreement with the United States

METHODOLOGY

Data for this report was collected from articles published by international media sources and through interviews with editors and writers from four Costa Rican newspapers and travel magazines, and with authors of four of the leading guidebooks on Costa Rica.

Articles clipped from U.S. and Canadian newspapers and national news wires represent a cross section of common themes associated with Costa Rica's tourism development from 1991 to 2008. These reports, compiled by CESD researchers, are the results of an Internet search about tourism news in Costa Rica. Reports were taken from national and local newspapers based in New York, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Washington DC, St. Louis, St. Petersburg, San Jose, CA, Sarasota, Austin, New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Toronto, Canada, Raleigh and Seattle, among others.

Interviews with Costa Rica's press focused on the coverage each publication gives to ecotourism and nature tourism compared with resort and beach tourism. Editors and reporters from The Tico Times, The Beach Times, Nature Landings and Costa Rica Traveler were asked to identify the issues surrounding coastal tourism development and the impact these issues have on the country's image relative to tourism. They also gave their perspectives on the relevance of coastal development issues to their readers and made projections about where current trends will lead.

Writers for top selling guidebooks on Costa Rica -- Frommer's, Fodors and The New Key to Costa Rica -- provided insights on how Pacific coast tourism areas have changed over the years, as well as how these changes are represented in their books. The Lonely Planet was also referenced. The authors were also asked to describe their coverage of ecotourism and sustainable tourism, and discuss the importance of Costa Rica's reputation as a leader in ecotourism to the content of the book. Writers also commented on the relationship between tourism and real-estate development, as well as the direction of Costa Rica's tourism model.

OBJECTIVES

To trace the perceptions about Costa Rica's tourism model by both the international and local media and identify the issues surrounding coastal development. This report also describes the role marketing has played in driving press and consumer perceptions about the destination and gauges the effects development has had on specific tourism sites along the Pacific coast. The report offers travel writers' insight on how these places will be positioned among the country's tourism offering as well as the future of ecotourism in Costa Rica.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An examination of press reports on Costa Rica's tourism offering from 1990 to the present, as well as interviews with journalists, editors and guidebook writers in Costa Rica, demonstrates a shift in media perceptions about the country's leadership as an ecotourism destination.

Once described almost exclusively in the press as an ecological playground featuring a host of inland nature sites that attracted active ecotourism adventurers, recent tourism news on Costa Rica alludes to a dual personality of the country's travel offering. Coverage of inland sites has waned while more focus has been given to the country's coastal areas. Leading U.S. newspapers that first identified Costa Rica's ecotourism model during the 1990s are now reporting on the changing landscape at several tourism beach towns and on luxury resort accommodations slated for construction. In most recent years, articles have appeared describing other destinations in Central America as the 'New Costa Rica,' since they offer similar nature experiences, but with fewer crowds and less development.

Despite the emergence of competing ecotourism destinations in the region, the country has maintained top positioning as nature-based vacation spot, albeit for a more mainstream market who also seeks luxury amenities, convenient services and even the chance to consider real-estate investment while at the beach. This market is drawn in by the same images used by the media to attract ecotourists in the 1990s: rainforests, wildlife, adventure tours. However, today's images more often than not come attached to the comforts of resort hotels or mixed tourism/real-estate projects. Texts that accompany these images continued—as they had since the 1990s—to leverage the country's longstanding reputation as a peaceful, democratic, ecological paradise, in close proximity to North America.

The shift toward imagery and texts that highlight a more comfortable and safe side of Costa Rica's tourism seems to have gained momentum post September 11, 2001. In an effort to draw in new markets, Costa Rica's tourism officials began positioning the country in the press as a quieter, more relaxing alternative to developed beach destinations elsewhere, while also offering 5-star accommodations and exotic nature experiences.

As the mainstream press took greater interest in reporting about the country's beaches, and these areas began to develop more rapidly, travel writers and guidebook authors began giving more space to new lodging and tour options in lesser known coastal areas. Guidebooks also responded to growing tourism

development by downplaying or eliminating coverage of big resorts in areas like Jaco and Tamarindo and adding sections on sustainability.

Media reports on Costa Rica's ecotourism and sustainable tourism was also given a boost in recent years with a growing number of hoteliers and tour operators supporting the sustainable tourism certification program (CST). Even so, reports on the certification efforts local tourism industry failed to overshadow the marketing campaigns used by resort and condominium developers to highlight Costa Rica's growing position in luxury and beach tourism circles.

Meanwhile local newspapers have turned a critical eye on coastal development, reporting on the social and environmental impact of unplanned and unrestricted construction. Specific reports on ecological damage due to sewage problems at a Papagayo resort came under scrutiny by the international media in 2008. This set off alarm bells about the veracity of the country's image as a sustainable tourism destination and its ability to manage the dual personality of its tourism product as reported by the press.

To respond to a changing perception about Costa Rican tourism, a greater effort is needed to engage travel writers on the country's efforts in sustainable tourism. Tourism representatives in the public and private sectors also require more awareness about sustainable tourism issues, in order to effectively communicate the country's efforts. And the management of current and future tourism developments, including resorts and mixed tourism/residential projects, must be held to a baseline of sustainable tourism requirements, in order to demonstrate evidence a national commitment to sustainability despite Costa Rica's evolving landscape.

INTERNATIONAL MEDIA PERCEPTIONS OF COSTA RICA TOURISM

A review of the U.S. media reports on Costa Rica from 1991 to 2008 yields some interesting changes in the perception of the destination among newspapers and news wires. The following clips show some trends in the themes associated with Costa Rica and tourism throughout these years.¹

While some significant changes are noted in the types of stories published on the country's evolving tourism model, Costa Rica's principal assets continue to be presented in the same way. Costa Rica is almost always described as politically stable, with the longest standing democracy in Latin America, having no army, a high standard of education and health care, in close proximity to the U.S. and Canada. Costa Rica's is also noted for its abounding biodiversity with 25 percent of its land set aside for conservation in national parks and reserves.

