

Indigenous Attitudes, Ecotourism, and Mennonites: Recent Examples in Rainforest Destruction/Preservation

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ABSTRACT: During the Summer of 1992, the author traveled to three distinctive rainforest regions. Two were located in Ecuador: the west coastal rainforest and the northern "Oriente", a headwater region of the Amazon Basin. The third rainforest was located in the northwestern region of Belize. As a member of a study group sponsored by Save the Rainforest, Incorporated, the author was involved with the Programme for Belize Research station at Rio Bravo. Having witnessed a variety of types of rainforest destruction in the Brazilian Amazon during the summer of 1989 and the accompanying multitude of indigenous attitudes concerning the same, the author was keenly aware of destruction/preservation activities in these other regions.

The indigenous peoples encountered during these travels displayed conservation-minded attitudes and a true desire to save the rainforest. In addition, three ecotourism resorts were encountered during these visits. Though these profit-making establishments do not contribute financial support to local conservation efforts, they do represent large investment concerned with rainforest protection. In Belize the immigration of Mennonites has been considerable. Though their American counterparts may observe a quaint and simplistic lifestyle, in Belize, Mennonites are a major destructive force.

Introduction

The tropical deforestation issue is, at the very least, a multifaceted one. The reasons for the destruction are many and varied. Through time I have sought to uncover the numerous ways in which the devastation occurs as well as the gallant efforts to save these priceless natural resources. In this article I discuss a few examples (Fig 1). One with definite pro and con facets, and another describing a bizarre role reversal.

Attitude of the Indigenous Population

Deforestation issues can spark a wide variety of opinions offered by the indigenous population. Previous experience in Brazil has shown quite a range of opinions (Trapasso 1992a and 1992b). Attitudes such as, "If destroying the rainforest can turn a profit, then let's do it and get it over with!" were displayed as a part of a 1989 Brazilian Presidential Campaign platform (by an unsuccessful candidate). On the the other end of the spectrum, I have witnessed extensive mass media exposure of cartoon characters to teach young children to respect nature. Though grassroots opinions may not dictate national legislation, especially in Third World countries, it is an important beginning.

During the summer of 1992, two incidents favorably impressed me. The first took place during mid-June in the Ecuadorian "Oriente" Region. This headwater region of the Amazon Basin is beginning to develop for tourism and commerce. While a colleague and I were canoeing on the Rio Napo, we observed a trail of smoke in the distance. Upon inquiry, the canoe trip leader Carlos, quickly pointed out that it was only a cook fire. He went on to say that the "people in this region do not believe in burning or cutting down the forest." Further observations around the region through the next few days found only very small "milpa" patches (slash and burn farming) growing sustainable crops such as banana plants and coffee trees. Carlos was apparently telling the truth.

Later that same summer, I experienced more impressive examples of protectionist attitudes by the people working for "Programme for Belize" an environment conservation group based in Belize City. These people coordinate the "Save the Rainforest Workshop" in that country, which I attended in July 1992. Not only did this group of native Belizeans direct and run the workshop, which was extremely informative, but also displayed a sincere pride in the natural beauty of their homeland. The group of participants included two Belizean teachers who would later carry their experiences directly into local classrooms. Actually, for a tiny Third World country of 200,000, Belizeans are quite conservation



Fig 1
Ecotourism resorts cited

conscious. Television and radio programming contained numerous public service announcements, mostly aimed at children, promoting a forest preservation philosophy. Though these efforts were impressive, I fear that the outside pressures to make this tiny impoverished country into a scuba diver's vacation paradise may override the courageous attitudes of these people.

Ecotourism; Good and Bad

In recent years, the concept of "Ecotourism" has appeared in literature. The First World Congress on Tourism and the Environment defined ecotourism as travel that promotes environmental conservation and economic development (Murphy 1991). Cater (1992) defined it as tourism based on a region's natural attractions, which also safeguards the ecosystem and the local inhabitants' welfare. Ecotourism according to Jesitus (1992) implies a responsibility on the part of both the travel industry and tourists. These definitions and accompanying implications are indeed the ideal and seem to create a feasible weapon to combat rainforest destruction (Warner 1991; Norris 1992). However, when put into practice, this ideal begins to falter.

My first exposure to ecotourism was during the Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar of 1989 in Brazil. While touring the facilities of the Fundação S.O.S. Mata Atlantica (Foundation to Save the Atlantic Rainforest), I toured the Ilha Grande (Big Island) project and the Praia do Sul

(South Beach) Biological Reserve. Approximately one-third of Ilha Grande's 310 km² and the Praia do Sul have been adopted by Essobras (Esso Brasileria de Petroleo Limitada) and Pro-Natura Institute (an independent environmental organization) as a nature reserve (Dedera 1991; Trapasso 1992 b). These ecotourism sites offered nature hikes through the rainforest, snorkelling off the beach and around patch reefs, and some overnight accommodations. Profits from these activities were to be used for the protection and maintenance of the reserve. Truly, these are useful outcomes resulting from conservation-minded planning. From this example, it appeared that ecotourism can, at least in part, save the rainforest.

