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## **Linking Tourism and Community Development: Lessons from Rural Costa Rica**

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the linkages between tourism and community development can be sustainable if managed properly and integrated into existing community practices rather than replacing them with tourism. The research is informed mostly by the work on building strong local communities by Max-Neef and Schumacher. The site of this research is Quebrada Grande, Costa Rica, a small rural farming village that has recently invited small-scale volunteer tourists into their community to help with miscellaneous projects. The author led a group to this area, which was the first of its kind to visit and work with the community for an extended period. This paper is based on observations during that visit.

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Dr. Jackiewicz is an Assistant Professor of Geography at California State University, Northridge. His research interests, broadly speaking, are in the area of economic and social development in Latin America and the United States. Specific areas of interest include: the social and economic impacts of tourism in Latin America, the consumption of urban space, the transformation of labor markets, et al.

The small countries of Central America have been particularly vulnerable to the vagaries of globalization because of their limited economic base often centered on agriculture especially the exportation of non-traditional crops, low- wage assembly factories (i.e. sweatshops), and more recently tourism. Often times, however, there is no coordinated strategy that works to help small communities or much of the region's marginalized population. For example, agriculture often is under the control of large local or international companies that focus on export crops. This form of agriculture does little to sustain much of the local population either, economically or nutritionally. Similarly, factories located in small Latin American countries are often times linked with large multinational firms and locate there to take advantage of cheap labor. This economic transformation has made these countries increasingly vulnerable to global economic shifts and the benefits of this to society-at-large are highly limited. Tourism is the most recent addition to the limited mix of development strategies to boost ailing Latin American economies. Tourism is a fickle industry often dependent on the whims of travelers and political and economic circumstances in foreign lands. The precipitous decline of tourism immediately following the events of 9/11 is recent evidence of this. Nonetheless, Costa Rica is one country that has made a conscientious effort to make tourism a focal point of their economy and they are among the best in the world at luring in tourists and have set an ecotourism standard that other countries are trying to imitate, for better or worse (Place 2001). The appeal of ecotourism has spread to areas that are seemingly off the beaten tourist track such as Quebrada Grande. This author, along with eleven student volunteers, had the opportunity to work in this community that is in the early stages of promoting ecotourism as a complement to its economic base of agriculture. As such, it provides a lens into how a small community can utilize ecotourism to improve local living conditions without surrendering its economic and cultural sovereignty.

E.F. Schumacher (1973) and Manfred Max-Neef (1991; 1992) are two authors who have put forth convincing arguments in favor of small communities taking control of their own well-being. This idea gained greater currency when, as Sachs (1997) argues, the “two founding assumptions of development lost their validity: that development could be universalized in space and that it would be durable in time” (pp. 292-3). Among those who have been most influential in envisioning an alternative form of development is Manfred Max-Neef’s (1992; 1991) work on *Human Scale Development*. In Max-Neef’s conceptualization he was critical of economic obsessions with large scale development, quantification and measurement, oversimplification of the critical conditions of the development process, the failure to recognize the conflict between existing socioeconomic systems and underlying ecosystems, among several other standard features of the development process. Rather he suggested that community development should be of a human scale and be sensitive to cultural factors and appreciative of the social complexity, such as the role of women and subsistence activities, and the balance between human activities and natural limits (Veltmeyer 2001, pp. 7-8). Additionally, he added that wealth and poverty were not solely economic measures but based on whether a number of human needs were met or not, what he refers to as “satisfiers” (Max-Neef 1991). These satisfiers include such things as: friendships, cooperation, peace of mind, sense of belonging, relaxation, self-esteem, autonomy, equal rights, awareness, spaces for expression, skills, imagination, physical and mental health. The integration of this type of small-scale community (i.e. not solely economic) development is instructive when examining the role of tourism in the town of Quebrada Grande, Costa Rica.

Recently, Quebrada Grande, in collaboration with three other nearby communities in the north central region of the country, has broadened its economic base beyond agriculture to incorporate small-scale volunteer tourism, and is demonstrating how a small community can

build regional, national, and international linkages to provide economic alternatives that benefit the community at-large. Quite wisely they have joined forces with other nearby communities in the form of a cooperative (ASCOMAFOR) to broaden their visibility and leverage to access greater resources. They have also tied their efforts into eco-tourism, which has been central to Costa Rica's national development strategy for some time, but had not yet spread to this small town situated off of the typical tourist trail.

In Quebrada Grande, there is an area that was in danger of being logged, but that was also an important nesting area for the threatened Green Macaw. Because this small, forested area is a popular nesting site for the Green Macaw they were easily able to integrate environmental conservation and ecotourism into their community development strategy and thereby receive greater national and international attention and resources. This reserve area has also become an important source of community pride. The Reserve (or *bosque*) is a lush tropical area complete with a waterfall, howler monkeys, a multitude of insects and reptiles, and birds. Green Macaw sightings have been infrequent, but the community (with the occasional help of volunteer tourists) is actively planting *almendro* (almond) trees to lure more of these birds to the area. The money for these trees comes from the funds provided by an OAS (Organization of American States) grant. This is a protected area that is also luring tourists to walk their trails, but also volunteer tourists to help improve the conditions for visitors. It is unlikely that Quebrada Grande will ever be on the "beaten track" of international tourists because of its remote location, but nonetheless it is establishing itself (at least regionally) as the "community with the reserve" and has begun to draw more visitors from the nearby areas. The community also hopes to draw more volunteer tourists who will stay with the local families and work on various projects. This type

of tourism is necessarily small scale, but nonetheless can provide a small stream of revenue and free labor, at least for short periods.

Because tourism in Quebrada Grande is not the focal point of the economy, the community is less susceptible to the potential negative impacts of tourism such as seasonality, cultural compromises, and the vulnerability of relying on one 'export' commodity. Rather, it utilizes tourism and tourists to bring in a small amount of supplemental revenue as well as a temporary labor force to assist with projects that might not otherwise get done such as: building trails, planting trees, painting, construction work, etc.

The community would benefit by luring a steady stream of tourists into the area, but it is essential that the focus remain on volunteer tourists who are there to assist with local projects and continue to have tourism work for them and limit the potential pitfalls of larger scale tourism.

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