

# Buying Up Nature

## Economic and Social Impacts of Costa Rica's Ecotourism Boom

by  
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*From a range of diverse political perspectives, proponents have presented ecotourism as a market-based activity that will provide income and empowerment to local communities while promoting environmental conservation. The experiences of Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula, where relative isolation has limited the presence of transnational corporate capital, suggest that the impacts of community-based ecotourism expansion are far from certain and are the outcomes of struggles over access to land and natural resources, economic benefits, and representations of the environment. Ecotourism, while potentially offering new economic opportunities to Latin America's poor majority, may also reproduce preexisting patterns of stratification, particularly where state policies have favored larger and foreign ecotourism enterprises. Ecotourism may also engender processes of ideological resistance and reconfiguration that transform existing relationships of nationality, class, and gender.*

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In the late 1980s, the Osa Peninsula of southwestern Costa Rica was a remote, "off the beaten track" travel destination with very limited services for tourists and a way of life centered on traditional activities of agriculture, cattle ranching, and gold panning. A decade later, small planes transporting ecotourists buzzed overhead, backpackers filled dozens of new small hotels (*cabinas*), and local taxis and expatriate SUVs clogged the main streets of the peninsula's new ecotourism hub, Puerto Jiménez.<sup>1</sup> The number of annual peninsula visitors exploded from several thousand in 1990 to over 20,000 in 2000 (Van den Hombergh, 1999). These changes on the Osa Peninsula reflect Costa Rica's recent emergence as Latin America's leading ecotourism destination. Costa Rica received over 1 million tourists in 2000, over half of whom visited at least one protected area (Zamora and Obando, 2001). The tourism sector employed 12 percent of Costa Rica's labor force by the late 1990s and had overtaken coffee and bananas as Costa Rica's second-leading source of foreign

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exchange, after microchips (Zamora and Obando, 2001; Inman, 2002). Over the past two decades, ecotourism has been a catalyst for economic, social, and environmental transformations in rural Costa Rica, even as the nature and normative desirability of such change is under debate. Support for ecotourism now forms part of state policy. Government officials and many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have lauded ecotourism as a qualitatively distinct market-based process that improves the quality of life and empowers local communities with minimal negative environmental impact. Critics contend, however, that, as Costa Rica's latest transnational activity, ecotourism perpetuates historical patterns of inequality, social exclusion, and environmental degradation associated with past patterns of dependent, agroexport-led growth in Central America.

To help address these issues, this case study focuses on the Osa Peninsula, where relative geographic isolation has to date inhibited the presence of transnational capital and international chain hotels, making it an excellent case for examining the potentials of community-based ecotourism. It approaches ecotourism as an inherently political process incorporating power struggles over access to land, natural resources, economic benefits, and representations of the environment and quality of life (Cheong and Miller, 2000; Hall, 1994; Mowforth and Munt, 2004). This paper explores the advantages and disadvantages of ecotourism, its economic, environmental, and sociocultural impacts, and the ways in which relationships of nationality, class, and gender and forms of collective mobilization are reshaped through ecotourism processes.

## DEBATES ON ECOTOURISM

Ceballos-Lascuráin first defined ecotourism as "traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the specific objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations" (quoted in Fennell, 1999: 30). In contrast to mass tourism, associated with packaged trips by large groups and a preponderant role for transnational corporations, ecotourism is characterized as flexible, small-scale, responsible activities in natural environments carried out by individuals or small groups (Mowforth and Munt, 2004). In practice, however, the lines may blur, as roughly half of visitors to Costa Rica fall under the definition of "soft" ecotourists, traditional "sun and sand" mass tourists who also make excursions to natural destinations (Honey, 1999; Zamora and Obando, 2001).

North American and European ecotourists who visit Costa Rica are relatively well-educated and affluent—one survey found that 68 percent hold college degrees and 36 percent have incomes over \$100,000 (Cheong and Miller, 2000; *Tico Times*, 2002). They seek a temporary escape from mundane and stressful lifestyles in industrial societies and the experience of novelty and authenticity through consumption of Third World tourist destinations like Costa Rica (Mowforth and Munt, 2004). Ideally, ecotourists, with their commitment to the environment and social justice, should be culturally sensitive, minimal-impact visitors who model and impart to local peoples positive environmental values in relationships that move beyond subject/object dichotomies to create spaces

of egalitarian interaction and self-development (Cheong and Miller, 2000). Supporters also argue that ecotourism provides income and control for local communities, builds environmental awareness, generates direct and indirect financial benefits for conservation, revitalizes local cultures, and strengthens human rights and democratic movements (Fennell, 1999; Honey, 1999).