1990-1993

In the early 1990s, Costa Rica was being described as the little country that was showing the world a different way to travel with a clearly defined target market of nature loving tourists. A slew of articles depicted Costa Rica as a pristine getaway for those who enjoy active, outdoors vacations. As the *Chicago Sun Times* put it: "Tourists head to this Central American country for hikes through lush tropical forests; bird-watching expeditions to spot the rare quetzal and some 500 other species; whitewater rafting trips on rivers edged by dense jungle; fishing excursions to catch tarpon, sailfish or rainbow bass; or simply for quiet days on nearly deserted beaches."²

Travel writers described hiking inland sites through Costa Rica's cloud forest and rain-forested volcanoes more prominently than spending time along its coastal areas. Specifically, Monteverde took a position in the limelight among the country's nature sites.³

While most articles highlighted Costa Rica's natural attractions, others noted the hospitality of its people. According to the *St. Louis Dispatch*, "One thing that made [Costa Rica] most pleasant is that the local people have absolutely no animosity towards Americans. They are uniformly pleasant and kind, no matter where you go."⁴

As early as 1991, Costa Rica was associated with ecotourism. According to *The New York Times*, “A new word has entered the lexicon of travel: ecotourism. Born of the environmental movement, ecotourism promises the traveler an opportunity to help save the planet and get a suntan in the process.” Under the headline “Ecotourism: Can It Protect the Planet?”, the *Times*’ piece went on to answer in the affirmative: “Nature based travel is in its nascent stages in Costa Rica providing a viable alternative to the agricultural and commercial development that endangers many pristine lands. In the process, a kinder, greener tourist is emerging. The ecotourist is more likely to choose low-impact transportation: a canoe rather than a cruise ship, walking rather than a Land Rover. And the ecotourist prefers small, locally owned lodges to huge hotels or resorts owned by multinational corporations.”⁵

In a similar vein, the *St. Petersburg Times* wrote, “Ecotourism - that hybrid of nature and adventure and international travel - has the potential to be the best kind of tourism. Done right, it is a boon to developing countries, a model of rural development that promotes conservation and provides for sustainable use of natural resources.” It added that Costa Rica was being promoted as an alternative “model for ecotourism” to the Himalayas, Galapagos, and the “African bush.”⁶

In 1992, Costa Rica was dubbed the “number one ecotourism destination in the world” by the U.S. Adventure Travel Association and a Costa Rican government survey revealed that most tourists were entering Costa Rica for ecotourism-related reasons.⁷ Costa Rican Tourist Minister Luis Manuel Chacon was quoted as saying the tourist boom will save the national economy and guarantee development.⁸

During these years, the media began raising some questions about ecotourism and journalists flocked to the country to see theory in practice. Many left with clearly defined concepts to explain it to their readers. They described the benefits of ecotourism development and declared Costa Rica as an ecotourism model to be watched.

However, some journalists noted problems, particularly the country’s high rate of deforestation. An article in *The Washington Times* stated, “Costa Rica is losing its forests almost faster than any country in the world.”⁹ The *St. Louis Times* added, however, that ecotourism offered an answer since it promoted protection and conservation.

Some of these early press reports conveyed doubts about the use of “eco” claims as a marketing tool and “greenwashing” ploys to make businesses seem eco-

friendly, even when they weren't. As the debate about tourism development unfolded, journalists were still struggling with the concept of ecotourism in Costa Rica while reports about the country's deforestation rate emerged. "Costa Rica is losing its forests almost faster than any country in the world. Central America's annual deforestation rate of about 4 percent is one of the planet's highest, according to the San Francisco-based Rainforest Action Network."¹⁰

Even some largely laudatory articles had headlines that raised questions. *The Boston Globe* headline began "Ecotourism: Good and Bad", while the *St. Louis Dispatch's* read: "The Ecotourism Debate: For Better or For Worse." This article went on to pronounce "Ecotourism is the travel buzzword of the decade." It noted that central or inland Costa Rica was being marketed to tourists *more than the coastal areas*,¹¹ an early acknowledgement that the Pacific coast was not sharing in Costa Rica's ecotourism boom.

A 1992 article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* was even more explicit regarding trends towards a different type of coastal development: "Costa Rica's popularity as a destination is international, and growing at a heady rate. Already, Japanese and Spanish investors are planning huge resort hotels, and places like the Manuel Antonio Beach area are starting to resemble crowded resorts everywhere else." It quoted one U.S. visitor as saying, "I wouldn't say Costa Rica's suffered from too much popularity yet, but it's on the rise."¹²

Local tour operators also began echoing the concerns of international reporters. "Costa Rica is now the most attractive center of ecotourism in the world. There is no other place which offers so much variety in a natural setting and so many facilities to tourists," said Michael Kaye of Costa Rica Expeditions. "But all this will turn into a big ecological cemetery if there is a mass invasion of visitors," he stressed. Kaye went on to warn, "'This marvelous country runs the risk of being filled up with hotel junk, prostitutes and criminals, like what happened in Mexico, Santo Domingo, Spain and Kenya'."¹³ This 1993 article, in the Inter Press Service, carried the headline: "Environment: Mass Tourism or Eco-Tourism?"¹⁴

1994-1996

While in 1991 *The New York Times* noted that coffee and bananas were far bigger revenue producers than tourism,¹⁵ by mid-decade, the balance had shifted: tourism had become Costa Rica's number-one foreign exchange earner.¹⁶ A 1995 article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* reported, "Tourism passed banana exports as Costa Rica's main source of hard cash last year, and

revenues are expected to grow from \$600 million to \$1 billion over the next three years.”¹⁷

