

KEEPING THE PEOPLE IN THE PARKS: A CASE STUDY FROM GUATEMALA

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No settled family or community has ever called its home place an “environment.” None has ever called its feeling for its home place “biocentric” or “anthropocentric.” None has ever thought of its connection to its home place as “ecological,” deep or shallow. . . . the terms themselves are culturally sterile. . . . the real names of the environment are the names of rivers and river valleys; creeks, ridges, and mountains; towns and cities; lakes, woodlands, lanes, roads, creatures, and *people*.

WENDELL BERRY

Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community, page 34, emphasis added

Ecotourism is seen as a mechanism by which environmental conservation can be promoted and attained. Nevertheless, nature conservation NGOs do not really understand that ecotourism has unforeseen consequences. Anthropologists can be good mediators between the conservation NGOs and the communities that are the targets of their ecotourism projects. This paper describes a case study in which the authors were indirectly consultants for The Nature Conservancy in Guatemala and the manner in which they served as a social conscience for the NGO. The authors also served as assistants in developing a collaborative network for tourism projects that have had direct benefits both in the short run and in the long run for the communities participating in those projects. The conclusion drawn from the case study is that applied anthropologists can play a significant role in mitigating the negative economic effects of conservation projects that are designed mainly to help wildlife rather than people. These anthropologists may also have a role in

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helping local communities benefit from the ecotourism development efforts of nature conservation-oriented NGOs, which are often found as part of the requirements for receiving funding from their donors. Key Words: ecotourism, Guatemala, conservation, participatory development, NGOs

INTRODUCTION

I was a teenager the first time I ever thought of a concept of “the environment.” It happened when I started seeing “Do Not Litter, \$200 Fine” signs along major highways and the early interstate road system. The next time I thought about it was during the Lyndon Johnson administration when Lady Bird Johnson, the First Lady, was the promoter of an anti-billboard campaign along interstate highways. I wondered what the big deal was, since I actually enjoyed seeing crazy signs to break up the monotony of driving long distances. Then came Earth Day, and soon there was a whole generation of people who had a strong commitment to environmental protection and conservation. Well, now I am nearing my sixth decade, and environmentalists are as active politically across the globe as they are here in the United States. On the other hand, for Diamente, a 20-something graduate student in anthropology, “the environment” has always been a basic concept and one widely accepted by most U.S. citizens. In the last thirty or forty years, there has been a proliferation of special NGOs whose sole purpose is to “protect, defend, and conserve” the environment. Now there are the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Defense Fund, the World Wildlife Fund, and The Nature Conservancy, to mention only a few. Anthropologists, too, are environmental activists, and the American Anthropological Association has a large, relatively new section called Anthropology and the Environment. I myself am the listowner of a listserv called Ambientnet (ambientnet@lists.ncsu.edu), an outreach tool of the Society for Applied Anthropology’s Environmental Anthropology Topical Interest Group.

The concern with the environment is paralleled by the historical growth and development of nature parks and national parks as well as the global expansion of tourism beyond the core to the periphery of Western and Central Europe and the United States and Canada. The concept of the “park” was invented in the West (Harper 2002:11), but it is the U.S. concept of “national parks,” exemplified by the institutionalization of the National Park Service, that is most emulated in developing countries (Brechin et al.:16). The underlying motivation for the first parks was the conservation of what had been seen

as rapidly diminishing natural resources (forests, wildlife, etc.).¹ In rural, usually remote “wilderness” areas, humans are perceived as the fatal factor in the demise of our ecosystems (Marks 1984:4–5), so the concept of “parks without people” was born. In the United Kingdom, parks are seen quite differently as serving the economic interests of local people, but it is the U.S. model that has been most widely diffused. In the developing world, the primary concern of environmental NGOs is, as it is in the United States, conservation of what are thought to be scarce and dwindling natural resources.

In many places around the world, natural resources are threatened by numerous factors, including the threat from enormous population growth and the lack of technology to make more efficient use of those resources. Madagascar, an island with incredibly unique and diverse wildlife, is a clear example of the very rapid loss of primary forests that may hasten the demise of many unique species of flora and fauna. In an attempt to assist in slowing deforestation, USAID funded several major environmental conservation projects in the 1990s, one of which was the Ranomafana National Park Project (RNPP) initiated by Patricia Wright, a physical anthropologist and MacArthur Foundation Fellowship winner now located at SUNY-Stony Brook.

I visited Ranomafana for five weeks in 1992 as an agricultural marketing consultant. RNPP was an ecotourism project that depended on the successful introduction of a national park for lemur protection. At that time there were about 30,000 Tanala and Betsileo peoples who were living on the periphery of Ranomafana National Park and depended on forest products for their survival. For generations they had relied on the forests for subsistence, but now they were required to stay out of the park and were sometimes arrested for activities using forest resources, such as chopping wood, hunting animals, harvesting crayfish, et cetera. The project hired an agronomist and an ecotourism expert to help develop the park and provide assistance to local people. Furthermore, it was expected that income from working in ecotourism, chiefly as park guides, would be a principal substitute for the locals’ loss of access to forest resources.

At the time of my visit, there was little direct economic benefit to local residents from tourism. Most of the income generated came from the project administrators, workers, and scientists (Wallace and Diamente 2002:10). The few ecotourists who visited the local parks usually stayed in the park itself and did not lodge in local hotels or eat at restaurants run by local residents. A small number of local residents worked as guides, but they earned more from selling national tourists the fern tree pots they made from endangered trees inside the park. A recent ethnography by Janice Harper (2002:211–12), who worked in

a Tanala community near RNPP, concludes that the payoffs to Tanala have been very few, and that indeed the local residents may be worse off today than before the project started.