Other scholars are skeptical, however, that ecotourism represents a qualitatively different or preferable form of development (Duffy, 2002; Mowforth and Munt, 2004; Robinson, 2003). Critics contend that despite its more laudable environmental and social intentions, ecotourism, like mass tourism, is still driven by the dynamics of capital accumulation and does not seriously challenge systems of power and unequal accumulation (Duffy, 2002; Mowforth and Munt, 2004). Rather, it is seen as a transnational activity compatible with and even advancing processes of corporate-dominated economic globalization (Robinson, 2003). Although ecotourism is conceptualized as small-scale and locally controlled, in practice it may become little more than a marketing ploy as economic concentration and corporate influence within the ecotourism sector increase (Duffy, 2002; Honey, 1999). In sociocultural terms, critics contend that status-seeking Northern "egotourists" may be particularly intrusive and disruptive of local cultures precisely because they seek out more remote and "untouched" travel destinations (Duffy, 2002; Mowforth and Munt, 2004).

## ENVIRONMENTALISM AND ECOTOURISM

One critical precondition for Costa Rica's ecotourism boom was the government's rapid expansion of protected areas in the 1970s and 1980s to incorporate one-quarter of the national territory (Zamora and Obando, 2001). On the Osa Peninsula, a U.S. corporation, Osa Forest Products (OFP), controlled some 47,000 hectares of land but invested little in this property, leaving some 80 percent of the peninsula covered in rain forest in the late 1960s (Rosero-Bixby, Maldonado-Ulloa, and Bonilla-Carrión, 2002; Van den Hombergh, 1999). Over the next decade, the presence of gold, as well as a series of push and pull factors linked to Costa Rica's broader development model—state-subsidized extension of infrastructure into undeveloped zones like Osa, pressures of land concentration in northern Costa Rica, and laws favorable to squatters—drew hundreds of peasant migrants to the Osa Peninsula.<sup>2</sup> These squatters claimed some 10,000 hectares of OFP land and clashed, at times violently, with OFP personnel until President Daniel Oduber took the land from OFP in 1975 and created the 41,789-hectare Corcovado National Park.<sup>3</sup>

Scholars link the Costa Rican government's early park creation and more general "environmental exceptionalism" in large part to the bipartisan influence of a small group of Costa Rican scientists/conservationists (Evans, 1999; Steinberg, 2001; Wallace, 1992).<sup>4</sup> The effectiveness of this conservationist group was enhanced by its transnational contacts with and access to funding from U.S. universities and environmental NGOs, the relatively elite backgrounds of its members and their close personal relationships with high-level politicians, and Costa Rica's post-1948 democratic political system (Carriere, 1991; Evans, 1999; Steinberg, 2001; Vaughan, 1979; Wallace, 1992).<sup>5</sup>

The Osa squatters who struggled for the expropriation and distribution to peasants of OFP land generally opposed the creation of the national park as a top-down and undemocratic action. They received support from the government Instituto de Tierra y Colonización (Institute of Land and Colonization—ITCO) and the Marxist Vanguard Party, part of what Carriere (1991) calls the national “social reformism” policy nexus of the time. However, the squatters, geographically isolated and limited in material resources and access to the upper levels of the Costa Rican government, were unable to prevail over the transnational environmental coalition.

The postdevelopment literature is critical of such top-down environmentalism for failing to address the underlying inequalities that propel deforestation and for representing an expansion and deepening of state and elite control over land and natural resources that traditionally served as local commons and a type of subsistence safety net (Escobar, 1995). In the case of Osa, the Costa Rican state hastened the end of the agricultural-frontier model of subsistence and upward mobility subsidized by the exploitation of natural resources on the peninsula. “Global” environmental claims were privileged over local claims to land and natural resource use, and Osa’s ranchers, agriculturalists, and gold miners faced restricted access to land and natural resources on 80 percent of the peninsula, loss of income, and disruption of livelihoods (PDR, 1995).