During the mid-1990s, there was ongoing debate as to how to handle growing numbers of tourists and the ecological dangers involved and associated with mass tourism. A 1994 *USA Today* article depicted the appeals of Costa Rica’s “Steamy jungles, smoking volcanoes and rugged mountains, and went on to note: “All have combined to make the tiny Central American country of Costa Rica one of the hottest eco-tourism destinations in the hemisphere. And therein lies a problem.” It quoted Ree Sheck, author of the book, *Costa Rica: A Natural Destination*, as warning, “The country is not overrun yet, but no one really knows whether it can handle mass-market tourism.”¹⁸

Academics that followed Costa Rica’s tourism growth also grew weary of possible overdevelopment. “Despite such exceptional qualifications, Costa Rica is no modern-day Garden of Eden. After a half-century of rapid economic and population growth, it has reached its environmental limits.”¹⁹

Tourism reps from the private industry attributed the growth, in part, to government marketing efforts aimed at “softer” more mainstream tourists. Tamara Budowski, president of Horizontes Nature Tours in Costa Rica, said that although ecotourism appealed mostly to birders and scientists a decade ago, today’s mass-market promotions zero in on the everyday traveler. “This tourist expects what you get in Hawaii and Cancun,” reported the *US NEWS and World Report* in 1995.²⁰

In 1996, the *Sarasota-Harold Tribune*, noted as well that Costa Rica’s marketing efforts to attract more mainstream ecotourists were also reaching a growing market of U.S. retirees interested in living abroad.

These retirees in Costa Rica seemed to respond to the same list of natural and social attributes which had been used to attract ecotourists to the destination: “Costa Rica’s rugged mountains are a visual feast to Floridians who are accustomed to flatness. Foreigners find that Costa Rica offers low taxes, investment opportunities, a 97 percent literacy rate, and possibly a gentler way of life. A peaceful democracy, Costa Rica is a country that still welcomes Americans.”

This article went on to say that the country’s reputation for quality health care, which consistently ranked among the best in the Americas (along with Cuba’s), began attracting what the media termed Medical Tourists. “Nature isn’t all that’s drawing Americans to Costa Rica. Some are making the trip to undergo dental

work and plastic surgery, such as facelifts, because the procedures are relatively inexpensive there (and their insurance does cover the elective procedures) and done by U.S.-trained physicians. Having such surgery in Costa Rica also gives patients a chance to recover in the privacy of a foreign country. Clinics dot the hillside outside San Jose."²¹

This began to raise concerns about the impacts on ecotourism. "As American retirees are enticed to move to Costa Rica by ads placed in American newspapers, how will their influx change Costa Rica's culture and environment? How supportive will American investors and developers be of efforts to save the rainforests and protect ecological balance in Costa Rica?"²²

Articles also began commenting on other tourism development that was out of line with ecotourism. According to a 1996 piece in the *Austin American-Statesman* from Texas, "Sport fishermen do not seem quite as enthusiastic as ecotourists about spending their free time hiking jungle trails or attending nature discussion groups. So three small casinos have recently opened here, where visitors with big bankrolls can gamble to their hearts' content. That, in turn, appears to have attracted a few prostitutes. 'The backpackers aren't the kind of people who spend a lot of money,' said the owner of one casino. 'We much prefer the fishermen, and we hope that more of them will be coming.'"²³

On the flipside, local tourism industry representatives also made international headlines that year for shunning large development projects in favor of ecolodges. A 1996 article in the *Environmental Magazine* noted, "Costa Rica has avoided large-scale commercial development in favor of small oceanside and mountaintop resorts that blend in with their natural surroundings. (When Barcelo Hotels built a 402-room beach resort, local tour operators - who typically promoted getaways of 50 rooms or less - talked about organizing a boycott.)"²⁴

That same year, the ICT launched a new advertising campaign under the banner: "No artificial ingredients." Over a decade later, this highly successful slogan is still used, despite the considerable changes on the ground in the country's tourism products.²⁵

1997-1999

Then, in 1997, reports began surfacing about flailing tourism numbers, attributed in part to rapid development. Under the headline, "Overbuilding, Bad Press Sap Costa Rican Tourism," the New Orleans' *Times-Picayune* wrote, "A few years ago, showing up on Costa Rica's Pacific Coast without hotel reservations in

February was akin to trying to find a room in the French Quarter during Mardi Gras. Now, after a decade of rapid growth made Costa Rica one of the hottest travel destinations in the hemisphere, tourism is down, the victim of poor planning, rising crime and increased competition. At the same time, the number of hotel rooms is up - to 25,000 from 12,500 just five years ago."²⁶

In response to growing press about greenwashing and amid fears the country was beginning to lose its edge, Costa Rica's tourist board (ICT) launched its voluntary Certification of Sustainable Tourism (CST) program, providing a resource for businesses to prove their environmental, social and service commitments through certification. In a 1997 article, Rodolfo Lizano, the director of the CST program wrote: "This program directly attacks the practices of some businesses which operate as 'greenwashers' (businesses which abuse the concept of 'eco' or 'sustainable') because it will offer reliable information about which businesses really make an effort to offer a sustainable tourism product and which don't. Without a doubt, this reinforces the image of the country as an authentic 'naturalist' destination, considerably augmenting our national tourism product's ability to compete."²⁷

The following year marked a return of more positive articles about a new ecotourism with a touch of luxury. Costa Rica received much press for upscale ecolodges like Lapa Rios and a new breed of ecotourist that the *New York Times* called the "neo-ecotourist". "We decided against the trip that promised the opportunity to boil our own water and sleep in a tree house and chose instead to stay at a resort, Lapa Rios, described as "the most deluxe jungle and beach hideaway in Costa Rica." The oxymoronic pairing of the adjective "luxury" with the noun "jungle" appealed to our manic-depressive travel style. We booked three nights."²⁸

