Jungle, Drugs, and the Moskitia:
A Case Study of Ecotourism for Development in Río Plátano, Honduras

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Research Questions

Can community-developed ecotourism provide sustainable economic opportunity for indigenous groups living on protected lands? How can it be used to promote the goals of sustainable development, community empowerment, and forest preservation?

What is the Río Plátano Biosphere?

- The largest continuous tract of rainforest in Honduras
- Named a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1982
- Home to about 6,000 indigenous Miskito, Pech, Tawahka, and Afro-Caribbean Garífuna
- Increasing populations (25,000+) of migrant Hondurans
- Declared "Endangered" by UNESCO in 2011

Materials & Methods

Research Methods:
- Participant Observation
- Journaling
- Interviews with tourists, tourism workers, community members, biologists
- Document Collection
- Participatory Mapping
- Literature Review

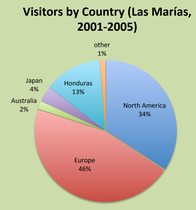
What is Participant Observation?

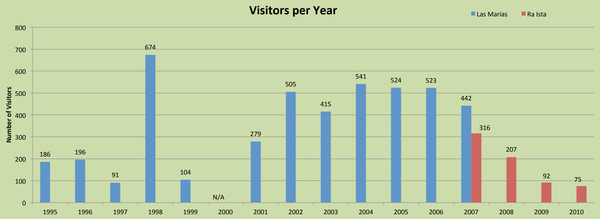
Participant observation is a Social Science research technique that allows investigators to take part in social interactions while taking careful observations about them. It:
- is "simultaneously data and analysis"
- requires a significant amount of time in the field
- lets investigators reflect upon their positionality in social research
- builds trust among a community
- builds important connections for future research possibilities

Results

Data Collected:
- A casebook and journal chronicling the research experience, impressions, and events from a social scientific perspective
- Nearly 500 documents and photographs
- 39 interviews from over 30 different informants
- Community map of land use by purpose and at-risk territory

Tourists to the Biosphere:
- Typically under 35 years of age
- From Europe, North America, or within Honduras





Community theories of touristic decline
- Late 2000's global economic crisis
- 2009 Honduran constitutional crisis (esp. affected tourist numbers from within the country)
- Invading *colonos* and resultant deforestation

Threats to the Biosphere
- Migrant *colonos* enterring illegaly by the thousands, cutting rainforest and displacing indigenous groups
- Rapidly expanding drug trade
- Escalating violence between communities

Community conflict and tourism development
- Failure of community organizations to distribute business equally between hostels has caused unequal profits, rifts in community
- Increasing drug transport and resulting violence threaten long-term tourism development plans
- Increasing squatters and plantations within biosphere limit expansion, reduce wildlife sightings

Conclusions

Ecotourism for rainforest conservation?
- Ecotourism strengthens claims to disputed land
- "Gives value" to forest
- Provides economic impetus for maintaining pristine land
- Should be combined with educational awareness program about deforestation
- Must include government involvement for safety

Recommendations for Improvement
- Improved contact between community groups and organizations
- Fair distribution of tourists to community hostels
- Streamlined transportation to and from biosphere
- Community programs for violence prevention, waste management systems
- Biosphere border security and land titling to reduce deforestation

Future Research

- How can tourism be linked to community-based development plans?
- How can decriminalization be used to reduce drug-related violence?
- What management policies are effective in maintaining preserved areas?
- How can tourism use global capitalism to achieve Development Goals?

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