Hybridization and Tourism Development
Along the Rincon River

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The Rincon River, like all rivers on the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica, is a short-lived river. It tumbles out of the uplands of Corcovado National Park and quickly winds its way through a handful of farms and cattle ranches. Roughly fifteen or so miles from its source, the Rincon empties into the top of Golfo Dulce, the scenically spectacular bay that sits on the leeward side of the Peninsula from the Pacific Ocean. The River runs through the geographic heart of the Osa Peninsula, and as a result has been partially immune from the relatively rapid pace of tourism development currently underway along the northern and eastern coasts of the Peninsula.

Yet changes are afoot along the river. Costa Rica continues to maintain its international market share as a premier green tourism destination. In the meantime, Corcovado National Park has been “discovered” as a world-class tourism attraction. In the past 10 years more and more backpackers, biologists, student groups, and other adventure oriented tourists have made their way up the Rincon River to the Los Patos trailhead into Corcovado. From there, the trail passes for 12 miles through the heart of the National Park, through spectacular stands of primary and secondary tropical humid rainforest, finally delivering people to the Sirena Biological Station on the Pacific coast. It is one of the most biologically diverse places on the globe, and the concentration of flora and fauna seen during the hike and during an overnight stay at the Biological Station is stunning.

As with any process of discovery, however, the interface of tourists and local residents – outsiders and natives – necessarily brings about change; change in individuals perceptions and attitudes (e.g., the demonstration effect) and structural change in communities (e.g., wealth and social power). In the tourism literature, these processes of change have been widely studied from the perspective of an “impact” framework. Tourism development produces inevitable social, economic, and environmental impacts that, while increasing wealth, can often rob a destination of its culture, sense of community, way of life and “authenticity.” This literature typically is cautionary in tone, pointing out the pathological effects of a global tourism industry that are imposed upon indigenous and organic societies at the periphery of a globalizing world. Yet the history of the Osa Peninsula, coupled with the “slow discovery” by tourists of the Rincon River region offer a different view of development and change – a view that does not fit well with the “imiseration” or pathological models inherent in much of the tourism impact literature. This paper uses the development experiences of people along the Rincon River to critique past models of tourism induced change, and to offer an alternative view of change that occurs at the interface.
of the tourist, who is a global outsider and the local who sits expectantly at the periphery of new global possibilities.

**Development on the Osa**

The Osa Peninsula was late to the table of contemporary economic development, but these recent changes that came to the region were contentious and troubling. Historically, the Osa’s distance from the mainland and the lack of large deep water ports has constrained extractive and agricultural exports, limiting most of the few residents to subsistence agriculture and hunting. The archeological record shows the presence of the Diquis culture that occupied the region from about 400 to 1400 AD. Their most notable legacy is the *bolas*, which are perfectly spherical granite balls from a few centimeters to 3 meters in circumference scattered throughout the peninsula. Most of these indigenous communities had disappeared when the Spanish Conquistadors passed through the region pillaging for gold. But even then, the region was known as the largest gold source in that part of Central America. The gold in the Osa, however, was not deposited in a clearly defined vein of surrounding bedrock, but instead was found widely scattered in the flakes and gravel stone of the rivers. This kind of deposit required labor intensive panning to extract the gold, such that miners operated on a small scale, and goldsmiths in the area were limited to fashioning small trinkets and ornaments for local ornamental and ceremonial use. The Spanish quickly became impatient and moved on to the Quanacaste region, leaving the Osa’s few inhabitants to relative isolation for another 350 years.

Modern development came to the Osa Peninsula in 1938, when the United Fruit Company acquired large tracts of land on the upper part of the Peninsula nearest the mainland. They established industrial sized banana plantations, clearing thousands of hectares of swamp and forest land for the *fincas*. Interspersed throughout the fields of bananas were company built towns with a church, a general store, perhaps a bar, and living quarters for the workers which were typically two story tin-roofed wooden houses that ringed a central soccer field. The United Fruit Company pulled out of the region in 1985, but the *fincas* and their legacy of large-scale industrial fruit farming lives on in the region, with all the typical problems of poverty, leakage, and environmental contamination.

The United Fruit Company was able to move into Costa Rica during this time because of a concerted effort by the central government of Costa Rica to establish titled ownership to all lands in the peripheral regions of the country. Prior to this time, land rights in the Osa (and much of Costa Rica) were usufructory – or limited to use, and squatters rights made property a perpetually contested issue across the landscape. So in mid century, the government of Costa Rica made efforts to establish exclusive ownership rights of land with two purposes in mind. First, they wished to encourage industrial investment in land by companies who could make more productive use of land. With titled property and the protection of the state from squatter
intrusion, fruit companies, timber companies, mining companies, and other investment groups could invest in land and the Costa Rican economy, without fear of land intrusions by squatters. Second, the central government was also interested in ensuring land access for all of its citizens. During the 1940s, it encouraged a demographic upheaval by making land title available to all citizens in peripheral, undeveloped parts of the country. This movement led to an influx of people into the Osa Peninsula, who primarily were involved in establishing a cattle ranching industry on the lower Peninsula that stretched along the lowlands of the northern coast from the town of Rincon and around the eastern coast to Matapalo. Puerto Jimenez developed at the center of this region, where cattle could be shipped by boat to Golfito across Golfo Dulce or up the Pacific coast to Puntarenas. By 1950, the Osa economy was primarily dominated by the fruit and beef industries.