2000 - 2002

By the beginning of the new millennium, the media had turned back to a sense of optimism about Costa Rica tourism but was also describing a wider variety of ways one could experience the country. The word "ecotourists" was being replaced by simply "tourists" and the country was portrayed as having conventional sun, sand, and golf as well as eco- offerings. As the Cox News Service wrote, "Don't think you have to be a high-adventure junkie or an eco-freak to enjoy a trip to Costa Rica. There's also plenty of traditional vacation fare, including deserted beaches perfect for meandering, sparkling new golf courses, five-star hotels, day-sailing trips to nowhere, and casinos and discos offering plenty of nighttime action....Petty theft is a problem, but robberies and more

serious crimes are still rare. Visitors who take reasonable precautions should have few problems.”²⁹

Interestingly, the president of the Costa Rican Association of Tourism Professionals, William Rodriguez was quoted in another article as saying beach tourism had surpassed ecotourism: "Ecotourism remains a small part of the tourism industry in Costa Rica, where the great majority of visitors come for the sun and beaches.”³⁰

A 2002 article in *Business Wire* is one of the first to mention Costa Rica as a top destination for weddings and incentive vacations, typically associated with beach destinations. "We have been designing travel for upscale individuals and groups in Costa Rica for over ten years, said Leigh Ann Cloutier, CTC, General Manager of Spur Incentives North America. During that time the traveler's menu of options has constantly evolved, and I see Costa Rica becoming very popular for small and medium size incentive groups, meetings, corporate events and weddings.”³¹

In the wake of the 911 attacks, Costa Rica's made headlines as a close and safe alternative to long-haul vacations for Americans. Inter Press Service predicted that "Costa Rica would accidentally be one of the biggest 'beneficiaries' of the fears triggered by the September 11 events, due to the country's proximity to the United States and its well-designed tourism policies and promotion strategies that draw U.S. and European travelers." It went on to say, "Crist Inman with the Costa Rica-based Central American Business Administration Institute (INCAE), a leading private center of higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean, said the influx of tourists in 2002 would be unusually large because many people from the United States are opting for quieter, safer and closer destinations for their annual vacations."

In 2002, Tourism Minister Ruben Pacheco, reflecting these trends, introduced the idea of 5-star ecotourism to international press, in effort to further boost tourism numbers. "We will try to maintain our focus on the protection and conservation of nature," Pacheco told Inter-Press Service, "but we are going to change the idea that Costa Rica is just forest and jungle." Echoing William Rodriguez' remarks, the Minister added, "Many people today think that going to Costa Rica means traveling to a region of gorgeous mountains and beaches where they will have to sleep in tents or outside under the stars," he said. But the new National Tourism Plan not only invites visitors to camp out, but also to enjoy five-star hotels built in harmony with the environment, in the middle of lush jungles, he added.³²

President Abel Pacheco added that Costa Rica intended to both keep its 'eco' mantel while expanding its beach tourism. He said the national tourism plan

would “diversify the menu of options offered to visitors by promoting ‘sustainable sun and sand’ tourism as part of the strategy to make the country one of the world's environmental leaders.”³³

2003 to 2006

During this period, more articles began to appear comparing Costa Rica with traditional beach destinations, with some reports suggesting that the country makes a good alternative to Spring Break haunts, such as Cancun, Acapulco, Puerto Vallarta and Florida. “College students are savvier travelers than they used to be, travel agents say. While many still flock to Texas, Florida and Mexico for sun, sand and surf, an increasing number are jetting to Paris and Rome and Costa Rica, spending their spring fling with Matisse and Modigliani and swinging over a rainforest canopy instead of guzzling beer on the beach,” reported the *Austin American-Statesman* in 2003.³⁴

While some articles praised Costa Rica for offering more in the way of nature and adventure tourism than traditional beach destinations, others spoke to Costa Rica’s perceived loss of identity as a nature tourism hotspot.

In 2003 *The New York Times* wrote, “The abundant flora, fauna and volcanoes promised in this ecological wonderland helped lure us to Costa Rica on a week’s Christmas vacation last year, along with the likelihood of good weather -- the dry season runs from mid-November through April. Beyond that, we wanted to relax away from the bustle that has made many beach resorts in Mexico and the Caribbean anything but relaxing during Christmas break.”³⁵

The same year a *National Post Canada* article described a Costa Rican holiday experience far from ecotourism: “Resorts have gobbled up most of the Pacific coast and foreigners are eagerly snapping up what is left. (Approximately 50,000 Americans and 6,000 Canadians live in the country full or part time, where they enjoy the sunny climate, the easy tax laws and the relatively inexpensive real estate and lifestyle. Costa Rica’s resorts are similar to those in any place that offers reliable sun. Several hundred guests lounge around pools punctuated with bougainvillea and golden coconut palms and thatched-roof refreshment stands. The booze flows, children frolic, and the strip of actual beach pounded by the playful Pacific is all but ignored.”³⁶

By 2005, newspapers were reporting on growing ecotourism trends in other Central American countries. In a *New York Times* article “A Crowded Field of Contenders Vying to Be ‘The Next Costa Rica’,” Costa Rica is described as

having been on the "must do" list for travelers who "want to experience a guilt-free (but still occasionally luxurious) vacation, as it has been home to a growing number of eco-resorts, including the trend-setting Lapa Rios. (The luxury factor went up a notch with the recent arrival of the Four Seasons on the Peninsula Papagayo, bringing with it a state-of-the-art spa and a championship golf course.) Now some other countries in Central America - including Panama, Honduras, Nicaragua and even Guatemala - have begun to muscle in on Costa Rica's territory. In particular, a lot of people like to compare Panama to Costa Rica 15 or 20 years ago... Whitewater rafting? Bird-watching? Monkey-viewing? Surfing? Snorkeling? It's all there."³⁷