The point is that economics, ecotourism, and conservation may be related, but they don't always go together well. Anthropologists must be the voice of conscience when conservationists want to use tourism to justify projects that might have negative impacts on local residents. Jin Igoe (2004) recently published an excellent ethnography of national parks and conservationism in East Africa. In one telling passage (Igoe 2004:320–31), he reports that one community-based conservation project he studied, ironically called “Good Neighborliness,” did not have the support, for a variety of reasons, of the local Maasai community. Nevertheless, in spite of local resistance to the project, the project directors and tour operators all insisted that the project should go forward regardless, leading to a paradoxical position in which a community-based project forged ahead without community support.

Environmental conservation and ecotourism development should take into account the needs not only of the international and national communities but also of the local people. This is an important reason why the anthropological perspective is an essential element in national park development projects. Within this context, anthropologists do three things very well: (1) they help environmental NGOs maintain an awareness of the importance of including local people in conservation planning, (2) they help local people become involved in the planning process, and (3) they translate environmental concepts employed by the local people so they can be incorporated into site conservation plans.² Also, anthropologists bring with them a transcultural perspective in which an understanding of how cultural patterns work in one context helps to understand how cultural patterns could work in other cultural contexts. Another element of anthropological investigation is its preoccupation with the well-being of local people and with the cultural transformations throughout historical advancements.

A CASE STUDY: THE NATURE CONSERVANCY AND THE PARKS IN PERIL PROJECT

In this paper, using an example from Guatemala in which we recently participated, we suggest a model by which anthropologists who study in tourism can work with conservationists to help ensure that the development process

includes participation from local residents and reflects local environmental concepts and attitudes toward tourism development. The NGO that developed this project in Guatemala was The Nature Conservancy, which received its funding from USAID. The Conservancy has been in Guatemala for some years, working in the northern forested areas of tropical Guatemala, Mexico, and Belize with varying degrees of success (Beavers 1995). In 2002, the Conservancy decided to direct some of its resources in its “Parks in Peril” program toward a long-term conservation project in the heart of the Mayan highlands west of Guatemala City.

Guatemala’s western highlands are characterized by a series of tall, forested volcanoes formed by relatively recent geologic events, including one about a million years ago that produced Lake Atitlán. Located in the Department of Sololá, the lake bed is a collapsed crater about 800 feet below the surface and is surrounded by jagged-edged volcanic remnants as well as more recent volcanoes, some of which are still active. Also, the slopes of these highlands are home to the largest indigenous population in Central America (Herlihy 1997:217). About 56 percent of Guatemala’s modern population are descendants of the ancient Maya, and Sololá has one of the highest concentrations of Maya people in the country. The region has seen rapid population growth in recent years, but it is also one of the poorest regions of the country. The beauty of the lake, the mountains (“la Cordillera Volcanica”), and the surrounding countryside has long attracted Guatemalan and international tourists alike. Thus, expensive tourist hotels and restaurants in some of the towns around the lake exist side by side with very modest dwellings of native Maya. In the eyes of the Conservancy, the combination of poverty, growing population, and international and domestic tourism have put the health of local wildlife and flora in jeopardy. Mayans, on the hand, regularly engage in their own kind of conservation practices (Hornback 2004) and often see themselves as stewards of the environment (Winkler 2001).

In January 2002, I arrived in Guatemala on a Fulbright to teach a course in applied anthropology and a course in the anthropology of tourism. In addition, I was to lead an ethnographic field school for anthropology and ecotourism students from the Universidad del Valle de Guatemala (UVG), my sponsoring university, and to undertake a small research project at Lake Atitlán. One morning shortly after my arrival, I was introduced to Edwin Castellanos, director of the UVG Environmental Studies Center (Centro de Estudios Ambientales). Dr. Castellanos asked me to join his group of UVG researchers in a subcontract to the Conservancy to produce an assessment of the



FIGURE 1. At 800 feet in depth, Lake Atitlán is the deepest freshwater lake in Central America.

status of native flora and fauna of the Lake Atitlán National Park. The central focus of the research was to find ways to counter the actual threats to the ecological biodiversity of the Lake Atitlán watershed, and in particular to the southwestern side of the lake, which appears to have had less tourism activity and growth than the other side. My role as a tourism expert in the project was a relatively small part of the overall schema. My responsibility was to “develop an assessment of the potential of ecotourism as a conservation-related income source” (UVG 2002:49) for the Mayan people of the southwestern side of the lake—the area that has the greatest amount of natural and secondary growth forests and thus, potentially, the greatest amount of new ecotourism projects. North American students and a Guatemalan student from the UVG were to assist in data gathering for the project.

ECOTOURISM AT LAKE ATITLÁN THROUGH THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL LENS

Whereas The Nature Conservancy approached the ecotourism component of the project with its “nature first” ideas, we found that it would be unfortunate,

if indeed impossible, to ignore the human and cultural elements of the environment. After all, the “environment” includes not only nature but also the individuals—both local residents and visiting tourists—who interact with and utilize nature and who together create a community. As anthropologists, our greatest concern engaged this broader definition of community when considering the terms of reference set out by the grant. In general, the Conservancy grant requested an assessment of the state of tourism development on the southeast side of Lake Atitlán, while keeping the ideals of ecotourism as goals for the all-too-near future. However, we quickly discovered the urgency of many social, ecological, economic, and cultural issues that need to be addressed prior to developing new ecotourism sites in the area.

