The Consumption of Conservation
Ecotourism in Costa Rica

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Abstract

Ecotourism has put pressure on the Costa Rican peasant not only to get a job in the ecotourism industry, but also participate in the ideology of nature-as-aesthetic – that is, the view that nature is a spectacle that must be experienced for its authenticity in a world where unchecked consumption has destroyed much of the "pristine" natural world. Costa Rica, which still has much of its rain forests, stands in a position to sidestep global trends and forestall consumption of their economic base in favour of turning the forest into another kind of resource, one that can be exploited for spectacle, and therefore without consuming it. However, one cannot claim that a Costa Rican worker's move from a peasant position to that of a tourism worker has been voluntary. This essay will marshal secondary research and first-hand tourist experience to show that the Costa Rican has been strongly influenced by lobby groups, government education programs and forest development projects which corral them into a position as "aesthetic labourer," one who must satisfy the ecotourist's desire for spectacle. For the most part, this has been accomplished, and now the process of education or indoctrination is self-perpetuating, but the industry itself may not be. The ecotourism industry will still have to change consumption patterns and avoid the ideological pitfall that consumption is always total and inevitable.

The Consumption of Conservation: Ecotourism in Costa Rica

International capitalism has kept the rain forest alive in Costa Rica, and may continue to do so. I have looked over the evidence many times now and no matter what my strongly anti-imperialist training says, I cannot argue with the facts as they sit beneath this paragraph. My more environmentally-conscious side, which knows that the only path for a sustainable human civilization lies in the preservation of our ecological base, takes some comfort in this; but my anthropological side still grumbles, mutters, and wonders what I could have done wrong to come to this conclusion. Those readers who find themselves equally perturbed by the case of Costa Rica may reaffirm their convictions with the evils that were committed to secure this ecological redoubt. All the usual suspects are here – neoliberal NGOs, foreign control of national resources, the defining of subjects by international agencies – and the victims are here as well. I can rant against international capitalism all day if I want to, but the weight of its crimes should not obscure a proper analysis of this moment in Costa Rica's history.

The medium that was used to channel conservation into Costa Rica was tourism, specifically ecotourism. The rain forests were not preserved because of the complicated network of ecological dependencies and relationships they are a part of, but because they are pretty. Both the Costa Rican and the tourist come to understand the complexity of nature – both individually and as a form of collective consciousness – but, as will be shown below, the forest is not still there because it supports the soil and prevents it from washing away, or because it contributes to the oxygen in our atmosphere or because it is a home to many species of plants and animals that might one day give us a cure for cancer; it is still there, principally, to be looked at. Baudrillard once made the point that our modern economy no longer produces things, it produces signs (1983), and Costa Rica is exemplary of that economy of signs. The tourist returns to his or her home country with images and narratives in exchange for foreign dollars, and Costa Ricans have altered their consumption patterns and stopped felling the rain forest in order to provide for this economy. Stories, images, memories and the right to say that one has traveled, have made the country of Costa Rica a stage, and each Costa Rican man, woman, and child into an actor in a play for the tourist's benefit.

The play is 'useful' to both audience and actor. The touring public gets what it wants, in this case a story of remarkable survival in the face of imperialism and international depletion of resources – in other words, the actions of many of the tourists' own ancestors. Stories of interest then travel back with the tourist like a product. What the local Costa Rican gets, on the other hand, is work, although work where they must learn a part which has been written for them. They play this part for the pleasure of the international tourist, until they are no longer acting, but have internalized the part as an essential aspect of their selves.

Programme

Tourism experienced a boom in Costa Rica at the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s, and long ago outstripped coffee and bananas as a source of capital for the Costa Rican economy (Campbell 1999:535; Boza et. al 1995:684) and since 1994 tourism has become the greatest source of foreign exchange in Costa Rica (Biesanz et. al 1999:53). This trend shows no sign of slowing down and the Costa Rican economy has undeniably acclimated to meet the needs of tourists; in 1995, fifty-four percent of the labour force was in the service industry (Biesanz et. al 1999:51), and in the last ten years, that number has grown to seventy-one percent (U.S. Department of State 2005). Overwhelmingly, this tourism is either ecotourism, or relies on ecotourism as a secondary activity for the tourist.

