



The Importance of Ecotourism as a Development and Conservation Tool in the Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica

Key Findings

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Key Findings

The Osa Peninsula is the last remaining section of Costa Rica's Pacific coast where ecotourism is the dominant economic activity. It therefore offers a unique possibility to ground test the economic, social and environmental impacts of ecotourism compared with other employment alternatives as well as to make possible some comparisons with the type of large-scale resort and vacation home tourism prevalent along the northern and central Pacific coast.

The following are the key findings that emerged from this field study.

Resident Surveys

The field team conducted 128 interviews with local residents of the Osa in and around Drake Bay and Puerto Jimenez, including 70 interviews with ecolodge employees and 58 with residents not working in tourism. The ecolodge employees included housekeepers, kitchen staff, bar and wait staff, maintenance and grounds workers, and front desk employees; managers are covered in a separate category. The occupations of non-tourism workers included agriculturalists and livestock managers, shopkeepers, school teachers, medical professionals, small business owners, and members of local skilled trades. Here are some key findings from these interviews:

- **Local employment:** Tourism workers are younger, more predominantly male, and far more likely to be from the Osa than non-tourism workers (58% compared with 35%). This indicates that small-scale nature-based tourism is an important employment opportunity for the Osa and that, unlike many other tourism destinations, tourism is not built significantly on imported labor. Expansion of ecotourism therefore would appear to be a good tool for helping to curb outward migration from the Osa Peninsula.
- **Income:** Tourism workers' monthly income is almost twice as high as those of workers not in tourism (\$709.70 versus \$357.12). Further, tourism workers reported that their total monthly household incomes were 1.6 times higher than households where no one works in tourism (\$784 vs. \$503). Therefore, ecotourism in the Osa is generating higher incomes for local residents than employment in the other locally-available types of employment, even during the "worst" months of the year.
- **Household expenditures:** Spending patterns are roughly the same for households with and without tourism workers, although households with tourism workers have more disposable income (\$338 per month vs. \$162). Further, tourism workers were two times more likely than non-tourism workers to feel that their jobs had allowed them to progress.
- **Attitudes towards the future:** Employment in tourism is viewed as a stepping stone to new employment or to management-level opportunities. Tourism workers reported they are far less likely than non-tourism workers to be in their present job in the future. Rather

tourism employees are more likely to have changed jobs to positions of greater skill and more likely to want to start their own tourism related business. Tourism workers exhibit a greater entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to change jobs according to opportunities and personal goals than do non-tourism workers.

- **Quality of life:** While both tourism and non-tourism workers said they feel they are living “a good life”, the percentage was higher for tourism workers (74% vs. 66%). In addition, tourism workers were also almost 3 times as likely to emphasize the importance of stable work as part of quality of life.
- **Tourism Expansion:** A majority of both tourism workers and non-tourism workers indicated a desire to see more tourists arriving in the Osa (63% for tourism workers and 76% for non-tourism workers). However, tourism workers gave a much higher percentage of qualified answers (16% vs. only 2% from those not working in tourism), suggesting that tourism workers have greater familiarity with the potential negative impacts of tourism.
- **Attitudes towards current issues facing the Osa:**
 - **New international airport:** Tourism workers were better informed (87% vs. 57%) about building a new international airport at Palmar Sur, and were more likely opposed to (25% vs. 5%). However, a majority in both groups favor the airport, viewing it as bringing development and increasing employment opportunities.
 - **Cruise ships in Golfo Dulce:** By nearly the same percentages, both groups see cruise ships as positive: 48% in favor, 12% against for tourism workers and 45% in favor and 19% against for non-tourism workers.
 - **Presence of foreigners:** Tourism workers were more than twice as likely as non-tourism workers to have a negative opinion about foreign-owned homes in the Osa (37% for tourism workers vs. 17% non-tourism), while both groups view sales of land to foreigners as more negative (31% and 34%) than positive (19% and 22%). On the other hand, both groups felt that the presence of foreigners was more positive (30% and 29%) than negative (14% and 12%). This would indicate a somewhat negative attitude towards foreign vacation home and property owners, particularly among tourism workers, while the overall presence of foreigners is seen as more positive than negative.
 - **National parks:** Both groups gave overwhelmingly positive responses towards national parks: 85% positive for tourism workers, and 74% for non-tourism workers. 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. This finding suggests that ecotourism, with its commitment to benefiting both local livelihoods and the environment, plus government and NGO efforts to promote poverty alleviation and create income-generating alternatives for communities living in and near protected areas, have helped to improve local attitudes towards national parks.

- **Environmental issues:** Respondents from both tourism work and non-tourism work overwhelmingly agreed that the worst threat to local species diversity at the present time was hunting, followed by deforestation. Yet 37.5% of non-tourism workers reported they had extracted items (such as wood, plants, and seeds) from the forest in the last year, compared to only 17.5% -- less than half as many—for tourism workers. While more research is needed to understand the reasons behind these differences, other studies found that ecotourism has sensitized employees to environmental issues.

