

Ecotourism in La Gamba, an economical and ecological alternative for the residents of La Gamba?

Ecoturismo en La Gamba, una alternativa económica y ecológica para los residentes de La Gamba?

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Abstract: Tourism in Costa Rica has always been based on nature. What began with biotourism, developed over the years to nature and beach tourism, mostly promoted as ecotourism. However, the annually rising number of tourists and, in some regions, perceived negative effects of tourism, calls the quest for sustainability of ecotourism into question. The beginnings of tourism and the touristic development at the community level in La Gamba partly reflects the beginning and development of tourism at the national level in Costa Rica. With the inauguration of the Piedras Blancas National Park and the opening of the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge and the Tropical Station La Gamba, the village first attracted the attention of scientists and later of travellers interested in nature. This entry into the ecotourism business was not unobstructed and different projects had to be induced to catch up after the unfortunate start. Today, the residents of La Gamba are mostly in favour of tourism. The changes in the community and the touristic development are perceived positively, whereas the economic aspect comes to the fore. This strong emphasis on the economic development and on economic expectations may jeopardise the concept of nature-based ecotourism in La Gamba in the future.

Key words: sustainable development, tourism development, ecotourism, resident perception.

Resumen: El turismo en Costa Rica estuvo y está basado en la naturaleza. Lo que comenzó con el bioturismo, se desarrolló a través de los años hacia la naturaleza y el turismo de las playas, promocionado principalmente como ecoturismo. Sin embargo, el creciente número de turistas y, en algunas regiones, la percepción negativa de los efectos del turismo, lleva a la pregunta sobre la sustentabilidad del ecoturismo. El inicio y desarrollo turístico a nivel de comunidad en La Gamba, refleja en parte el comienzo y el desarrollo del turismo a nivel nacional en Costa Rica. Con la instalación del Parque Nacional Piedras Blancas, la apertura del Refugio Bosque Lluvioso Esquinas y la Estación Tropical La Gamba, la villa atrajo en primer lugar la atención de los científicos y posteriormente de los viajeros interesados en la naturaleza. Este comienzo en el negocio del ecoturismo no fue sin obstáculos y diferentes proyectos tuvieron que ser inducidos para superar la mala suerte inicial. Hoy en día, la mayoría de los residentes de La Gamba están a favor del turismo. Los cambios en la comunidad y el desarrollo turístico son percibidos positivamente, mientras que el aspecto económico a pasado a primer plano. Este fuerte énfasis en el desarrollo y expectativas económicas, pueden a futuro, poner en peligro el concepto de ecoturismo basado en la naturaleza en La Gamba.

Palabras clave: desarrollo sustentable, desarrollo turístico, ecoturismo, percepción de los residentes.

Brief overview of tourism in Costa Rica

Tourism has a long tradition in Costa Rica, starting in the beginning of the 20th century, mainly with domestic tourists and visitors from other Central American countries. In the 1960s and 1970s, the first tourist resorts, clubs and parks were established for recreational and adventure tourists. Nature tourism dates back to the year 1969, when the Forestry Law outlined that na-

tional parks are not only created for the conservation of flora and fauna, but also to offer opportunities for scientific research, recreation and tourism (EVANS 1999:72). Mario BOZA¹ (in EVANS 1999: 216) supported this law in 1969 with a comment in the daily newspaper La Re-

¹ Mario Boza is one of the founders of the national park system, and one of the country's most famous conservationist leaders. He currently serves as an advisor to the Ministry of Environment and Energy (MI-NAE)

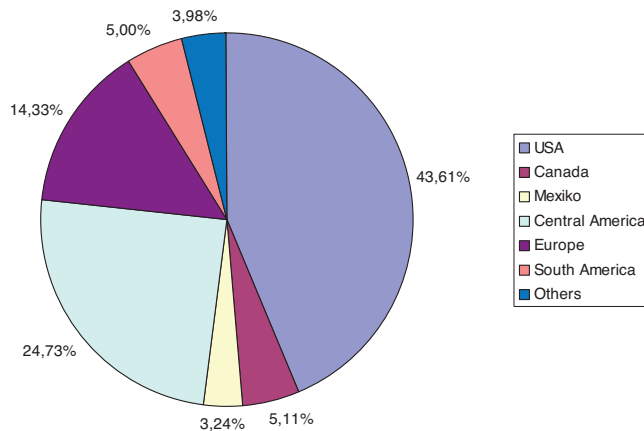


Fig. 1: Tourist arrivals of Costa Rica by region. (Source: Market Data 2005 & ICT¹⁰ Yearbook 2005, modified).

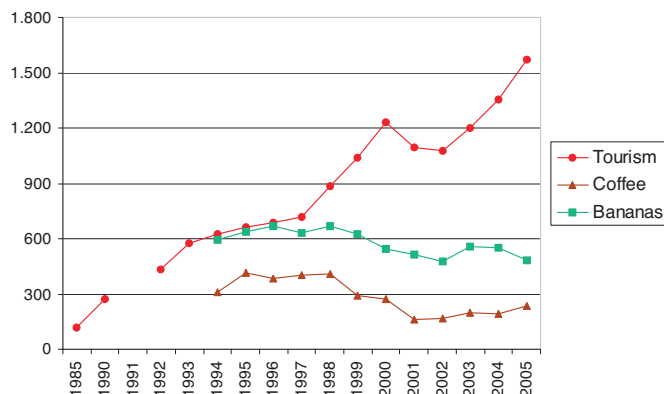


Fig. 2: Annual income in million US dollars by tourism and export of main products. (Source: Market Data 2005 & ICT Yearbook 2005, modified).