Articles also began appearing that year on specific real-estate developments in Costa Rica. For instance, *Business Wire* reported, "This Costa Rican paradise may have started as the bustling port for the Chiquita Banana empire in the 1920's, but today a team of Miami developers will transform it into Bahia Escondida, a luxury tropical playground located just off the southeastern side of Costa Rica's Golfo Dulce." Mega yacht pleasure cruisers or sport fishing enthusiasts will appreciate the bragging points of the Bahia Escondida marina, the largest and most complete state-of-the-art marina on the country's Pacific coast. Bahia Escondido's prime eco-friendly location attracts vacation homebuyers, real estate investors, luxury eco-travelers and avid fishing enthusiasts looking to be a part of the ultimate lifestyle experience that blends adventure and relaxation into one coastal community.³⁸

The New York Times announced in 2006 the planned construction of an oceanfront St. Regis Resort and Residence on Costa Rica's central Pacific coast. Among amenities including restaurants and a spa and fitness center, the article mentions plans for "assistance in arranging outdoor activities, including guided hiking trips in a nearby preserve, deep-sea fishing and golf. Private butlers and helicopter transportation from the airport in San José will also be offered."³⁹

When ecotourism oriented stories did appear on Costa Rica, they often centered on family travel options, upscale accommodations and light adventure tours.⁴⁰ "Costa Rica offers soft adventure, such as white water rafting, fishing and rain forest hiking. It's a good place for people who want adventure travel with a good network of tourist facilities," reported a Louisiana paper.⁴¹

A 2006 article in an Indiana paper quoted a survey which asked nearly 300 travel agents to name popular international destinations for families. London was No. 1, followed by Rome; Paris; Cancun, Mexico; **San Jose, Costa Rica**; Nassau, the Bahamas; Mexico's Riviera Maya; Venice; and Florence.⁴²

2007 to the Present

In recent years, travel articles have continued to portray Costa Rica's dual personality as both a good tourism and investment alternative to traditional beach destinations. "Costa Rica is an entry point for adventurous travel because there are well-educated people, good infrastructure, good health and well-trained guides. Our travelers have cut their teeth on adventure there. People have been to Hawaii, Mexico, so they're looking for something different," wrote the *Seattle Times* in a 2006 article.⁴³

A number of business stories began describing the possibility of incorporating tourism and investment alternatives into one luxury-eco-adventure-holiday-vacation-home experience: "The reasons people come to Costa Rica will all be within reach for residents of One Jaco Resort. Jaco is flush with spectacular surfing, pristine beaches, fine dining and non-stop casino action. There's also horseback-riding in the hills above Jaco, which offer spectacular views of the beach and access to a bird-watchers paradise. As an investment, One Jaco is a tremendous opportunity. But people want more than just a good investment, they want a destination that's exclusive, luxurious and will provide a lifetime of great memories," wrote *Business Wire* in 2006.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, earlier articles in the *New York Times* that hinted at Costa Rica's waning positioning in the ecotourism market took a more definitive tone in its 2007 article, "The Costa Rica Experience Moves Next Door." The article features Boquete, Panama, and highlights the area's natural assets and adventure tours: "Surrounded by green mountains topped by misty, craggy peaks, Boquete offers plenty of outdoors adventure, like hiking, climbing, bird-watching and white-water rafting."⁴⁵

By 2007, articles on real-estate development began overshadowing those on tourism, with emphasis on coastal areas rather than inland ecotourism destinations like Monteverde. A 2007 *Business Wire* article stated, "Beach One Developments has announced plans for a new Costa Rica real estate development at Punta Leona, a private, gated beach club community located about 90 minutes southwest of San Jose (just north of Jaco). The high-end resort condominium project will introduce a new level of luxury and design to the area."⁴⁶

In 2007, The *New York Times* reported on a luxury Oceanside development on Costa Rica's northern Pacific coast, which weaves environmental and community commitment in its marketing message directed at high-end second home buyers.

“Steve Case says Revolution Places will seek to redefine the luxury resort category by making environmental preservation and cultural authenticity priorities at every property it develops. Cacique, scheduled to open in 2010, is the firm's first resort under that model...Once a remote destination favored by backpackers and surfers, the northwest Pacific corner of Costa Rica has experienced a recent surge of development as the region has caught the interest of well-heeled U.S. consumers. Several luxury hotel and condominium projects -- including one operated by Four Seasons -- have been built in recent years, and more are being planned...These will be some of the most expensive homes and hotels for the affluent families who want the best of the best. We're targeting the high-end, most discerning buyers and travelers.”⁴⁷

Interestingly, some resorts, such as Case's Cacique, garnered enormous press – as well as meetings with Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias – even before they had broken ground. “For many travelers, Costa Rica has become a destination for eco-tourism -- that is, vacations intended to celebrate and preserve the natural environment. And over the years, travelers on such trips have come to expect mostly ascetic accommodations after long days of surfing or hiking, typically not much more than a decent bed in a bug-free room with a semiprivate bathroom. But the options are expanding for those with more discriminating tastes. Breaking ground next summer is Cacique, Costa Rica, an \$800 million, 650-acre luxury resort in Guanacaste, on the Pacific Coast of the northern part of the country,” wrote *The New York Times* in 2007.⁴⁸

In Cacique's case, the project ground to a halt in 2008 after it failed to get clearance for its plans. It is now slated to restart in 2010.

SUMMARY

The international press has followed Costa Rica's tourism development with praise and skepticism since the early 1990s. Interestingly, many of the early warnings about the potential negative impacts of unplanned coastal development and mass tourism have come true. Once described as a nature destination that featured inland cloud forest and rainforest hikes for ecotourism adventurers, recent articles on Costa Rica now allude to a dual personality of the country's tourism offering. Articles identifying the country an ecological playground also tell of the changing landscape at several tourism beach towns, and luxury resort accommodations slated for construction. These changes have contributed to a loss in credibility among the ecotourism market, which the press is now directing to alternative destinations in Central America.

