

Ecotourism's Poster Child

Ecotourism trends in Costa Rica and their application in the Savegre Valley

BRENDAN BLOWERS

Final Paper

Dr. Pankaj Jain

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Introduction

The environmental challenge facing Costa Rica today is exemplified by its claim to both the cleanest river in the Americas (Río Savegre) and the most polluted in Central America (Río Tárcoles) (Marjerle 2011:www.ticotimes.net; Murillo 2010:www.nacion.com; www.quetzalvalley.com). It is becoming an increasingly popular eco-tourist destination and has made a number of adjustments to its economy to boost tourism and promote its “green” image. Although quite a small country (51,100 km², .03% of the planet’s surface), Costa Rica boasts 4% of the total species estimated worldwide, and over a quarter of the country is under private or park protection (www.inbio.ac.cr; Menkhaus and Lober 1996:2). However, with increased human traffic comes a greater need to monitor and reduce the negative impact on the environment, an issue that Costa Rica must be prepared for if it is to protect its valuable ecosystems and biological diversity. This will not be the first time Costa Rica’s ecosystems will balance precariously on the decisions of its human inhabitants. This paper will describe the diverse ways that the land of Costa Rica has been conceptualized according to culture, ethnicity, political interests, and market demands. I will then analyze the ecological and socio-cultural implications of current ecotourism trends and suggest ways to manage growth for areas situated in this alternative tourist economy. These suggestions will be applied specifically to a case study in the Savegre Valley, where the above-mentioned river is located.

The Question of Ecotourism and Political Ecology

Environmental issues weigh heavily on almost any political and economic topic in Costa Rica. A recent (November 2010) dispute includes a near violent conflict with Nicaragua in the north due to aggressive dredging operations on the Río San Juan which divides the two countries

(The Economist 2010:www.economist.com). Additionally, just last year (2010) the government faced rigorous opposition to a Canadian open-pit mining project, in which it annulled a previous decision to allow it, resulting in a hard-won victory for environmentalists. Reports have been rampant for several years now about illegal shark-finning in Costa Rican waters (McDonald 2010:www.ticotimes.net). These issues are just a few examples in a laundry list of other issues that could generally be attributed to Costa Rica's increasing involvement in transnational markets.

In reaction to this, ecotourism might seem to be the perfect solution to protect the environment and simultaneously compensate private enterprises economically for their eco-friendly practices. However, the reality is far more complex, and a number of critics of tourism have outlined several doubts as to whether it can really be defended as an environmentally-friendly endeavor.

The question that is raised, then, is how to strategically use the growth of the ecotourism industry and control the process so as not to fall victim to pressures that result in unsustainable practices and the degradation of the land. What are the implications of this new wave of ecotourism and what direction will it head in the future? How does conceptualizing the land for ecotourism purposes compare with historical perspectives on the land?

Brief review of the socio-cultural and environmental context of Costa Rica

When Sibö decided to create this world, the Earth, the first people he made were the indigenous people. He brought corn seeds from the other world and planted them in the soil of the Earth, and they grew into the first indigenous people. We are called /dtsö/, which means corn seeds.

Juan Vargas

The origin of white people is the King of Leaf-cutter Ants. Just look at the leaf-cutter ants, how they all work together cleaning and clearing all the land around their nests.

Where the leaf-cutter ants live, all the vegetation is gone because they cut every last leaf and take them back to their big nests. That's how the white man is. He works very hard, but he destroys Nature. He chops down all the trees to make his big cities, and where he lives all the vegetation is gone. There is nothing there. The white man cuts down everything that is green, and where he lives there are no trees, no rivers, no animals. He destroys everything in his path.

On the other hand, the indigenous people don't work so hard. We plant corn, raise animals and live in the forest. We like to see the plants and the animals, the birds and the rivers around us. We don't like to destroy nature, we like to live in Nature.

Gloria Mayorga

(Palmer et al. 1991:35-37)

Costa Rica's first inhabitants viewed themselves as part of the natural environment, planted by Sibö (their owner-god) and thus growing up from the same soil just like all other plants of the natural world. There is not a large distinction in their conceptualization of the land and themselves. There are specific rules in regards to hunting – no part of the animal should be wasted, and one should never kill more than they plan to eat and use for their family. Meat should not be sold. If people overhunt or kill animals excessively, Sérke, the Owner of the Animals, sends his servant Duarö to gather the animals and corral them in a hidden area to punish people for taking advantage of his animals (Palmer et al. 1991:41-43). The principal thing to understand is that the indigenous view does not see nature as “spiritual” or “mystical” – it is rather a possession of its owner-god, in the same way the people are property of their owner-god, Sibö. Everything is already “owned” by the gods, and one cannot steal or exploit what belongs to someone else. They are gifts, and are supposed to be treated as such.