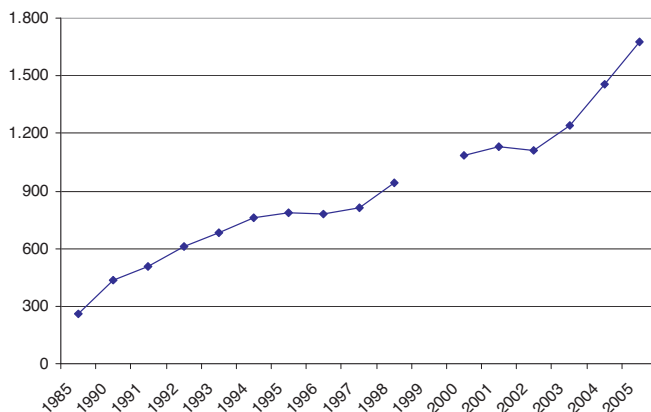


Fig. 3: Tourist arrivals in Costa Rica/year in thousands. (Source: Market Data 2005 & ICT Yearbook 2005, modified).

publica: "Although from a commercial viewpoint parks might seem an unnecessary investment, they could become one of the major sources of revenue for the nation". On the one hand, he was right with this glimpse to the future, as the parks did indeed become "a major source of revenue for the nation", but on the other hand, the creation of a national park was sometimes the end of local development, as happened for example on the Osa Peninsula, with the foundation of the Corcov-

ado National Park in 1975. The population was removed from the new area of conservation and left without an alternative source of income (see references in Carlos M. MORERA BEITA 2001).

The opportunity to carry out scientific research in the newly-created national parks (1970s) attracted biologists and travellers with an interest in nature to the small country. The ongoing inauguration of parks and biological reserves created the "green reputation" of the country. In combination with the country's stable political situation and the longing for untouched exotic nature in industrialised nations, Costa Rica gained importance as holiday destination. The visitors' pattern began to change in the mid-1980s. The number of tourists from North America and Europe started to grow continuously, while the percentage of domestic tourists and visitors from Central and South American countries declined gradually. Today, the majority of the visitors come from the United States (43.61%), followed by Central America (24.73%), and Europe (14.33%)².

The Costa Rican government, in co-operation with the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT) started to support this development in the 1980s and provided investment incentives for touristic enterprises and foreign investors with the goal to establish luxury resorts in the country. Altogether, a lot of efforts were made to sell the "oro verde" of the "rich coast", and the country's green reputation succeeded economically in the 1990s, when Costa Rica jumped in popularity to the head of the ecotourism queue, ahead of older nature travel destinations such as the Galápagos Islands, Kenya and Nepal. In 1994, tourism became the number one foreign exchange earner for the first time, with 627.7 million U.S. dollars (Market Data 1996: 24). Since then, this amount nearly doubled to 2003, with an annual foreign exchange income of 1.200 million U.S. dollars (<http://www.visitcostarica.com>).

Costa Rica expanded its popularity in ecotourism, and the international travel industry elected Costa Rica the worldwide best travel destination in adventure and ecotourism in 2003 and 2004. This trend is reflected in the annually rising tourism arrivals (Fig. 3). In 1994, Costa Rica was visited by 761.448 travellers, but only 10 years later, in 2004, the tourist arrivals doubled and the country was visited by 1,452.926 tourists.

² The Costa Rican Tourism Institute compared visitors from the United States with visitors from Europe. They found out that people from the USA are more wealthy and generally older than visitors from other countries. Furthermore, U.S. tourists are less willing to forego minimum standards of comfort, even in remote tropical rainforest areas. Their main reasons for a trip to Costa Rica are the Pacific beaches, whereas Europeans visit the country because of its nature spots.

³ ICT = Instituto Costarricense de Turismo. The first tourism board was set up in 1931, and in 1955 it became the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT) which continues to the present.

This trend continuous and each year, more tourists choose Costa Rica as their holiday destination. What started in a small scale with “biotourism” or “scientific tourism” based on the national parks and biological reserves, developed for a wider ranging audience into nature tourism, adventure tourism, and “ecotourism” based on the tropical scenery. Today, sun, sea and sand are the reason for 60% of all tourists to visit the country, 35% come because of the rich flora and fauna. These figures are matching with those, showing that only 32.5% of all tourists are visiting a national park or a biological reserve.

Comparing the touristic development of the country with the principles of sustainability and ecotourism, the doubt arises whether ecotourism on this scale is possible, or if ecotourism is possible at all. What is obvious is that the prefix “eco” is often used to promote tourism to special nature spots. However, (eco)tourism can range from sustainable tourism in the best case to destructive tourism in the worst case.