The creation of the Corcovado National Park also generated more social conflict than in any other region of Costa Rica. In part in response to the departure of the transnational United Fruit Company and high levels of unemployment in nearby banana zones, hundreds of gold miners resisted state environmental policy by clandestinely entering the park in the mid-1980s. When the Costa Rican government dislodged them by force in 1985, the miners responded with a protest march to San José, eventually receiving land and monetary compensation from the government. Scholars credit these gold miner protests with hastening a shift in government policy from an exclusionary, “policing” environmental model toward support, at the level of discourse at least, of meeting local community needs and environmentally sustainable, income-generating activities such as ecotourism (Steinberg, 2001; Wallace, 1992).

### ECOTOURISM ON OSA

While state environmental policies helped lay the groundwork for it, the rapid growth of both mass tourism and ecotourism were largely private-sector initiatives (Cordero and van Duynen Montijn, 2002). In contrast to the situation on Costa Rica’s northern Pacific beaches, where transnational hotel chains have come to dominate, on the Osa Peninsula individual North Americans and European investors led the pursuit of land with ecotourism potential in the late 1980s (Minca and Linda, 2000). Hotel chains have not to date invested on the peninsula, probably because of its geographical remoteness and lack of infrastructure and its relatively high level of social organization (discussed further below), a type of deterrent for hotel chains unwilling to face local protests (*Tico Times*, 2002).

The individual foreign investors who began to buy up property on the peninsula in the early 1990s possessed key economic and cultural advantages that enabled them to first identify and then take advantage of ecotourism opportunities on Osa.<sup>6</sup> First, they had access to capital to purchase land and invest in ecotourism infrastructure. In contrast, under the neoliberal reforms of the past two decades, which have emphasized market criteria over social criteria, bank loans have been more difficult for Costa Ricans to obtain (Edelman, 1999). Misael, a small farmer, expresses the frustration of many Costa Rican peninsula residents: "There is no one here in La Palma who has the means to start a tourism project; even the simplest of projects cost millions [of colones]." In addition, foreign investors possessed specific cultural knowledge of post-industrial societies, had a greater range of international experience, and participated in fluid, transnational social networks that enabled them to recognize the ecotourism potential on the peninsula much sooner than Costa Ricans still embedded in more localized and limited social and cultural networks.

On the basis of these initial investment patterns and the *de facto* dynamics of economic exclusion, a three-tiered model of participation in ecotourism has resulted on Osa. On the top tier are small to medium-sized, largely foreign-owned ecolodges with up to several dozen salaried employees. These ecolodges, located on private reserves with rain forest and beach access on the edges of Corcovado National Park and in Drake Bay, offer a dozen or more rooms ranging from \$50 to several hundred dollars a night. They attract the more well-off ecotourists, and, while local informants estimate that as many as one-quarter of such ecolodges run into financial difficulties, they also offer the greatest opportunities for profit. The peninsula's second tier of ecotourism enterprises consists of some 35 *cabinas*, small hotels with an average of three to eight rooms located in the town of Puerto Jiménez, which cater largely to budget travelers and backpackers (COBRUDES, 1997). The *cabina* owners, generally more well-off residents of the town before ecotourism, charge from \$10 to \$20 a night for lodging and employ family labor along with one or two salaried, usually part-time, workers. In addition to *cabinas*, local Costa Ricans operate taxi, fishing, aquatic, and horseback services for ecotourists. The third tier of participation in ecotourism is that of less well-off Costa Ricans who are employed as cooks, maids, handymen, caretakers, guides, etc., generally by the foreign-owned enterprises.

## ECONOMIC IMPACTS OF ECOTOURISM

Informants from community organizations and government agencies in Puerto Jiménez estimate that 20 percent of the population works directly in ecotourism, while another 60 percent receive indirect economic benefits. Costa Ricans who are employed or self-employed in ecotourism and those whose businesses are indirectly impacted by ecotourism widely evaluate ecotourism as having an overall positive economic impact on the peninsula. As in other ecotourism zones of Costa Rica, Osa residents identify generation of new employment opportunities as a key economic benefit of ecotourism (Campbell, 1999; Weinberg, Bellows, and Ekster, 2002). In Puerto Jiménez in particular, ecotourism has overtaken gold mining, farming, and ranching as a central

economic activity.<sup>7</sup> When ecotourism began to expand on the peninsula, gold mining was already in decline because of the establishment of the national park and forest reserve and falling world market prices. Likewise, the production of cattle and rice on the peninsula has stagnated in the past two decades in part because of government policies of trade liberalization and neoliberal reforms. Ecotourism in Osa, therefore, has not so much disrupted more traditional local or nationally oriented economic activities as offered new income-generating opportunities within the limitations of foreign ownership described above.