Under these rules, then, it is no surprise that in recent years indigenous people have had a harder time finding game, according to the consequences of violating Sérke's hunting rules. As seen in the quote from above, however, most of the violations are committed by white people (non-indigenous *ladino* Costa Ricans and other outsiders). “White people's” use of the land is very different from indigenous use of it, as Costa Rica has always has always had a more

utilitarian perspective of the land. Originally the land was used for local agriculture. Eventually, some of their crops they grew for export, the most notable of these being bananas and coffee, and to a smaller degree, beef. Investing in beef cattle is described as “the biggest – and most disastrous – step toward [agricultural] diversification” (Biesanz 1999:46). The Caribbean coast in the southeast may have received the greatest strain on the environment, as “most of the region’s economic activities have involved the exploitation of resources for sale to the international market” (Honey 2008:178). Natural resources were not the only thing to be exploited.

Transnational corporations exploited racial tensions between Afro-Caribbean English-speaking blacks and ladino Spanish-speakers, as Philippe Bourgois (1994) documented in his research on the United Fruit Company. They also consumed large tracts of land and displaced many indigenous people in their race for profit. Even now, there are ethnic delineations around who does the coffee picking and banana collection, and many consequences of land and racial exploitation in the southeast still affect Costa Rica today (Biesanz 1999:44-45). From a conservationist perspective, the commercial use of Costa Rica’s natural resources is quite grave, especially when they are subjected to the interests of the global market or transnational corporations. The concern directed toward foreign ownership of businesses in Costa Rica is now extended to concern toward foreign ownership of prime real estate on the west coast. Beachfront property is one such example, 80 percent of which was owned by foreigners by the early 1990’s (Honey 2008:164).

However, Costa Rica’s utilitarian use of its environment has been an impressive model on several levels. For example, 99.2% of its electricity needs are satisfied by renewable sources, mostly from hydroelectric dams (González 2004:www.tierramerica.net). The dams cause major disruptions in the ecosystems of the rivers they are built on, but the benefits of clean energy is a

nice tradeoff. Smith provides a favorable review of one such hydroelectric project by the Arenal Volcano, which “succeeded in improving the standards of living and returning control over their own lives to resettled people within five years of implementation of the project” (Smith 2005:197).

Tourism is the most recent conceptualization of land use, one that carries considerable market value and is a plausible alternative to other utilitarian uses of nature. Tourism comes in several flavors. In 2007, the Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (the Costa Rican Tourism Institute, or ICT) defined four types of tourism that they would officially emphasize – ecotourism, adventure tourism, sun/sand/beach, and rural community based tourism (Honey 2008:161). Adventure tourism tends to be less attractive to local communities, yet towns along the Río Pacuare were able to prevent the construction of a dam on the river by presenting a plan for white-water rafting and other tourism attractions. There are ecotourism locales sprouting up all over the country, many of which simply use the ecotourism label because it is trendy and popular, and bound to attract more visitors. However, places such as the Monteverde Cloud Reserve and Cabo Blanco on the Nicoya peninsula actually began as privately protected land reserves before the communities around them made strategic decisions toward incorporating sustainable ecotourism into their future plans.

Case Study: Savegre Valley in San Gerardo de Dota

The cleanest river in Central America mentioned in the beginning of this report flows through the heart of the Savegre Valley. It is located on the Talamanca mountain range in the central region of Costa Rica. In surveying the history of the area, it is clear that the river’s

cleanliness is the result of some very strategic decisions made by Costa Rican homesteaders in the Savegre Valley.

