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PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Study Confirms Benefits of Ecotourism in Biodiversity Rich, Economically Poor Region of Costa Rica

A new study, released today, finds that employees in ecolodges in Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula are earning twice as much as workers in a range of other fields. In addition, tourists surveyed describe their holiday in the Osa as "good value" and a majority expresses a willingness to pay more for the same experience.

The 70-page study by the Center for Responsible Travel (CREST) was carried out by a joint team of Costa Rican and U.S. researchers directed by Stanford University personnel. The study, "The Importance of Ecotourism as a Development and Conservation Tool in the Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica," is based on 225 surveys with Osa residents, hotel managers and employees, and tourists.

The Osa Peninsula, hailed by National Geographic as "the most biologically intense" place on earth, is also one of Costa Rica's poorest regions and the only area which has been experiencing an outward population flow. Tourism in the Osa consists of some hundred small to medium size lodges and hotels, ranging from rustic to luxury and offering nature-based activities. Annual tourist arrivals to Osa have doubled since 2002, with some 150,000 visitors expected this year, predominantly from the United States.

"This study demonstrates the positive economic contributions of ecotourism in the Osa Peninsula, as well as its potential, if better organized, to generate even more social, economic and environmental benefits for local communities," says Stanford University professor Dr. William H. Durham, one of the study's authors. Durham, who is also Co-Director of CREST, adds, "Using a methodology that compares tourism workers and non-tourism workers in the same communities, our data show clearly the income and career development advantages of employment in ecotourism over other employment opportunities in the Osa."

Among the key findings are:

- **Income:** Tourism workers earn on average twice as much each month as workers not in tourism (\$710 vs. \$357). Households with tourism workers average 1.6 times more income than those where no one works in tourism (\$784 vs. \$503).

- **Local employment:** Tourism workers are younger, more predominantly male, and far more likely to be from the Osa than non-tourism workers (58% vs. 35%). Tourism workers also exhibit a greater entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to change jobs according to opportunities and personal goals than do non-tourism workers.
- **National parks:** Tourists list visiting Corcovado National Park as their primary reason for coming to the Osa Peninsula; park visitation has doubled since 2002. All residents surveyed (both tourism and non-tourism workers) expressed an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards protected areas which make up 80% of the Osa Peninsula. This appears to represent a substantial shift in the attitudes of Osa residents who historically opposed the top down declaration of Corcovado and other parks and the exclusion of local people who had depended on these lands for their livelihoods.
- **Tourist attitudes:** 62% say traveling “responsibly” is “important” or “very important” to them and over 80% say it is important that their hotel be socially and environmentally responsible. However, 73% admitted they *did nothing to verify* their hotel’s environmental practices, while 81% did nothing to verify the hotel’s social practices. Only 8% purchased carbon credits to offset the impacts of their air travel. This indicates that while travelers endorse responsible travel, most are not pro-active in applying these principles when planning their vacations.
- **Cost of travel and willingness to pay:** Visitors stay between 5 and 6 days in the Osa and spend between \$888 (independent travelers) and \$2150 (package tours) per person. They perceive their visit to be “good value” and 66% expressed a willingness to pay an average of \$177 more for the same experience, including \$42 more to visit Corcovado National Park. In addition, more than half – 58% - say they are willing to contribute an average of \$68 more to support local community and conservation projects. This indicates that with better organization, the Osa Peninsula could be capturing more tourism dollars, both through increased rates and traveler donations.

This study was supported with grants from the Tinker Foundation and Stanford University. The full study is available free in downloadable format at: <http://www.responsibletravel.org>

This is the latest in a series of tourism projects CREST has undertaken in Costa Rica, including studies of the social, economic and environmental benefits of individual ecolodges. CREST studies have also examined the impacts of large-scale resort and vacation home development along Costa Rica’s northern Pacific coast, as well as the impacts of cruise tourism on ports of call in Costa Rica, Belize and Honduras.

About Center for Responsible Travel

Center for Responsible Travel (CREST) is a policy-oriented research institute with offices at Stanford University and in Washington, DC. It is committed to using tourism as a tool for poverty reduction and biodiversity conservation. CREST’s network of experts provides interdisciplinary analysis and innovative solutions through consultancies, research and field projects, publications, conferences and courses. Core programs include Coastal and Marine Tourism, Market Research, Travelers’ Philanthropy, Ecotourism and Certification.

www.responsibletravel.org and www.travelersphilanthropy.org

For information on the 3rd International Travelers’ Philanthropy Conference, July 20-23, 2011 in Costa Rica, see: www.travelersphilanthropy.org/conference