During the 1950s, two main events occurred that sped the rate of change on the Osa Peninsula. In the early part of the decade, gold was “rediscovered” on the Rio Madrigal, setting off a mini-gold rush that drew in many prospectors who combed the region’s rivers for placer gold. Gold mining since then has exhibited the classic boom and bust cycle in the Osa region, but it still plays a role in the story of change in the region today. More importantly, however, the late 1950s saw the entrance of Osa Productos Forestales, or Osa Forest Products (OFP). To encourage development in the region, the government granted the company 30,000 hectares (~75,000 acres) in what is today the lowland part of Corcovado National Park. Throughout the 1960s, the company lay claim to all the traditional farms within their holdings, and led a program of eviction of farmers and gold miners in the region. The land on which the Sirena Biological Station is built was originally a small farming village with a handful of farms, a church, a soccer field, and store. These were some of the first farmers to go, as the Company set up field operations there and built a road that bisected their holdings from Sirena to Los Patos on the Rincon River (the current 12-mile hiking trail). Once established in the region, OFP’s plan was to clear-cut 1000 hectares per year, cycling through their holdings within a 30-year time frame, before starting over with the original plot. This plan, however, was never executed for two reasons.

First, the campesinos and gold miners resisted eviction. Because historically almost no one on the Peninsula held title to the land they used, the traditional residents resisted the new claims and rights exerted by OFP. Because of this resistance, OFP with government support created its own private armed militia to enforce evictions and defend its interests in the area. The military force even included a helicopter for aerial reconnaissance, where they could search out gold mining camps or hunting camps within
their land holdings. The conflict between “La Osa” (OFP) and the locals became particularly violent in the early 1970s. Company officials working in the area became assassination targets; gun battles between squatters and company militia increased; and campesinos blew up company vehicles and set fires throughout the region. There were even reports of a group of gold miners who cut off the hand of one unfortunate company worker who wandered into the wrong place at the wrong time. Prior to 1970, campesino response to the heavy handed Company defense of its property was mostly self-defense and localized resistance. By 1970, the region’s communist party had organized in support of the campesinos and gold miners, as the troubles had broadened into a more targeted conflict over class interests.

The second reason OFP did not execute its forestry plan was because of corruption. To deal with the emerging guerrilla war in the region, a congressional commission was formed in 1974 to investigate the roots of the conflict. The inquiry discovered that OFP was owned by Robert Vesco, a man with a history of corrupt business dealings. Vesco, however, was also a man with strong political ties, who carefully “nurtured” relationships with governments at the highest level – particularly the Figueres administration in Costa Rica (1970-1974). Incidentally, Vesco had dealings with the Nixon administration in the U.S. during the early 1970s and was even implicated in the Watergate scandal. The inquiry also discovered that OFP was tied to companies in Panama and the Bahamas that sold mutual funds to investors interested in gold, timber, ranching, and real estate development. But instead of investing in these business activities with the mutual funds, Vesco used the money to buy gold from the U.S. Treasury and to pedal political influence throughout the hemisphere. In this context, Osa Forest Products was primarily a dummy company used to create false profit and value statements (and to launder money) with exaggerated accounting reports of productive output, but with very little actual extractive activity taking place. At the conclusion of the inquiry, the Costa Rican government revoked OFP’s claim to land in the Osa Peninsula, and booted Vesco and his associates out of the country.

During the congressional commission inquiry, a U.S. biologist, Joseph Tossi also played a role in the proceedings. Tossi and his organization the Tropical Science Center had been hired in the 1960s by Osa Forest Products to conduct biological surveys of their holdings and to help them manage their forestry project. Tossi was impressed by the biodiversity and came to believe that the area should be left untouched. He gradually mobilized support for protection of the area, calling on fundraising contacts and the global scientific community for support. He also lobbied throughout the Costa Rican government for a National Park on the Osa. Tossi’s timing could not have been better. When the commission was completing its inquiry, the government agreed to establish Corcovado National Park in the entire 30,000 hectare property, and even allocated money to buy out existing farmers and miners who
still made claims on land within the borders. An additional 13,000 hectares of uplands was added in 1982 bringing the total to over 100,000 acres covering nearly half of the Osa Peninsula.

**Up the Rincon River**

The Osa Peninsula was also late to the table of tourism development. Social unrest and the area’s remote location mean that the region is still playing catch-up to Costa Rica’s tourism boom. Access to the Peninsula is difficult. When driving to the region, one must turn off the Central American Highway at Chacarita, and begin a 27-mile trek down a winding narrow road that passes up and down through steep hills and deep narrow valleys on its way to the village of Rincon. The road is mostly paved, but the rainy season makes maintenance difficult. One is constantly slowing down for graveled sections where the pavement has broken apart. Potholes are a constant obstacle that slow one’s progress and drivers must be mindful of landslides that have taken away parts of the road. When the road is in relatively good shape, the drive may take an hour, but more typically the drive lasts an hour and a half or more. At the village of Rincon, the road travels for a mile or so next to where the Rincon River joins Golfo Dulce, crosses a rickety bridge that spans the River, and then heads across flat cattle ranches to the town of La Palma about 4 miles further down the dirt road. From here, one can turn left and head down the coast another 10 miles to Puerto Jimenez and then beyond around the southern tip of the Peninsula, passing through more cattle country. (The road from Rincon to Puerto Jimenez was dirt up until 2009, when it was paved, which has cut travel time between the two towns in half. Also, the bridge across the Rincon River is currently being replaced.) Or one can turn right on to a dirt road at La Palma and head up the Rincon River and into the heart of the Osa.