In 1952, Efrain Chacón hiked four hours from the Pan-Am highway curving through the dangerous *Cerro de La Muerte* mountain pass. He began clearing land in order to do what he knew best... raise dairy cattle. The area was perfect for grazing, and he continued clearing land for the next few decades for cattle, felling trees one by one by ax. He also found an Israeli species of apple that grew well in the Savegre climate and added that to his exports. As in many situations, the land clearing for more pasture could have continued on inevitably, but this story takes a different turn. As the story goes, one pivotal evening Efrain and his son had been working hard all day when they finally rested for a few moments at the foot of a towering white oak. They lay their axes by the tree so they would not have to carry them back and could pick up where they left off the next morning. From high up the side of the mountain they could now see the open space they'd cleared all the way to their houses in the valley. As they looked over the cleared land they did some serious talking, and serious brainstorming about the future and other possibilities. This was not a sudden decision; they had been realizing the need for a better strategy while talking with visiting biologists and naturalists. They carried their axes back down to the house that night, leaving behind the forest-clearing method of agriculture in favor of the new possibilities offered by ecotourism. The towering white oak still stands today, as a commemorative point on a trail still connected to their ecotourism lodge. This story spurred a model of participatory conservation that environmental biologist Dr. Leo Finkenbinder termed the "White Oak Model" (Neuenschwander and Finkenbinder 2001:9).

Since 1983, when Efrain and his family made the decision to shift their livelihood from dairy to ecotourism, they have devoted themselves to the task with as much dedication and

innovation as they did to cattle raising. Being willing to be innovative and use new strategies is one of the key characteristics that helped the settlers in the Savegre Valley implement an ecotourism model that worked (Williams 2004:4). As more inhabitants came to the San Gerardo de Dota valley, the Chacón family led the way and set the tone for environmental responsibility. They have also drawn from the expertise of visiting biologists, who conduct research from the Quetzal Education Research Center that was constructed on part of their property. The research center has made its results available to the community, and includes expositions involving the community's children that educate and inform the families about environmental conscientiousness (Neuenschwander and Finkenbinder 2001).

This transition, then, was a strategic decision for Efrain and his family, one made in their best interests but one that also recognized the limitations of the environment. And the residents of Savegre Valley are not the only ones in Costa Rica to use rising trends in tourism to their own advantage. There are dozens of similar locations, but one of the most carefully studied is the Monteverde Zone further north on the Tilarán mountain range, another cloud forest dealing with an increase in tourism traffic. Monteverde has no equivalent environmental narrative around which its community was formed, like that of Ephrain Chacón and the White Oak, but their response to increasing tourism has evoked controversy around the contested vector for visitor traffic to their region – the road leading to their community. Around this issue many different ideologies clash. There are constant complaints about the road to Monteverde, which Martha Honey describes as a “bone-jarring, muffler-mashing, switchback dirt road” (Honey 2008:184). She also points out, however, that the community's decision to not pave the road symbolizes the “Monteverde way of doing things” (Honey 2008:191). In fact, the community has repeatedly decided to *not* pave the road in order to keep tourist traffic at a moderate level and also require

them to spend a night if they visited. This is just one example of a community decision made in order to preempt and control the effects of tourism in the region. However, the traditional way of making decisions such as this, through a town meeting to come to a consensus, is one of the casualties of the ecotourism boom in the Monteverde area.

There has been much critique of whether ecotourism endeavors are really as “sustainable” and “eco-friendly” as they claim to be. Projects certainly fall along a scale of how well they meet these goals, and one of the best ways of determining this is by environmental monitoring for changes in levels of pollutants in the soil and rivers, and by ongoing surveys of biodiversity. The residents of Savegre Valley face challenges in terms of both too much traffic and too little. To manage their growth the residents must draw from lessons learned in other regions attempting to create sustainable ecotourism sites, as well as a solid understanding of globalization processes and rational actor theory from microeconomics.

Tourism theories and methods

Research into tourism is relatively new, but classical theories are often used and applied to the context of tourism. Some of the more popular theories applied to ecotourism could be divided into categories of globalism, actor-network theories, and rational-actor models (along with other related models of micro-economics).

Globalism, political economy, and development studies all contribute to ecotourism research because these constructs draw from recent trends in international connectivity accelerated by cheap and fast travel, communication, and flows of capital. These are all components that ecotourism as it exists today rely upon to function. On a broader level, the tourism industry “reflects the increasing interconnectedness of the international economy” and

“depends more than most not only on transport, service, and trading networks but also on political and environmental relationships between the consumers and producers of the tourism experience” (Hall 2005:2). Ecotourism in developing countries also has strong connections with issues of development, as this type of tourism not only compensates developing countries monetarily and creates flows of capital from affluent countries to poorer ones, but also creates an ethic for environmental protection and conservation. This high degree of connectivity with global actors shows that “conservation in Costa Rica is intimately connected to the global context even from its inception; the efforts of these conservationists could not have succeeded without the support of international global actors” (Amador 2004:27). Not only does this category include analysis of the flows and global trends of tourism, but also studies balances in power, issues of dependency, sustainability, and unequal development (Cheong and Miller 2000:373). Economic and social pressures from the core affect the periphery, their use of the environment, and their decisions of how to use their land.

