

# **Toward Sustainable Coastal Tourism in Costa Rica: Manuel Antonio case study**

## **Preliminary Report**

By William H. Durham

Since the 1990's, tourism has undergone rapid change along the Pacific coastline of Costa Rica. Large-scale commercial tourism projects, including "residential tourism resorts," have sprung up all along the central and northern coast in areas that previously hosted only small-scale ecolodges. What is the impact of resort tourism on wildlife and natural habitat along the country's Pacific coast? What is its net social and economic impact? Are the resorts a significant new source of local employment and livelihood? Are their guests concerned about social and environmental impact of the places they stay? This project was designed to assess both impact components, social and environmental, of two selected tourism lodges—one a prize-winning ecolodge and the other a larger "spa resort"-- in the community of Manuel Antonio near Quepos, Costa Rica.

### **Research**

Field work was carried out in summer of 2009, with an interdisciplinary team of Stanford faculty and students. The team was composed of: Professor William Durham (Anthropology and Human Biology), Professor Rodolfo Dirzo (Biology), Eben Broadbent (graduate student, Biology), Angelica Almeyda (graduate student, Anthropology), Patrick Gallagher (graduate student, Anthropology), Laura Driscoll (university research staff, Anthropology), and Rosalyn Salters (university research staff, Anthropology), and Jared Schultz (student intern with W. Durham). The team also recruited two Costa Rican undergraduates to join the effort, from the national Universidad de Turismo (UTUR): Angelica Colmenares Madrigal, and Mardy Ocampo Villalobos.

Work on site in Costa Rica took place between July 1st and July 18th. The field team traveled to the Manuel Antonio region of Costa Rica, an area chosen because of its tourism growth in both small-scale ecotourism and large-scale resort tourism. The region also boasts one of Costa Rica's premier national parks (Parque Nacional Manuel Antonio), allowing us to analyze park visitation by different types of tourists, and for evaluating the effects of tourism on vulnerable protected ecosystems.

The field study had two major components. The first was a comparison of two hotels: "Si Como No" (smaller scale, more eco-focused), and "Hotel Parador" (larger scale, less eco-focused). The study tested the hypothesis that the smaller, greener lodge would have more favorable ecological, social and economic effects on the surrounding region than its larger, less green counterpart. At each hotel, a random sample of hotel employees (ensuring distribution across type of duty performed) was interviewed for their views on the local environment, the local economy, their earnings, and tourism's impact. Hotel managers were also interviewed about each hotel's resource use, ecological awareness, and sustainability programs. An ad hoc sample of guests

was interviewed on their activities, perceptions, and financial choices. Ecological impact data were collected from the hotels, from community residents, and from the nearby National Park.

The second component focused on the social and environmental attitudes of guests at both hotels. Regardless of the impact record of the respective hotels, guests might well have the interest and willingness to help with social and environmental efforts in and around the host community. The study therefore explored guests' "willingness to pay" for such efforts in the vicinity of Manuel Antonio.

### **Major Findings**

(1) There are few significant differences between the guests of the two hotels in terms of their perceptions, activities and financial expenditures. We believe this is because the larger lodge is now deliberately and visibly 'greening' its operation.

(2) Guests at both hotels said they would pay, on average, an additional \$71.00 US each on their visit to enhance local conservation efforts (64.6% for environment, 35.4% for culture), and also an air-travel carbon tax of \$44.00 to help combat global climate change.

(3) Employees and their neighbors regard Si Como No as having a significantly better than average impact on human health, deforestation and the value of flora and fauna. Both hotels have a better than industry-average impact on alcoholism, drug addiction and prostitution.

(4) Serious conservation and infrastructure issues exist at Manuel Antonio National Park, one of the first and most visited of all Costa Rica's protected areas. An interpretive and education center is sorely needed, among other things, to curb rampant feeding of wildlife.

Work on the project continues today. When final results are interpreted and disseminated, the project will provide a case study comparing the social, economic and environmental impacts of two different styles of tourism development in a coastal Costa Rican context. Within Costa Rica, both the government's 'Paz con la Naturaleza' initiative and its agency, Estado de la Nacion, have expressed eagerness to see our findings, as they seek to make informed decisions about future coastal tourism development. We will also send our report to SINAC, the governmental agency responsible for parks and conservation areas. The findings will also be cited by the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST) in the final report to the Blue Moon Fund and the Tourism Ministry from the study of coastal tourism nationwide. Outside Costa Rica, we plan to publish our findings in the Journal of Ecotourism, where we already have one paper in press and another on the way, to form a small series of comparable studies from Stanford.