The Conservancy proposal envisioned a three-year project moving from a diagnostic phase to a site conservation—planning phase to the project’s implementation phase. We were in the thick of the field school and our research when we were asked to provide suggestions for projects for the year-two phase of the grant. Certainly, this forced us not only to think beyond the work that we had been able to accomplish by that date, but also it required that we review what the grant had set out to do in this first phase of the project. The original funds set aside for the tourism research component had already been cut by two-thirds, so we were quite concerned that we did not have enough resources to do a thorough assessment, let alone enough data to prepare for projects in the second year. Nevertheless, the principal investigators at the Conservancy insisted we should forge ahead with a much-scaled-back “background research” study that would “help them to focus and better manage” their development projects. They also made the assumption that we, the foreign anthropologists, with very little funding for research resources, would be capable of determining what the local people needed to improve their socioeconomic situation vis-à-vis ecotourism. In spite of the limitations, we were able to produce a set of recommendations for year-two projects. Several of these were implemented, as we will discuss later.

The original thrust of the ecotourism component of the project set out to investigate the conditions of tourism, the principal actors in tourism or related to it, and the potential for new sources of income from tourism within each of the six communities of the pilot area. However, the Conservancy seemed to hint that we should search for potential ecotourism development areas in places outside the Maya communities—primarily in the heavily forested areas of the Mayan municipalities and on lands held by private chalet owners. The southwestern side of the lake is much more forested than the northeastern side

due to the great height (above 3,000 meters) of its three volcanoes (Atitlán, Toliman, and San Pedro). Their steep slopes at higher elevations make farming more difficult. The southwestern side also has a larger area of land covered by coffee trees. The northeastern side has more maize and vegetable farming and thus fewer trees.

As anthropologists, we were aware of the possible issues, obstacles, and dangers associated with targeting tourism development. We made sure to keep our eyes and ears focused on the members of the communities and to examine what tourists actually do when they visit the region and how their visits interconnect with the lives and activities of the local residents. The indigenous Mayan peoples have a history of caring for their land, and the Lake Atitlán region is certainly not an exception. Even though rapid and vast population increases have caused stresses on the land and the ways in which the people care for it, all aspects of the land—its water and forests—remain sacred elements of the culture. Nevertheless, a number of additional social and environmental factors have damaged or might one day endanger the rich biodiversity of the region. These factors form the basis for The Nature Conservancy's concerns.

In this respect, the Conservancy's intentions are good. Seeing ecotourism as ideal, its goals are for more tourists, more local participation, better environmental education and awareness, and thus increased benefits for the people and the land. Unfortunately, the equation is not that simple. The lack of proper training in tourism management, the lack of institutional support for tourism entrepreneurs, and the inability to effectively provide widespread security for ecotourists in rural areas cannot be overlooked or solved very easily.³ Moreover, the forests where these new ecotourism destinations were “supposed” to be concealed more than the numerous *Costumbrista* spiritual sites of the people.⁴ Not long ago, in the 1980s, they were the hiding places, battlegrounds, and graveyards of very many people during the most violent years of Guatemala's civil war. Still today, there are stories that not even the forests will tell and dangers that neither TNC nor any anthropologists truly could foresee. Therefore, the ecotourism component of this project could only be provided by following the notion that ecotourism means exploring to all ends, leaving no ground untouched, or moving deeper into forested land with hopes of “preserving” its biodiversity. After all, what was once pristine can all too quickly become poisoned. Ecotourism development, as we saw it, should be aimed at taking advantage of the biodiversity and beauty of the lake in places where there were already possibilities.⁵

In our study, not only did we try to estimate the potential for ecotourism development, but we also evaluated current levels of infrastructure and of institutional and community support for more tourism. In addition, we interacted with project leaders frequently to make them aware of the need to be careful in drawing conclusions before we more fully understood how the proposed conservation projects and tourism development plans would impact local communities. Even though there are few destinations where planning actually has preceded development, it is essential that ecotourism development, as experts agree, is well planned and involves a high level of local participation before initiating tourism businesses. We wanted to produce a report that addressed the conditions necessary for successful and sustainable ecotourism development and that would also support environmental conservation on the southwest side of Lake Atitlán. Ecotourism can only be viable when it completes its dual mission of providing local economic benefits while helping to protect and conserve the ecological environment (Whelan 1991:20).

One major problem for future ecotourism plans was the lack of safety and security for tourists who planned to hike trails in forested areas between and above the towns in the study area. Since the end of Guatemala's 30-year civil war in early 1997, there has been a rise in ambushes of tourist buses and private vehicles, armed robberies, lynchings, and kidnappings (Gonzalez Arrecis 2004). The large number of tourists around Lake Atitlán makes them attractive targets. During our stay, two tourists were relieved of all their possessions by two armed men as they walked along a trail from one town (Santa Cruz) to another (San Marcos La Laguna). In January 2004, three tourists traveling with an armed guide were confronted by four machete-wielding, pistol-toting thugs. The guide fled after he shot at and missed the robbers, leaving the three tourists to be robbed of everything they carried (from the website of the U.S. Embassy in Guatemala).