This is perhaps a good time to go over some of my terms. I am concerned here with a broad definition of ecotourism, one that seeks out 'the natural' and scenes of natural beauty, and part of the claim that I am making is that this kind of ecotourism stands in a position to sidestep potential ecological catastrophe. The point has been made that without our ecological base, our present, global civilization cannot sustain itself. Indeed, this point is often followed up with the argument that most civilizations on this earth have seen the sun set on their empires when desire for economic growth eclipses our concern for long-term sustainable practices (Rees 2000:23, Wright 2004). 'Conservation,' then, means more than trying to fix some natural resource in unchanging quantity, it means shifting one's focus from short-term gain to the long-term benefits of preserving our ecological base. What I would argue, then, is that 'conservation' must be part of the agenda of ecotourism if one wishes to make ecotourism profitable as a national industry.

Allow me to elaborate. Ecotourism should, out of self-interest, attempt to conserve the environment as the source of its revenue – a marked difference from the locust-like migration patterns of most modern industry: pay to use the land, exploit it, then move on (Kutting 2004:29; Weaver 1998:90). One cannot, after all, continue to make money off natural beauty if that beauty is constantly being trampled under the iron boot of industrial progress. And what is more, because the natural beauty that most attracts the ecotourist is the spectacular – the old-growth forest, the large fauna –one cannot simply "seem" to have natural beauty. One depends on a vibrant, complete biosphere to maintain those living spectacles in the matrix of their ecosystem. Promoting ecotourism in Costa Rica thus has the potential to be a pan-national project that alters consumption patterns, to treat the forests as a renewable resource for obtaining tourist dollars. However, so far this golden promise of ecological and financial security has come at a price. For the Costa Ricans, this price is one of foreign control of how the local society should accommodate itself to the rules for presentation and management of nature and society. In the area of tourism, the Costa Ricans have been corralled by economic pressure into participation in an ideology that aestheticizes nature and presents it as display. This display, which is the result of conservation, is then consumed as a product by the tourist.

This analysis will therefore focus on the relationship between consumption and conservation. The tourist as consumer will be examined, but also those in the tourist industry – the waiter, the guide, the driver – as aesthetic labourers, who are encouraged to represent the tourist's expectations of Costa Rica. They serve the banquet up for the eyes of the tourist, but like a servant in a Jane Austen novel, if they appear they must be unobtrusive, so that the eye slides off them, as if the banquet floats to the table all on its own.

Act One: The Tourists' Romance with their own Expectations

Thomas King once said that the true test of authenticity was in the rarity of the thing (2003:56) and that test could certainly be applied in this paper. Costa Rica offers "a dream of authentic and undisturbed landscapes" (Vivanco 2001:85), – where the global destruction of the environment is countered with an experience of a landscape characterized by certain areas 'untouched by human hands'. The rareness of real conservation and the window it provides the tourist into some Edenic past becomes a lure to the Northwestern observer: 'come see the world as it once was,' beckons the advertisement, as if one is a visiting a pre-Columbian past, or at least pre-neoliberalism. This may be outlandish, but I would suggest the lure is particularly strong for people like myself, of Caucasian, European descent, because it promises to take one to a world free of the guilt of our imperialist ancestors, where the blood of many natives may be washed away by seasonal rains beneath a centuries-old canopy. In other words, the story of the rain forest is a story set in imperialism and in Costa Rica one has the chance to read the epilogue detailing the life of the survivors: the hope that the West did not ruin everything, and may be redeemed by the corner of the world it missed plundering.

It is hardly surprising then that Ecotourists tend to believe they have a greater moral value than most other tourists do, because their presence and their money is supposed to preserve the environment (Jackiewicz 2005:267), and this is crucial to their absolution. They therefore wish to avoid any visible exploitation and unnecessary interference (obviously, though, there still can be exploitation even if there is not any evidence of it). For instance, in the town of Ostinal – a small settlement on the Northwest coast – tourists were quite dismayed at the "unnaturalness" of a sea-turtle-egg harvesting project, and said they would have been happier if the turtles' procreation appeared innocent of human interference (Campbell 1999:550). This is paralleled by a situation in the town of Toruguero, on the Caribbean side of the country, which took up tourism but found out very quickly that tourists had no taste for exhibits: they wanted to see the turtle nests, the birds and the trees, not history (Jacobson and Robles 1992:707). This natural image is, of course, a fantasy, but a lucrative one which requires active work on the part of tourism workers to conjure up a paradise willing to accept the visitor without hesitation and without condition (MacLeod 2004:87), as if any such condition or hesitation would suggest the tourist's lingering guilt, and something still unforgiven in the eyes of the world.