From Sustainability to Ecotourism

Ecotourism has its roots in the idea of sustainability, which was a key theme of the United Nations Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972. The concept was coined explicitly to suggest that it is possible to achieve economic growth and industrialisation without environmental damage. In the following decades, mainstream sustainable development thinking was progressively developed through the World Conservation Strategy (1980), the Brundtlandt Report (1987) and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio (1992), with the idea of connecting the three dimensions of environmental, social and economic sustainability. Over the years, the definition of sustainable development has evolved, multiplied and adapted to different development strategies and economic sectors, like for example to ecotourism. While Ceballos-Lascuráin⁴ claims that he first coined

the term ecotourism in 1983, other experts say it originated in Kenton Miller's⁵ work on national park planning in Latin America in 1978. Miller argued that development must integrate biological considerations with economic, social, and political factors to meet both environmental and human needs. Today, there are numerous definitions of ecotourism. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) claims that sustainable tourism should minimise impacts, build environmental awareness, provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people, support human rights and democratic movements, respect local culture and provide direct financial benefits for conservation.

Tourism in La Gamba

The village of La Gamba

La Gamba is situated in the southern part of Costa Rica, in the province of Puntarenas, and the district of Golfito. It was founded in the mid 1940s by five families⁶ whose life initially comprised subsistence agriculture and hunting. In 1938, the United Fruit Company signed a contract with the Government of Costa Rica, granting it the right to use 4.000 ha for banana plantations in the Golfito region up to Quepos for 50 years (FUCHS 1991: 311, 312). A regional consequence of this contract was that deforestation and population increased. In the 1950s, people from La Gamba started to work with the United Fruit Company (Universidad Nacional 2002, FUNDACIÓN NEOTROPICA 2006), which was the most important employer for more than 30 years. In 1984, the United Fruit Company left its plantations in and around Golfito overnight, and the region tumbled into an economic crisis which continues to today. Employment was, especially in this time, very rare and people lived mainly from agriculture and livestock production for subsistence and from different jobs as day labourers.

La Gamba is not a historically-grown village, as people often settled here for a short period of time only, in search of work and land. A consequence of this coming and going was that social ties between the families were weak, and community leadership was absent. These circumstances became effective when people from La Gamba got involved in the ecotouristic project “Esquinas Rainforest Lodge”.

Today, a small and unpaved road leads the visitor within 3 km from the Interamerican Highway to the heart of La Gamba. The village numbers about 90 families – in total about 400 people. The majority of about 50 families live in the centre of the village and about 40 families in the nearby valleys of ‘El Bonito’ and ‘La Bolsa’ (Universidad Nacional, 2002). In the centre of the village, one can find within a distance of about 500m all fa-

⁴ Héctor Ceballos Lascuráin is one of the first leaders in ecotourism. In 1981, he founded PRONATUR, an NGO mainly running conservation projects in Mexico. In 1984, he founded ECOTOURS, the first travel agency for ecotourism in Mexico. Since 1991, he has been working for the IUCN (World Conservation Union), where he is a special advisor for ecotourism. He is also the Director of PICE (Programa Internacional de Consultoría en Ecoturismo) and a special advisor for ecotourism to the WTO (World Tourism Organisation).

⁵ Kenton Miller was Director-General of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) from 1983 to 1988, served as Chair of IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas from 1976 to 1982 and again from 2000 to 2004. During the same period, he served on the IUCN Council. He has received numerous international awards for his rôle in shaping the international protected area agenda.

⁶ According an interview with Don Efrain Camacho (pers. comm. Oscar Viatoro Pineda “Camacho” 2005) the 5 founder families where: Antonio Rivas Rivas (known as Camacho, he is the father of Don Efrain Camacho), Adolfo Briceño, Ramon Moya (he lived in the house what today is the Tropenstation La Gamba and he is the father of Don Braulio Moya), Clemente Briceño and Heli Salaz.



Fig. 4: (a) Main road in the centre of La Gamba, (b) Children of La Gamba, (c) Road gossip in La Gamba.

cilities they have: the public phone (there are no phones in private households, except cellular phones), the police-station, the football field, the community meeting centre, one Catholic and one Evangelical church, two

'pulperias' (small groceries), one "restaurant", one small bar with refreshments, coffee and snacks, one bar with music, the cabinas Yarielis and Dona Victoria, kindergarten and school, and the newly installed central park. Mains electricity has provided since 1978, and by 1985, every household had mains water (pers. comm. Oscar Viatoro Pineda "Camacho" 2005). The private houses are usually made of wood and situated around the centre of the village and along the roads to La Bolsa and El Bonito, two valleys close to La Gamba.

The mainstay of the people is subsistence agriculture and livestock, day-labourer work, employment on plantations, mostly outside La Gamba, and the plantation of '*palma africana*' (*Elaeis guianensis*, Arecaceae). The two biggest employers in the village are the Tropical Station La Gamba with 7 employees and the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge with 17 to 25 employees, depending on the season (pers. comm. Catalina Torres, March 2007).

Esquinas Rainforest Lodge

In 1993, the construction of the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge⁷ began (see further readings at Michael Schnitzler in this book). It is situated about 3 kilometres from the centre of La Gamba at the end of a valley, and is surrounded by primary forest. The lot was a mixture of swamp, pasture and secondary forest. After a construction period of 9 months, the lodge opened its doors in December 1994. The lodge was built according to ecological principles. The materials used were mainly bamboo, cement, wood and palm leaves from a plantation (*Asterogyne martiana*, Arecaceae). During construction, a Costa Rican NGO was in charge to verify the ecological objectives of the project.