From La Palma one can continue down a flat, yet narrowing dirt road that passes through more cattle ranches. The further one goes, the more one is likely to observe smaller subsistence farms along the way. After 4 or 5 miles, the road comes to the village of Guadalupe, which marks the end of the road for normal vehicles. Here the hills of the central uplands begin to rise, and one needs a four wheel drive (or tractor) to continue. A short way on from the village, the road meets the Rincon River. Until 2008, one had to follow a 4-wheel drive track that made its way up the river bed, crossing back and forth through the water to wherever there were short stretches of flat terrain along the river bank. In 2008, the government extended the 4-wheel road another three fourths of a mile before depositing vehicles into the riverbed in front of the entrance to the Guaymi Indian Reservation.

From the Guaymi Reservation, the river begins to narrow and the hills fall steeply down to the river bed. Consequently vehicular traffic can only pass through the river bed at this point. It is difficult, exhausting travel. If riding in the flat bed of a truck or trailer, one must constantly hold on to avoid being thrown out by a large rock along the way, or from the lurching of the vehicle in and out of the water. When travelling on the river bank, one must be aware of overhanging branches that can smack you in the face or even throw you out of the vehicle. Travelling on foot
is no less exhausting as one passes across the rocky terrain and in-and-out of the river. The rainy season brings with it a new set of challenges for travel up the river. As the water rises, it makes vehicular travel impossible, and yearly floods change the river bed while destroying the existing vehicle tracks. So each year, residents must fashion new tracks by hand and smooth the river crossings of newly deposited large rocks. The Los Patos trailhead lies 3.5 miles above the Guaymi Reservation. In 2008, the Park built a new ranger station on the opposite bank of the river from the trailhead, as trekking increases in popularity in the Park.

Just up river from the trailhead begins the site of gold mining activity along the river. A mile and a half beyond Los Patos one may find a small gold mining community – Cerro de Oro. This enclave is situated on a noll overlooking the river, and was originally established as a gold mining cooperative (Coopeunioro). After 5 years of operation in the late 1980s members found that gold mining was not sustainable on a commercial level, so they transformed it into the self-proclaimed first ecotourism project on the Osa Peninsula. However, the ecotourism project has likewise struggled because of its remote location, and since 2007 is no longer in operation. Today, one only finds a few individual gold miners living and working in the area. A short distance up river from Cerro de Oro, the Rincon River passes fully into Corcovado National Park. From here the River begins its steep climb into the uplands toward its source and few tourists explore beyond this point.

Travel up the Rincon River offers a unique experience that attracts a certain type of tourist. As one’s vehicle creeps through the riverbed and the rainforest crowds in, it is easy to observe among the many student groups I’ve accompanied that they are well out of their comfort zone. The experience can be demanding physically and emotionally. For all the challenges it presents, however, the river, as it narrows, passes through some of the most spectacular stretches of primary rain forest. With the National Park on one side and the mostly untouched buffer zone on the other, the rainforest canopy rises steeply up each side of the river in a riot of tangled diversity. The abundance of rare and unique wildlife along with the cacophony of forest sounds eventually engulfs the visitor in a captivating grip of fascination and discovery. In that sense, the River has almost a magnetic draw that prepares to launch the traveler across the heart of the Corcovado rainforest experience.

The Rincon River and Postmodern Travel

The slow tourist discovery of this “gem” in the heart of the Osa Peninsula naturally brings about change to the area, as local people take advantage of this new influx of visitors who hike Corcovado National Park and bring expendable income. Coopeunioro, the gold mining cooperative, was the first, offering rustic bunkhouse accommodation. Programming there was low-key and impromptu. One could try their hand at gold mining, pick cocoa beans from the
small farm to make chocolate, learn about medicinal plants the coop was cultivating, or tour their micro-hydro project.

The Guaymi reservation also attempted to capture some of this growing tourism market. On the reservation, two lodges were created. One was an attractive bunkhouse constructed of local building materials that resembled traditional Guaymi architecture. This lodge however, was located at the end of a long steep muddy road accessible only by foot or horse during most of the year. Because of access problems, this structure quickly fell into disrepair. The second lodge is simply a slight modification of one tribal member’s house, which is not very comfortable or appealing for most Western tourists. Today, most tourists make day visits to the reservation. Tourists are accompanied by a tribal member on a walk through the reservation, either up the muddy road or up a rainforest trail that was built in 2004. They pass by the soccer field, visit the school, and end at one family’s house where they sell beadwork jewelry and small handbags made out of the bark of one of the local rainforest trees. The tribal guide may tell tourists a little bit about life on the reservation and tribal history, but the quality of the information is nowhere near the standard of professional guides in other parts of Costa Rica. The tour in 2011 had been upgraded a bit. The guides have had some training now, and there are a number of roughly made interpretive signs along the way.

