

# Ecotourism and Sustainable Development Practices in Costa Rica

## ENVS 150/PRT 188/NR 185

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**Course Objectives:** This course will explore the forces and processes of social change in Costa Rican communities given the rise of nature based travel to this Central American destination. We will consider the processes of how communities involved in service sector enterprises relate to the general concepts of sustainability, including environmental, social and economic impacts. From a conceptual and operational point of view, we will explore the concept of **sustainability/sustainable development** [*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*], with an emphasis on community-based sustainable development.

Specifically, we will:

1. Gain an understanding of **ecotourism/green tourism/nature-based tourism** – its ideologies, practices, and pitfalls.
2. Observe sustainable development strategies and initiatives in Costa Rica, and evaluate and critique them within competing notions of sustainability.
3. Explore the relationship of tourism and ecotourism to international development issues.
4. Gain exposure to the natural history and ecology of Costa Rica, especially tropical rainforests.
5. Gain exposure to non-governmental organizations engaged in environmental conservation and protection of biodiversity in Costa Rica.
6. Gain a better awareness of ourselves and our own culture through exposure to “otherness.”

### NATURE OF THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

**Class Format:** Much of the learning in this class will be accomplished through onsite experiences in Costa Rica: site visits to National Parks/Preserves, community stays, ecolodge facility tours, guided rainforest tours, demonstrations, and all the other day-to-day experience

of international travel. Traditional classroom sessions including lectures, seminar discussions, case studies, participatory activities, and guest speaker presentations will also be part of the learning experience. These will be held in Vermont (2 pre-trip class sessions, and 1 or 2 post-trip class sessions) and in Costa Rica on the beach, on the bluff overlooking the palm plantation, in the cloud forest, or at the Indigenous reserve. Finally, part of the learning experience will come from course assignments and graded activities (see below), and will include journal writing, assigned readings, site evaluations, and community studies.

Because of the nature of the course, attendance and active participation in all class meetings are essential. Sharing your knowledge, feelings, and skills with others in the class will enrich the course immeasurably. Also, it is important that you provide continual feedback as to the degree to which the class is meeting your needs; changes can be made if necessary to meet the individual learning needs of class participants. This is especially important given the broad and diverse nature of participants and the fields we are investigating.

**Readings:** The required readings for this course are drawn from:

***Books to be purchased:***

Honey, Martha (2008) *Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise?* 2nd Edition. Washington, DC: Island Press.

Baker, C. P. (2013). *Costa Rica Handbook*. 9<sup>th</sup> Edition. Chico, CA: Moon Travel Handbooks.

***Articles available online and to be read prior to our departure:***

Emery, M., & Flora, C. (2006). Spiraling Up: Mapping Community Transformation with Community Capitals Framework. *Community Development*, 37, 19-35.

Ekins, P. (1997) Making development sustainable. In: M. Redclift & G. Woodgate (eds.) *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

Berkes, Fikret. 2007. "Community-Based Conservation in a Globalized World." Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 104(39): 15188–93.

***Bring the following 4 articles with you to Costa Rica. We will split you into four groups, and your group will be responsible for presenting one of the following:***

Fox, J. W. (1999). Real progress: Fifty years of U. S. aid in Costa Rica. Washington: OECD Publications.

Kiss, A (2004) Is community-based ecotourism a good use of biodiversity conservation funds? *Trends Ecol Evol* 19: 232–237.

Stem, C. J., Lassoie, J. P., Lee, D. R., Deshler, D. D., Schelhas, J. H. (2003) Community Participation in Ecotourism Benefits: The Link to Conservation Practices and Perspectives. *Society and Natural Resources*, 16, 387-413.

Kuentzel, W. F. (2010). Hybridization and tourism development along the Rincon River

**Assignments:** Because this course seeks to provide you with an opportunity to experience directly the work of sustainability, ecotourism, and community development, assignments are a significant part of the course. You should think of these exercises as a chance to field test what you read in your reading assignments and what we discuss in class, and as a case study by which you gain a better understanding of these fields.

1. **Journal/Field Notes:** A journal is a place to practice personal or expressive writing; an individual record of educational experience that allows you to think about and process your experiences as they happen.

