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Why Latin America Has Embraced Ecotourism

CARTER A. HUNT

In 1983, Mexican architect Hector Ceballos-Lascuráin popularized the term "ecotourism." He defined it as "traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objectives of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these areas." It has since been argued, however, that the academic Nicolas Hetzer was the first to use the term, to describe the ecotours he organized on the Yucatán Peninsula in the 1960s. Costa Rican conservation biologist (and future president of the International Ecotourism Society) Gerardo Budowski is also credited with promoting the symbiotic potential in the conservation–tourism relationship, back in the 1970s. In any case, what these three origin stories make clear is that ecotourism was conceived in Latin America. That is also, arguably, where ecotourism is best represented to this day.

In the mid-twentieth century, policymakers promoted tourism primarily as a tool for advancing traditional or underdeveloped societies through a series of economic stages linking them to global markets. But at the height of this modernization era in international development, scholars began to question the growth-based approach to tourism and its ability to provide countries with a passport to development. By the late 1980s, development experts began to reject top-down approaches in favor of a more democratic and holistic concern for people and nature. This turn was epitomized in the title of the World Commission on Environment and Development's 1987 report, "Our Common Future." Known as the Brundtland Report, it drew attention to social and environmental concerns that had been largely absent in international development discourse, ushering in the era of "sustainable development."

In the realm of conservation, the new thinking about sustainable development led to strategies that aimed to use community-centered approaches for improving people's welfare while simultaneously protecting the environment. Sustainability challenged growth as the ultimate goal of development, and new forms of alternative tourism more consistent with natural, social, and local community values came to be viewed as a "green passport" to developmental success. Development specialists and conservationists in the public, private, and nongovernmental sectors all promoted ecotourism in particular as a "win-win" option for both communities and ecosystems.

The impetus for sustainable development created by the Brundtland Report and the subsequent Rio Earth Summit in 1992 set lofty expectations for ecotourism. The sector was hailed as a stimulus for sustainable economic activity, an effective mechanism for biodiversity conservation, a strategy for empowering marginalized peoples, and a means of promoting cross-cultural understanding through appreciation for nature. The subsequent years saw dramatic investment and growth in the ecotourism sector, putting its ability to achieve these multiple objectives to the test across Latin America.

By the end of the century, the dueling mandates of environmental conservation and community development proved hard to fulfill across all settings. Bolstered by the launch of such publications as the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* in 1993 and the *Journal of Ecotourism* in 2002, a parallel wave of critical scholarship arose across the disciplines of anthropology, geography, and biology. Some of this writing questioned whether tourism could be part of the solution to sustainable development and biodiversity conservation challenges, or if it

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was simply another form of business-as-usual capitalism dressed in sheep's clothing.

Other scholars have argued that such critiques rely on faulty understandings of what distinguishes ecotourism from other forms of tourism. All too often, the term "ecotourism" is used interchangeably to describe different varieties of nature-based tourism. These may involve tourist experiences in nature, but do not contribute directly to the conservation of biodiversity or the well-being of local communities, whereas ecotourism is supposed to generate net benefits for conservation and local communities in destination areas. Such benefits include creating direct financial support for wildlife and protected areas; diversifying livelihoods to reduce dependence on mining, logging, or uncontrolled hunting and farming; enhancing environmental interpretation and ethics for hosts and guests; and strengthening resource management institutions.

Critiques of ecotourism also often fail to consider the wider context in which conservation occurs. Ecotourism is not just an alternative to other forms of development—it is also an alternative to other forms of tourism. Any reasonable assessment of its value must recognize what likely would have happened in the absence of existing forms of ecotourism. Alternative economic activities in biodiverse contexts (such as commercial agriculture, fossil fuel extraction, timber harvesting, or mass tourism) almost always involve far more deleterious outcomes for local people and environments. At its best, ecotourism keeps such powerful influences at bay.

Overtourism is an increasingly critical concern in the Galápagos.

In practice, little heed has been paid to such ivory tower debates. Ecotourism continues to be an essential strategy pursued by individuals, enterprises, and conservation and development institutions across Latin America. Surveying its outcomes in different parts of the region, with attention to the broader sociocultural, economic, and political history in each context, will show that ecotourism continues to offer much of the same promise in Latin America that it did when the idea was first defined and explored there in the late 1980s.

GROWTH IN THE GALÁPAGOS

For over two centuries, explorers, pirates, whalers, naturalists (most famously, Charles Darwin), and conservationists have meticulously studied and described the Galápagos Islands. Before Ecuador created the Galápagos National Park in 1959, these islands hosted plantation agriculture, prison colonies, and even a US Army base that used the iconic geologic formations for target practice. The migrant-based population grew over the twentieth century, bringing new residents from populations as diverse as the native Salasacas of Andean Ecuador, Norwegian farmers from Hardangervidda, and utopian visionaries from the United States. This convergence of multiple ethnic groups, cultural worldviews, and livelihood strategies has created a multilayered society, linked by the shared challenges of negotiating the islands' unique ecological conditions.