The marketing of the tropics as a "paradise" is certainly nothing new and fundamental to that marketing is how to "satisfy those images" that tourists have in mind before they even embark on their trip (Pattullo 2005:174; see also Campbell 1987; Urry 1990). These images mostly come from marketing, which is especially important for Central America, requiring the "projecting [of] vivid images of the wildlife and the culture of the habitat" (Dowling and Page 2002:266). "Natives" usually must appear to be purely local, and not taking part in a global process or it will burst the bubble and breach the fourth wall (Pattullo 2005:174; Urry 1990:140). All is subsumed into the undifferentiated, uniform mass of "native" –

plants, animals, water, soil, and locals (MacLeod 2004:85; Urry 1990:38). Everything must be carefully prepared to not upset the tourist's delicate temperament, or make any suggestion that the tourist's nation of origin is responsible for any previous ravages – they are on vacation, after all.

Here, I turn to my own most recent trip to Costa Rica. I must admit I was only in the country for a few weeks, which is certainly not enough to engage in true participant observation, neither is it enough to develop a rapport with any ethnographic informants. However, what I can report on is the nature of the trip for a tourist, and I will return to that experience several times in the course of this paper. So much of what I will describe is in terms of the performance for the sake of the tourist, and while I cannot report first-hand on the experiences of any of the tourism workers who surrounded me on my trip, I will use my personal experiences to comment on the nature of that performance as this essay proceeds.

While nature may have become a symbolic Eden in Costa Rica, according to the newspaper handed to us on the flight, Costa Ricans themselves do not subscribe to the image of the 'noble savage'. *The Tico Times,* subtitled "Central America's Leading English-Language Newspaper" paints a picture of intense interest in international relations.[1] It also included a section called "Weekend," which showcased the local theatre, rock climbing, and a review of *Batman Begins* (Abarea 2005:W-8). There were also a number of advertisements for real estate, which someone on the flight promised to take advantage of by buying land, and paying "the local Ticos" a dollar fifty a day to build them a house[2]. Nature, in the advertisements for restaurants and real estate, is in the background, a backdrop to luxury, at times half-covering the verandas and the rooftops as if to suggest that the houses were built around the forest (especially in a real estate advertisement on page 24). Nature is shown as present in the life of a very cosmopolitan Costa Rican, and frames the tourist's expectations, in this case not of "authentic" nativeness, but the "authentic" (and unharmed) nature that will be the focus of the trip. The role of the native is important, since their prosperity is a part of reassuring the tourist that they are not taking part in another stage of imperialism. They must not believe they are exploiting the locals. If you do not speak Spanish you will have to mutter a few phrases here and there – 'where is the bathroom?' and so on – but really, the natives are here to make you comfortable and at home, and if they do otherwise it would be just rude.

Once the tourist is there, observation begins. Tourist behaviour calls attention to specific sites of great difference from the land they are coming from, and tourists mark sites with photography (Vivanco 2001:83). This is the exotic kind of difference: brightly coloured birds, exotic mammals, hummingbirds, butterflies, foreign insects of unusual size and unfamiliar plant life. One can often hear the phrase "everything here is so colourful!" on the nature trails, and at each step the camera shutter snaps and another megabyte of information is taken up on the camera's memory card. This "difference" will be taken back with the tourist to their own country to be related to others in narrative as well as in photographs, for what are these photographs without the story of how one came to see this thing? Difference becomes essential, because it is only in the "breach" from the banality of their lives back home that the story becomes worth telling (Boyer 1994; Bruner 2003).

John Urry has said the tourist is a collector of gazes, a collector of images but behind this collection is a potent power relation. The tourist can regard the object without fear of its objection. It is there for him, and therefore with his demand that the object present itself to him, the tourist defines the thing in terms of what it will be (1990:57). The local must not contradict this gaze, nor the expectations of the tourist for a satisfying trip (Urry 1990:59), which should be remembered as "satisfying" not "good". We all know how much more fun a terrible trip is to talk about. The experience must instead satisfy an exotic breach with the banality of the tourist's life in their country of origin.

Ecotourism finds this breach in gazes upon remarkable kinds of nature, and stories about the colour and the splendour of the natural world, which the tourist is permitted to capture in photographs or in story form (if the two can really be called exclusive) to bring back with them as a kind of wealth (Urry 1990:129). Tourism therefore becomes another kind of export industry for Costa Rica: it exports stories for use by the returning tourist. What a tourist really pays for is a verifiable claim that they have traveled, to be evidenced by those stories and those images. What must be understood though is that the tourist already has the script ready before he or she sets foot in Costa Rica, and all that needs to be filled out are the details. They know what they want, in other words, and they are here for it.