Although The Nature Conservancy wanted us to investigate specific ecotourism projects that might be undertaken by private Ladino⁶ and Mayan entrepreneurs, early on we came to the conclusion that so little was known about tourism at Lake Atitlán that we needed to reorient our research along more diagnostic lines. The more familiar we became with the Conservancy perspective, the more we began to realize that it assumed the local residents themselves were the main threats to the biodiversity of the region. Despite the presence of several excellent ecologists on the Conservancy staff, it seemed to us that they failed to recognize in the grant proposal that local people had been living in this environment for centuries and that they had probably worked



FIGURE 2. The Maya make discreet use of their land, but tourists need hotels.

within a time-tested system of checks and balances involving the nature of the region. On the other hand, the Conservancy did assume that “modernization” was bringing with it unforeseen consequences that might negatively affect the environment. To its credit, the organization also hired a UVG graduate student in anthropology, who in turn recruited six volunteer anthropology undergraduates from the UVG to research the ways local residents use forest resources in their daily lives. However, we faulted the Conservancy on three accounts: (1) they did not provide sufficient funds to hire a team of professional anthropologists to do the research, (2) they generally were uninterested in investigating local concepts of ecology, and (3) they did not allocate enough time to establish the rapport with locals that would provide the basis for in-depth ethnographic reporting. To compensate for this, we provided logistic support and mentoring for the undergraduate volunteers to help them gather and process the data more effectively.

Another thing that the Conservancy overlooked in their proposal was the idea that tourism itself may be a cause of negative effects on the environment. For example, around the lake are nearly a thousand vacation homes, locally referred to as *chalets*, built by largely absentee Ladino and foreign landowners

(Petrich 1999:88).⁷ Most of the chalets are precariously perched on craggy promontories on the steep slopes of the mountains that rise from the lake. Add this to the fact that there are more than 100,000 tourists that visit the shores of the lake each year. Between the potential erosion caused by the chalets and the waste generated by the tourists, not to mention the cultural effects caused by tourist demands, there is the potential for dramatic effects on the local environment. Nevertheless, The Nature Conservancy focused on local people and their relationship to environmental harm and not on the tourists and chalet owners and their potential for damaging the environment. As anthropologists, we both believed that it was our responsibility to refocus the Conservancy perspective on tourism and the environment while still fulfilling our contractual responsibilities. In light of our concerns about this proposal, we developed the following objectives for our part of the research:

1. Investigate the strengths and weaknesses of current and potential tourism destinations and activities in the Lake Atitlán area, focusing on the capacity and flexibility of regional tourism in order to modify and create better tourism development for the pilot area;
2. Identify key actors in tourism within the pilot area; and
3. Determine strategies to strengthen institutions related to tourism development in the pilot area.

FIELDWORK

The fieldwork part of the study began at the start of March 2002 with the permanent presence in Panajachel of one of the authors (Diamente) and visits three times per week by the other author (Wallace). During this time we initiated contact and communication with the principal actors in tourism in the Atitlán region and arranged the logistical foundations for the arrival of the North American and UVG students at the end of May. They were to work on a series of rapid analyses of touristic elements in the Atitlán region. Meanwhile, Diamente, with the assistance of Wallace, began a rapid analysis of the impacts of tourism and ecotourism in the six communities of the pilot area. Until the end of May, Wallace concentrated on the training of UVG students, maintaining contact with the North American students, and compiling a bibliography relevant to the topic, with reference to previous tourism studies in Atitlán. On May 24, the students arrived at the lake and moved in with local families in the pilot area. In addition to these 17 students, six additional UVG anthropology

students worked on the collection of data in the human use and management of natural resources.

From the end of May until July 6, the students carried out their fieldwork using ethnographic methods such as participant-observation, informal and semi-structured interviews, and other participatory methods to create a research project on a tourism topic. They finished their preliminary reports prior to leaving the Atitlán region, and we incorporated their findings into our final report. Throughout the seven-week term of the field school, we held classes in ethnographic training for the students and managed the research projects while continuing our own ethnographic research (systematic observation and interviewing) for the project in the six communities in the pilot area.

The anthropology and ecotourism students from Guatemala and North America who participated in the field school contributed greatly to the research activities and data collection associated with the grant, in addition to designing and completing their individual research projects. Although we did not specifically assign any of the activities, with the possible and loose exception of activity 4 below, the students did volunteer valuable information that aided in carrying out the required research. With their help, we were able to carry out the following associated activities to accomplish the original objectives of The Nature Conservancy project:

1. Identify key actors such as local residents, guides, private business owners, NGOs, government and private leaders—all who have or have had initiatives in tourism;
2. Compile and review previous studies on tourism in the Lake Atitlán area to ground the fieldwork and to complement it with the necessary information;
3. Carry out a rapid analysis of the ecotourism and tourism elements in the six municipalities of the pilot area;
4. Carry out a rapid ethnographic analysis of cultural and environmental impacts of actual tourism in order to investigate more carefully the type of problems that exist and to better determine the actions that can be taken both to abate the negative impacts and to augment the beneficial impacts;
5. Compile data for GIS maps in order to visualize the distribution of actual and future tourism resources; and,
6. Determine strategies for training workshops for individuals employed in tourism services, such as tour guides and transportation workers such as bus and van drivers and ferry boat captains.