The human population of the Galápagos was just 300 in 1900, and there were still only 1,500 residents in 1950. The slow trickle of tourism that began in the late 1960s began to pick up pace when the Galápagos Islands were designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1978. Since that time, the population has grown to over 35,000, and some 270,000 visitors arrived in each of the two years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The "floating hotel" model of boutique cruise tourism in the islands was designed to limit ecological impacts, but it provided negligible local economic benefits for island communities in the early decades. As the local population grew, so did demands for more economic opportunities for residents. Eventually, in 2011, on-island visitors began to exceed boat-only travelers. Attracted by economic conditions better than those in most of mainland Ecuador, the migrant population has grown alongside the increase in visitors.

Though tourism has been largely successful as a mechanism for conservation and development, it has also quickly become one of the primary drivers of change to the local environments. Invasive species now outnumber native species in the islands, and the growing human presence is further exhausting freshwater resources, generating large quantities of waste and sewage, and jeopardizing the habitats of several endemic plant and animal species.

Even in light of growing concerns that the impacts of the current scale of tourism in the small archipelago exceed what can legitimately be considered ecotourism, it is essential to remember that this tourism does not occur in a vacuum.

Without ecotourism's support for the National Park and the Galápagos Marine Reserve (created in 1998 and recently expanded during the COP26 global climate policy meeting in November 2021), the scale of other activities—particularly commercial agriculture and fishing—would have increased far beyond current levels in the islands. Furthermore, visitors to the Galápagos National Park subsidize the rest of the Ecuadorian National Park System; a drop in visitation would have inhibited conservation efforts across the country. As is true in all popular ecotourism destinations, avoiding overtourism will remain a critical concern in the future. Nevertheless, in the Galápagos we can still safely say that conservation and communities on the islands are better off than they would have been had the ecotourism industry not been established.

Indigenous Integration in the Amazon

Building on an earlier history of safari hunting in the region, ecotourism potential in the Brazilian, Ecuadorian, and Peruvian Amazon drew attention in the 1980s, in the wake of the Brundtland Report. Early satellite imagery revealed the destruction under way across the Amazon. The Indigenous rights movement was also garnering increasing international support. Many public and nongovernmental institutions promoted ecotourism as a win-win for Amazonian biological and cultural diversity.

Arrangements between private ecotourism operators and Indigenous communities with varying levels of land-tenure security arose in response to the growing opportunities. Despite concern that tourism could exploit and commodify local Indigenous communities, some of these joint ventures permitted their participation in ecolodge management, decision-making, and ownership. Successes in cultural preservation and revitalization have been documented, along with political empowerment and mobilization to incorporate additional conservation areas. Even critical scholars recognize that Indigenous Amazonians have exhibited the ability to develop ecotourism enterprises while avoiding the cultural disruption that often results when global markets reach Indigenous communities.

Despite such localized successes, many academics and other critics remain hesitant to acknowledge the value of ecotourism for the region's biodiversity and Indigenous residents. To qualify even the most valid concerns, it is again helpful to consider the activities for which ecotourism provided an alternative.

The petroleum industry has played a disproportionate role in endangering the health and well-being of local communities across the Amazon. Cattle ranching and commercial agriculture (especially focused on soy and African oil palm) have caused considerable forest loss and social conflict as well. Hydroelectric projects have forced the relocation of communities or otherwise displaced long-standing subsistence livelihood practices. Considering the likely impacts of these "alternative" development strategies for the region, we can conclude that the region's biological and cultural diversity are better sustained by the presence of ecotourism as a primary land-use and livelihood strategy.

The Costa Rican Experiment

Costa Rica may be the country most associated with the phenomenon of ecotourism. Long before then-President José Figueres announced that it would be "offering itself to the world as a 'laboratory' for this new [sustainable] development paradigm" in 1997, the "Green Republic" had been at the forefront of ecotourism development. Costa Rican-based biologists like Gerardo Budowski, Mario Boza, and Dan Janzen drew early attention to the symbiotic relations between tourism, conservation, and national park management. Janzen even suggested that from a conservation standpoint, "ecotourists are a better form of cattle."

The government had avoided the political turmoil and armed conflict that afflicted many of its Central American neighbors. Instead of funding a military (which it abolished in 1948), it had invested in the schools found in every corner of Costa Rica. But it was not until ecotourism got a strong foothold, with numerous small-scale ecolodges scattered across the country, that Costa Rica's economic performance began to set it apart from its neighbors. Places like Tortuguero on the Atlantic Coast, Monteverde's cloud forests in the central highlands, and Manuel Antonio National Park on the Pacific Coast led the early ecotourism waves.