Difference, therefore, is not about people in Costa Rica, and the tourist wants no human history. Unlike tourism that takes the individual to witness strange cultures and scenes of human variation (for instance Mexican tours in the Yucatan that take the tourist into Mayan villages and fantastic ruins) the Costa Rican is much more unremarkable to the gazer. In fact, the unremarkability of the Costa Rican must be ensured in order to draw the photographing gaze of the tourist to nature. Yes, the tourist is glad that Costa Ricans escaped the ravages of imperialism to live, today, in a relatively affluent Central American country, but really one is meant to be more impressed by the survival of wildlife. 'Breach' and 'banality' do not hold a one-to-one relationship with 'nature' and 'Costa Rican' respectively, but the complete catering of Costa Ricans to the tourist, and the overall composition of the piece that is Costa Rica leads the eye away from the human participant, and towards nature. Other possibilities for spectacle, such as museums, 'colourful' natives and even dramatic poverty are downplayed or absent, for that would entail a resurfacing of the imperial past into the awareness of the tourist, a return of the repressed. The Costa Rican must therefore remain a part of the unremarkable, the matrix or setting for the true gems of the trip.

Act Two: Costa Rica is Pursued by the Villain of International Pressure

At this point, it may be useful to consider the recent history of Costa Rica and how it achieved and received its tourist industry. The story begins with magic beans, appropriately enough. Coffee, in Costa Rica, began as an export crop, not one that was cultivated for domestic consumption (Biesanz et. al 1999:20-21). Bananas had also been a staple for export since the late nineteenth century, since a railway through the country created new farming land (Nygren 2000:18). However, by the 1940s coffee had obtained such significance in the lives of Costa Ricans that schoolchildren were instructed to recite a rhyme about it every morning in order to learn Spanish (Biesanz et. al 1999:42). This adoption of coffee into common national discourses is made even the more amazing by the fact that the only soil in Costa Rica that is well-suited to growing coffee is in the mountains (Biesanz et. al 1999:21) – a mere two percent of the total farmland used in the country (Biesanz et. al 1999:42). All the same, those who can farm coffee are usually well off because of the international demand for and prestige of Costa Rican coffee. If you can farm coffee, it is *all* you farm, and you buy your food elsewhere. Low-lying farms and farmers tend not to be so fortunate (Anderson 1994:64). But what they do have is beaches and forests, and there is certainly a way to make money on that – more on that later.

The 1980s saw a terrible turn for Costa Rica, when the international market for all products shrivelled. Deep in the doldrums of international trade, the government supported any industry it could think of, introducing beef as an export product (Biesanz et. al 1999), and even trying to export flowers (Brown and Schuler 1999:455). Sawmills and plantations were already starting to close before the recession, and, in the case of the town of Tortuguero, the population had quadruped to work in an industry that suddenly was no longer there (Jacobson and Robles 1992:703). The cattle industry proved the most ill-fated: cattle, grazing on steep slopes, quickly rob the soil of supporting roots and good earth is lost to erosion, a process exacerbated by frequent and heavy winter rains (Nygren 2000:24). The situation was made worse by private companies who hired people to squat on public land, claim the land for their own through a lengthy legal process, and then sell it back to the private company for almost nothing – "land invasion" is the technical term, and it has cost the country a great deal of its fertile farmland (Anderson 1994:105). The economic crisis was deep and broad.

In its time of need, the government had no shortage of advice. Free-trade zones also appeared, as the government hoped to provide some relief to the ailing economy, and to bolster this trend the neoliberal lobby group CINDE appeared, advising free trade (Brown and Schuler 1999:455, 458). The 1980s also saw the environmentalists arrive in Costa Rica, and the introduction of a promise that the country could have part of its foreign debt cancelled if it allocated a certain percentage of its country to forest conservation (Nygren 2000:25). The government gave an ear to the advice of both groups, but the ecologists obtained greater favour, and by 1998, the rate of deforestation reached almost zero (Silva 2003:98) The last twenty years have therefore seen a complete reversal of the government's policies toward forests, because they could see the advantage in playing to international sympathies for those forests.

Additionally, Costa Rica's "location specific advantage" – namely a stable government, unlikely to confiscate or destroy foreign property – attracted considerable foreign investment, and helped to reinvigorate the Costa Rican economy (Brown and Schuler 1999:453). Democracy can be a great selling point to American investors, and legends about the "peaceful resistance" typical of Costa Ricans probably did not hurt (Anderson 1994:xv). Foreign investors took it as a given that Costa Rica would be receptive to foreign control, and the twofold result of the economic crisis of the eighties – forest conservation and massive foreign investment – would set the trend in the decades to come. The ones who became caught in the ebb and flow of this trend were, predictably, the poor, and before too long the poor Costa Rican's problems took centre stage in the tourist boom.