There is a main building with reception, dining room, bar and library, and 7 single houses with two double rooms each. According to ecological standards, the rooms have no air conditioning and the swimming pool is fed with water from a stream. Directly behind the lodge, a 10-mile long network of marked trails lead through the primary forest. The lodge is open all year round and has 25 employees (17 full time employees – 10 male and 7 female – and 8 part time employees – all female). Of the 25 employees, 22 are from La Gamba (pers. comm. Catalina Torres, 2007). The manager is Catalina Torres from San José.

In its everyday work the management of the lodge considers the environment and the local development

⁷ After the Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (1992), the Republic of Austria decided to finance the project "Rainforest of the Austrians" including the construction of the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge, as part of its Development Aid Programm.

of La Gamba, for example by growing its own vegetables and fruits (partly) and producing its own marmalade, fresh fruit juices and bread. The waste is separated into organic waste and recyclable waste like plastic, glass, aluminium, cardboard, iron, copper and paper. Biodegradable detergent is used for cleaning, and the clothes and towels are sun-dried under a transparent panel roof. Agricultural products are bought, as far as available, in the village. Local organisations producing herbal cosmetic products and handicrafts may sell their products in the lodge. On the other side, tourists are encouraged to visit the village including the school (pers. comm. Catalina Torres, March 2007).

At present, the management of the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge is applying for “Certification in Sustainable Tourism” (CST). This national programme of the Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT) was designed to differentiate tourism companies, based on the degree to which they comply with a sustainable model of natural, cultural and social resource management⁸. The highest level is 5 according to the “star” rating of international hotels. Until 2007, only two lodges reached level 5. However, the certification programme is criticised by various institutes. Respect, the Austrian Institute for Integrative Tourism and Development, argues that the programme does not take into account economic features like money transactions of profits to foreign home countries.

La Gamba enters the eco-tourism stage

The south of Costa Rica and especially the region around Golfito is still a barely visited region in the country compared to other sites, e.g. the Pacific beaches in Manuel Antonio or the northern province of Guanacaste. Until 1993, La Gamba had no accommodation and tourism was limited to a few day tourists interested in nature. With the installation of the Tropical Station La Gamba in 1993, and especially with the opening of the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge in 1994, La Gamba rapidly entered the eco-tourism business, which was beset with problems in the beginning.

Michael Schnitzler, as president of the “Rainforest of the Austrians”, introduced his plan of building an ecotourism lodge as an alternative source of income to

⁸ Four aspects are evaluated: 1) Physical-biological parameters: evaluating the interaction between the company and its surrounding natural habit. 2) Infrastructure and services: evaluating the management policies and the operational systems within the company and its infrastructure. 3) External clients: evaluating the interaction of the company with its clients in terms of how much it allows and invites the client to be an active contributor to the company's policies of sustainability. 4) Socio-economic environment: evaluating the interaction of the company with the local communities and the population in general (<http://www.visitcostarica.com/ict/paginas/tourismboard.asp>).



Fig. 5: (a) Pulperia (grocery) in La Gamba, (b) Restaurant in La Gamba.

the residents of La Gamba. Options for the implementation of the project were discussed together with the organisation ‘Verein Regenwald der Österreicher’ and people from the village. Together, the idea evolved to found a co-operative society with elected members, ideally one per family, as a legal entity to run the lodge. A specific date to hand over the lodge to the co-operative has not been explicitly arranged but people thought that the lodge would be handed over to them immediately after opening. As this did not happen, some had the impression of being cheated. The next problem was that not all families were given the possibility of becoming a member of the co-operative. At this time, unforeseen circumstances, like the missing sense of community and the ambitions of one family to include only family members took effect. As the rumours in the village grew louder, the Austrian government contracted a sociologist to find out possible reasons for the dispute. The

result showed that 26 out of the 29 members of the co-operative belonged to one extended family. Furthermore, some members might have had the intention of selling the lodge immediately after it was handed over. As a consequence the 'Verein Regenwald der Österreicher' took back the intention to hand over the lodge to the co-operative. As an alternative "income", the people from La Gamba were offered all profits from the lodge to use in community projects in the village. However, a new problem arose with this alternative. In general, the first profits from ecotourism projects comparable to that one in La Gamba can be expected only after a period of seven years. This long-term promise was of course doubtful for the people of La Gamba, who already felt uncertain.

To catch up this unintentional and negative development, the Government of Austria and the 'Verein Regenwald der Österreicher' asked the Fundación Neotropica (FN), a Costa Rican NGO, for help. As a first step, in 1996, the FN founded the Asociación Pro-Bienestar de la Comunidad de La Gamba (ASOPROBI). The association served as a platform for the people of La Gamba to discuss the future of their community, strongly supported with the know-how of the Fundación Neotropica.

The goal was to create and co-ordinate projects with the background of installing a communal discussion platform in order to unify the broken community and to help the people face the new challenge of tourism (FUNDACIÓN NEOTROPICA 1996).

Projects in La Gamba

With the opening of the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge, and the Tropical Station La Gamba, the village became the new touristic centre of the Piedras Blancas National Park. In the course of the touristic focus, different organisations carried out projects to solve the described starting problems, to develop earning potential and to raise the standard of living with educational, environmental and social projects. Not all of the projects are directly related to tourism, but were attracted by the beginning of touristic activities in the village and by the future touristic potential of the region. Finally, all the projects, initialised by the Fundación Neotropica, by different Austrian organisations, by the Canadian NGO Plannagua and by the people from La Gamba, have made the village more attractive for the European and North American tourist market.