Nowhere is the value of ecotourism better demonstrated than on the Osa Peninsula, home of the country's biodiversity jewel, Corcovado National Park. There, ecotourism has not only helped reduce deforestation, but its presence is also associated with reforestation in several places. Though

it is hard to imagine, given its current reputation, Costa Rica had one of the highest rates of deforestation of any country in Latin America heading into the mid-1980s.

This southern Pacific region had seen decades of other development efforts, starting with multinational fruit companies and artisanal gold mining, then proceeding through subsidized agricultural intensification, cattle ranching, and failed forestry operations. As recently as the early 2000s, tiny Costa Rica was among the world's top ten producers of African palm oil, which is now cultivated right up to the edge of protected areas across the Osa region. Ecotourism is an essential mechanism for keeping the palm oil sector and these other more environmentally degrading activities at bay in the region.

Costa Rica also is another example of how ecotourism serves as an alternative to other forms of tourism development. With the 1995 opening of Liberia airport in the Guanacaste Peninsula, the northern Pacific region underwent extensive multinational resort development. This raised concerns that the country was jeopardizing the small-scale ecotourism industry on which its international reputation had been built.

By 2012, plans for a large airport in the Osa Peninsula raised fears that the region was headed down a similar path of overtourism. Mobilization of the ecotourism, conservation, and scientific communities in opposition to such an airport has helped Osa avoid that path for the time being. Small-scale boutique operations—an increasing number of which are owned and operated by Costa Ricans—continue to support a mosaic of public and private protected areas across the Osa Peninsula region and livelihoods for dozens of rural communities.

NICARAGUA'S INSURMOUNTABLE ODDS

By the end of the twentieth century, one would have been hard-pressed to find a tourism industry in any part of Latin America that did not try to capitalize on the tidal wave of ecotourism development by incorporating at least the rhetoric of green, sustainable, and eco-friendly practices. As Costa Rica made a name for itself as an ecotourism leader, neighboring Nicaragua saw its first Sandinista experiment come to a close in 1990. Three subsequent Western-friendly administrations led to a degree of political stabilization and external investment that had not been seen in the country for decades.

Nicaragua's economy had been heavily agrarian heading into the late 1990s. The only meaningful industry consisted of exploitive textile maquiladoras outside Managua. Ecotourism development was one of the few other activities that provided an alternative to further intensification of agriculture or natural resource extraction.

Natural disasters and armed conflicts had left the Nicaraguan economy starved for foreign exchange. But the largest lowland rainforest in Latin America outside of the Amazon provided ample resources for ecotourism development. Substantial economic incentives for foreign investment were written into 1999's Ley de Incentivo para la Industria Turística (Law 306) and the 2004 Ley General de Turismo (Law 495). These laws provided complete exemptions from import, sales, materials, equipment, vehicle, and property taxes for both foreign and Nicaraguan individuals and businesses involved in tourism-related activities.

Ecotourism is an essential mechanism for keeping environmentally degrading activities at bay.

Cheap labor and real estate also helped fuel a tourism development boom, especially along the southern Pacific Coast, which had been made more accessible to the outside world by Liberia airport in northern Costa Rica. Bifurcated trends in tourism resulted, with rustic, rural operations on one end of the spectrum, and on the other, luxury boutique hotels purporting to offer ecotourism at its finest.

Closer inspection of these places revealed that the same institutionalized corruption that had long characterized Nicaragua also manifested itself in the tourism sector with extensive exploitation of employees, disputed real estate acquisitions, and ecolodge properties used as fronts for illegal timber extraction. But despite such questionable ethics in the sector, tourism was helping to draw attention to conservation threats, endangered ecosystems, and the potential for increased nature-based development. Would the industry expand in a sustainable fashion that prioritized net benefits for local communities and conservation? Political developments rendered the question moot.

Daniel Ortega, the former leader of the revolutionary Sandinista government, returned to power in 2007, and his new presidency quickly devolved

into another oppressive regime. Ortega, along with his wife and vice president, Rosario Murillo, oversaw the violent quelling of student-led protests in 2018 and the imprisonment of leaders of the political opposition before the 2021 elections. After two decades of continuous increases, tourism arrivals dropped by 28 percent in 2018 and remained at those reduced levels heading into the COVID-19 pandemic.

Although ecotourism can provide net benefits for communities and conservation, it cannot overcome the effects of poverty, corruption, and authoritarian rule. There are limits to what ecotourism can accomplish, as Nicaragua demonstrates. Yet this is not evidence of a defect in the idea of ecotourism, or an indictment of its record to date, but rather a testament to all that ecotourism is up against across Latin America—and its potential value to the region.