COMMUNITY	NUMBER OF INTERNATIONAL TOURISTS 2001–2002
Santiago Atitlán	54,750
San Pedro La Laguna	29,000
San Marcos La Laguna	10,950
San Lucas Tolimán	2,560
San Juan La Laguna	1,825
Santa Clara La Laguna	210
Total:	99,295
Panajachel	141,000

FIGURE 4. Estimated number of tourists visiting the study area in comparison with Panajachel, 2001–2002. (Some tourists visit more than one community during their stay.)

communities (Santiago, San Pedro, and San Marcos) receive a considerable amount of tourists, although all of them manifest a certain degree of potential for development. On the other hand, both San Juan La Laguna and, to a lesser degree, Santa Clara La Laguna express interest in ecotourism development but do not see any considerable amount of tourism at the present. San Juan has the advantage of neighboring San Pedro, and therefore some tourists take day trips or hike through the town. However, few find the women’s weaving cooperative or the talented painters (see <http://www.artemaya.com>), for example, since its minimal attractions are not well developed as of yet. Similarly, Santa Clara, a mountain town and the only one not bordering Lake Atitlán, does not have much to offer in terms of attractions to the scarce tourists that happen to pass through, though the denser vegetation in the higher elevations above the town has been designated as the location for a canopy tour.⁸

All of the towns lack a sufficient foundation upon which to build, but San Pedro is the most prepared for more ecotourism development. In Figure 5, we have listed the distribution of touristic services among 12 communities on the shores of Lake Atitlán. The table shows that the gateway town of Panajachel has most of the tourism services and that, with the exception of San Pedro and Santiago Atitlán, there is not much substantial tourism activity at the present. Part of The Nature Conservancy project’s goal is to increase the amount of tourism in the less touristed areas by developing ecotourism attractions. We concluded that

ecotourism would not prosper in the short run without significantly enhancing security and developing a strong network of local entrepreneurs who were prepared financially and administratively to enter the business. Furthermore, we worried that ecotourism would not provide a large, steady amount of tourists to support new businesses. Finally, we thought it somewhat counterproductive to encourage more tourism when one's goal is to reduce human impact on an already fragile ecosystem, especially if one starts with the assumption that local residents are the principal threat to that ecosystem. For these reasons, we wrote our final report in such a way as to encourage entrepreneurship training, institutional, and community-strengthening projects.

In the next section, we would like to describe two of six communities in which we and our students were working. This brief ethnographic description may help in giving the reader a better understanding of the nature and variety of tourism in these communities, as well as the challenges facing ecotourism development and conservation projects in the study area.

San Pedro La Laguna

In the last ten years, the community of San Pedro La Laguna has become the third most visited destination around the lake, after Panajachel and Santiago Atitlán. And although more tourists visit Santiago, San Pedro has far more overnight guests than any other community except for Panajachel. Tourists like San Pedro because the residents have a live-and-let-live philosophy toward tourists that allows them more freedom of action—more breathing room to relax and enjoy the scenery. Also, many of the tourists are of the backpacker type and are seeking a less expensive, more “authentic” experience. Although authenticity is in the eye of the beholder, and one can vigorously debate which community is the most authentic, San Pedro has a welcoming feel to tourists. In addition, it boasts a growing number of hotels and restaurants that cater to the backpacker tourist. Finally, San Pedro today features about fifteen Spanish-language immersion schools that cater to a diverse tourist client. San Pedro also has the best trail to the top of the local volcano (Volcán San Pedro), which is the least difficult mountain to climb of the three in the region. In next section, we describe what it is like for a tourist who is discovering San Pedro for the first time. Perhaps this account will help the reader better understand the tourism issues that are confronting this town and others like it.



FIGURE 6. San Pedro La Laguna is the fastest growing ecotourism destination around Lake Atitlán.

San Pedro La Laguna: a Mini-Ethnography We arrived in San Pedro by boat from Panajachel, as most tourists travel there, and immediately we were approached by a number of men who insistently offered their tour guide services, just as they do to every boat that docks at the main pier, every hour, every day. Having visited on several occasions already, we knew the routine of “No, gracias,” to say to them, as well as to the ubiquitous bread ladies and children, and to the indiscreet “What ya smokin’?” as we passed by the tourist hangouts and up the hill to Big Foot Excursions Travel Agency. This one travel agency in town acts more as an outdoor adventure guide and doubles as a nonprofit reforestation project. Whether tourists want to rent kayaks, bikes, horses, or climb the volcano, they can arrange it. And so we set out with a group of students on a gorgeous, clear morning to “conquer” the top of volcano San Pedro.

Feeling a bit like cattle, we all piled into the back of an oversized pickup truck and headed up the curvy gravel road to the start of the hiking path. First, we passed through the bustling center of town in front of the large, simple Catholic church and its statue of Saint Peter (San Pedro), and it became obvious that this town had become a center for regional commerce. The tourist

part of town along the shore, with its winding sandy paths that reveal a variety of international restaurants and cafes, hostels, and language schools, seemed a world away. And all of that faded as we ascended the base of the volcano together.