The literature has documented a number of characteristics of wage labor in the traditional mass tourism sector—low pay, long hours, and the unstable, seasonal nature of the work—that are disadvantageous for or even exploitative of local workers (Brohman, 1996; Stronza, 2001). On the Osa Peninsula, however, ecotourism wages, approximately 2,400 colones (\$8) per day in 2000, have been generally on a par with or higher than wages in sectors such as agriculture, which paid 1,500 colones (\$5) per day.<sup>8</sup> Ecotourism positions that require more specific skills and training generally pay higher wages; nature guides, for example, earn an average of \$50 per day. On the negative side, during the high season work hours may be long, with cooks, for example, reporting shifts of 12 hours or more, while during the rainy, low season a number of the ecolodges temporarily lay off employees.

Proponents stress that, in comparison with other globalized economic activities, small-scale ecotourism offers greater opportunities for local power and control (Scheyvens, 1999). On the Osa Peninsula, however, an important degree of economic control has shifted toward North Americans and Europeans, who, in a pattern that extends across Costa Rica, control substantial portions of the peninsula's coastal, ocean-view, and forested land in private reserves that average 440 hectares (COBRUDES, 1997).<sup>9</sup> Built upon the environmental protection measures of the 1970s, ecotourism has further reinforced the trend toward increasingly limited and externally controlled local access to land and natural resources. Daisy, a La Palma small businesswoman, explains, "They [the foreigners] exploit us. From Puerto Jiménez to Carate [beach] the land all belongs to foreigners. There is only a little bit of wage labor for us." Loss of local control of land and natural resources has also been accelerated by ecotourism-fueled land speculation on the peninsula. According to Puerto Jiménez real estate agents, during the 1990s the value of coastal, ocean-view, and forested land on the peninsula doubled every year. By 2000 peninsula oceanfront property sold for as much as \$25,000 per hectare, and purchase of land for ecotourism projects or agriculture had become prohibitively expensive for many Costa Ricans. It should also be emphasized that prior to ecotourism, large producers dominated cattle ranching and rice cultivation on the peninsula. Sixty-two percent of agricultural land was controlled by 11 percent of the population, and six ranchers controlled over 17,000 hectares of peninsula land (COBRUDES, 1997). In other words, patterns of stratified landholding have been present for decades and ecotourism represents a continuation of this trend rather than the rupturing of an egalitarian society. In the 1980s exclusion was physical when gold miners were removed by force from the national park. The 1990s saw a shift to a less dramatic but still

powerful process of market exclusion as key groups—poorer Costa Ricans without access to capital and communities without beaches, ocean views, rain forest, or infrastructure—have been to a degree shut out of participation in key ecotourism activities.

In addition to market dynamics, the concomitant expansion of state regulatory power over land in the Golfo Dulce Forest Reserve has also constrained local residents' ability to benefit economically from ecotourism. In the 1990s, as many as 95 percent of private landholders in the forest reserve still did not have legal title to their land, and many have been unable to meet the government's titling requirement that they demonstrate long-term possession of the land (Arias, Chaves, and Camacho, 1993). In interviews, landholders identify the Costa Rican government and the Instituto de Desarrollo Agrario (Institute of Agrarian Development—IDA) in particular as the principal obstacle to legal land titles that would both increase the value of their landholdings and, in some cases, facilitate land sales to foreign ecotourism investors.<sup>10</sup>

Despite a discourse of support for small-scale ecotourism dating from the 1990s, the Costa Rican state in practice has not facilitated a shift of power and resources toward those local sectors that have benefited least from ecotourism but rather has tacitly reinforced inequality. As discussed earlier, the ecotourism boom on Osa and in other zones such as Manuel Antonio was primarily market- and foreign-driven, with little direct government intervention (Cordero and van Duynen Montijn, 2002; Wallace, 1992). This dynamic has been reinforced by the Costa Rican government's weak enforcement of regulations to limit foreign control of coastal land and tourism tax incentives and subsidies, which have been disproportionately captured by large-scale and international tourism enterprises (Honey, 1999). Small-scale ecotourism operators in Puerto Jiménez perceive little support from the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism, and in fact the government has supported studies to promote the establishment of medium- and possibly large-scale hotels on the peninsula, despite local opposition (*Tico Times*, 2000). Government policies favoring large-scale tourism investors reflect the increasingly transnational nature of the Costa Rican state, the deepening hegemony of neoliberalism in the region, and, in some instances, the personal economic interests of government officials (Robinson, 2003; *Tico Times*, 2003). Luis, struggling to establish an ecotourism business, expresses frustration at such policies: "The government is to blame. They should control the foreigners, give work to the ex-miners. Foreigners carry out tourism projects, make big investments, and all the profits go to them. And all we can do is sit here watching them pass by, doing nothing."

## ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS OF ECOTOURISM

Local government and NGO officials and ecotourism activists widely credit the park creation with bringing deforestation on the peninsula almost to a halt. Likewise, studies of the Osa Peninsula have not identified serious negative environmental impacts to date from ecotourism lodges and related

services (COBRUDES, 1997; Rosero-Bixby, Maldonado-Ulloa, and Bonilla-Carrión, 2002). The key environmental problems identified on the peninsula—logging in the Golfo Dulce Forest Reserve, poaching in the national park, agrochemical runoff into the gulf, and solid-waste disposal in the towns—are generally linked to more traditional extraction and agricultural activities (COBRUDES, 1997; MIDEPLAN, 2003; Van den Hombergh, 1999). Indirectly, ecotourism has helped shift local participation away such environmentally damaging activities as rice cultivation and cattle ranching and provided a material underpinning for collective mobilization on environmental issues.

Although only one Osa ecolodge, Lapa Rios, has to date received a government certificate of sustainable tourism, local informants report that most ecolodges leave as much rain forest intact as possible on their properties, build in styles that blend into the natural environment, and employ technologies such as solar panel heating and environmentally friendly waste control measures (Lapa Rios, 2002). Minca and Linda (2000) note, however, that less well-funded Costa Rican-owned ecotourism ventures employ more environmentally damaging techniques of waste disposal than foreign-owned ecolodges on Osa. In addition, without mitigating measures, the peninsula may one day face environmental deterioration similar to that in Manuel Antonio, which receives 250,000 visitors a year and faces overcrowding, a proliferation of hotels, bars, and tourist concessions, damage to plants and animals, and pollution (Honey, 1999; *Tico Times*, 1999b).

## SOCIOCULTURAL IMPACTS OF ECOTOURISM

Ecotourism visitors to Costa Rica generally possess a series of advantages over local residents—higher levels of wealth, education, and status and participation in broader, transnational institutional and social networks—that potentially allow them to advance social and cultural power at the local level (Cheong and Miller, 2000; *Tico Times*, 2002). Critics also contend that, however it is packaged, ecotourism is at bottom green capitalism and as such is inextricably linked to unequal distributional impacts and practices and beliefs of competition, individualism, material accumulation, consumption, and commodification. Such processes may disempower local peoples, fragmenting communities, limiting collective action, and restraining imaginings of qualitatively different forms of development (Duffy, 2002; Mowforth and Munt, 2004).

On the Osa Peninsula, ecotourism does appear to have intensified a more long-term dynamic of capitalist modernization, a movement away from a rural Costa Rican culture of frugality and commitment to family and social relations toward greater consumerism, commodification, and efficiency (PDR, 1995; Van den Hombergh, 1999). These implicit and explicit cultural requisites embedded in ecotourism as a market-based activity, while resonating with postindustrial societies and the deepening of economic globalization, signify for certain local groups transformation of valued way of life and even cultural loss. Gold miners, for example, have exchanged a more autonomous lifestyle for the capitalist disciplines of supervision, hierarchy, and externally defined work schedules. Likewise, during high season, certain ecotourism workers



such as cooks may be required to work 15-hour or longer days, disrupting family and social life in a way that more traditional economic activities on the peninsula have not done.