While travelling through three distinct rainforest areas during the summer of 1992, I happened upon two different ecotourism resorts. These sites brought about a new meaning to the term "ecotourism." Taken chronologically, the first was encountered during the canoe trip on the Rio Napo located in north-eastern Ecuador's Oriente Region. The resort is called Cabanas Anacondas (Anaconda Cabins). Off from the Rio Napo and down a rainforest trail for about a kilometer brings a traveller to a sign that says, "Welcome to the Jungle." The clearing opens into a grassy area with circular, thatch-roofed bamboo huts, one of which serves as a lobby and registration desk, and the largest of which is the restaurant and lounge. Though the outside of the huts look like indigenous housing, the interiors are reminiscent of rooms at a modern hotel. Without a doubt, this is a vacation resort. We stopped to

rest, take shelter from a short but intense convective rainshower, and had a drink at the lounge.

The grounds also displayed a zoo-like atmosphere. Beautiful and exotic birds were both in large cages and flying free around the grounds; boa constrictors were in wire-meshed cages. (Though boas are fairly sedate when well fed, during mating season they can become rather dangerous.) On the friendlier side, Capuchin monkeys curiously approached us from the trees. Turtles and wild turkeys roamed the grounds. Though an enjoyable respite, we were happy to leave his "artificial jungle" atmosphere.

The second encounter occurred about a month later in north-central Belize's Orange Walk District. About an hour and a half drive from the Rio Bravo Research Station, down both paved and gravel roads, a traveller arrives at Chan Chich Ecotourism Resort. The layout of this resort is very similar to the one encountered in the Ecuadorian Oriente. In addition to the rainforest surrounding the resort, Chan Chich offered an interesting twist. During construction of the bamboo cabins in the complex, builders discovered the resort was located in the middle of a plaza of an ancient Mayan City. The curious mounds surrounding the resort were actually Mayan temples and pyramids complete with looter's trenches that exposed interior rooms and hallways of Mayan buildings.

The largest hut encloses the registration desk/lobby, restaurant and bar, and a rather expensive gift shop upstairs. The private huts are nicely decorated, again in a modern, vacation resort style. The grounds are adorned with very colorful families of wild turkeys. In general, this is a pleasant overnight stop, or brief respite from hiking through the Belizean rainforest. A black water stream (ie, water high in tannic acid) allows for a cool swim with relative safety from aquatic life that might attack. Most flesh-eating fish cannot tolerate the low pH levels of this iced-tea colored water.

The advantages and disadvantages of the Cabanas Anacondas and Chan Chich resorts are all too readily apparent. The disadvantages include the obvious profit motive for their existence. These resorts are money-making operations, of which all the profits benefit the owners. No money is donated to local environmental conservation efforts. These resorts, like most ecotourism resorts, are often foreign investments and represent foreign property ownership (Cater 1992). Though not a major disruption, at least some rainforest destruction must take place during the building of these facilities and accompanying access roads. As discussed by Blum (1991) resorts such as these are affordable to the more affluent tourists. Nightly rates of \$ 80.00 to \$ 90.00 US (as of 1992) and greater are expected at these resorts. Most native travelers would find these places too expensive to visit. In essence, these resorts are expensive hotels that use the rainforest as a "sales gimmick." Additional gimmicks such as the proximity to Mayan ruins or accessibility to an Amazon headwater stream add to the marketability of these vacation resorts.

The rainforest as a "sales gimmick" can also be listed as an advantage rendered by these ecotourism resorts. Essentially, for these resorts to stay in business, they are now forced to, at least in part, protect the "sales gimmick" that allows their existence in the first place. Since large investment concerns such as logging, mining, large-scale ranching, and agribusiness (often foreign concerns) are those that are responsible for destroying the rainforest (Trapasso 1992a); the ecotourism resorts now represent large investment concerns (again, usually foreign investments) that must work toward saving the rainforest. The power and money associated with this large tourism investment can now combat the power and money bent toward deforestation. The small conservation organizations now have a powerful ally.

Though ecotourism resorts do not directly donate funds toward or otherwise aid conservation efforts, they do stimulate the local economy. Such resorts employ local people in a variety of jobs, except management positions.