Crossing through corn fields and criss-crossing through rocky and sparsely forested areas, we huffed our way up the mountainside, stopping to rest quite often. To whom did these sloped *milpas* (corn crop fields) belong, anyway? And how do they feel about all of these tourists tromping through their source of food, income, and life? These thoughts ran through our minds while we intensely concentrated on foot placement, and exhaustion crept in. At the halfway mark, after two hours of hiking and an extended rest, only the more daring and determined half of the group proceeded. While Wallace had to accompany the sensible persons, Diamente pushed on and upward through thickening forest. Although I remember the surroundings to be beautiful, in between grasping vines to pull ourselves up and quite often slipping on the muddy precipitous trail, it was difficult to appreciate the biodiversity that encircled us. Unfortunately, this seems to be the case with most mountain climbers, since the achievement of reaching the peak supersedes the beauty one treads through to get there.

As if the stress of the climb were not tiring enough, being responsible for anything that could have happened drained us. We could not help but worry about someone injuring himself, or, even worse, someone else wanting to hurt us. It is no secret that tourists have been assaulted and robbed on this very volcano, as well as in numerous other areas of the Lake Atitlán region. There is no need to look farther than the U.S. Embassy's homepage to learn of the latest misfortunes. And yet, despite what have become urban legends that prevent some concerned tourists from partaking in such amazing activities, we kept them in mind and took the advice of so many to only venture into unfamiliar territory with a trained local tour guide. We requested three. Just how indispensable a guide is, not only to machete away at the trail and lead the way, became terribly obvious as we finally reached the peak. With a clearing up ahead, and success in mind after four arduous hours, I could not believe that the lead tour guide suddenly ran ahead, out of sight. Dumbfounded, I inquired why he did such a thing when he returned after a few brief moments to lead us up to the lookout. "I had to make sure no one was waiting for us," he simply replied. As my eyes grew wide, he added, "Just a few days ago, when we got up here, there were a group of thieves waiting who then robbed the tourists of all they had." Clearly, some stories take longer to disseminate, if they

ever do. This one I decided to keep to myself for the moment, as everyone else seemed awestruck by the magnificent beauty of the view and the incredible sense of self-gratification. The view truly made all the pain and soreness for the following days worth it, at least this time.

In a community meeting a few weeks later, the leaders of *Vivamos Mejor*, a local NGO and a partner in The Nature Conservancy project, asked us to share some of our data on tourism to help promote their ideas. They wanted to create a project to improve the climb of the volcano San Pedro and possibly to construct a geology museum as part of the plan. We told our story, whose point was that security, or rather a lack thereof, was a major issue and needed to be a community concern. The work that *Vivamos Mejor* is trying to initiate, together with interested members of the community and municipality, has two aims: (1) increasing the income and benefits of tourism for local residents, and (2) recognizing and conserving their rich natural environment. Our concern for safety, along with facts on the quantity and rapid growth of tourism development in the town, helped put this project into perspective. At the very least, it served as yet another reminder of the need for a strategic development plan that would strengthen security for tourists, improve infrastructure, involve more local actors, and initiate an environmental education program for both children and adults, possibly through the museum project. At the close of this meeting, everyone agreed that the volcano is one of their attractions with the greatest ecotourism potential and that steps need to be taken to take advantage of and protect the resources they have. What remained to be decided, and that which is still in process, is what those steps will be. The basic goals are always the same: increased benefits for locals, tourists, and the land. Our question for them remained: How can the incentives to conserve and care more for the land be encouraged and communicated to both local residents and tourists?

Maybe the people of San Pedro will be able to direct their attention to this question and others after all. Since this first meeting, members of the community representing various sectors have formed a tourism committee that will be working directly with the municipality and *Vivamos Mejor*. With technical support from experts with *Vivamos Mejor*, they have drawn up plans both to improve and expand the climb of the volcano as a tourist attraction and also to address the necessary issues, including security. In fact, in a recent telephone call I learned that with the help of one of my students from the field school in 2003, the trail improvements have been completed, a tourist information building at the start of the trail has been constructed, and the

guides have been retrained to begin working with the expected large numbers of tourists.

Santiago Atitlán

The community of Santiago Atitlán receives the largest number of tourists in the study area, second only to Panajachel around Lake Atitlán. However, very few of the tourists stay more than a few hours. This is reflected in the fact that this city of 30,000 Tz'utujil Maya has only four hotels, only two of which have accommodations geared towards an international clientele. Nevertheless, Santiago has many attractions. It has a vivid culture, well-known artists and wood carvers, a famous and tragic history, and a stunning location at the base of Atitlán and Toliman volcanoes that faces the bay on the other side of San Pedro volcano. Its historical importance as the ancient capital of the Tz'utujiles at Chuitinamit (as yet unrestored) is as significant as its more recent history during the civil war years. Given the presence and support of the guerrillas in the surrounding mountains, the violent years had a tremendous impact on the community. The Atitecos (residents of Santiago Atitlán), however, accrued international fame for their resistance and perseverance against the Guatemalan army, especially when they united and successfully expelled the military in 1990 after a protest that resulted in tragedy for Atitecos. To commemorate the event, they constructed the “Parque de la Paz” (Park of Peace) on the site where 13 Atitecos were murdered during their protest against the local military regime. Today, the site serves not only as a sacred place and reminder to the local community but also as an informative site of cultural and historical tourist interest.