Projects initialised by the Fundación Neotropica

In January 1998, the Fundación Neotropica started a project called "Fortalecimiento de la Capacidad Auto-

gestionaria de la Comunidad de la Gamba" with the implicit goal of self-development in the field of communal micro-enterprises, communal self-government and sustainable production. In the field of communal micro-enterprises, a total of 18 families managed to diversify their income with the opening of a private business (bakery, soda, horse rental) or through participation in a communal business (handicrafts and herbal cosmetic products). Four families participated in a sustainable and agricultural production project.

The work of the Fundación Neotropica in La Gamba ended in August 2005, but the implemented processes still can be seen. Overall, the FN helped to take the edge off the strained situation between the people of La Gamba and the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge and it unified the community for a new start to the tourism business. ASOPBROBI is now standing on its own and is in charge of continuing the work on projects for the well-being of La Gamba.

Projects initialised by Austrian organizations

The first and most necessary alterations in the community were the renovation of the school and the construction of a health care station in 1996, financed by the organisation 'Verein Regenwald der Österreicher'.

In 1998, the research station initialised a school project for children whose parents are unable to afford the costs of going to secondary school. Currently (2007), 15 children from La Gamba are supported in this way.

In 2005, the Tropical Station La Gamba started a long term project with the title: "Biological corridor in the vicinity of La Gamba". The scope of the project is the connection of primary forest islands by the reforestation of pastures and riversides.

In the same year, a permaculture project started to diversify the agricultural production in La Gamba. People are supported in diversifying their cultivations and in selling these products on nearby markets.

One of the most recently realised projects (2006) was the installation of a new water system for 62 households in La Gamba. The project was initialized by the Tropical Station and organised by the community of La Gamba (Committee de Aguaducto) with the know-how and conduction of Werner Klar, a member of SES (Senior Expert Service, German). Financial support was given by the La Gamba Fund, Estacion Tropical SA, Esquinas Rainforest Lodge, SES and the community of La Gamba.

A current (2007) project of the Tropical Station, the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge and the SES is the com-

bination of waste water disposal in septic tanks and plant clearing arrangement.

In January 2008, the co-operation between La Gamba and Austria with the resulting development and innovations of the village were presented in the first exhibition in the “salón comunal” (assembly hall) de La Gamba. This event was a co-operation of the Tropical Station, the University of Vienna – Faculty of Life Science, the Biological Centre of Upper Austria (Oberösterreichische Landesmuseen), the ‘Verein Regenwald der Österreicher’ and the people of La Gamba. The exhibition is currently (October 2008) being presented in the the Biological Centre of Upper Austria (Oberösterreichische Landesmuseen) in Linz.

Projects initialised by the Canadian NGO Plannagua

In June 2004, members of Plannagua (<http://www.plannagua.qc.ca/>) an NGO from Canada, came for the first time to La Gamba. This organisation has chosen La Gamba for its projects because of its ecotouristic potential and the pro-active attitude towards tourism. In 2004 and 2006, over 20 volunteers between 18 and 30 years old came to help. They renovated the assembly hall and painted private houses. They also gave lessons in English, French and computing. A project with the scope to make children sensitive to conservation issues was started in the primary school. In addition, the first tourist folder introducing La Gamba was made (pers. comm. Maryline Mailhot, member of Plannagua, 2007).

Projects and enterprises by the people of La Gamba

The positive development in the village of La Gamba due to the projects (see above), encouraged private persons to start their own business, mainly in tourism.

A former hunter, now dedicating his live to the protection of flora and fauna, breeds agoutis (*Dasyprocta aguti*), an animal which already is in danger due to over-hunting. This mini-zoo is frequently visited by tourists.

Two new groceries (pulperias), a bar with music and a restaurant with typical Costa Rican meals opened recently.

A private taxi which can be ordered via a “personal message” is used by individual tourists, students and also by people from La Gamba.

Various households produce and sell agricultural products to the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge and the Tropical Station.

In 2005, Cabinas Yarielies and Dona Victoria, the first accommodation available in the centre of La Gamba opened.

Cabinas Avellan, somewhat outside of La Gamba on the way to Golfito, opened in 2006 and provides cabins, a restaurant and a nature trail with a waterfall.

Finally, starting problems were handled with the help of various institutions and the co-operation and engagement of the people from La Gamba. The projects mentioned had mostly positive effects on the community as they improved the infrastructure of the village and diversified the economic situation.

“Seeing” tourists – living with tourism

The residents’ perception of tourism

With the beginning of tourism in La Gamba, the infrastructure and economy changed and the residents had to adapt and to deal with tourists in their daily life.

In general, the perceptions of tourism and its impacts were quite different. While some claimed not to see any change, others noticed shifts due to the work of “Fundación Neotropica” and ASOPROBI. Another part comment on a higher economic standard of living, increased employment opportunities, nicer homes and a better infrastructure due to tourism (STEM 2001). It can be deduced that in their outlook towards tourism, the community is divided into those (a) having direct employment and contact to tourists, (b) those benefiting indirectly from tourism and those (c) not perceiving benefits from tourism or having contact to tourists.