A more specific and delineated category often related to globalism studies, but from less of a macro-structural perspective, is to view ecotourism through the lens of actor-network theory. Actor-networks connect “within and across different societies and regions, transport-systems, accommodation and facilities, resources, environments, technologies, and people and organizations” (van der Duim 2007:967). Their principal elements in tourism are people, the “array of networked objects, media, machines, and technologies,” and “spaces” (van der Duim 2007:967-968). The importance of biodiversity, for example, is established discursively throughout a network of knowledge-producing institutions occupying key positions of power from within this network (Escobar 2006). Actor-network theory shifts the focus from macro-

structures and world systems theory to networks of specific instances of people, places, and tools that interact and affect these larger structures.

A third model that applies well to ecotourism is that of actor-based models within the context of processual ecological anthropology (Orlove 2006). One example of a relevant actor-based model is the rational-actor model from economics, which “assumes that an individual calculatingly pursues his [or her] self interest” (Ellickson 1993:1325). This provides an alternative explanation to the story of Don Ephrain in the Savegre Valley, wherein he calculatingly chooses the path of ecotourism instead of dairy farming because in the long run this will benefit him and his family better than the original plan which involved cutting of the forests. Rational-actor models are also helpful when combined with other economic techniques such as cost-benefit analysis, in order to create a sustainable model of ecotourism that will actually cover its costs and work to the benefit of the stakeholders who invest in it (and in the best interests of the land upon which the project is implemented). Decision-making models are closely related, which explain “that many social systems contain options among with individuals must choose” (Orlove 2006:206). Decision-making models can further be divided into cognitive models, with more emphasis on the decision-making process, and micro-economic models, which emphasize more the outcome of the decision (Orlove 2006:206-207). One final related economic theory which is foundational in some of the research methods used to analyze user preferences is Lancaster’s theory of derived utility that “proposes that consumers’ utilities are defined over a bundle of attributes or characteristics of a purchased good or service” (Hearne and Salinas 2002:156). These theories of economics and consumption and relating research methods are discussed in more detail in the following section on methods.

Green Gold: Assigning a Dollar Value to the Natural Beauty of the Environment

Costa Rica presents a special case in ecotourism models because its number one industry is tourism, and a large percentage of tourist interest in Costa Rica is for its natural beauty. It follows, then, that conservation of Costa Rica's natural beauty is, on the whole, a profitable enterprise. This has caused a lot of the sociological research regarding tourism in Costa Rica to focus more on tourist preferences (as opposed to scientific research which monitors environmental change). In 1988, tourism was the third largest industry in Costa Rica after coffee and bananas at \$164.7 million per year. By 1997, tourism was number one at \$700 million per year (Evans 1999:216). In addition, an Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (ICT) survey in 1985 showed that 75% of foreign tourists said they visited Costa Rica for its natural beauty (Evans 1999:217). For Costa Rica, such a successful enterprise means that in their country, "the dual goals of nature conservation and income generation are most often complementary" (Hearne and Salinas 2002:154). For this reason, various methods from economic theory are used to help create cost-benefit analyses of pricing and environmental conservation.

This important connection between paying tourists and conservation has resulted in a number of stated preference valuation methods to calculate how much tourists are willing to pay for park entrance and other improvements. In 1994, entrance fees were the same for national and international visitors at US \$1.25. By 1999, entrance fees were standardized at US \$6.00 for foreign tourists and US \$1.25, and contingent valuation estimates indicated foreign tourists would be willing to pay even more (Hearne and Salinas 2002:154). The fee is currently at US \$10 for foreign tourists and about US \$3 for locals. Another stated preference valuation method is the use of choice experiments, which "have more direct links with economic theories" (Hearne and Salinas 2002:156). The choice experiments showed that both Costa Rican and foreign

tourists were willing to pay between US \$0.73 and \$2.11 for more information and better views. Foreign tourists also valued the need for limited access to some trails, but this was not statistically significant in the responses of Costa Rican visitors (Hearne and Salinas 2002:160).