Ecotourism also may shift class, gender, and interethnic relations in the very heart of communities (Stonich, 2000; Duffy, 2002). As with other ecotourism zones, on Osa Costa Ricans with access to investment capital have been better able to take advantage of ecotourism opportunities, and preexisting patterns of social class inequality on the peninsula have been maintained (Campbell, 1999). Similarly, women on the Osa Peninsula have experienced ecotourism differently from men.<sup>11</sup> Traditional gender norms in rural Costa Rica have limited women's income-earning opportunities. With the arrival of ecotourism, however, women began to take an active role in opening cabins, restaurants, and other small businesses. Ecotourism has not necessarily challenged or subverted traditional gender roles but rather has been viewed as a "natural" extension of women's household roles of cleaning, cooking, and serving others (Apostolopoulos, Sönmez, and Timothy, 2001). In interviews, women credited their participation in ecotourism with providing them income they could more directly control and positive opportunities to interact with foreigners. Yet within the ecotourism sector gender stratification persists. Typically, the most well-paid positions that require higher levels of skill and extended periods of time outdoors—nature guides and fishing and scuba diving expedition leaders, for example—are still filled largely by men. Young women in particular have also sought out romantic and/or sexual encounters with ecotourists and expatriates.<sup>12</sup> Such relationships in theory may offer women an opportunity to free themselves at least temporarily from the constraints of local patriarchal gender norms and opportunities for income, travel, etc. Observers suggest, however, that given the often wide differences in age, power, and wealth between local women and male ecotourists, in practice such relationships tend to be more exploitative than empowering for the women.

The power differentials between local residents and foreign ecotourist entrepreneurs should not, however, be overstated, because ecotourism, in some instances, has facilitated more sustained and more egalitarian interactions between local residents and ecotourists. In interviews, a number of Costa Ricans expressed self-confidence in their interactions with ecotourists and a willingness to confront foreigners about perceived inappropriate or demeaning behavior. In addition, some expatriates and ecotourists are seen by Costa Ricans as contributors to positive social change at the local level, for example, offering time and funding toward medical services, environmental education seminars, programs for single mothers, and other community projects.

### CONFLICTING ENVIRONMENTALISMS

Prior to the ecotourism boom, many Osa residents viewed the natural world from an instrumentalist perspective, as a space of hardship and even danger to be overcome and one whose primary function was to serve the

material subsistence needs of the human population (Stem, 2001; Van den Hombergh, 1999). While instrumentalist representations of the environment persist on the peninsula, new, localized socio-environmental discourses and forms of collective mobilization have emerged with ecotourism in the Puerto Jiménez zone in particular. These new environmental discourses are in part a product of the income generated by ecotourism over the past decade and growing local support for the conservation of the peninsula's rain forests as critical to sustaining ecotourism in the long term.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, ecotourism has formed the basis of a self-selection process through which environmentally conscious Costa Ricans have relocated to the peninsula and utilized ecotourism as a means of material support for a lifestyle of close contact with the natural world and activism on environmental issues.

On an ideological level, expatriates and ecotourists have brought to the peninsula a conceptualization of nature as a space of adventure, risk, aesthetic enjoyment, and leisure activity while representing local practices and ways of life as environmentally destructive (Mowforth and Munt, 2004). Local residents, however, have not been passive recipients of these external environmental discourses. Rather, as a counternarrative to external accounts of environmentally destructive campesinos, peninsula residents expound a history of local resistance to OFP's logging activities and those of the international mining companies that dredged the peninsula's rivers in the 1970s (Van den Hombergh, 1999). In contrast to ecotourist narratives, the new socio-environmental discourse of Costa Rican activists is grounded in nationalism, social justice concerns, and long-term experiences of place and networks of family, friends, and local ways of life. One Costa Rican environmental activist highlights these tensions as she describes a debate with a European colleague:

The difference between the two of us is that I live in this country and I can't stop thinking about the people who live here. It is not enough just to put up demonstration parcels and buy up land. . . . The impact of the conservation measures on the local population has been very hard. They are told you can't use certain nets at the mouths of the rivers to fish and don't touch the animals. People are here with their arms crossed [doing nothing].

This localized environmental perspective questions many of the precepts of market ideologies and the global advance of materialism and commodification. In contrast to utilitarian views of nature, this discourse holds that human beings have a fundamental ethical and spiritual relationship with the natural world. One community activist argues:

People have an innate appreciation of beauty. They appreciate the ocean, seeing the dolphins leap. As human beings, we cannot deny the connection between ourselves and nature. Those who first came and cut down the forests, it hurt them. The campesino says, "I was destructive." We have to recognize the power of natural resources over human beings. The majority love nature that gives them life.

From this perspective, "quality of life" is framed as daily contact with the natural environments of beaches and rain forests, time for leisure, and relative

material simplicity—in other words, a mirror image of stressful capitalist routines in “cement prisons” and artificial urban environments.