Healthy reckonings

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic brought worldwide tourism to an abrupt halt in March 2020, the industry was already facing at least two major reckonings. First, unchecked development in the sector, which came to be called overtourism, was leading to high-profile protests in various destinations. Second, tourism's carbon footprint, particularly from long-haul travel, provoked both important discussions regarding the industry's long-term sustainability and an emergent flight-shaming movement that seeks to shift social norms against air travel.

Nonetheless, new frontiers of ecotourism have been emerging across Latin America. Colombia's 2016 peace accords opened up interior regions to ecotourism development. Panama has invested in infrastructure upgrades and promoted greater domestic use of its national parks. Extensive expansion of private and public protected areas in Chile has added to ecotourism resources in that country. Yet just as such positive changes were occurring across Latin America, other countries were backtracking from their earlier ecotourism successes. Beyond Nicaragua's political violence, Honduras, El Salvador, and Mexico all saw gang and drug cartel–related violence slow or stop the development of nature-based tourism in numerous destinations.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought a third reckoning: it exposed the vulnerability inherent in heavy reliance on tourism. The dependence of sectors like transportation and food production on a thriving tourism industry was made particularly apparent. The pandemic also revealed the critical role that ecotourism plays as a conservation and development tool. The loss of the resources it provides for conservation placed wildlife populations in jeopardy as desperate people returned to extractive activities, illegal poaching, and expansion of subsistence cultivation.

How will ecotourism evolve in response to these three challenges? In the eventual reemergence from the pandemic, will desperation to return to previous levels of revenue lead to a reordering of priorities, resulting in less concern for the degree of social and environmental well-being generated by tourism?

One aspect of the regional debate about overtourism is that many of the most iconic Latin American national parks have historically been visited by more international tourists than domestic visitors. There had been some previous pushes to increase domestic park usage, as a means of promoting greater awareness of the value of protected areas. But it was the pandemic that prompted more extensive local use of parks, as outdoor recreation became one of the few permitted public activities during lockdowns.

This type of visitation also has distinct climate consequences, producing much lower emissions than international long-haul travel. Yet it is uncertain whether growing domestic markets can yield levels of financial support for conservation that are comparable to the international, high-value/low-density model often promoted within the ecotourism sector. As in the Galápagos, where the international visitor fee of just $100 for up to a 60-day visit has inexplicably stayed the same since 1993, such shifting visitation dynamics across Latin America will require careful restructuring of user fees for parks that host ecotourism activities.

The ongoing embrace

It has now been nearly four decades since Hector Ceballos-Lascuráin popularized the term "ecotourism." Today, the most widely cited definition is that of the International Ecotourism Society, recently updated as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education." But much as ecotourism was framed as a win-win approach for both environment and society in the decade after the Brundtland Report ushered in the era of

sustainable development, other niche tourism labels now compete for the mantle of essentially the same principles, as in recently popularized calls for "regenerative" tourism. Yet as Martha Honey, a cofounder of the Center for Responsible Travel, has argued, "To abandon the concept because of its misuse or confusion is a classic case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater."

Problems can arise when ecotourism strays from its principles or succumbs to the temptation to scale up too far, risks that must be carefully managed in popular destinations like the Galápagos and Costa Rica. Mechanisms that keep limits on visitors' numbers and their activities, and other management controls such as those in the joint partnerships in Peru, provide a blueprint worth considering elsewhere. In cases like Nicaragua's, however, even well-managed ecotourism will not be enough to overcome entrenched forms of poverty, inequality, authoritarianism, and corruption.

The global tourism industry as a whole crossed the threshold of more than one billion international travelers in 2012, eventually peaking at 1.47 billion in 2019. In the nature-based tourism sector alone, international and domestic visits to protected areas worldwide exceeded 8 billion per year before the pandemic. Most prognosticators expect that the industry will soon return to such levels, then surpass them in the coming decades.

For such reasons, scholars have included international tourism in the suite of indicators used to describe the "Great Acceleration" of the Anthropocene, the post-1950 era of unprecedented environmental change and species loss resulting from anthropogenic activity. It is now more critical than ever to understand how human activities can be better managed to support the survival of species—including our own—on the planet. By highlighting alternatives to business-as-usual development (other forms of tourism among them), ecotourism will have a continuing role to play.

In Latin America, the stakes are exceptionally high. Threats from human activities—such as industrialized agriculture and oil palm plantations; mining, petroleum, and other extractive industries; unregulated commercial fishing; and less responsible forms of mass tourism—combine with the resulting biogeophysical changes (climate change, ocean acidification, pollution) to jeopardize biological and cultural diversity throughout the region.

Certainly, ecotourism is not without its limitations. But in light of the social and environmental consequences of what might otherwise exist in its absence, ecotourism's promise as one of the most sustainable means of protecting biodiversity while supporting rural communities' well-being is alive and well. Committed application of ecotourism principles remains an effective conservation strategy that passionate environmentalists are busy promoting over the alternatives, and implementing to great effect across Latin America. ■