Specifically, the Costa Rican peasant's consciousness of nature was what was at stake. It would be wrong to romanticize Costa Rican peasants as "wise stewards of their ecology" as someone once put it of Kalahari Bushmen (Wright 2004:39) but it would also be wrong to ignore the pre-tourism awareness of the natural world (Anderson 1994:12). Much of the discourse on forests and nature pre-tourism seemed to have been to view the forest as a wilderness. The peasant's relationship to the forests was usually somewhat adversarial: it had to be tamed, and each generation established its relationship to the land through that conquest (Nygren 2000:21, 22). Now the role that nature played in the average peasant's life seems to have come back to bite them, and it is a popular sentiment in discourses of environmentalism in Costa Rica to blame peasant ignorance for deforestation (Nygren 2000:25). And as the debate proceeds on whether to encourage strict conservation or sustainable development with tree replanting, peasants have usually been left out of the debate entirely, with no strong unions or local community leaders at the table to represent small interests. The view is instead that the peasants are merely subjects to be educated (Silva 2003:107; Vivanco 2001:86) and should have a new and 'proper' understanding of nature provided for them. The old view that nature had to be subjugated was called out as ignorant, given what was to be demanded of them. The peasant therefore had to be brought under control if the project of renovating the country for tourism was going to succeed.

The problem is made worse by the fact that where the soil is poor, landless Costa Ricans cannot find work. There is no surplus food supply in many low-lying areas, the crops sell for comparatively little, and many peasants cannot afford to pay landless peoples to work the soil. Higher up, where the coffee farmers are, this is not the case, and so work becomes scarcer the farther one gets from the mountains (Anderson 1994:96, 99). If one wishes to change locations, reaching the mountains is difficult, especially if one has kinship networks and attachments to a low-lying area. Much fertile land is also privately owned, and so while survival may not be hard for a Costa Rican peasant, a stable livelihood certainly is (Anderson 1994:70, 101). For someone in this situation, pursuing work in agriculture can seem like a dead end – tourism beckons the young and the poor, and many farms are abandoned in a gold rush for tourist dollars (MacLeod 2004:109). Few could come up with a practical reason to avoid being educated, if that education meant access to the tourists and their money.

This pressure on farmers is a part of the shrinking carrying capacity of soil the world over as good farmland succumbs to urban sprawl, erosion, and salt contamination (Rees 2000:27; Wright 2004). Certainly, a poor Costa Rican's situation is not unique, but the conservation movement in Costa Rica has led to some distinctive experiences for its peasants. Some peasants have lost their land to ecological projects, as was the case when Ston Forestal, with the help of the National Guard, evicted peasants for the purposes of reforestation (Brown and Schuler 1999:461), and this means that the generation of tourist industry employees may be a circle that feeds itself. The more tourists come, the more forest is preserved, and the more peasants lose their farmland to conservation projects.

With the forest as a new source of money, this time as a site that must be preserved, many young people have adopted the environmentalist's viewpoint on forest conservation, and bemoan the ignorance of their forefathers (Nygren 2000:26). This internalization of "peasant-as-ignorant-destroyer" has been accompanied by the resurgence of a sense of ownership: the forest is 'ours' to show to tourists and make money off of. This sentiment is echoed everywhere, along with the worry foreign logging companies will come and try to take the forest away (Ibid:27, 30).

This is not so different from the old attitudes of the logging and cattle industries, who "[subjugated] resource extraction to market ideology" in the predictable way that massive, capitalist industries do (Kutting 2004:42). Now the difference is that resources are being extracted from the visiting tourists, just as the resources the tourists are coming to seek are not in the ecology, but emergent from its very presence. So it is hardly surprising that the Costa Rican who turns to work in the tourism industry subjugates resource extraction to a different kind of ideology – the nature-as-aesthetic ideology – and is led to participate in that ideology to get work. This is not a moral judgment on the tourist, the Costa Rican who goes to work in sight of the tourist, or on tourism, but it does speak to how little choice the peasant had in his or her change of vocation. Wherever the soil is poor it was a simple decision, and if someone tried to hold back the tide of tourists rushing up the beaches, they could not count on many people to help them. After all, after that tide covered the land and went out again for the day, the money was practically lying there on the sand waiting to be picked up. It would seem, to the casual beachcomber, that the tide took nothing back, but we will return to that 'seem' soon.