### NEW FORMS OF COLLECTIVE MOBILIZATION

As discussed earlier, in the 1970s a small, elite group of Costa Rican environmentalists allied with U.S. and European universities and environmental NGOs strongly influenced state policy in the creation of the Corcovado National Park, while local claims for land were largely excluded. Two decades later, however, ecotourism provided a material and ideological base for new forms of local mobilization against the plans of a transnational wood product company, Stone Container Corporation, to build a wood chip plant on the peninsula (see Van den Hombergh, 1999). Costa Rican activists, drawn largely from the ecotourism sector, opposed the wood chip plant on both nationalist and environmental grounds, as the project was seen to threaten local control and the environmental conditions needed to maintain ecotourism. Several years after they blocked the wood chip plant project, Costa Rican activists, together with the foreign ecotourism entrepreneurs, launched a campaign to denounce illegal logging in the Golfo Dulce Forest Reserve by Costa Rican companies, allegedly with the complicity of corrupt local Ministerio de Ambiente y Energía (Ministry of the Environment and Energy) officials (*Tico Times*, 1997). While foreign ecotourism operators had gained substantial economic power on the peninsula, in interviews activists noted that in the 1990s expatriates tended to take a more limited and backstage role in environmental activism on the peninsula, in part so as not to undermine the nationalist credibility and political effectiveness of the campaigns.

It should also be noted that neither the protests against Stone Container nor the later antilogging campaign had the complete support of the peninsula's Costa Rican population. Individuals concentrated in the agricultural, ranching, and logging zones of the peninsula formed a loose, multiclass coalition that supported, from an instrumentalist environmental perspective, the construction of the wood chip plant and fewer restrictions on logging as a key source of income on the peninsula. In both instances, however, the environmental activists prevailed in eventually winning state support to halt the establishment of a wood chip plant on the gulf and place a moratorium on logging (*Tico Times*, 1999a). The Osa environmental activists sought political support from Costa Rica's national conservationist sector, dating from the 1970s, as well as financial and technical aid from the growing number of national and international environmental NGOs. In both cases, Osa activists launched media and political lobbying campaigns and employed direct action techniques such as demonstrations and highway blockages to pressure policy makers.

### CONCLUSION

While proponents see in ecotourism the potential to advance income-generating opportunities, environmental conservation, and local empowerment, critics suggest that as the region's latest transnational, market-driven

process ecotourism perpetuates historical economic inequalities and further disempowers local peoples (Duffy, 2002; Fennell, 1999; Honey, 1999; Mowforth and Munt, 2004). On the Osa Peninsula, ecotourism has fulfilled neither these worst fears nor the most optimistic of hopes. It has not so much disrupted such traditional activities as economically revitalized zones like Puerto Jiménez and expanded opportunities for salaried and self-employment. Similarly, ecotourism to date has not had the type of negative environmental impacts seen in smaller, more intensely visited Costa Rican national parks.

On the negative side, Osa's ecotourism boom, built upon policies of top-down environmentalism in the 1970s, has further eroded local control of and access to land and natural resources on the peninsula while advancing state and foreign influence. In addition, the peninsula's tiered ecotourism sector suggests that even in zones in which transnational corporations have not yet penetrated, smaller-scale patterns of stratification and exclusion are still likely to emerge. On Osa, such hierarchies of nationality, social class, and gender have been reproduced through unequal initial access to land, capital, and cultural knowledge, unequal participation in social and institutional networks, restrictive gender norms, and the relative absence of redistributive, leveling state policies.

The Osa Peninsula can also be conceptualized as a space of both resistance to and engagement with the external ideologies and cultural practices that have arrived with ecotourism. Osa residents have drawn on local traditions of resistance and embedded social networks to reshape an external environmental discourse into a localized one that is a sometimes tension-ridden mix of environmentalism, local livelihoods, and nationalism. The impact of the ecotourism boom on relations of power on the peninsula is likewise multifaceted and complex. Even as foreign ecotourism entrepreneurs have increased their economic influence, ecotourism has been a catalyst in the emergence of an empowered group of local activists who have successfully challenged the presence of transnational corporations and struggled for local control over natural resources, ecotourism, and the future of the peninsula. The coupling of Osa with global flows and processes of ecotourism has in part stimulated a resurgence of a more localized and place-centered way of life for some residents, even as other groups are drawn more deeply into "modern" and transnational ways of being.