Another approach called the “travel cost method” attempts to calculate the net *value* tourists place on Costa Rican rainforests. This value is calculated “based upon observed travel expenses by visitors to the area” (Menkhaus and Lober 1996: 2). This method shows that ecotourists visiting a Costa Rican rainforest valued their trip at US \$1,150 per visit, and domestic tourists valued each visit at US \$35. Multiplying this by the number of U.S. tourists to the Monteverde cloud forest region results in an annual value of approximately \$68 million (Menkhaus and Lober 1996: 8). Again, this figure includes travel costs, and so is more indicative of how *valuable* the main purpose of the trip was for the tourists, not how much money goes into the local economy. It raises an important perspective, though... while some projects may struggle to be truly cost-effective and sustainable, how much are these protected areas actually *valued* by calculating the entire amount people spend to visit them?

Greenwashing the Truth (critiques of ecotourism)

A survey of the research and public discourse regarding the tourism industry in Costa Rica establishes its role as “ecotourism’s poster child” (Honey 2008:160). However, this does not absolve it from criticism and specific instances of major environmental degradation. Exceptions to the rule are important to note, because they reveal weaknesses in Costa Rica’s reputation for environmental concern. They also point out where problems may occur in the future, and reveal that open trade agreements are still allowing foreign actors to encroach on Costa Rica’s reputation as an environmentally conscientious nation.

If we accept the premise that ecotourism is defined mainly on the terms of a Western construct of nature, then we see that tourism in Costa Rica has, and will continue to have, close connections with globalization from the very beginning (Cater 2006). The profile for ecotourists puts them at high income levels with high levels of education (Fennell and Eagles 1990:26). It is inextricably linked to global changes, and this has important implications for power balances within the tourism industry. In addition, many of Costa Rica's most renowned ecotourist destinations (many of the ones studied in the research) are private protected lands, outside the control of the national park system. This makes the relationship with global flows of capital and relationships of power key factors in understanding recent environmental infractions to feed foreign markets.

The introduction to this paper mentioned the Río Tárcoles, which is purportedly the most polluted river in Central America. Río Tárcoles empties into the Pacific Ocean on the Western side of Costa Rica near the overdeveloped beach resort of Jaco, which frequently has to be shut down because of high levels of contamination in the ocean (Marjerle 2011:www.ticotimes.net; Murillo 2010:www.nacion.com). One of the main rivers feeding into the Río Tárcoles is Río Virilla, which flows through the capital city of San Jose and around an urban slum called La Carpio on the outskirts of the city. A water-treatment plant is scheduled to be built in La Carpio, which is home to over 30,000 residents who cannot own titles to their land, half of whom are Nicaraguan from the poorer country to the north of Costa Rica (Díaz 2011:www.nacion.com). This slum already boasts the largest garbage dump in the country, which has received 700 tons of garbage per day since it was built in 2000 (this is now up to at least 1500 tons according to the landfill's official website). The attempts to control pollution and manage waste are crucial endeavors, considering the leaked U.S. Embassy cable that claimed that less than 3% of Costa

Rica's sewage and wastewater was treated in 2007 (Williams 2011:www.ticotimes.net).

However, both the problems of pollution and the increasing gap between the rich and poor (according to the 2010 State of the Nation report) illustrate the toll that neoliberalism trade policies are causing toward Costa Rica's efforts at being "green." Portions from the decoded cable read as following:

While famous for its investment in 'green' issues such as national parks and biodiversity protection, Costa Rica does not walk the talk when it comes to 'brown' environmental issues such as sewage treatment... For a tourism-dependent country that relies upon its reputation as an environmental paradise and prime ecotourism destination, the nation's use of its rivers in lieu of a modern sanitation system as the conduit for dumping raw, untreated waste onto its most convenient beaches and important fishing areas is a shocking revelation. The poor state of the sewage system creates particular hazards for agricultural areas downstream of major cities, where sewage-borne disease like cholera could frighten away customers. The lack of fundamental sewage treatment infrastructure is further evidence that Costa Rica's modernization and development is fragile.

(Williams 2011:www.ticotimes.net)

Water treatment and the two previous examples given earlier in the paper of illegal shark-finning in Puntarenas and the opening of a Canadian-owned open-pit mine are connected to threatening economic pressures and dangerous alliances with foreign investors. They indicate that Costa Rica must take a stronger stance against environmental degradation by reforming their neoliberal trade policies. The role of increased immigrant labor also raises questions of unequal development.