I also hope that I am not giving off the impression that Costa Ricans have been brainwashed by a foreign power with my talk of 'educating' the peasant. Far from brainwashing, the worry that Costa Ricans have become "an army of waiters" is talked about, but most locals seem to welcome tourism anyway (Biesanz et. al 1999:54). There are also concerns that only guides will benefit from tourism, but these voices find little purchase (Campbell 1999:544). Such was the case in the aforementioned Tortuguero, which showed immediate signs of internalizing the need to preserve turtles not just as a natural resource, but also for their own sake (Jacobson and Robles 1992:710). I suggest that the tourist industry in Costa Rica positions Costa Ricans to become active participants in the propagation of tourist ideology and the realization of tourist expectations in order to make a living. Their country has become their canvass, and like anybody who sells art for a living, one is always encouraged to see it from the consumer's perspective, and give the public what it wants. For a single individual, this pressure might do little more than make one more commercially conscious, but countless communities living under this pressure for a generation is a different matter. Tourism workers are made by tourism, and have to be interested in the environment – in the dual sense of 'focused on it' and 'have a vested interest in it' – to work in the tourist industry. Remember: industry can manufacture consumers (Kutting 2004:44) and so, conversely, ecotourism creates producers in reaction to consumers, and these producers are encouraged to care about their product in the same way the client cares about it.

Small wonder, then, that the tourist is in Costa Rica to see the trees and not the people, for too close a look might uncover the whole history of exploitation and international pressure, extant to this day. The trees have no desperation, the frogs and birds emanate no bitterness, but one would have to feel for the Costa Rican if it was his or her story that the tourist had come for.

Act Three: Flashing-Forward to the Present Day

Costa Rica represents a special case in Central America given the incredible presence of foreign investment in the country. Almost 53% of all foreign direct investments in the region go to Costa Rica. It therefore becomes very difficult for the local businesses to deviate from broader neoliberal trends (Brown and Schuler 1999:452). Costa Rica has tried to swim within this current, rather than against it, though recently Costa Rica has fallen behind some of its neighbours, and as such has allowed foreigners to start buying massive amounts of land for tourist project development (Brown and Schuler 1999:456). The lobby group CINDE, most of whose elite members were educated in the United States and whose funding comes from USAID, has been instrumental in this openness to foreign control of Costa Rican territory (Brown and Schuler 1999:458).

The chance of a Costa Rican worker taking control of the tourist industry is also slim. Peasants are never given the resources to run or even properly participate in local development boards (Silva 2003:119-120), and so foreigners have stepped in to 'take charge' (Campbell 1999:550). Almost forty percent of the habitable land on the coast is now foreign-owned, a product of the policy of former Minister of Tourism Luis Chocan, who wanted to increase the number of resorts in Costa Rica as soon as he could (Brown and Schuler 1999:463). The result has been profitable, but in some towns, more than half the population works in the tourist industry (Jacobson and Robles 1992:702). In other words, half the population could potentially be involved the propagation of tourist ideology, while the state remains the "guardian of capital and production only", safeguarding industry, but not regulating it (Kutting 2004:18).

I mentioned before that the tide of tourists seem not to take anything with them when they retreat, but as it turns out they take the beach. Most foreign resorts were built *on* protected areas (Biesanz et. al 1999:55). Some hotels have been built over mangrove swamps (Schuler and Brown 1999:463), and piers stop the retreat of sand, which in turn causes the retreat of the beaches as sand piles up rather than being distributed along the coast (Pattullo 2005:135-6; Gmelch 2003:20). The degradation is slow, unlike deforestation or cattle grazing, but the destruction happens anyway. Costa Ricans may be very well aware that they are being exploited for their country's natural beauty, and that the more this exploitation takes place, the quicker it may come to an end, but the "better to be exploited than not to be exploited at all" way of thinking is powerful when one has so few ways to make money (Kutting 2004:54). The concern that tourism will destroy what it beholds has little force when money is there for the taking, and their country is surrounded by examples of failed economies. In ecotourism, though, the hope is that most will "come and go away" (Campbell 1999:544), leaving no noticeable impact. But is this really workable? Let us look at a textbook example of an ecotourism site and see if we can answer this question.

Act Four: Night Falling on Monte Verde

Monte Verde is the most-visited private reserve in Costa Rica (Buckley 2003:130), founded in the 1950s when a family of Quakers set aside almost a third of the land they owned for watershed protection (Buckley 2003:130; Vivanco 2001:83). These days, Monte Verde is a big money-maker and there has been a gold rush to capitalize on it – in 1992 a quarter of the area's population had only arrived within the past five years (Weaver 1998: 95).