Furthermore, these vacation resorts become an important link in local economic networks. Several examples were witnessed at the previously mentioned resorts. For instance, the proprietor of the Rio Napo canoe trip business listed the Cabanas Anacondas as a stop on his itinerary. He offers the ecotourism resort as a rest stop for food and drink with a visit to the "jungle zoo." The ecotourism resort in return, has extra restaurant business and free publicity. In Belize, the proprietor of a horse riding stable used Chan Chich as a stop on his itinerary. He sells the idea as a rest and refreshment stop and as an opportunity to visit the Mayan ruins, where local natives act as tour guides. At the same time, Chan Chich gets free publicity and additional restaurant and bar patrons. In general, all access roads and waterways leading to and from ecotourism resorts allow indigenous small businessmen to sell to tourists a variety of soft drinks, beer, snacks, local arts and crafts, and so forth. Ecotourism certainly stimulates the local economy.

Whether the overall effect of ecotourism is positive or negative to the rainforest remains to be seen. Undoubtedly, these business endeavors must be watched and evaluated in the future (Murphy 1992).

Mennonites: A Role Reversal

In my city of residence, Bowling Green, Kentucky, USA, Mennonites appear occasionally to shop and run errands. The Mennonites of Kentucky have their European origin in the Anabaptist (Rebaptizers) movement that began during the early sixteenth century in German-speaking Bern Canton of Switzerland. Originally called the Swiss Brethren, the forced migration to the German regions of Alsace and Palatinate led to the name change of "Mennonite" after Menno Simons, a Dutch Anabaptist (Petersen 1988). The first Mennonite settlement in Kentucky occurred in 1954 in Todd County. Through the

following decades, settlements were established in the surrounding Logan, Simpson, and Allen Counties (Hoover 1983).

According to Petersen (1988) just as religious denominational fragmentation took place in the Protestant movements of Luther and Calvin, disagreements as to religious discipleship created differences in Mennonite religion and lifestyle. An explanation for the difference between groups of Mennonites and the reasons for the differences in lifestyles lies in the interpretation of a Bible scripture (Hoover 1983).

"And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." Romans 12:2

Small geographical aggregates of Mennonites will also tend to maintain an internal set of characteristics (Walton 1984).

Three major settlements found in south-central Kentucky, Petersen (1988) classified them as "horse and buggy" Mennonites. This group has retained a very traditional technology-horsepower. There is no use of electricity or internal combustion engines. The "tractor and buggy" Mennonites of other regions are less traditional in their choice of technological innovations that relate directly to agrarian activity. These people have accepted electricity and indoor plumbing. The third group referred to as "tractor and automobile" Mennonites and are the most worldly in terms of acceptance of modern technology. The taboo toward the use of radio and television is the most obvious trait they share with the other two Mennonite groups. It has been my experience that Mennonites have always been the passive, peaceful, quaint folk whose baked goods and vegetable stands are troves of high-quality, low-priced foods and whose horse and buggy rigs are reminiscent of simpler times.

In actuality, Mennonites are shrewd business people.

"Make no mistake about it, Mennonites turn a profit - it's not large, but they're in it for the profit" (Petersen 1992).

In 1957, the Mennonite church reached an agreement with the government of Belize (then British Honduras) to establish settlements with limited taxation, full rights of movement, religious freedom and protection, exemption from military service and mandatory insurance levies, and freedom to invest their profits in any fashion, including removal from the country. In return the Mennonites would grow crops and show other ethnic groups how to develop agricultural production. Traditionally, growing crops was viewed by most British Hondurans, especially the Creole population, as slave work and as such was disdained by most of the population. This resulted in making British Honduras (Belize) an importer of food products (Wright 1992).

While travelling through Belize, I witnessed an interesting twist in the deforestation issue. In the Rio Bravo area of the Orange Walk District, the major form of deforestation is Mennonite farming - not just quaint little farms, but massive slash and burned and/or bulldozed acreage. In a country with an estimated population of

200,000, the estimated 6,500 to 7,000 Mennonites (Lizama et al. 1991) have established themselves as leaders in establishing settlements. Several visits to a Mennonite-owned and -operated gas station/general store/local bank complex, served as proof that their hard work ethic and keen business sense have resulted in a major commercial center in that part of the rainforest. A Mennonite-operated medical clinic nearby is another example of regional development. The ironic example came with recreational visits to the Mennonite Reservoir. This favorite local swimming facility was impounded by a small hydroelectric dam that produced power for the immediate area. All of these ventures, in my opinion, represent a total role reversal of the quaint, passive, peaceful folk who prefer the simple life.

Conclusion

In other articles (Trapasso 1992a and 1992b) I have emphasized that the reasons for rainforest destruction were many and varied. As more rainforest regions are visited, the realization that the causes for deforestation take on an individuality specific to the region. Likewise, the means to combat the destruction must be individually specific and equally innovative.

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