Ecotourism and Sustainable Development Practices in Costa Rica

RM 188/NR 185
(3-Credit Option)


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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 an understanding of the natural history and ecology of Costa Rica, especially tropical rainforests.

5. Gain an understanding of 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 experiences 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 in Costa Rica on the beach, on the bluff overlooking the palm plantation, in the cloud forest, or at the Indian reservation. 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:

Honey, Martha, Ecotourism and Sustainable Development: Who Owns Paradise? (Island Press, 1999)


Course reading packet available on line prior to departure.


participation in ecotourism benefits: The link to conservation practices and perspectives. *Society and Natural Resources, 16*, 487-413.


**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
- Three examples of sustainable practices you have seen that day
- Three examples of unsustainable practices you have seen that day
- Your answer to the “Question of the Day” posed by the instructors
- Comparison of the day’s activities to a course reading
- Ecotourism site assessments – develop a scorecard and evaluate at least 4 different sites
- 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.

2. **Test** on the 4 chapters from Martha Honey’s book – Chapter 1 through 3, and the Chapter on Costa Rica. See the study guide posted with the readings on the course website. You will take the test at some point during the first week of the trip in Costa Rica – probably on the slopes of the Arenal volcano.

3. **Abstract/brief/precis of selected readings in course packet**: After you have completed readings in the course packet, write an abstract for that article. You will summarize each of the 7 online articles. The abstracts should summarize the main points of the articles you are reading - don't get lost in the details. In other words, they should answer the question: Why did the author(s) bother to write what they did?

It's unlikely you can do this in 3 or 4 sentences. It'll probably take a minimum of 200 words. On
the other hand, don't write more than a single page (typed, double-spaced). Abstracts will be due in San Jose on the first day of the trip.

4. Research paper or project on Costa Rica: Identify a topic related to this course (Costa Rica, sustainability, eco-tourism, community development, etc.) that you are especially interested in. Research it in depth and write a research paper, properly documented. Be sure to have the instructor approve your topic as soon as you have decided on it. The final draft of the paper is due no later than one month from the last day in Costa Rica, or February 15, 2007 (in Walt’s office: 357 Aiken Center.)

Content information on the topic of your paper or project may come from books and journals in the library, interviews with knowledgeable people, the Internet, etc. In this sense, your work will be very much like that of international development consultants with severe time constraints who must use best available information and who must “satisfice.” It is essential that you draw upon your own and others’ knowledge and skills to accomplish what needs to be done in a limited time period.

5. Costa Rican Communities: We will ask you to split up into 4 groups of 3 people. Each of the groups will be assigned one of four communities that we will visit while in Costa Rica: 1) Arenal/La Fortuna region 2) Monteverde region, 3) the Quepos/Manuel Antonio region, and 4) 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 ecotourism potential? 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 ecotourism, community conservation, and sustainability 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, we would like you to present it in the form of a case study for Author Martha Honey to use as she is updating the text we are using for class. Since she will not have time to conduct a complete review of every region of the country or all of projects mentioned in the current version of the text, she has invited our class to help prepare submissions. With this in mind we would like each of your groups to present your story/analysis in the form of a ten-page report highlighting the region you are studying.

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.
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