The area is perhaps most famous for the Quetzal (Buckley 2003:130), a bird that forms the focus for much of Monte Verde's advertising and one which, therefore, the tourist is encouraged to see. There are Quakers still living in the area, but because they do not "look like Quakers" – at least not the one on the bag of oats – tourists do not pay attention to them (Vivanco 2001:83). They do not meet the level of 'breach' to make a story about them worth telling, and therefore cannot enrich the tourist. The Quetzal, on the other hand, looks very unlike the birds of Europe or North America. The males bear a tail fully as long again as their whole body, and when they fly it trails behind them in a magnificent green-and-red display. The appearance of the Quetzal is therefore "performance" (Vivanco 2001:84) not in the sense that its appearance has been contrived for that moment, but at least in the sense that the reserve has set the stage for it. If Quetzals disappeared from Monte Verde today, it would likely shut down, because its mascot and lure would be gone (Vivanco 2001:85).

The inhabitants of Monte Verde, who are learning to see the spectacle, are increasingly internalizing the need for the continuing presence of Quetzal. In the words of one middle-aged producer of handicrafts:

> I have only seen a quetzal once, and that was because I really wanted to see one and a friend who is a naturalist guide showed me. This was very exciting to me since I had already been embroidering them. No one paid any attention to them here when I was younger, before the tourists began to show interest in them. They were just common birds to us...I embroider other birds now, like the toucan, because I know the tourists like them (Vivanco 2001:89).

There may be discussion going on in the background about the viability of tourism, or its effects, but the value of nature-as-aesthetic is unquestioned here. The naturalist guide encourages others to see that aesthetic and understand it, and so while the speaker was already creating quetzal designs, she still 'really wanted to see' the authentic article, as the ecotourist would want to see it: not as a backdrop to human social action but with human social action as the backdrop for the bird. What I am getting at here is that the terms of the debate on ecotourism can carry the unexamined assumption that nature really is as the tourist wants it to be: a show.

Whether Costa Ricans themselves have repressed their national history in favour of aesthetic consciousness, as the tourists have done, I do not know. But because in this somewhat mimetic relationship between producer and consumer there is the possibility that the Costa Rican may forget his or her own history for the sake of the immediate profit. That is to say, they may forget the perspectives of their ancestors, their history of industrialization, their local customs, traditions, and narratives that have made up their communities. All that could be erased because the tourist does not want to know about it, and therefore there would be no material gain to reproducing that aspect of their culture. Such erasure, such repression of the legacy of imperialism, would not surprise me, though it would certainly depress me.

In the absence of more on-the-ground studies, the best evidence I have now for the Costa Rican's awareness of nature as aesthetic is the number of locals who are arriving in high proportions to take the tour (Weaver 1998:89). The Quetzal has been "revalued" by the tourist's presence. The aesthetic consciousness of nature is growing, self-perpetuating, bolstered by economic factors and actively seeking new participants in the ideology of nature-as-aesthetic-performance.

During my stay there, a great deal could have been called a performance. Shutters clicked everywhere, and whenever a new and colourful character appeared, such as a toucanette, the guide positioned his telescope and secured a picture for us of the bird with our own digital camera, aiming it through the telescope lens – something I saw many tourists asking their guides to do. Most of the pictures I have are of trees, but a great deal was made of everything we saw – and it was interesting. I have never seen cyanide-laced centipedes, Quetzals, or turquoise hummingbirds in Canada. The trail wound into the mountain around the trees and at every step, there was something that our guide, Adrian, could tell us. And he told us about himself as well. He talked about the training programs that he took at college, in biology and chemistry and ecology, for the purposes of taking this job and answering our questions. Adrian was our representative not only from Costa Rica but also from the forest, and our entertainer. I am sure he spoke four languages, and since I was a tourist, he would never tell me everything he felt, so I do not know if he always enjoyed his job or where he came from. All I can tell you is that in terms of the performance of nature, he, as guide, was master of ceremonies. Our gaze was directed and managed by the narratives he provided, but we, having paid for the ticket, were plainly in control. We did not manage the stage, but we could have made almost any demand we wanted at any time.

The town we were staying in, Santa Elena, was another story entirely. It was arranged in a triangle, and the grocery store, the bank, the restaurants (many of these) and the souvenir shops were all inside the triangle. One could walk in any direction and in ten minutes come to whatever a tourist might be looking for. The schools were far removed from this area, as were the residences of the tourism workers, and plainly the tourist was meant to stay within the triangle, unless, of course, one wanted to visit the snake or frog mini-zoos nearby, each decorated in festive greens and yellows so as to be seen from far away. Locals cleared out of my way as I walked down the street. Other tourists did not. Everything was cheap and on-hand and if I can extend my theatre metaphor again, this was the lobby, complete with snack bar. The show would resume on-demand for me.