In particular, the group with direct employment in tourism in the Lodge or in the Tropical Station, had a positive attitude towards tourists and tourism, mainly based on the perceived economic benefits, on the safe employment, on the health insurance⁹, and on the knowledge of getting help in case of an unexpected event. Further, the meetings with tourists were described as very interesting and as “like a window to another world” (FAHRNBERGER 1999).

People not directly related to tourism but benefiting from it (e.g. pulperia – small grocery, bakery, taxi) had positive attitudes but complained that the contribution of tourism is too little. They argued that the lodge is isolated and too far away from the centre of La Gamba, so that tourists rarely walk by for a drink. They also claimed that tourist buses rarely stop in the village (FAHRNBERGER 1999, STEM 2001). Fortunately, this has changed in recent years, as the Lodge offers tours to La Gamba, where tourists visit the primary school, the shampoo production, the handicrafts shop and of course the groceries

⁹ The health insurance of the employee is also valid for the spouse and the children, whereas the medical treatment for children up to an age of 12 is completely free of charge.



Fig. 6: (a) Accommodation in La Gamba with the owning family, (b) Some of the pupils who receive financial support to visit secondary school, (c) Work with the plants for the reforestation project, (d) Introduction to gardening for pupils as part of the reforestation project, (e) A taxi ride in La Gamba, (f) Selling of handicrafts and shampoo – projects initialised by the Fundación Neotropica, (g) Opening of the exhibition “La Gamba — Austria” in January 2008, (h) Folk dance at the exhibition opening.

in the centre (pers. comm. Catalina Torres 2007). Nevertheless, there is still a desire for more tourists, and for more business in the centre of La Gamba.

Locals with absolutely no relations to tourism argued that while they have nothing against tourism or tourists, they don't benefit from tourism either. On the contrary, they have the impression that since the inauguration of the national park, life has become harder as it is now forbidden for them to take anything from the forest. They want a selective use of the forest for their own necessities but not for business (STEM 2001, FAHRNBERGER 1999). They assume that the park was made only for tourists and tourism-related enterprises.

Despite the wish for a selective use of the forest, 86% of those surveyed felt that without tourism there would be much less forest. Additionally, 94% said that tourism had helped them to realise the value of nature (STEM 2001: 65). Furthermore, households with family members employed in tourism were more likely to engage in conservation practices than those without employment in tourism (STEM 2003b). The main reason for the increased awareness of nature is that people know that the tourist attraction is the national park and the intact nature; as Lewis says, "rural communities have realised the potential of tourism and have begun to capitalise on community resources to develop tourism" (LEWIS 1998: 91).

Generally, people from La Gamba have a positive perception and attitude towards tourists and tourism, which is mainly based on its perceived and/or expected economic benefits. Furthermore, the more residents were involved in tourism and benefited from it, the better was the perception and attitude towards tourists and tourism.

It seems that the primary motivation in attracting tourists and developing as a tourist area is to improve the economic and social well-being of the individual and the community. ALLEN et al. (1993) studied the possibilities of reactions towards tourism in rural communities and they found out that the attitude of the residents is determined by the tourism development in combination with the economic situation of the region. Residents from rural communities with low economic activity and low tourism development have high hopes and/or expectations for future tourism development and a positive perception of tourism. AP (1992) says that, as long as the residents perceive the exchange of "nature for money" as balanced, they will have a positive perception of tourism. MADRIGAL (1993) came to the conclusion that the economy is the greatest determining factor for a positive perception: "Perhaps the most persistent finding over the years has been the positive relationship be-