We will use the journals in class to start discussions, to focus attention upon topics, to draw connections between readings and class discussions, to summarize discussions, and to respond to field trips or guest speakers. Some specific examples include:

- Pre-trip impressions (*an entry to be completed before you leave or on the plane*)
- Notes *and* reflections from the guest speakers or guides that we will spend time with
- General reflections about your daily experiences
- Your answer to the “Question of the Day” posed by the instructors
- Discussion questions on the 4 readings
- A post trip journal entry that summarizes what you’ve learned from the experience

We have posted an example of an ‘A’ journal on the website for you to see the type of detail we expect, and the thought processes that went through the mind of an engaged student from one of our past trips.

*Journals will be due at our final class session, tentatively scheduled for February 5<sup>th</sup> at UVM.*

2. **Test** You will be tested on the content of the readings below on the first official class day (December 29<sup>th</sup>) of the trip. All readings will be available on the course website except for the Martha Honey book. See the Exam Study Guide posted on the website (in the “Readings 2013” section) to help you prepare.

- Martha Honey chapter’s 1, 2, 3, and 5.
- Emery, M., & Flora, C. (2006). Spiraling Up: Mapping Community Transformation with Community Capitals Framework. *Community Development*, 37, 19-35.
- Ekins, P. (1997) Making development sustainable. In: M. Redclift & G. Woodgate (eds.) *The International Handbook of Environmental Sociology*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.
- Berkes, Fikret. 2007. “Community-Based Conservation in a Globalized World.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 104(39): 15188–93

3. **Article Presentation:** We will be reading the other four articles while traveling in Costa Rica. You will work in groups of 4 people. Each group will 1) summarize the article for the rest of the class and 2) lead a discussion about each reading among the class. You will also be asked to write a discussion question. Students will write a response to this discussion question in their journals.

4. **Ecotourism Site Assessments:** You will use Martha Honey' Scorecard for Ecotourism to evaluate four ecotourism sites that we visit during our stay in Costa Rica. These may be included in your journal.

5. **Costa Rican Communities:** We will ask you to split up into 4 groups of 4 to five people. Each of the groups will be assigned one of three communities that we will visit while in Costa Rica: 1) Monteverde region, 2) the Quepos/Manuel Antonio region or 3) The Osa Peninsula.

Your task is to act like reporters and “tell the story” of the region you have been assigned. What are the economic, social and environmental issues facing the region as it develops its potential for sustainable development and ecotourism potential role in development? As these communities try to cope with the pressures of contemporary globalization and change, what are its strengths and what are its weaknesses? How can these communities leverage their opportunities into positive developments, and what are the constraints holding them back? Given these considerations, *what is the future outlook for development/sustainable development, ecotourism, and community based conservation in the community?*

In “telling the story,” it is imperative that you not accept the experiences and presentations in Costa Rica at face value. One objective of the class is to teach you how to look at communities in a way that goes beyond the obvious. But, in addition, the real challenge in this assignment is to also find ways to get people tell you things they might not have otherwise told you. Once you have developed the story, you should present it in a graphic-rich form of either short video documentary, interactive PowerPoint presentation, or website.

*You will present your project at our final class session tentatively scheduled for February 5<sup>th</sup>.*

6. **Final Assessment:** You will be given four essay questions and be asked to answer *three* out of the four. Each essay question should be answered in no less than three double-spaced pages. The questions will be purposefully broad, and will call on you to draw from your experience and reading/research to effectively answer them. We will provide you essay questions to choose from within a few days after returning home.

*This project will be due via email after we return from Costa Rica on January 24<sup>st</sup>.*

**Grading and Expectations:** Each class participant is expected to participate and become actively involved in all class sessions, contributing to the growth of other class members as well; to read all class handouts and reading assignments; to complete required assignments, journal entries, etc. on time.

Participation	20
Journal	15
Test	15
Article Presentation and Ecotourism Site Assessments	15
Take-home Essay	15
Costa Rican Communities Project	20

**Post Trip Dinner:** We will hold one final class session tentatively scheduled for February 5th. We will likely provide a pizza dinner and then each group will present to the class the Costa Rican communities final project. Afterwards, we will have an overview discussion of our experience and what we have taken away.