Other critiques of tourism development in Costa Rica point out problems of rising costs in access and real estate that are beyond the level of Costa Ricans to afford (Honey 2008:212). This is particularly the case in coastal regions, only 7 percent of which have any regulatory plans (Evans 1999:229), and, as mentioned before, by the early 90's an estimated 80 percent of the beachfront property was owned by foreigners (Honey 2008:164). This creates serious questions about who benefits from tourism in general, and whether it is "sustainable" on the local level or merely a way of siphoning off money toward foreign investors. Honey (2008:214) summarizes the concerns quite well:

While all of tiny Costa Rica is being marketed as an ecotourism destination, the reality is that ecotourism exists only in certain areas. There is concern that the rapidly expanding mass tourism is tarnishing and undermining Costa Rica's well-deserved international reputation for high-quality ecotourism. Unless effective control is exerted to ensure sustainable development, particularly in the coastal areas, Costa Rica risks losing its reputation as the world's leading ecotourism "superpower."

Implications for the Savegre Valley

The concerns of rapidly expanding mass tourism described above are not quite as intense in the central tropical rainforests, yet they are still major concerns. Many of the problems of tourist traffic have caused Monteverde to make careful, deliberate decisions in order to restrict too much traffic to their region, such as the decision not to pave the road previously mentioned. Monteverde is a four-hour drive from the capital; the Savegre Valley is only two hours away, and boasts a similar cloud forest climate (slightly higher in elevation) and lowers levels of tourist saturation. The valley offers tourism services, beautifully landscaped hotels, trout fishing,

quetzal viewing, and a towering waterfall. Early on the Savegre Valley gained popularity with hoteliers in the capital who “recommended San Gerardo as a spot equivalent to, if not superior to, the famed Monteverde Reserve for quetzal watching” (Williams 2004:9). It is not unlikely that the valley will face increased tourist traffic in the following years, due to the numerous nature tourism attractions it boasts and its close proximity to San Jose. The preceding discussions on theory and method can be applied to the case study of the Savegre Valley in order to give it hopeful prospects for the future.

In the same tradition as the Monteverde Zone, the Savegre Valley attracts a lot of scientific tourists to its valley. It has had on-site environmental monitoring since the Quetzal Educational Research Center was constructed in 2000 on the grounds of the Hotel de Montaña Savegre. It has also had several scientific studies done measuring land cover change and biodiversity. Continued monitoring of human effects on the environment are crucial to maintaining the biodiversity and ecological stability of the region. However, it is recommended as well that the valley form a more strategic socio-economic plan to pre-empt the inevitable increase in tourist traffic. Monteverde stands as a good model for community organization and strategic management of tourist traffic, but the Savegre Valley has many features that make it unique. These unique features both give it an edge on Monteverde and also increase the importance of designing an appropriate strategy for the San Gerardo de Dota community. Savegre residents should make careful decisions about pricing, charging enough to keep traffic at a moderate level and invest in progressive eco-friendly modifications to their hospitality services, but not charging so low as to improperly cope with the amount of human traffic the price drop will attract. This is one helpful way the user-preference methods could be used.

However, user-preferences must be used toward the advantage of the community in a way that will not jeopardize their most marketable asset – the valley’s biodiversity, upon which most of their tourist attractions are based. Actor-network theory allows for “things” and “objects” to play roles as actors as well, taking into account that they have a social significance that impact interactions on any given landscape. In the case of the Savegre Valley, the quetzal is one of the principal “actors” bringing fame and recognition to the valley and attracting tourists. It stands, then, that protecting the valley’s celebrity bird is important to their ecotourism efforts. However, the quetzal bird requires the fragile ecology of the entire valley to remain stable. Changes are inevitable, of course, but *rapid* change caused by the introduction of non-native species, or the disappearance of a crucial species in the food chain, or too much human traffic, could cause the quetzal birds to move elsewhere or even die out. Maintaining the stability of the Savegre Valley ecosystem, then, extends beyond focusing on the exonerated quetzal actor and to also protecting the stability of the entire ecosystem. The Hotel de Montaña Savegre, the ecotourism lodge pioneered by Don Efrain Chacón and his family, has incorporated this systemic view of conservation not only by encouraging scientific environmental monitoring by the Quetzal Educational Research Center on their property, but also by educating tourists in the variety of species that frequent the valley. The hotel website lists 160 species of birds that can have been spotted in the valley (<http://www.savegre.co.cr/listaaves.html>). Visiting tourists, then, are educated in the importance of biodiversity, as well as getting a chance at viewing the “Holy Grail” of avid bird-watching fans.