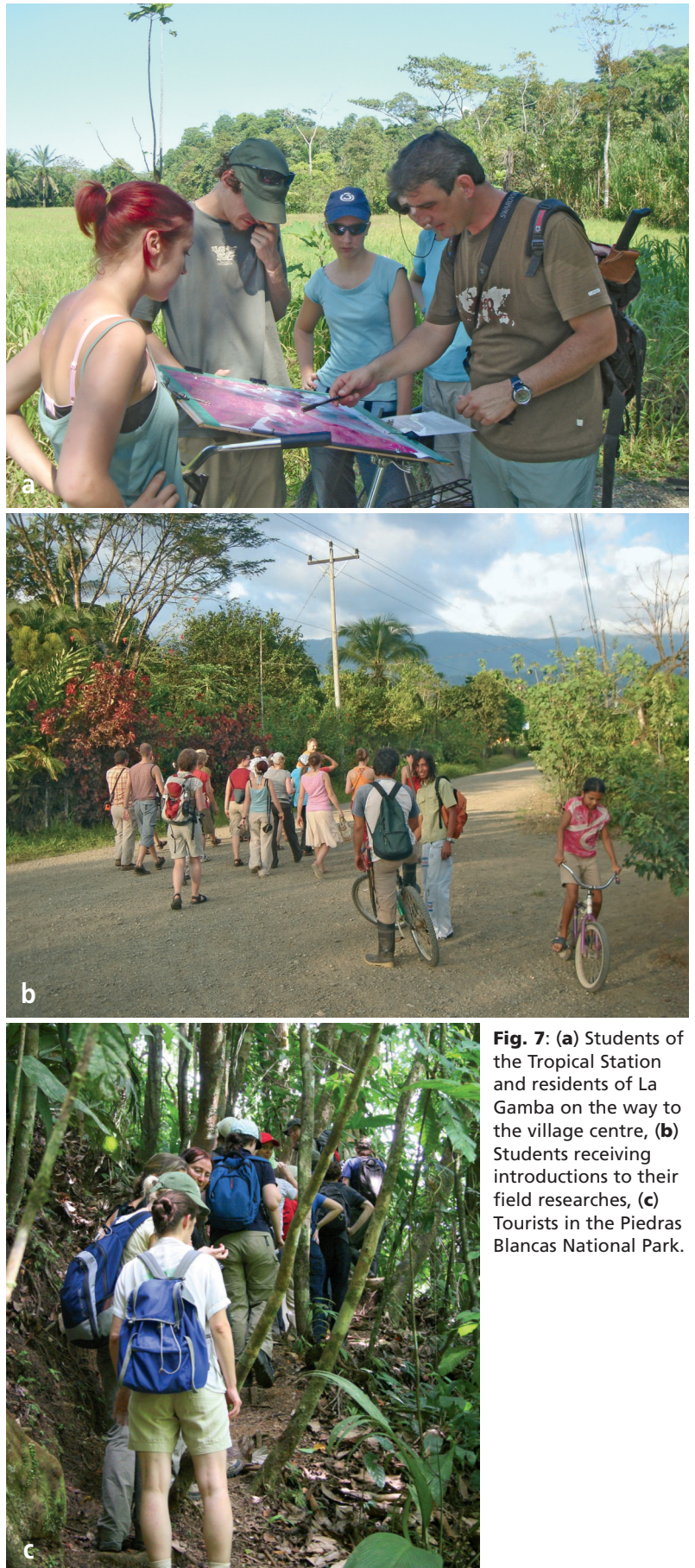


Fig. 7: (a) Students of the Tropical Station and residents of La Gamba on the way to the village centre, (b) Students receiving introductions to their field researches, (c) Tourists in the Piedras Blancas National Park.

tween perceptions of tourism and economic reliance on the tourism industry" (MADRIGAL 1993: 337).

People from La Gamba support this finding and conclusions on the economic importance very clearly, when they make assurances that tourists are very welcome because "tourism means work and money", as the following interview shows:

"Sí, sí claro influye, por ejemplo cuando viene un grupo grande en la pulperia, se vende más refrescos, y más pan, y la señora que le compren el pan ella vende más, y la señora los huevos, si vendia un doceno, vende cinco docenos, y si un señor vende leche y si hay muchas turista vende más. Y así sucesivamente todos venden más. [...] Toda la gente le gusta que vengan turistas, [...]. Por ejemplo ahí hay una catarata [...] es totalmente independiente y ese señor le pagan, si vienen turistas, y si no vienen turistas no le cae plata, y eso es así, entonces gana. Como te repito, si vienen turistas bastantes, todo el pueblo gana, porque todos los empleados del turismo son del pueblo. Te digo, si hay más turismo, hay más trabajo" (FAHRNBERGER 1999: 71).

The "rich" tourist

The majority of tourists come from Europe and North America, from the so-called "first world". Those meetings are described as asymmetric and unbalanced as "rich" meets "poor" or "haves" meeting "have-nots" (KRIPPENDORF 1984, PEARCE in AP 1992, MATIEHSON & WALL 1982, DOGAN 1989). From this point of view, it can be assumed that hosts will envy the guests for their "rich" lifestyle, but people in La Gamba see this conversely as tourists are transporting the image of the villagers' hard life to the tourists' home countries like the following interviews show:

"Bueono, yo pienso que ellos se han venido para acá, porque allá es una vida más dura,..." or "A mí me han dicho los turistas que preferían vivir aquí, por que el costo de la vida es mucho más barato,..." or "Entonces lo que significa que la vida es mucho más facil aquí. Y además aquí, si usted tiene un pedacito de tierra y lo cultiva bien hay comida. Aquí se puede cosechar el maíz, frijoles, papaya, pipa, naranja, hay muchisima comida. En cambio allá, solamente hay la manzana y las papas." (Interviews with people from La Gamba in FAHRNBERGER: 1999)

Tourists are reporting about high cost of living, high economic pressure, cold climate, loss of stability in the families, over-population and the absence of untouched and intact nature in their home countries. Those so called "push factors" are responsible for the decision to travel, "pull factors" like the hot climate, untouched nature, few people etc. are responsible for choosing a certain travel destination.

"The industrial man will prefer to flee to an environment that one has convinced him is in every way opposed to that in which he has the habit of living, a sort of earthy paradise in comparison to the hell within which he has the impression of being stuck during so many months" (SPREITZHOFFER 1994: 40).

Due to these "narratives from tourist home countries" none of the respondents had the wish to swap their lives for those of the tourists (FAHRNBERGER 1999).

How "eco" is tourism in La Gamba?

The development and changes in La Gamba, as well as the residents' attitude towards tourism and tourists, were generally positively perceived and presented. Nevertheless, there is still the question of whether tourism in La Gamba fits in the scheme of ecotourism. A widely accepted and used definition of ecotourism is from The International Ecotourism Society (TIES). It characterises responsible tourism activities by fulfilling the principles of

- (1) minimising impact,
- (2) building environmental awareness,
- (3) providing financial benefits and empowerment for local people,
- (4) supporting human rights and democratic movements,
- (5) respecting local culture,
- (6) and providing direct financial benefits for conservation (<http://www.ecotourism.org>).