Danta Corcovado Lodge is located in the town of Guadalupe, just before the road ends and one must start traveling up the river bed, and caters to a more up-scale clientele. This ecolodge features spectacular custom-designed woodwork throughout the structures, which are situated on an old farm. They offer a variety of local tours guided by residents of the area – birdwatching tours, rainforest canopy tours, kayaking in Golfo Dulce, a chocolate farm tour, and so forth. They also feature a volunteer tourism program that enables tourists to become involved in activities in the local school and community.

Each of these developments along the Rincon River inevitably brings about change to the area. One of the more notable outcomes of travel is when people from different backgrounds discover similarities between one another – the universals of being human. Nevertheless, the differences between hosts and guests in a tourist destination do matter, and may be the primary engine of social change. The traditional term scholars have used to describe this form of cultural contact is the “demonstration” effect. The demonstration effect assumes that contact between people in the developed world and people in the underdeveloped world create a demand for the products and
lifestyles of the developed world among people in less developed destinations. One can observe indigenous cultures trading wool for blue jeans and polyester lined jackets, fruit juices for Coca Cola, or salsa music for rap. This substitution extends beyond tradable products. Traditional values, family structure, and life aspirations are all potentially affected by the lifestyles that tourists demonstrate to their guests in less-developed destinations. The most important point to be made about the demonstration effect is that it is a one-way effect. Influence from the developed world is imposed on people of the underdeveloped world.

The demonstration effect was one of the earlier concepts that cast a cautionary note on the tourism enterprise, and which questioned the “good-news” story told by tourism promoters who advocated the many benefits of tourism. This critical approach to tourism development had its precedent in at least two influential commentaries about tourism in the context of modern society. The first was Daniel Boorstin’s essay about the “lost art of travel” and the rise of “pseudo-events” that are readily apparent in the modern tourism industry. The second was Dean MacCannell’s essay on authenticity and the way this concept is organized within the tourism industry.

**Boorstin and the Pseudo-Event.** Boorstin was one of the early critics of modern tourism, arguing that the tourism industry had spoiled the “art of travel.” Historically, people left home to discover the exotic in other places. To get there, one had to endure long arduous periods of travel with “no predictable conveniences” along the way. Travel took large investments of time, as people slowly made their way along difficult or non-existent highways, rubbed elbows with “thieves and cutthroats,” and often went without the comforts of home for extended periods of time. Boorstin idealized this form of travel because it required one to work at something – to actively seek out new experiences and become engaged with exotic cultural practices. In short, it celebrated self-sacrifice and a sort of Victorian notion of heroic adventure and discovery. Boorstin’s vision of tourism is consistent with the Greek ideal of leisure as the active engagement in self-improvement, expanding one’s world view, and furthering one’s education.

Modern day travel has spoiled all this, by having turned the exotic into an everyday experience to be purchased by the tourist and repeated for the masses. The modern day tourism industry has insulated the tourist from the hardships of travel, moving people across the landscape at great speeds and relative comfort. Once tourists arrive at their destination, they are provided “all of the comforts of home in the heart of Africa” or in the most remote regions of the globe. Boorstin states that the tourism industry has robbed the traveler of the landscape, replacing the lived experience of going with a sterile, detached transport system designed to get one from home to destination in as little time as possible.

Once tourists arrive at their destination, they are confronted by what he calls pseudo-events. Pseudo-events are the “products” of the tourism industry – contrived attractions and experiences that lack any vestiges of spontaneity that was formerly observed by the traveler. They also are planned to highlight the dramatic, reduce risks to the tourist, and to be reproduced repeatedly for a growing tourist market. Because of this, Boorstin argues that touristic pseudo-events reflect only a shadow of the reality that may have inspired them. Pseudo-events in the tourism industry are simply a decontextualized imitation of the real.
At first glance, it is easy to see how Boorstin might applaud the experience of traveling up the Rincon River. It is geographically remote, off the beaten track of Costa Rican tourism. It is difficult to get there requiring longer travel hours over rougher roads than most contemporary tourists are willing to endure. Once one starts up the River, the relative “comforts of home” mostly disappear. However, at the first sign of the modern tourism industry as it is overlaid onto a hinterland region like the Rincon River, Boorstin would likely object. Modern adventure travel even in its earliest developmental stages succumbs to the trappings of the pseudo-event.

Perhaps the best example of a pseudo-event in this region is the carving of a face into a rock wall on the Guaymi Reserve. The carving is a petroglyph depicting what appears to be a “Mayan-esque” looking face with a head-dress. In 2011, the guide solemnly described to our group that this area was sacred to the tribe and that the face was originally carved by his ancestors probably as a guardian spirit to watch over a nearby ancient burial ground. What the guide neglected to tell us was that this indigenous group had only arrived in the area in 1975, having been relocated from Panama. Moreover, he also failed to mention that the rock carving was not there in 2006, when one of our earlier groups had hiked this trail. Their efforts to produce for tourists an “indian” like experience of spirituality with almost no ties to reality was transparent and disappointing to those of us who had visited the Reserve before.