In addition, the Catholic church, its renovated (and syncretic) altarpiece, and its colorful, crowded traditional celebrations during Holy Week serve as tourist attractions. That is to say, if there are three things that one must visit when in Santiago, as one resident claimed, “They are the Parque de la Paz for history, the Catholic church for tradition, and the notorious Maximón (a key icon in contemporary nativist religious beliefs) for Atiteco culture.” The religious life of Atitecos plays an important role in the community and has become a tourist attraction for its “costumbre” traditions and, more than anything, for the infamous, venerated, revered wooden statue of Saint Simon or “Maximón.” In fact, the first thing tourists hear when they step off the docks, or anywhere within the town, is “Maximón,” as tour guides—often small children—offer their services. Tourists visit the *cofradía* (religious brotherhood often associated with syncretic Mayan-Catholic rituals) where Maximón resides



FIGURE 7. The Maya have adapted to change for centuries, and their customs attract tourists.

for a year at a time to witness ceremonies or make an offering of cigars, alcohol, or money, all of which are much appreciated and expected by the members of the *cofradía* that keep the decorative, wooden-masked figure company.

Inevitably, on the way to any of these three tourist attractions, a tourist passes through “Calle Gringo” where one can purchase an almost overwhelming abundance of weavings, carvings, paintings, and an endless number of other souvenir-type artworks of the Atitecos. We discovered a number of issues during our research, such as the social and economic consequences of local competition and children in tourism, directly related to this street alone (see Reyes 2002 and Castro 2002). Despite the high level of day tourism in Santiago, few tourists actually stay for more than a few hours, an occurrence that reduces the amount of income from tourism. On the other hand, Atitecos find tourists to be a very mixed blessing and, according to many of my students who have been housed in Santiago, they appear quite happy to see the last boatload of tourists leave for Panajachel. It is also well known around the lake that Atitecos are not very open to tourists and newcomers. Surely it is difficult to appreciate the biological and cultural diversity that the area embodies in this short time, which both resembles and



FIGURE 8. This rescued hawk is one of the main attractions at the Butterfly Farm of the Atitlán Nature Reserve, a local private venture.

generates the lack of interest, awareness, and activities in the natural and cultural environments.

Santiago is also very important for The Nature Conservancy project because it has one of the largest forested areas in the Lake Atitlán watershed. Most of the forested area is located on Atitlán and Toliman volcanoes, and the mayor of Santiago is the steward for most of it because it is considered community land. He alone is authorized to permit its use, whether it be for cutting trees for firewood or for permitting ecotourism ventures. At the present time, there is almost no local support for developing ecotourism activities—or really any tourism activities—beyond Calle Gringo. The Conservancy would like this to change, but has not had much success in getting the municipality's cooperation.

By contrast, the mayor of San Pedro La Laguna and his municipality have been very supportive of new tourism and ecotourism products. In part, this is due to coffee's recent and dramatic failure as an income-generating venture, which makes tourism look pretty good as a means to generate income for local residents. Another reason is that Vivamos Mejor has cultivated close working ties with the mayor of San Pedro and other community allies. Atitecos, on the other hand, have a broader array of economic activities on which to depend

for their livelihood, and though they are anxious to sell their crafts to tourists, they don't want them around for too long. *Vivamos Mejor* has not been able to develop a strong working relationship with the Santiago municipality and has not spent much time cultivating relationships there. One result of this difference between the two municipalities is that most of the Conservancy efforts have been concentrated in the area of San Pedro. It is hoped that Atiteco attitudes will change over time, but we believe that this change will not occur quickly, if at all, without a more concerted, better-funded, community-based marketing scheme.

CONCLUSION: THE NATURE CONSERVANCY PROJECT, ECOTOURISM, AND CONSERVATION

To determine the ecotourism potential of any area, there needs to be an extensive study in order to locate and develop a tourism destination that complies with all of the many requirements described above for a successful ecotourism project. The limitations of this study did not permit an adequate evaluation of the many sites in the area with possible ecotourism potential. Moreover, aforementioned regional and local barriers block the development of such sites—including a lack of security, land-ownership conflicts, a lack of infrastructure, attitudes that tourism brings more trouble, and a low level of community participation. This is not to say that some of these ecotourism suggestions could not be developed. Rather, it is yet another reminder of the complexity of the situation.

As witnessed throughout the six communities, a number of intricate issues need to be addressed and resolved prior to pursuing The Nature Conservancy's original wishes to create ecotourism destinations. From our standpoint, the next, most important steps were to involve the community more in the decision-making process and to provide training opportunities for individuals who wanted to work in tourism either as guides or as partners in small businesses. We believed that it was more important to work with local Maya residents rather than chalet owners in part because they ought to be the ones to decide the degree to which their lands, their forests, and their towns would be impacted by new tourists.

As the second year (2003) of the Conservancy project began, Diamente was contracted as the local coordinator of the second phase (i.e., the phase devoted to designing implementation projects). She became the only social



FIGURE 9. Guatemalan anthropology and ecotourism interns prepare for a PowerPoint presentation to women of San Juan La Laguna who are starting a traditional medicinal plant tour program.

scientist officially employed by the Conservancy project (which may reflect the lower priority The Nature Conservancy placed on applied ethnographic involvement). On the other hand, we chose to conclude that the Conservancy had come to recognize the importance of having at least some anthropological perspective in the overall project. Unlike so many anthropological diagnostic studies, our work from the first year would have a continuing follow-up.

