



Center for Responsible Travel

Transforming the Way the World Travels

Stanford University & Washington, DC

www.responsibletravel.org

CREST's film related to coastal tourism in Costa Rica:

In the course of a 2-year research project on coastal tourism dynamics in Costa Rica ([click here](#) for the report), it became clear to us that some forms of development were causing serious social and environmental issues, and that local people were not often heard on the matter. We therefore commissioned a 30 minute film (“Cracking the Golden Egg: Tourism on Costa Rica’s Pacific Coast”) to highlight, on the one hand, some of these problems and local responses, and on the other hand, some of the more successful, sustainable solutions based on Costa Rica’s model of ecotourism. Because the film has generated controversy and some strong reactions, we summarize here what we have done and what we have agreed to do.

1. The film was commissioned in late 2009 by CREST, using funds raised separately for this purpose. It was not funded from the same sources as our 2-year research project, nor was it reviewed by our project’s Research Team or Advisory Committee in Costa Rica. As we state on our website, our Research Team and Advisory Committee has intentionally included, from the outset, several dozen “experts in their fields and representing a cross section of political views. They are united in their concern that there is an urgent need for an objective, data focused and unbiased study of tourism related development along Costa Rica’s Pacific coast, as well as an assessment of future development plans and projections of what the likely impacts will be.”

2. CREST commissioned two award-winning filmmakers, one of whom is Costa Rican, who had previously made an excellent educational video for our Travelers’ Philanthropy program. We thought a video about Pacific coast tourism development would be a useful educational tool, highlighting a selected sample of problems revealed in the larger study and some promising solutions. We planned a Study Guide to go with it, to expand upon the themes in the film and add more context and details. (This study guide has not yet been done and won’t be if we are not distributing the film.) All those interviewed in the film signed a “personal appearance release” form as is standard practice in documentaries.

3. The film was first shown at CREST’s Coastal Tourism Innovators Symposium held at Stanford University, January 20-22, 2010. A panel with the filmmakers plus Manuel Ardon of Peninsula Papagayo, Eduardo Villafranca of Responsible Business Alliance, and Martha Honey, CREST Co-Director, discussed the film with the audience. The film was praised for its educational value and for its exemplary presentation of ecotourism compared to all-inclusive resort and residential tourism. One observer commented that it did not portray a balanced or representative sample of Costa Rican tourism, and another wondered if the film might harm the country’s image if it were shown internationally. We explained that it was primarily intended for local use with a planned study guide that would make its purpose clear.

4. The film was then distributed to members of the CREST Board, to some members of the

Costa Rica Research Team and Advisory Committee, and to people who appeared in the film, to solicit feedback and ideas for the study guide and distribution.

5. March 3: At CANATUR (the Costa Rica Tourism Chamber) in San Jose, Costa Rica, CREST presented preliminary findings from its 2-year research project and also showed the film at a gathering of 40 invited tourism leaders and others involved in CREST's project. Discussion included strong reactions to the film, both positive and negative. Several officials with ICT and the tourism industry voiced concerns that the video was not objective and balanced and might damage Costa Rica's tourism industry if shown internationally and out of context, while others said it showed important issues that could help provoke needed discussion. In addition, some viewers inadvertently came to the (mistaken) conclusion that the video summarized the findings of the 2-year research project.

6. Based on this discussion, CREST issued the following Foreword to accompany the video:

The video documentary contained in this packet is designed to highlight a selection of problems and conflicts caused by the rapid rise of all-inclusive resort and vacation home developments along Costa Rica's Pacific Coast. It is a supplementary document to The Center for Responsible Travel's two-year research project, "Impact of Tourism Related Development along the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica" (see www.responsibletravel.org). We solicited this video for three main purposes:

- (1) To show some of the more serious issues raised by recent resort and vacation home development along the Pacific coast of the country;
- (2) To give voice to some of the rural peoples and communities affected by these developments, including people who are often not heard in public discussion;
- (3) To show that, in contrast, there is a model of coastal tourism development in Costa Rica that already works quite well for both conservation and development objectives: i.e., nature-based tourism, or ecotourism.

The video is *not*, and was never intended to be, a synthetic, comprehensive, or panoramic overview of the state of tourism in Costa Rica as a whole, and we hope no one will try to use it in that way. As goes without saying, it is not a documentary of the energetic, sometimes heroic efforts of other individuals, organizations, and agencies to push toward genuinely sustainable forms of tourism in Costa Rica. Although not originally intended to show the responsiveness of Costa Rican agencies to internal problems, the video does also serve that purpose. One of the serious issues portrayed in the video when it was filmed in December 2009—the contaminated creek at the entrance to Manuel Antonio National Park—was already ameliorated by agency action when the film was first produced (March 2010). We hope that other problems and conflicts depicted in the video will also be speedily resolved.

Although many colleagues thought that this Foreword responded to the criticisms and would end the controversy, unfortunately it did not. We were told that if we did not withdraw the film, our two-year study could not be taken seriously.

7. April 23: To make it very clear (a) that the film should not be confused with our 2-year research effort and its Summary Report (released April 22), and (b) that CREST's focus remains the findings and recommendations of that Report, we informed Minister Carlos Ricardo Benavides at the Costa Rica Tourism Institute (ICT) that CREST will not henceforth distribute or

show the film. He thanked us and accepted the fact that CREST cannot engage in censorship nor prevent others from using the video for their own purposes (including copies distributed before the agreement). Since this meeting, CREST has not shown, posted on the Internet, or distributed the video. When asked, we explain that we are not distributing it and are instead concentrating on circulating the findings and stimulating discussion of our research project.

7. At present: There is some discussion of remaking the film with useful updates and a broader, more inclusive scope based around the findings of our study, as well as a study guide. Whether this will happen or not depends on funding and other pending arrangements.

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