Perhaps the first example of tourism creating a pseudo-event was the creation of Corcovado National Park. National Park creation is the practice of drawing somewhat arbitrary boundaries around available land, as opposed to enclosing land based purely on biological or social criteria. Historically, once the boundaries are drawn, human occupation is excluded, and traditional uses (e.g., hunting, gold-mining) of the land are prohibited. A system of management is then overlaid, designed to protect “the environment” first, but which ultimately benefits scientists and tourists. For Boorstin, this system of management is “insurance against risk.” As part of this management system, the Los Patos ranger station helps keep the tourist safe in a variety of ways. Rangers control illegal activities such as gold-mining or peccary hunting, thereby minimizing contact between tourists and local law-breakers. The Park Service maintains a helicopter landing site just inside the Park boundary in case emergency evacuation is needed. They also provide showers, a meal, and a bed and mattress in bunkhouse accommodations at the ranger station for the exhausted hiker. With these safeguards, the tourist is spared the dangers of travel, as the provision of tourist services broadens the availability of the experience to the “masses.”
In concert with these forms of risk reduction, extraordinary events are made ordinary by the machinations of the tourism industry. For Boorstin, the buffet of tours offered by Danta Corcovado Lodge and others are the primary example. One can purchase guided tours to observe chocolate making on a cacao farm, pan for gold at the upper reaches of the River, horseback riding tours near Corcovado National Park, rainforest day hikes graded to the physical abilities of each tourist, or zip-line tours through the rainforest canopy. In remote places such as this, the ordinary experiences of everyday life can also become extraordinary. Electricity does not extend far up the river, so a tour of Coopeunioro’s micro-hydro generating station becomes a tourist attraction. Similarly, volunteer tourism in the area where people teach school kids English, help build/repair houses, or work on farms become saleable products of the tourism industry.

For Boorstin, each of these experiences is a pseudo-event, decontextualized from normal everyday life, and forever cheapened by their commoditization and sale to the “masses.” In Boorstin’s view, the tourism industry victimizes both tourists and local residents in tourist destinations. It leads legions of unaware tourists around the globe by the nose, providing them with hollowed-out diversions that are only caricatures of real life.

MacCannell and Staged Authenticity. Like the Greek ideal of leisure, Boorstin’s notion of the “lost art of travel” was elitist, and there is little about the modern tourist industry that might escape his critical scorn. MacCannell in his book “The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class,” presented a more positive analysis of modern tourism. MacCannell saw tourism as a positive force for integration in the modern world. “The act of sight-seeing is uniquely well-suited among leisure alternatives to draw the tourist into a relationship with the modern social totality” (p. 7). Writing in the early 1970s, MacCannell argued that the primary challenge of modern life was the problem of alienation. People feel alienated in the post-modern world because they are less likely to be anchored in traditional social roles that define their “place” in the world, and less likely to be governed by rigid normative expectations about how one should act in any given context. MacCannell says the modern world is producing an explosion of roles, opportunities, values, and expectations, which creates in individuals a sense of pervasive ambiguity and often overwhelming saturation. It is difficult to know the real self, because one’s roles change as one must interact with a diversity of people in an array of different contexts throughout daily life. Similarly, one struggles to understand the “reality” of situations and places because the meanings that people attach to the situation are fluid and changing.

For MacCannell, the post-modern solution to this pervading sense of contemporary angst and ambiguity is commoditization. Where there is ambiguity, individuals seek certainty, and the primary road to certainty in post-modern life is through our experience with commodities – the tangible products of a capitalist system. By consuming the products of this system, we become
re-integrated into a system of values and aspirations oriented around the productive forces of a
global economic system. MacCannell, then, focuses his analysis on tourism, because he claims
that tourism, as a form of cultural production, is one of the more powerful forces of integration.
Through tourism, the individual is able to connect in an intelligible, coherent way with a
complex and diverse global system of values, behaviors, and world views. In short, MacCannell
sees the process of commoditization in the tourism industry as a positive thing.

Tourism works as a source of integration by commoditizing the collective experiences of a place
into a tourist attraction. The foundational concept in the production of tourist attractions is the
concept of authenticity. People are motivated to travel by some concept of otherness, a concept
that gets at the heart or core of a place or people in the destination one visits. When a tourist
gazes on a new place, his or her eyes are drawn to the things that are indicative of the
fundamental “reality” of the subject – the Irish pub, the Eifel Tower, the “native” dress of the
Guaymi women, or a stand of primary rainforest. Each expresses the Irishness, the Frenchness,
the native-ness, and the natural-ness of the destination. It is this essential characteristic of
authenticity that motivates travel and directs the tourist gaze to certain signs and experiences that
indicate the otherness and reality of the places we visit.