However, getting a ticket to this show will probably be harder in the future, and it will be hardest on Adrian. Trail erosion has become a serious problem in the reserve (Buckley 2003:131; Weaver 1998:94), and when I was there, they were hastily putting down cinderblocks for people to walk on. I did not survey any other tourists while there, except to notice most were American, British, or German. Vivanco (2001) reports that there was a consensus among people he interviewed that tourism was probably in danger of destroying Monte Verde, but that did not mean anybody was going to stop coming. The consumption of the environment was thought of as inevitable – greed and destruction is something that one can barely resist, so why try? Instead, if you go with the flow, maybe you can pick up a few gems of story before the mine is completely exhausted. This pessimism is more than just a general feeling of being downtrodden: it has the potential to destroy the ecology that supports the community, if not with the forester's chainsaw, then with the trampling of many feet.

Act Five: Cliff-Hanger

The wonder of Costa Rican ecotourism is that it might somehow work – but work for whom? Simple supply and demand says that as long as tourists want to be ecotourists in Costa Rica, then the government and the people will try to keep the forests alive, and the wildlife, the watersheds and the biodiversity – all have a better chance of being preserved here, where the rate of consumption of natural resources is slowed, and the workers have been indoctrinated into an ideology of nature-as-aesthetic.

However, that is not to say that this kind of tourism is in itself sustainable; as we said at the start, the consumption patterns of tourism must be fundamentally different from those of the logging and cattle industries if it is to successfully preserve the ecology of Costa Rica. The mindset that the total consumption of nature is inevitable must be changed as well, because tourism of this type will have to last for a meaningful amount of "ecological time" before it has any real effect (Kutting 2004: 30). But who is to change that mindset? The answer one may feel the least squeamish about would be 'everyone'. We would hope that that no one group is educating – or indoctrinating – the other, that all power relations would be equal in the project of conservation. I hope for that day, but hardly expect it. We have arrived at this level of conservation only with aggressive construction of the Costa Rican subject, and international economic pressure. It is therefore not outside the realm of possibility that the same two forces could secure true, long-term sustainable conservation.

Whether one can depend on tourists to make the appropriate demands frankly seems like a toss-up. But tourism workers, who have been indoctrinated/educated to know so much about the environment might conceivably be able to find a place at the table when new negotiations come up – they can no longer be dismissed as ignorant peasants. Perhaps these workers might argue for the preservation of the forests and the lasting health of the soil. But unless a strong workers' rights movement springs up soon, this becomes doubtful. Worse still, if Costa Ricans forget that the ground on which they walk is more than a stage, and is actually the flesh and blood of the earth that we humans are only parasites upon, things look doubly bleak – triply so if both tourist and Costa Rican forget the history of exploitation that led up to this stage for the sake of the immediate sensual experience of nature.

So, again, the sustainability of Costa Rican ecotourism comes down to consumption patterns, and the demand for the authentic, undisturbed nature. If this demand persists, it seems likely the rain forest will as well. Spectacle, gaze, and the economy of images and narratives will preserve the ecological base in Costa Rica for a while longer at least, perhaps even for long enough that the damage done begins to reverse. It is perhaps naïve to nurture the hope that life may imitate art and provide the work that locals so desperately need (and the absolution tourists so arrogantly and implicitly desire). I affirmed at the start of this piece that ecotourism is an industry compatible with conservation in Costa Rica, and I would repeat that statement here, albeit in a qualified manner. We must make sure we have not transformed from one kind of lethal parasite into another, slower one. We must go beyond an effort to make ecotourism sustainable in the long-term. Costa Rica and the world must find a way to arrive at an ideology that not only sees natural beauty as profitable, but indicative of the health and well-being of our global civilization's ecological base. A forest is more than just decoration; it is one of many defences against environmental disaster – an aegis against collapse.

True, the conditions on the ground are hardly ideal for the forest and the peasant alike, and true, whatever forest remains in Costa Rica is there because of aggressive indoctrination and the lure of the almighty dollar. Capitalism is not the ally one might expect to have in the fight for conservation. However, if profit and performance are the only chips that one can barter with for the preservation of Costa Rica's ecological base, perhaps these are the best conditions we can hope for. Perhaps it is better that the forests remain as a spectacle rather than not at all.

Notes

[1] "U.S. Senate Approves Trade Pact;" Stanley 2005:1; "Winged Export Boom;" Baxter-Neal 2005:6; "NASA Team Studies Hurricanes in Costa Rica;" Goodier 2005:8.

[2] I have no idea if they succeeded.

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