Our first concern was to communicate the data we had learned to members of the different communities in the study area. Our second concern was to involve more local residents in community development. Furthermore, we also strongly recommended a series of training seminars for local tourism entrepreneurs, and especially for women, because they carry out the bulk of the craft production and sales. We also suggested several smaller tourism development projects targeted at the average Maya family household level to spread the benefits of tourism more widely. Throughout most of 2003, Diamente was heavily involved in the development and implementation of environmental education materials and training that stemmed from the first phase of the project. Wallace returned in May 2003 with another group of

North American and Guatemalan anthropology field school students and, in addition, he taught a practicum for a group of UVG ecotourism students. The work of these students was particularly productive in getting community involvement in tourism development projects. The students produced:

1. A tour package of traditional medicinal practices for the benefit of local San Pedranos;
2. A coffee tour for small-scale San Pedro coffee producers;
3. A boating and fishing tour package working with local San Pedro artisanal fishers;
4. A self-guided tour for ecotourists visiting San Juan La Laguna;
5. A series of marketing workshops for San Juan midwives and San Juan weavers;
6. A guided tour of the famous Tz'utujil archaeological ruins of Chuitinamit through work with a local Atiteco historical society;
7. A thorough, qualitative pre-study of Panajachel tourism service providers to assist them in long-range planning;
8. An analysis of the level of local support for several planned ecotourism attractions in Santa Clara La Laguna; and
9. A tour history and culture tour package for the developers of a local San Pedro museum.

Clearly, by the end of our stay in early August 2003, we had accomplished much of the agenda we had hoped for at the end of 2002. Moreover, we had left an indelible impact on the Conservancy project. Although we both had to return to work back in the United States, several of the Guatemalan students were now well placed to continue affecting the direction of the Conservancy project. Even more importantly for us, the director of Vivamos Mejor was so impressed with the work of our students and with Diamante's work for The Nature Conservancy that he hired one of the UVG ecotourism students, Maria Isabel Lambour, as the full-time staff person for a newly opened San Pedro La Laguna office, where she is now perfectly located to influence local policy and provide constant support to local residents venturing more deeply into tourism work. Another student, working directly with a different NGO, Fundación Solar, returned to San Juan La Laguna for her thesis work to complete a thorough local tourism development strategy for the community and to provide more training workshops for craft vendors. In summer 2004, Wallace returned again with another group of U.S. and Guatemalan students, this time with even more support from Vivamos Mejor, to help them with the next phase of development of ecotourism projects. We also began to work in communities

beyond San Pedro and San Juan to develop the basis for community support for sustainable ecotourism projects.

Without the anthropological lens that we brought to this particular case in Guatemala, it was questionable whether or not ecotourism development around Lake Atitlán was going to include one of its fundamental components: the people. Since the departure of Diamante, one of the UVG project directors told us that The Nature Conservancy has not employed any more social scientists, nor have they been interested in any more social components to their program. On the other hand, much of that role has been taken up by other NGOs, especially Vivamos Mejor and, to a lesser extent, Fundación Solar. Both of these organizations have fought to bring in a social component in spite of the opposition or indifference from their international donor collaborators (e.g., The Nature Conservancy). So, even though we have not changed the Conservancy orientation, we were able to make what appears to have been a sufficient effort to ensure that local voices are heard, consulted, and brought into the discussion on a permanent basis.

There were two key pieces to this project: (1) the anthropologist–university connection, which contributed tremendous expertise and knowledge (e.g., ethnography) at low cost, and (2) local participation. The addition of locally trained university students had both short-term and long-term benefits. In the short run, the Guatemalans were able to kick-start community efforts on local projects, and, in the long run, these same students will be able to apply the skills and attitudes they have learned here to other settings. Still, local participation is key to the success of any ecotourism project regardless of its location, but especially when it involves the land, a river, or any element of the environment that people call their community or their home. As we become more aware of and concerned for our environment, we must not forget that we all, wherever we may reside, are part of the earth beneath our feet. In this case, our applied ethnographic endeavors helped to remind others that we must keep the people in the parks because *they* were there before *we* could call them anything other than what *they* have always known.

NOTES

1. See Lofgren 1999 for a history of the development of the concept of parks and wilderness.
2. See Stonich 2000 for an extended example.
3. There have been a number of reports of tourists robbed on trails by machete-wielding thieves.
4. *Costumbre* is a syncretism of traditional Mayan practices and mediaeval Catholicism. Since the 1950s, the rapid increase of support and participation of various Protestant churches (i.e., Evangelical)

has influenced the religious practices of the people, although many remain loyal to Costumbre tradition. This traditional Maya cosmivision centers itself around ritual and ceremonial aspects. The best example of this is seen through the presence and active role of the *cofradías*, religious groups that have incorporated their Maya-Tz'utujil identity in the practices of the Catholic church of Santiago Atitlán.

5. The head of AMSCLAE, the Lake Atitlán Water Authority, told us of several instances where tourists hiking in mountain terrains left the existing trails for sightseeing and trampled on endemic flora unique to Atitlán and disturbed Mayan sacred sites.

6. Ladino is equivalent to *mestizo* (mixed Indian-Iberian ancestry) in other highland Indian regions of Latin America. In Guatemala there is a strong racial divide between Ladinos and any other ethnic groups. Ladinos have held the dominant social, political, and economic power in Guatemala since the start of the Colonial period.

7. We were told by a local architect that he has built vacation homes for international tourists who only visit the lake once every four to five years.

8. The canopy tour is a series of cables connecting five to six tall trees high in the canopy. Tourists swing along the cable from one tree stand to another. Ostensibly the tour is to observe the forest at the canopy level, but in fact most tourists are attracted to the thrill of sliding along the lines high above the ground. The tour opened in late 1994.

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