The Osa case study also highlights a series of preconditions—an absence of powerful transnational economic actors, a generous natural resource endowment, democratic government, and a local population with a history of collective action and resistance—that should facilitate genuinely community-controlled ecotourism. Yet even in this "best case" scenario, ecotourism has still fallen short on issues of power, distribution, and inclusion. In contrast to Costa Rican state policies, which have largely benefited large-scale enterprises, these processes of disempowerment could be mitigated by government and NGO programs to counterbalance market inequalities—subsidies, fiscal incentives, and credit programs targeted directly at small ecotourism enterprises, as well as stronger regulation of foreign tourism enterprises and foreign ownership of coastal land. Given the current hegemony of neoliberalism and Costa Rica's increasingly transnationalized political class, expanded government intervention is unlikely, however, without some form of grassroots

mobilization and pressure. To this end, ecotourism on Osa has fostered personal interactions between ecotourists, expatriates, and Costa Rican residents. Although the class and cultural tensions that underlie these interactions should not be underestimated, ecotourism offers at least the potential to forge more complex, cross-national and cross-class advocacy networks centered upon common values and discourses of social justice and localized environmentalisms.

## NOTES

1. This case study incorporates data from 32 interviews and from observations carried out in 2000 and 2001 in the ecotourism center of Puerto Jiménez and in La Palma, a nearby agricultural community largely excluded from ecotourism. I interviewed key figures active in ecotourism and community issues, as well as local nongovernmental organization and government officials.

2. In addition to interviews with La Palma informants, this section draws upon Van den Hombergh (1999), PDR (1995), and Vaughan (1979).

3. In 1979 the government expropriated the last remaining OFP land to create the Golfo Dulce Forest Reserve, where landholders have been allowed to remain with government restrictions on land sale and use.

4. The Costa Rican government has also taken the lead in innovative environmental initiatives such as debt-for-nature swaps, carbon offsets, bio-prospecting, and payments for environmental services (Brockett and Gottfried, 2002). Accounts suggest that the OFP offered relatively little resistance to the loss of its land on the peninsula, perhaps in part because the land was marginal and undeveloped (Van den Hombergh, 1999).

5. Costa Rica's post-1948 political system has been characterized by use of dialogue and negotiation over force, elite-led state reform, and state mediation between labor and capital, a political culture that aided the small conservationist lobby in advancing park creation in the 1970s (Edelman, 1999). However, although Costa Rican government officials maintained a degree of autonomy in the environmental arena to act against individual capitalist interests such as OFP in the interest of broader social stability, government policies overall were not anticapitalist (Robinson, 2003). State subsidies for infrastructure and cattle ranching in this era contributed to extremely high rates of deforestation outside of protected areas.

6. This section is based on interviews with members of the Osa Chamber of Tourism and Puerto Jiménez ecotourism operators, as well as Minca and Linda (2000) and Stem (2001).

7. This section draws on interviews with Ministerio de Agricultura y Ganadería (MAG) and Instituto de Desarrollo Agrario (IDA) officials and is corroborated in Van den Hombergh (1999).

8. The data that follow are drawn from interviews with member of the Osa Chamber of Tourism and Puerto Jiménez ecotourism operators and employees.

9. Local government officials and Chamber of Tourism representatives concurred that foreign ownership of land on the peninsula is substantial and also noted that to date there are no systematic data on land tenure on the peninsula. Numerous informal and illegal land transactions along the coast and in the forest reserve, in particular, further complicate the situation (*Tico Times*, 1996). The Costa Rica Institute of Tourism also estimated in the early 1990s that up to 80 percent of Costa Rica's beachfront property had been purchased by foreigners (Honey, 1999: 134).

10. IDA officials interviewed defend government restrictions on land sales to foreign ecotourists in the Golfo Dulce Forest Reserve on nationalist grounds—the risk that too much of the peninsula's land will be controlled by foreigners—as well as in terms of social justice—that unrestricted land sales would lead to a reconcentration of landholdings in the hands of a few.

11. This section draws on interviews with female community activists and ecotourism operators.

12. Multiple informants in the town of Puerto Jiménez identified such relationships, as well as an increase in prostitution, as important social impacts of ecotourism.

13. Stem (2001) found that ecotourism had a measurable impact on environmental attitudes and behaviors only in zones with a significant amount of ecotourism activity, a condition that would apply to the town of Puerto Jiménez, the peninsula's ecotourism hub.

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