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TOURISM BRAND COSTA RICA – HISTORY AND FUTURE CHALLENGES

As a tourism brand, Costa Rica is arguably a success story. Over the past two decades, the country has earned its reputation as the preeminent nature and ecotourism destination in the world, supported by strong attributes of political stability and local hospitality. This note provides some background on Costa Rica's branding history and today's branding challenges.

Costa Rica's branding success came about through a confluence of political and historical circumstances and private sector initiatives, rather than through a deliberately drafted grand plan. The country's government early on had the vision to recognize the country's biodiversity and take steps to ensure its preservation, which led to the establishment of the national park system in 1970. Soon after, the country's natural splendor started to attract international scientists which helped generate positive word of mouth among people with professional and/or personal interests in nature, which later on spurred the first ecotourism wave.

In these early stages of the ecotourism movement in the late 1980s, the country's tourist board (ICT) pursued a different strategy, seeking to position Costa Rica as a sun-and-sand destination and supporting private sector resort developments. Even as these plans did not come to fruition, ecotourism continued to play only a small role in the country's branding strategy. Instead, city tourism, beach tourism, golf, and conventional tourism were highlighted in promotional efforts.

In the mid 1990s, at a time when the U.S. Adventure Travel Association had already named Costa Rica "the number one ecotourism destination in the world" and as ecotourism

had grown in importance, the tourist board realized the marketing potential of what was once perceived as a niche market and focused its efforts in that area. Two main projects define Costa Rica's ecotourism brand positioning until today, one being the heralded certification for sustainable tourism (CST) program and the other the country's "No Artificial Ingredients" campaign.

The 1996 marketing campaign „No Artificial Ingredients“ developed by McCann Erickson, presented a vacation in Costa Rica in the form of a cooking recipe, for example, "Take Central America's largest volcano, add in national parks, mix in miles of pristine beaches". The campaign's witty theme took the seriousness out of ecotourism and presented a vacation in Costa Rica in a playful way. At the same time, the campaign highlighted the country's diverse touristic offer, cleverly disguising the fact that Costa Rica does not possess a stand-alone must-see tourist attraction. For the past 14 years, even as the recipe theme has no longer been part of the country's campaigns, Costa Rica has continued to use the tagline.

Looking ahead, Costa Rica's brand is facing tough external and internal challenges. While the country is still considered by many the leading ecotourism destination, the competition has intensified. Countries that promote nature-based tourism have been nicknamed "The Next Costa Rica"; Brazil, Chile, or Panama, as well as some Caribbean islands, for example, are in strong competition with Costa Rica. Internally, Costa Rica's brand is threatened by changes to its tourist product. While nature and soft adventure tourism activities remain at the core of the country's brand, they are complemented by other forms of tourism traditionally found in coastal areas, such as all-inclusive resort, sun-and-sand, and cruise tourism, potentially clouding Costa Rica's unique brand attributes.

In summary, to keep the tourism brand Costa Rica as valuable as it is today, future branding has to do the balancing act of continuing to emphasize the brand's core competency

as an ecotourism destination while at the same time reflecting the actual diversification in the country's tourist product.