MacCannell argues that this commoditization process is not simply controlled by the tourism
industry. Rather, these signs of authenticity are purposely structured within the tourism industry
to control the interactions between hosts and guests. He says that these interactions are structured
along a continuum. At one end are the “front region” tourists attractions – attractions built and
designed purely for the benefit of tourists. At the other end of the continuum is the back region
where the locals live and interact, the authentic life of the “native” that motivates the tourist’s
imagination. In between are five stages of commoditization that progressively open up the back
region of the destination to the gaze of the tourist – e.g., the touristic front region organized to
look like a back region, or the back region opened to the tourist by design or mistake. The main
thrust (and legacy) of MacCannell’s work was the tension between allowing tourist access to the
behind-the-scenes reality of everyday life of the hosts without spoiling the integrity of those
lifestyles and without changing their patterns of daily life. This notion that there is an authentic
reality that can be observed by tourists and sustained for future tourist consumption is at the heart
of contemporary notions of sustainable tourism. It drives the dominant “impacts” approach to
tourism development, which seeks to preserve authenticity, while maximizing the benefits of
modern day travel.

As influential as MacCannell’s notion of authenticity has been among tourism scholars and
planners, this framework may not be very useful as a way of describing how tourism has brought
about change along the Rincon River. The primary reason for this is that the history of settlement
up the Rincon River is relatively short and certainly tumultuous. An identifiable indigenous
culture disappeared centuries ago, and whatever remnant populations of Indians that remained
were absorbed into the recent waves of ranchers, gold miners, and other itinerant laborers in the
agricultural and forestry industries. Farmers and ranchers, who were oriented around export
agriculture, began to arrive in the 1940s. Gold miners and loggers arrived in the 1950s. And the
Guaymi, who were transplants from Panama, arrived in the 1970s. Throughout the 1960s and
1970s, settlement in the region could sometimes be unstable, with a bit of a “wild west outlaw”
character to everyday life. Given this volatile context, who among these settlers can make a claim for “authenticity?”

Moreover, from at least the 1930s through the 1990s, the primary economic activity on the Osa Peninsula was resource extraction. As many years of research have shown, extractive economies retard cultural and social development. Because of the volatility of these economic activities, it has been difficult for “authentic” practices to establish a foothold in this area in a way that lends a unique identity to the area. The gold mining cooperative at Coopeunioro was successful for only about 6-8 years. This group of miners even invested in industrial machinery to maximize their efficiency and profits. But as with all industrial extraction operations, the easily accessible gold was quickly exhausted, and the machinery broke down. The cooperative dissipated into just a handful of individual miners panning for gold and living from week-to-week on the few slivers of gold they can pull from the River. It is a highly unsustainable lifestyle that certainly encourages no stable sense of authentic social practices. Forestry is somewhat more sustainable because it is a renewable resource, but the strategies used by Osa Forest Products in the community were combative and exclusionary. It is difficult to establish “authentic” everyday practices when one is in constant conflict with those around you. Bananas and ranching may be somewhat more sustainable over time, but the labor structure of these operations can perpetuate poverty and instability through low-paid, temporary employment, devoid of benefits and land tenure.

Even the Guaymi appear to have only a shadow of “authenticity.” If people are looking to the Guaymi as the mythical rainforest Indian tribe in the Osa, most would probably be disappointed. They are instead a shy, humble people mostly living in clapboard houses with tin roofs, and wearing typical campesino clothing. I suppose an anthropologist would be able to describe their religious beliefs, architectural styles, shamanistic practices, swidden agricultural techniques, and unique world view. And surely, they have their own traditional forms of ecological knowledge. But more apparent is their assimilation into rural Costa Rican culture. The Guaymi, like most Osa immigrants of the last 75 years live pragmatic lives oriented around access to land and natural resources. Because, access in the Rincon River area has been so contested during that time, any sense of authenticity, staged or otherwise, struggles to take root.

To summarize, both Boorstin and MacCannell acknowledge the central role of commodification in contemporary tourism. Boorstin views the commodification process in a negative light, with virtually no hope that the tourism industry could ever accommodate his nostalgic (and elitist) notion of the traveler. MacCannell, on the other hand, sees the commodification process in a more favorable light. The tourist product is grounded in an essentialist view of authenticity inherent in a destination that stimulates the imagination of the tourist. The job of the tourist industry is to present these authentic representations in a way that protects the integrity of the
host destination and gives the tourist an experience that goes beyond mere “sight-seeing.”

MacCannell’s view of contemporary tourism is a far more progressive view of tourism development and change, and is consistent with the planning and impacts frameworks that dominate the tourism industry today. Yet, both frameworks tend to be industry led. For Boorstin, the contemporary tourism industry is a juggernaut that cannot be stopped in its incessant drive for new tourism products - new pseudo-events. For MacCannell, there is a more concerted effort to respect and preserve the authenticity of a place. But, in practice, the efforts to preserve authenticity tend to be top-down, industry-led planning and management solutions, which either purposefully exclude, or struggle to include host perspectives in decision-making. For a place like the Rincon River, neither perspective provides a useful interpretive framework or strategy for tourism development in the region. A third perspective of change may hold more promise for the elusive element that is essential for sustainable development – local control.

Hybridization and Global Tourism. Frameworks of hybridization come from post-modern theories of social change, which take a decidedly different view of the contemporary world. Traditional modernist theories focused their analysis on the stable properties of the social world that lend order and coherence to everyday life. Essentialist notions like authenticity fall into this traditional category by assuming a stable foundation of reality that defines the unique characteristics of a group of people and their locality. Post modern theories have shifted the focus from stable, structural properties of the social world. They instead argue that that the most important feature of contemporary life is its accelerating rate of change. One way of describing this process of change is through the concept of hybridization in a globalizing world.