Despite this, the country has maintained positioning as nature-based destination for a more mainstream market who also seeks luxury amenities, convenient services and the chance to consider real-estate investment while on the beach. This market is drawn in by the same images the media used to attract ecotourists in the 1990s: rainforests, wildlife, adventure tours. Only now the images come attached to larger resorts or real-estate projects that leverage the country's longstanding reputation as a peaceful ecological paradise, and its close proximity to North America. This trend seems to have gained momentum in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, when tourism officials began positioning the country in the press as a quieter, more relaxing alternative to other more developed beach destinations that also offers 5-star accommodations.

LOCAL MEDIA PERCEPTIONS ON COASTAL DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

Local Newspapers

Reports about real-estate and tourism development projects have traditionally been portrayed favorably by Costa Rica's mainstream Spanish-language newspapers.⁴⁹ Business articles featuring specific projects are often printed alongside artists' renderings of the construction and photos of politicians shaking hands with developers. Figures on the overall investment were usually highlighted, as well as statistics on the number of jobs the project would create for the area. As one bilingual travel magazine editor put it, "Local newspapers usually pander to clients with stories about the splendors and grandeur of development."⁵⁰

Costa Rica's English language newspapers, read largely by foreigners either living in Costa Rica or abroad with vested interest in the country, have generally been more skeptical about the benefits of development, responding to questions posed by local communities and environmental activists. A reporter for a weekly newspaper covering Central American news said, "We give little promotion to special projects. We simply don't have time to investigate the green claims of each one."⁵¹

In 2008, there was a surge in local newspaper coverage about tourism and real estate projects in Guanacaste and the Central Pacific regions. That year CESD researchers monitoring the local Spanish-language press clipped 61 articles related to coastal development issues, up from 12 articles in 2007.⁵² One editor for a newspaper based in Guanacaste said, "It has been like the Wild West. Buildings started going up very fast and nobody has been able to keep pace with it."⁵³

In another interview, a newspaper reporter covering environmental issues noted, "We saw a boom with no regulation, and somebody needed to say what was going on."⁵⁴

He described how populist newspapers *La Prensa Libre* and *Diario Extra* began driving interest in coastal development issues by publishing articles about local people's sense of unfairness about who was benefiting from real-estate and tourism projects, as well as the impact of development on local people's lives. "Ticos in general started to pay attention and were outraged that foreigners were getting rich and then bailing." Reports began surfacing about "locals who had lived in areas for generations being overrun by developers."⁵⁵

Newspapers were alerted to stories by the public when growing opposition to development projects in coastal areas led to a rise in protests about the social and environmental impact. Tamarindo, Playa Hermosa, Papagayo and the southern zone from Dominical to the Osa Peninsula were areas of the greatest conflict.

One reporter linked growing public opposition to foreign owned beach development with the movement against the Central American Free Trade Agreement with the United States. “The Anti-CAFTA movement brought a lot of people together (against foreign development). We saw non-activists become more aware and concerned about environmental impact of projects. Disparate networks came together, and they had Internet to create social networking. Environmental issues that were once localized became a national issue because of these networks. People were galvanized through the common cause.”⁵⁶

Newspapers whose readership included investors and potential second-home buyers in coastal development projects and tourists also covered protests very closely, as a service to their readers “They read us online to see what’s happening with their investment,” said the editor of an English language business publication.⁵⁷

Newspaper journalists and editors interviewed for this report revealed several key issues surrounding coastal development that are of interest to their readers. “We can get 20 letters saying why don’t you follow this or that, and we are heavily taken to task for our take on a story,” said one newspaper editor. Following are some candid quotes on the social, environmental and economic angles of coastal development stories that they will be following in 2009:

‘Neocolonialism’:

- Equal distribution of land ownership is Costa Rica’s claim to fame, the basis of its democracy now eroded by neocolonialism,” said one reporter who has lived in Costa Rica for more than 20 years.⁵⁸
- “People in the communities where there is a lot of real-estate development can’t afford to rent in the town where they work. Since they don’t speak English, the best they can do is get a job cleaning [at condos and resorts]. They see tourists spending in one night what they earn in a month,” said one editor covering coastal development in Guanacaste.⁵⁹

Impacts on Tourism and the Economy

- “Mega projects are all tourism related; three of those were opened by the president last year and within 12 months they are shut down. We can’t ignore that,” said one editor covering Guanacaste.⁶⁰
- As journalists, we’re very cautious about the country’s sustainable tourism programs when we see the Ministers of Tourism and Environment inaugurating a mega project, and the next day doing a press conference on Blue Flag. There’s a credibility problem,” said another reporter covering the environment.⁶¹
- “Our readers want to know what’s happening with key developments on the books, like Flamingo Marina. What happens with that project and others like it will have direct effects on cost of land,” said one business publication.⁶²
- Reports on arrivals at Liberia’s Daniel Oduber International Airport are important indicators for journalists looking at the health of the local economy. Everyone expected a 13% rise in 2008, which ended 5% because tourism from August to October collapsed. That was right when the ICT said that Costa Rica would not be affected by the economic turndown,” another editor added.⁶³

Lack of Planning and Control

- “The problem [with beach development] is that key municipalities have outdated or non-existent Development Plans (*Plan Regulador*). The government’s Chorotega Decree that limits where and how and how high you can build is great,⁶⁴ but it all goes back to the same problem: no one is keeping an eye on the construction,” the editor added.⁶⁵
- “In real estate, everyone’s in it for themselves. Local municipalities will tax a project \$50,000, but all the money disappears,” said one editor.⁶⁶
- “The majority of property buyers came as tourists, they found it cheap, word got out, they flipped it, and more hotels went up. Then came the global real-estate community that had no real interest in Costa Rica. They moved from selling Arizona to selling Miami to selling Costa Rica. It will be interesting to see what they do now,” the editor said.⁶⁷
- “Peace with Nature has done NOTHING!” added another reporter.⁶⁸