Overall, the two groups both see positive changes in education, job training, and value given to nature, and a decline in hunting and deforestation. On the negative side, both groups see increases in land and consumer prices, sale of land to foreigners, and alcoholism, drug addiction, and prostitution. However, the two groups differed in whether or not they attributed these changes to tourism. Those not working in tourism were less likely to attribute either perceived benefits or perceived detriments to the impacts of the tourism industry. In the case of opportunities for job training and local value of nature, tourism workers felt overwhelmingly that the increases were due to the impacts of tourism, whereas more ambivalence was shown by the non-tourism group.

Hotel Owner/Manager Surveys

The surveys with tourism and non-tourism workers were supplemented with surveys of owners and managers from 11 hotels to help determine environmental, social, and economic practices and perceptions. While the sample was small, it included some of the better known ecolodges in and around Drake Bay and Puerto Jimenez. They range in size from 4 to 20 rooms and have between 1 and 45 employees. The interview pool included five Costa Ricans, five U.S. expatriots, one German and one Swiss (in one hotel, two different owners took part).

Many of the findings seem surprising given the 'green' reputation of the Osa and its ecotourism sector. While the hotel executives clearly have a deeper understanding of the threats to the Osa posed by uncontrolled tourism development, in practice they seem to be doing relatively little to monitor and measure the impacts of their own businesses or to invest in staff training and procedures to reduce their environmental footprints. The most significant findings from these manager interviews included:

- None of their hotels are CST certified, although several have initiated the process. Being small hotels, a number said they do not even have enough staff to maintain

detailed accounts. They urged CST to provide more assistance to help with the certification process. Similarly, only a few beaches in the Osa – including Playa Blanca near Puerto Jimenez, Matapalo at the tip of the Peninsula, and Playa San Pedrillo in the north of Corcovado National Park—have received Ecological Blue Flag certification.

- Just over half (6 of 11) say their hotels are volunteering time or contributing material resources or funds to support community and conservation projects. However, *tourist* participation in these “travelers’ philanthropy” projects was even less at most hotels in the sample, ranging from zero to 20%. But the proven record of hotels in Osa with successful projects is proof concept: there is great potential for expanding these efforts in Osa.
- In terms of environmental practices, most of those interviewed report having high quality waste management and septic systems. However, all but one hotel receive electricity from the grid; four supplement this with solar and three with hydro power. (An official with the government-run electricity company, ICE, said that 85 percent of the company’s electricity is from renewable sources, water, solar, and wind.) In addition, few have systems for monitoring and measuring water and energy use, solid waste production, or use of toxic chemicals. Only one hotel has a system to identify, monitor, and keep record of its negative environmental impacts.
- In terms of climate change, none offer on-site opportunities for tourists to off-set the carbon impact of their travel to Costa Rica, and only one reported contributing directly to a carbon off-setting organization.
- They expressed strong concerns about a lack of effective local government, the difficulties in securing land tenure and clear property titles, and the possibility that unplanned and large-scale development as has happened in Guanacaste would come to the Osa. Three of those surveyed were outspokenly opposed to building the new international airport.

Tourist Surveys

The field research teams interviewed a total of 73 tourists, nearly evenly divided between men and women, who stayed on average 5.5 nights in the Osa. They ranged in age from 19 to 70, with a mean age for women of 41 and for men of 38. In terms of their views, activities, and spending patterns, the most important findings were:

- **Reason for visiting the Osa:** The top reason was to visit Corcovado National Park, with the two runner’s ups being the recommendation of a friend and the region’s reputation for unspoiled tropical wilderness.

- **Most popular activities:** Underscoring the importance of healthy natural environments, visitors listed their four top activities as hiking (66%), photography (64%), bird watching (64%), and national park tours (62%).
- **Importance of responsible travel:** Two-thirds (64%) said traveling responsibly was very important or important to them, and over 80% said that it was important that their hotel be socially and environmentally responsible. However, only 8% said they had purchased carbon credits for their travel, while 73% said they did nothing to verify their hotel's environmental practices and 81% said they had done nothing to verify the hotel's social practices. Further, only 18% of travelers surveyed had heard of the Certification for Sustainable Tourism (CST) program. Therefore while most tourists visiting the Osa say they are concerned about traveling in ways that are socially and environmentally responsible, few are taking any concrete actions to do so.
- **Cost of travel:** It proved challenging to calculate costs because tourists come to the Osa in a variety of ways and were interviewed at various stages of their stays. However, costs can be, roughly, divided into those for package and non-package visits. Independent travelers were found to stay an average of 5.5 days and spend on average \$888. Package tour travelers stayed an average of 5.6 days and spent on average a total of \$2150. Because of the assumptions and extrapolations, figures should be taken as approximations.
- **Willingness to pay:** Tourists surveyed perceive their visit to the Osa to be a “good value” whether they were on package tours or traveling independently. Out of 73 visitors surveyed, 44 (66%) indicated a willingness to pay more than they had for the same experience in the Osa – an average of \$177 more. Of this amount, they expressed a willingness to pay on average \$42 more for a visit to Corcovado National Park.

In addition, 42 (58%) of visitors said they were willing to contribute on average \$68 more to support local projects in the Osa. This indicates strong support among visitors for the idea of travelers' philanthropy. However, at present only 6 of the 11 hotels whose managers were surveyed have travelers' philanthropy programs and only a few are directly soliciting contributions from visitors. Clearly the potential exists in the Osa to generate more money from tourism by increasing the travel costs and by soliciting contributions for local projects.