It should be noted as well that the decision to publicize the valley as an ecotourism endeavor and formidable bird-watching destination also attracts a certain type of tourist – one whose choice preferences and tourist dollars will go toward appreciation of nature rather than

adventure tourism, for example. This is important to consider as other hotels in the valley have decided to incorporate various forms of adventure tourism in order to offer a more diverse package of tourist attractions. This brings up another factor that should be carefully examined and anticipated in the Savegre Valley, and that is how issues of competition for limited resources should be handled. Igoe and Brockington (2007:446), in a paper favorable to the opportunities neoliberalization brings to conservation efforts, warn that “neoliberalism’s emphasis on competition, along with its the *[sic]* rolling back of state protection and the social contract, creates spaces in which local people are not often able to compete effectively in the face of much more powerful transnational interests.”

A final concern that must be addressed is the Savegre Valley’s local effort at ecotourism within the larger context of neoliberal policies and the spread of free-market capitalism. Costa Rica was the last in a batch of Central American countries to ratify a free-trade agreement with the United States, which was put into full effect in January 2009. The decision was highly controversial and passed by a narrow margin of 53/47 (TicoTimes 2009; Office of the United States Trade Representative Website). In addition, the most recent “State of the Nation” report revealed that inequality had increased between 2008 and 2009 (Vanessa 2010:www.nacion.com). These trends, among others, are macro factors affecting industries that rely on international flows of capital to feed their profits.

On the other hand, the ecotourism introduced in the early 1980’s to the Savegre Valley relies is a part of these international capital flows as well, and land cover studies of the region actually revealed a *reverse* trend in deforestation. Land cover studies showed that “between 1984 and 1996, the deforestation rate dropped significantly (0.4 ha year⁻²), and finally leveled off to almost zero in 2001” (Kappelle and Juárez 2006:394). 59.6% of the montane forest area was

actually regenerating (van Omme et al. 1997:3). One of the key reasons for this trend was attributed to participatory conservation, which is associated with both successful poverty alleviation and protection of biodiversity (Kappelle and Juárez 2006:394). An article by Jim Igoe and Dan Brockington point out that although “neoliberalism” is usually posed as the opponent to successful conservationist efforts, in actuality “these new types of neoliberal conservation promise to infuse new types of resources into biodiversity conservation, especially in poorer parts of the world, where states lack the resources and capacity to effectively protect biodiversity” (Igoe and Brockington 2007:434). For example, neoliberalization allows states to “reregulate” things that were previously valueless into tradable commodities (Igoe and Brockington 2007:437). The authors go further to show how neoliberal conservation “promises to protect rural communities by guaranteeing their property rights and helping them enter into conservation-oriented business ventures” (Igoe and Brockington 2007: 434). Involving local community stakeholders as private land owners (which is a successful and quite popular trend in Costa Rica as well, in addition to the 25% of the land that is federally protected) allows the conservationist effort to expand beyond the state and into the hands of private enterprises as well (Langholz and Lossoie 2002). What both these articles suggest and provide evidence for is that conservation within the context of free-market capitalism can be successful if it is initiated and managed by local entrepreneurs. The Savegre Valley has this as its heritage; the future cohesiveness of its ecotourism service to outsiders relies on keeping a tight, organized, and democratic decision-making process where the long-term benefit of the entire community is voiced and protected.

Conclusions/recommendations

This paper has shown how various theories and research methods can be applied to the practice of ecotourism in the Savegre Valley of Costa Rica. Although Costa Rica has an admirable track record of environmentally responsible tourism and its economic incentives for growth are tightly related to conservation, recent neoliberalization trends are cause for critical reflection and deliberate planning for places that wish to continue offering ecotourism options to foreign and local visitors. Local participatory conservation and private land reserves have been successful in Costa Rica and are a model example of how neoliberal conservation can be implemented. Continued environmental monitoring is an essential part of scientifically tracing the impact of increased tourist traffic to Costa Rica and other countries that present their country as environmental attractions to eco-tourists.

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