On Water and Protected Areas

- “Water is the main issue for Guanacaste, both coming in to properties and going out,” an environmental reporter said.⁶⁹
- “We will see a greater concentration of water quality issues,” predicted one editor.⁷⁰
- “We receive emails on both sides of the Las Baulas National Park development issue,” the editor added.⁷¹
- “We don’t cover Jaco-Manuel Antonio as much because there is less conflict there. Everyone accepts Jaco for what it is. People aren’t surprised that Jaco is polluted; it’s not on the eco map,” said another reporter.⁷²

Local Travel Magazines

Meanwhile local travel magazines that cater to international tourists remained quiet about political debates surrounding coastal development, reporting more on upbeat news. One editor said that their focus was to present the positive side to development. “Jaco went from a one horse town to skyline resembling San Jose. But when we mention Jaco, we write about the new boardwalk, improvements to water and police. About 25-30% of our ads are in real estate. We try not sugar coat anything; we just don’t mention certain problems beyond warnings like ‘be prepared for the crowds.’”⁷³

The magazine editors interviewed say that Costa Rica’s international draw as a nature destination has remained strong, and that they cater to that perception. One Travel magazine editor pointed out that their readers are on vacation and want to read stories about the country’s natural history, nature tours and efforts in sustainable development, not about beach resorts. “That’s why [our readers] came to Costa Rica,” he said. “We don’t give much importance to Costa Rica’s beaches.”⁷⁴

Another magazine editor said, “We don’t give Papagayo coverage, it’s like tourism apartheid out there, no access to the beach with guards everywhere. We give much more editorial space to sustainable tourism, how to reduce your footprint, hotels working with the Rainforest Alliance, rural community tours, opportunities to get in close contact with culture.”⁷⁵

But magazine editors admitted that coastal development issues are getting harder for them to ignore. “There’s a big struggle between our international image and what our readers see happening in certain areas. In response, he says, “We talk about positive efforts in order to rescue something about destinations we have to cover.”⁷⁶

GUIDEBOOKS' PERSPECTIVES COSTA RICA TOURISM

The editorial position on coastal development taken by leading travel guidebooks, which are generally read when planning a vacation, is far stronger than that of local magazines generally read for entertainment once in Costa Rica.

Costa Rican guidebooks date back to 1976 when Jean Wallace published *Costa Rica--the Inside Scoop*. The book was later renamed *The Key to Costa Rica* in 1978 by her daughter Beatrice Blake who has written and updated the book ever since. Today, *The New Key to Costa Rica* is in its 18th edition with special highlights on community based ecotourism options in Costa Rica. In late 2002, Lonely Planet's Costa Rica guidebook (5th edition) was listed as the first place best-selling travel guidebook to Latin America at Amazon.com. Frommer's 2003 edition ranked sixth. Ingram Distributors listed Lonely Planet, Fodors, Frommers, and New Key among its top sellers.⁷⁷ Guidebooks have long been a staple source of information read by an estimated 13.4% of potential travelers to Costa Rica in 2007.⁷⁸

Local and international news reports on coastal development issues have influenced the way guidebook writers portray tourist destinations in Costa Rica.

By 2008, *The New Key* had left out Papagayo and Tamarindo altogether from its section on northern Guanacaste. *Frommer's* has moved Tamarindo out of its section that highlights the country's best beaches. And Fodor's now updates information on northern Guanacaste resorts by phone, sending its reporter to areas that would be more useful to its readers.⁷⁹

Following are some excerpts from interviews with guidebook writers for this report:

More Water Woes

"How can I recommend Papagayo after the poop problem? We're starting to look at relationship with communities and tourism. When people have to sue to get clean water, tourism is not sustainable," said one interviewee, who updates her book every two years.⁸⁰

"I used to think that in order to serve our readers, we needed to include these places [resorts]. Updating them was so lonely and boring and they all blended into each other. They went under new management in each edition of book. It was just so depressing," she said, adding that news about the sewage problems

among two Papagayo hotels has led her to remove the Papagayo area from her book.

“You have to put foot down somewhere and say this is not right. If they are not doing the basics, they’re out of the book,” another added regarding the sewage problem in Papagayo.⁸¹

Another writer said that she does not cover Papagayo since travelers who are interested in resorts are buying into the resort experience rather than the destination and don’t need guidebooks. “If they want to go to Four Seasons, they know what they are getting; they don’t need us.”⁸²

The Concrete Jungle

Aside from water management issues, writers noted that the amount of construction influences their recommendation of tourist areas. “We still include Manuel Antonio because you can still see greenery and views, but in Jaco you see great big hulking things over the landscape,” said one writer who has been updating information on Costa Rica for more than 20 years.⁸³

“Tamarindo is awful. A nine-storey building went up and a casino, the boulevard is always muddy from non-ending construction. From Playa Grande, I turned toward Tamarindo and saw Emirate cities rising from the desert, cranes and high rises. I thought this is nightmare mirage,” said another writer who lives in Costa Rica.⁸⁴

In response to the changing landscape of places like Tamarindo, guidebooks are leading travelers to less developed beach destinations. “No one has asked me to go to resort areas in Guanacaste. I send them to Nosara and Samara and Uvita or Drake Bay. There are still lot’s of beaches I can recommend,” said an author who also provides travel consultations.⁸⁵

“We describe Avellanas, Junquillal as little gems still undeveloped. It’s human nature, people want to be on an uncrowded beach that stretches on for miles,” said another writer and longtime resident of Costa Rica.⁸⁶

“I used to say that Playa Hermosa was a place you could go that’s not too crowded, but now there’s a hulking skeleton of a project that’s been stopped,” he added.⁸⁷

The *New Key* provides additional commentary on the cultural impact of large scale, foreign-owned developments in its section on “Costa Rica Today”: “The

large foreign owned hotel and condo projects that are turning the Central Valley and the beaches of Guanacaste and Jaco into a concrete jungle also created opposition to CAFTA. Locals watch massive amounts of money being invested in luxury second homes and time shares that don't bring economic benefits to local people."⁸⁸

Backlash of 'Guanacastecation'

At least one guidebook author noted that the resort and residential development of Guanacaste has provided a model that others areas reject, hoping to avoid the "Guanacastecation" of Costa Rica. "Many people call me say we've heard that everything in northern Guanacaste is too touristy," she said in an interview."⁸⁹

As a response, guidebook writers are beefing up information on sustainable or green choices for readers citing a growing interest in that information among their publications.