Why is global change so momentous at this point in history? In Vermont, a common discourse that comes up in public arguments and debates of any sort is the notion of “natives” and “flatlanders.” Natives are those who have lived their entire lives within the state, and likely have parents and grandparents who did the same. Flatlanders are the “cosmopolitan” newcomers to the state who do not know the local norms and traditions, and whose “new” ideas may conflict with the local ways of doing things. At one level, invoking this discourse is an effort by “natives” to claim the moral high ground in a strategic move to control a specific debate. Local knowledge, tradition, and common sense are better than transplanted practice and theoretical knowledge. At another level, however, the native/flatlander discourse, which is played out similarly in hundreds of other locations around the world, is a prime example of global reflexivity (Robertson, 1995; Beck, 2000) – or thinking about one’s individual or social identity in the face of people who think and act differently. People need not think about or define what it means to be “native” except when confronted on a day-to-day basis with people who are different. And it is this increasing frequency of encounters with people who are socially, culturally, ethnically, and ethically different that is the defining feature of a globalising world (Gergen, 1991).

What has produced this incipient global reflexivity? Most commentators point to a relaxation of time and space constraints on human activity and interaction, or what Giddens (1984) calls time and space distanciation. Historically, human activity was constrained by physical movement across the landscape. Today, many forms of interaction are no longer limited by proximity and physical movement. With modern technologies of communication, the ability to communicate with almost anyone across the globe is nearly instantaneous, and the variety of people one can talk with is limited only by the extent of one’s social networks. Advanced transportation
technologies and infrastructure allow the movement of products around the globe at unprecedented speeds. Knowledge-based industries and financial services can deliver products instantaneously. In short, time and space no longer confine human activity to physical movement. The result is an intensification of human interactions (Giddens 1991), the intensification of consumer options (Baudrillard, 1998), and the intensification in the variety of ways people organise themselves (Nederveen-Pierterse 1995).

These trends have produced what Robertson (1995) calls a dialectical process of globalisation, where forces of homogenisation and heterogeneity are simultaneously at work. On the one hand, the most easily recognizable force of change is the expansion of markets, telecommunications, and tourism, which has brought about pressures of cultural homogenisation. This has been called the McDonaldisation effect where mass produced hamburgers, blue jeans, and cola products have replaced locally made products such as rice and beans, alpaca wool, and yak butter tea. The tourism literature calls this the “demonstration” effect (Crandall, 1987; Pearce, 1989), where the products and lifestyles of the western world often become the standard for which people in the developing world aspire. On the other hand, Robertson and others have argued that localities are not simply the passive recipients of a new world order imposed by the juggernaut of transnational corporations. Instead, the often ignored force of change is the intensification of global interactions, which creates new spaces of local identity and local advantage. The experience of difference in global interaction enables localities to better understand what makes them unique and valuable, and as a result better able to position themselves as contributors both economically and socially within the global totality. Globalization no longer means a one-way influence from the developed to the developing world (i.e., the demonstration effect). Instead, an ever-expanding diversity of social identities (i.e., cultural heterogeneity) produces a broadening horizon of diverse cultural and economic possibilities within the social discourses of global reflexivity.

This emergent reflexivity is most apparent in the tourism context, where interacting with the locals is the focus of many tourist experiences. Often times, it takes an outsider to tell local people what is special and extraordinary about their everyday lives. I spent a sabbatical year in Dublin, Ireland, and during the course of my research I managed to travel through all 32 counties of Ireland. Toward the end of my stay, I was commenting about this to one of my son’s friends, who was 12 at the time. He thought it was a little curious, and asked me what part of Ireland was my favourite. I started to effusively describe the spectacular scenery of the western counties in Ireland, which stimulates the imagination of most American tourist. He casually remarked that he had never been to the west coast of Ireland. I was shocked and asked him why – to which he replied “It’s just not all that interesting.”

In Costa Rica, on a tour through the Guaymi, the guide was showing us the community soccer field, not unlike any other community soccer field in rural Costa Rica. Someone in the group asked if they made any other use of the field. The guide described a few festivals and community gatherings and then made passing mention of a game they called balsaria. We pressed him about the details of this game. He described a context among the men, who after copious amounts of alcohol are consumed, chase each other around the field with spear like sticks carved from balsam trees attempting to impale the other player’s legs below the calf. The apparent goal was to hobble the opponents, and the last person standing was the winner. Perhaps the most
interesting part of this exchange was the look on the guide’s face. He clearly was surprised and amused that our group found this game so interesting. The following year, with a different group of students and a different guide, I asked again about balsaria, and again received the same look of surprise, amusement, and this time a little embarrassment. The guide assured us that the young people don’t play that game anymore.