According to these principles, tourism in La Gamba comes quite close to the concept of sustainable ecotourism, but does not comply with all requirements.

- (1) The Esquinas Rainforest Lodge strives to minimise the assumed negative effects of the hotel, trails and other touristic infrastructure by using either recycled or plentifully available local building materials, renewable resources of energy, recycling and safely disposing of waste and an environmentally sensitive design. Due to the basic idea of the project, the efforts of the lodge, and importantly, the small number of tourists, any major negative impacts on the nature are not yet apparent. However, no detailed ecological study about e.g. trail erosion and changes in flora and fauna has yet been made.
- (2) What is already apparent is that tourism has positively influenced the people of La Gamba in terms of their awareness of nature. Most residents state that tourism had helped them to realise the value of nature, which is caused by the nature-adoring tourists and by the alternative economisation of the rainforest.
- (3) Partly, people from La Gamba benefit economically from tourism through direct and indirect employ-

ment and by an improved infrastructure, but not all residents benefit from tourism and tourism may not offer an economic basis for the whole community.

- (4) Nevertheless, due to tourism, various social projects have been realised. Tourism has also offered a chance for the women of La Gamba to get trained on the job, to earn money and to contribute to the family income. Women have raised their self confidence and gained greater financial independence.
- (5) The general attitude of the residents towards tourism and tourists is positive, which may be caused by the relatively few contacts between tourists and residents, and further by the circumstance that ecotourism is not only "greener" but also less culturally intrusive and exploitative than conventional tourism.
- (6) Non-profit organisations, e.g. the Rainforest of the Austrians, the Tropical Station and the University of Vienna (Faculty of Life Science) among others, are still raising funds for conservation and social projects, which are developed and planned together with local organisations (ASOPROBI). Furthermore, tourists coming to La Gamba made aware of conservancy projects and are thereafter mostly more inclined to support the project and sustainable development on a private basis.

Thus far, it seems that tourism in La Gamba is not over-stepping the limits of ecological carrying capacity, and is not visibly harmful to the environment. On the other hand, it is not complying with all requirements, especially in the economic field. The reason for the positive environmental situation lies on the one hand on the ecological efforts of the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge and Tropical Station and on the other hand on the small number of tourists visiting La Gamba. But this small scale is also responsible for not reaching the financial goal of providing economic benefits for a larger number of residents. The ecological and economical optimum of ecotourism seems difficult to obtain.

Conclusion

Costa Rica has a long tradition in tourism, started as early as the 1920s with domestic tourists and visitors from nearby countries. The inauguration of national parks and the Forestry Law (1969), emphasising the possibility of recreation and conservation, attracted travellers interested in nature, biologists and scientists from North America and Europe. Costa Rica's national parks, the tourists' longing for untouched tropical nature and the quest for sustainability in the industrialised countries were the ideal ingredients for the Costa Rican tourism industry to build up the country as an ecotourism destination. What started in a small scale with

bio- or scientific tourism evolved with the annually rising number of tourists to nature adventure and beach tourism mostly promoted as ecotourism. Today, tourism is the most important industry in the country and the leading foreign exchange earner. The other side of this economically positive development are the negative environmental and social effects of tourism which are already visible and perceived in some touristically highly developed regions (e.g. Manuel Antonio) where unregulated growth has happened.

National tourism development in Costa Rica and community tourism development in La Gamba show some parallel operations. The cornerstone for tourism in La Gamba was the installation of the Piedras Blancas National Park. The park and in the following the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge and the Tropical Station attracted the first nature-interested travellers and scientists to the small village. Today, the Tropical Station is frequented by scientists all year round, and the Esquinas Rainforest Lodge is booked by individual travellers, group tours and visited by day tourists.

La Gamba adapted to this small scale tourism, after starting problems were solved in the community, partly by projects initialised by different organisations, and partly by the people's own engagement. Today, many of the residents receive economic benefits, either directly or indirectly from tourism. Generally, tourism in La Gamba is perceived positively, as tourists may offer a "window to another world" and most importantly "tourism means work and money". However, the financial expectations are a danger for the concept of ecotourism as the tourism industry and the residents will try to attract more tourists without thinking of possibly negative side effects. To date, tourism in La Gamba has, due to the relatively small number of tourists, failed to fulfil the ecotouristic principle of economic sustainability but is for the same reason not exceeding the ecological and cultural limits.

The future challenge for La Gamba will be to find the golden way of not over-stepping its cultural, social and environmental limits, while at the same time reaping the benefit of its natural and cultural resources. One possibility could be to determine the ecotouristic carrying capacity of the region and to evaluate and monitor the limits of the carrying capacity, in order to protect its nature and culture for sustainable future development. It is widely accepted that the future competitiveness of destinations will be based on the extent to which they are concerned about the sustainability of their natural, economic and cultural resources (KOZAK & NIELD 2004: 138).

Ecotourism is a narrow bridge, and its success may lead to its destruction, or as an Asian proverb says:

tourism is like fire – you can boil a soup with it, or you can burn your house.

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