Fodor's has changed their format in the 2009 editions to highlight national parks and ecotourism. "In 2009, we have 13-page chapter on ecotourism Costa Rican style. Within that there are sustainable hotels working with the Rainforest Alliance⁹⁰, close-ups on community tourism, that we're calling a trend in the way to see country, a wildlife glossary, and responsible traveler tips. Information on natural history is sprinkled throughout the book. For every chapter, we have a park spotlight with two or three national parks with what's special at the front of each chapter. We also feature three model ecolodges per chapter with 300 words on each; anchor an area with information on why the area is a hotspot and for bird watching, for example. We also include the Blue Flag Beaches and CST leaves in the text."⁹¹

The *New Key to Costa Rica* also drives its readers to responsible travel choices beginning in its introduction: "In each chapter of this book, you will learn about the tourism destinations that are combining innovative ideas, green practices and community self-sufficiency throughout Costa Rica and you'll find highlighted reports on our adventures traveling to these communities. Costa Rica still has dreamy ecolodges that made it famous."⁹²

"There's growing concern for sustainable tourism in all *Frommer's* books," said the author, who gives much more space to nature based tours and mentions ecological damage created by some developments in the book."⁹³

Guidebook writers also point out that their readers are interested in nature tourism, which still represents the country's principal tourism offering. "There's still only about 10 large resorts compared to hundreds of little lodges. Resort tourism is very localized, only in Guanacaste and the Central Pacific. I just try to present the country as it is," one author mentioned.⁹⁴

'Dangers and Annoyances'

Finally guidebooks are also warning about safety issues and crime in more developed coastal areas. Lonely Planet's: "Dangers and Annoyances" sidebar warns of petty crime in areas such as Jaco and Tamarindo.⁹⁵

Another writer recalls feeling vulnerable to crime in Tamarindo. "When I went to use the pay phone in Tamarindo circle, there were all these lowlifes, I had to wade through men who were construction workers lying on ground to make call. I later heard that a woman was dragged and raped from that phone booth," she said.⁹⁶

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

An examination of the North American and Costa Rican press coverage and of leading guidebooks, as well as interviews with journalists, editors and guidebook writers in CR, demonstrates that CR's international reputation as the hemisphere's leading eco and sustainable tourism destination has slipped. While the country is still portrayed as an ecological paradise, more reports have appeared that highlight its growing position in luxury tourism circles. As a response travel reports are recommending alternative ecotourism destinations, and guidebooks are adding sections on sustainability and downplaying or eliminating coverage of big resorts in overdeveloped areas like Jaco and Tamarindo. Initiatives have also begun to strengthen the government's program to certify sustainably run hotels and tour operators. The local and international press has also taken a greater role as whistle blowers for projects that allegedly cause ecological damage.

On Tourism Marketing:

- Travel writers agreed that development won't stop ecotourism in Costa Rica, since the number of ecolodges and ecotours heavily outweighs the number of coastal resorts. However, problems have arisen in the perception of the tourism product in the press due to mixed messages sent in media campaigns and public relations efforts by government officials. More preparation about sustainable tourism is called for among these spokesmen, as well as the need for a clear brand message that is backed up by examples of green efforts among a growing number of hotels and tour operators in the tourism sector. Non governmental organizations that provide such training, such as the Rainforest Alliance, could provide this support.
- In 2008, advertising texts for residential real-estate projects began overshadowing travel news articles on Costa Rica. Some efforts are necessary to engage the travel writers in order to provide fresh travel news about the destination
- Travel writers should also receive training on sustainable tourism issues and how to look for and how to cover problems associated with tourism development.
- The ICT should use its marketing budget to help promote businesses that are taking steps to become certified and that provide experiences in line

with its “No Artificial Ingredients” campaign and Peace with Nature Initiative.

On Social Impact:

- The local press and guidebook writers expressed significant concern about local people being displaced by developers. This must be addressed by the Costa Rica’s Housing Ministry, and programs should be put in place to better prepare local people for employment at residential and resorts. This information should be disseminated by the ICT’s press office and marketing agency to the local and international press.

On Sustainable Tourism:

- There is growing concern about whether tourism in Costa Rica really supports the protection of wild lands and wild animals. The ICT should fund research on the relationship between tourism and conservation in Costa Rica for the local and international press.
- Costa Rica’s Minister of Tourism should reserve his office’s participation in ground breaking ceremonies for projects that make commitments to sustainable tourism practices and provide plans for community involvement programs. This will help improve their credibility with journalists.

On Water Woes:

- Certainly the cleanliness of Costa Rica’s beaches and the sewage problem at two Papagayo hotels was most damaging to the country’s image as a green destination. Efforts by AyA, the Ministry of Health and the ICT to ensure black water is well managed should be reinforced, and a plan for damage control should be clearly established by the ICT’s press office, in case of future problems regarding waste water management.

On Future Construction:

- The financial crisis is perceived as a boon for CR’s environment, as several mega projects have slowed or halted construction. Now is the time to review environmental impact studies and make the information available to the press.

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