The point is that the things that attract the tourist’s gaze (Urry, 1992) are frequently not the same things that draw the local’s gaze. At the heart of contemporary tourist products is this reflexive global interaction between locals and tourists that helps create an emergent sense of local identity. This identity may or may not be tied to traditional practices or historical allegiances. Its defining feature, instead, is that the “thing” that tourists come to gaze upon is a fluid and flexible, often contested mélange of everyday life expressions. As a result, new boundaries of local meaning are being drawn in reference to ones’ global reflexivity, producing an emergence of new “glocalities.” The outcome of this dialectical process is the “hybridisation” (Nederveen Pieterse 1995) or the “creolisation” (Friedman, 1990) of local culture producing such outcomes as “Tai boxing by Moroccan girls in Amsterdam, Asian rap in London, Irish bagels, Chinese tacos” (Nederveen Pieterse 1995; p. 53), Hawaiian veal sausages (Beck, 2000), or Alaskan wildlife art sold in the country music tourism destination of Branson, Missouri. It is a juxtaposition of practices and signs that on the surface may seem non-sensical, but in their everyday context contain a hybridized coherence. Globalisation is expressed by a growing mélange of often unlikely combinations forging ever new historically unique social, cultural, and economic combinations.

Today along the Rincon River, one can find a variety of hybridized expressions of local practice oriented around tourism. At Coopeunioro, one can still find a few of the old communist insurgents who originally came to the area to support the struggle against Osa Forest Products. In their effort to practice a “kinder, gentler” form of socialism, they established the gold mining cooperative. But, when gold mining was no longer economically viable, they established the first “agro-ecotourism” project on the Peninsula providing food and lodging for the new adventure tourists passing through the area, and establishing a small scale nursery where they cultivated medicinal plants from the rainforest.

At the Guaymi reservation, one can observe the hint of outside influence throughout the reserve. Most notable are the solar panels for electricity mounted on the top of a number the houses, which were provided by a Dutch rural development NGO. At Danta Corcovado Lodge, the owner has not simply drawn from traditional architectural styles to design his ecolodge. He instead, has drawn from his University education in San Jose, and his experience in the city as a building contractor in every facet of his design. The buildings, the bathrooms and all of the
furniture are custom designed with an extraordinary degree of imagination and creativity. He uses the characteristics of the wood to drive his designs - each bed, each chair, each table all have design features that are absolutely unique. He is, in short, creating a delightful environment that draws from his own intuition and creativity, rather than from any locally established standard of architectural style.

The bottom line is that contemporary tourist destinations are leaving their “traditional” spaces of “authenticity” behind for a new “glocal” understanding of what it means to be an attraction. “Natives” may appeal to traditional definitions of what it means to be local, but they do so only in reference to the global “other.” Reflecting on what it means to be native in this way also opens up the possibility for outsiders to discursively become “more native than the natives.” Globalisation theory then indicates that rural change over the last 50 years is much more than just structural change. It has also redrawn the boundaries around the meaning of the tourist product based on culture, ethics, and ideology.

**Implications for Sustainability**

Theories of hybridization suggest a unique perspective to discourses about sustainable tourism development. The best know definition of sustainability comes from the Bruntland Report. They define sustainability as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Ecotourism has added to this need-based definition the notion of authenticity, and the need to minimize the impacts of tourist activity on host communities. To meet the needs of future generation, tourism development must not spoil the social, economic, and environmental foundations upon which tourism is built. The primary mechanism to ensure needs are met and impacts are minimized is through proper planning. In this context, the tourism industry is given free reign to go about its normal steps investing, product development, programming, and growth. Sustainable development expands the focus beyond mere profitability to incorporate a higher ethical standard of planning. Nevertheless, it still operates in a business-as-usual framework.

The hybridization framework turns the focus away from responsible business practices and focuses more exclusively on local people – particularly local choice. The Irish government articulated a vision for rural development in Ireland that advocated “vibrant sustainable communities…[where] individuals and families will have a real choice as to whether to stay in, leave or move to, rural Ireland” (Department of Agriculture and Food, 1999; p. 19). One could easily apply this definition, which features choice, to the concept of sustainable development. So many economic activities in the Osa Peninsula have given local people little choice: contract agricultural labourers, gold mining, prostitution, subsistence farming and land eviction. And the level of poverty in the area is easily apparent.

Tourism development along the Rincon River, to this point has not meet present need in the region. Coopeunioro closed its doors in 2007 and the Guaymi seem to treat tourism as an after thought in their everyday routines. Without any coherent sense of “authenticity” in the region, it is also difficult to attract tourists, and then subsequently preserve the qualities of the region that the tourists came to see. If nothing else, the lack of any significant tourist activity has helped to preserve the wild and scenic qualities of the place.
How then, will tourism development provide choices for residents on the Osa Peninsula? The manager at Coopeunioro has been approached several times by hotel investors who would like to build an upscale lodge on the site. But this sort of outside development from the start tends to short-circuit the sort of locally reflexive process that builds place identity. Instead it risks imposing a more external, top-down interpretation of the territory; one that may constrain the choices available to local residents. Conversely, the efforts of Danta Corcovado Lodge serve as a better model of local reflexivity. Danta is owned by a person who grew up on the same property, provides year round employment for 5 local people, facilitates tours up the Rincon to the Guaymi reserve and beyond, and actively engages tourists in the local community. It is locals working with locals to reflexively create the tourism product that is the Rincon River. Sustainable development in this context originates more from the social capital of local people rather than from external investment capital. Tourism development, therefore, must start by building social capital among locals, who can then engage with global constituencies to create a “glocal” community of choice and control.