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THESIS APPROVAL

The abstract and thesis of Michael Lupro for the Master of Arts in Geography were presented May 30, 2000 and accepted by the thesis committee and the department.

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SIGNS OF POPULAR ECOLOGY IN THE ECOTOURISM LANDSCAPE
NEAR TIKAL NATIONAL PARK, GUATEMALA

by

MICHAEL LUPRO

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
GEOGRAPHY

Portland State University
2000

ABSTRACT

An abstract of the thesis of Michael Lupro for the Master of Arts degree in Geography presented May 30, 2000.

Title: Signs of Popular Ecology in the Ecotourism Landscape near Tikal National Park, Guatemala

Ecotourism is a common conservation and development strategy in the Maya Forest region. New sites of ecotourism consumption, such as El Rematé near Tikal National Park in Guatemala, are developing in response to consumer demand for budget accommodations in this attractive cultural and natural setting. This study analyzes new ecotourism infrastructure developments in El Rematé for signs that this tourism draws on ecological imagery as expressed in popular media - or popular ecology - not on the natural and cultural ecology of the region that is the target of international conservation efforts. Analysis suggests that ecotourism entrepreneurs who effectively associate their product with texts of popular ecology will out-compete the community ecotourism projects supported by the non-governmental organizations managing the Biosphere Reserves in the region, challenging the success of international conservation and development strategies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Self-funded foreign fieldwork is a challenging and rewarding process. Without the inspiration received from the people who live in and visit El Rematé, this project would never have been started, let alone completed. My sincere thanks to my advisor, Martha Works, for her relentless patience and skillful guidance throughout this process. Without her encouragement and support this project could not have been successfully completed. I would like to thank Barbara Brower for challenging my thinking and inspiring me to expand my understanding of critical issues. Thanks also to Tom Harvey and Connie Ozawa for providing a compelling academic environment in which to develop my research and writing skills. The generous gifts these people have given me will be treasured always.

A special thanks goes to Grace Dillon for putting me back on the right path. Thanks also to Rafael Gutierrez for his assistance in generating maps and to Martin Lafrenz for his help crunching the numbers. I would also like to thank my sister, Kelly Lupro of the Social and Behavioral Research Institute at CSU-San Marcos, for her help in generating a workable survey instrument and for parenting Nicholas and Marley Lupro, the two people who make it all worthwhile. Without AmeriCorps and the Office of University Studies, I would not have had

the funding, or the inspiration, to continue my education.

Finally I would like to thank all my friends for continuing to support me despite their contention that I am much better suited to the stage than the library, field site, or classroom.

Rock on.

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INTRODUCTION

Just past the small El Rematé sign on the road to Tikal National Park lies another sign (Figure 1). Unlike the simple black text on white metal of the El Rematé highway sign, the second larger sign is brightly colored and bears the logos and names of those responsible for the expansion of the potable water system. At present, the second sign is not serving its function of advertising the charitable infrastructure development work of Cooperación Española and the Guatemalan government. Instead, the sign lies disfigured in the ditch in a deliberate act of vandalism and serves as an emblem of the contested geographies characteristic of the Maya Forest region.

Most of the half a million or more tourists projected to travel this road on their way to Tikal (INGUAT 1998) are not likely to care about why someone might vandalize a sign advertising a local infrastructure development project. The tourists come to see signs of ancient Mayan culture in the form of temple ruins and the forest in which they are enshrined. In the words of one tourist, “I came here to see the ruins and hopefully some plants and animals. The politics and how things work here is not my business and doesn’t concern me” (personal notes).

I intend the term ‘sign,’ used to describe the advertisement for the water project, to function in two ways: figuratively as a sign in the semiotic interpretation of a system of signs and symbols and literally in the sense of a sign

on a post. It is this first sense of sign that will be in use in this research. The focus of this paper is to identify critical signs in the El Rematé landscape and interpret their place and function in the global natural resource debate.

Figure 1: Cooperación Española Sign ¹

Tourists occupy themselves with the collection of signs (Urry 1990; Culler 1981; MacCannell 1976; MacCannell and MacCannell 1982). Visitors to the Maya forest seek signs of wild nature, signs of pre-Columbian indigenous culture, and other texts of popular ecology. Tourism service providers incorporate signs of these popular culture texts in the creation of their facilities and their marketing. While the average tourist in El Rematé may be unconcerned with local squabbles over how the water project is implemented, it is very much their business. El

¹ All figures by author unless otherwise noted.

Rematé is developing its tourist industry infrastructure in order to capture the expendable income the tourists bring with them. Thus, the consumer preferences of ecotourists drive the type, scope, and location of infrastructure improvements (roads, utilities) and of new tourist service facilities (accommodations, other services). A feedback loop is thus created wherein the material landscape of El Rematé is transformed by developers to meet the service demands of ecotourists; the material transformations revise the conceptual landscape through the conscious manipulation of signs for the tourist to collect; and this new version of the conceptual landscape returns to alter the future material landscape through revised ecotourist service demands and the revision of themes in the global conservation debate (Sluyter 1999).

El Rematé is a burgeoning destination on 'The Gringo Trail,' the established circuit of ecotourism destinations in the Maya Forest region of Southern Mexico, Northern Guatemala, and Belize (Zurick 1995). Located on the shores of Lago Petén Itzá, on the road to Tikal National Park, and at the edge of the Maya Biosphere Reserve (Figure 2), El Rematé is experiencing a rapid transformation of landscape and culture driven by those seeking to take advantage of the lucrative ecotourism trade. The community of El Rematé is a crucible for issues of ecotourism development. The village is geographically well situated to take advantage of the booming ecotourism trade in the region (Figure 3). Local residents are exploiting their lake views, their proximity to both cultural and biological attractions of international stature, and their knowledge of popular

- Areas Held in Biosphere Reserves
- Main Highways
- Lago Peten Itza

Figure 2: Regional Map

Figure 3: El Remat Tourism Corridor

Maya legend in an attempt to sustainably develop their economy while sustainably conserving the surrounding forest.

The ecotourism development taking place in El Rematé is being driven by popular ecology and the pristine myth (Denevan 1992) rather than ecology as it functions in the forest. Despite much hopeful discourse on the potential of ecotourism, it is unproven whether ecotourism can serve as an effective strategy to conserve the natural resources of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. Given that the conceptual landscape is shaped by a mediated popular ecology, or disneyfication as Sundberg (1998b) playfully describes it, I suspect it is likely that the material landscape will develop in kind.

Long before geographers and other tourism researchers have established a functional working definition of sustainable tourism development or even implemented suitable evaluation criteria, El Rematé's landscape will begin to show the impacts of new tourism media by revealing the interactive edge effects of the meeting of the post-modern capitalist discourse and themes of pre-modern Maya resource management and cosmology. The ecotourism demand in El Rematé is shaped not by an understanding of ecology or local culture but is mediated by the environmental discourse played out in the popular culture of Western Europe and North America. This paper will describe the signs of popular ecology found in El Rematé and show how these texts can travel from a place without electricity, through the modern electronic media milieu, and back. The

reading of the El Rematé ecotourism texts herein relies on popular culture analysis.

When I say reading, I mean the reading of landscape. This is said within the trope of landscape as text. The trope is not in a formal sense different from other tropes common to geography. These include the earth as a spaceship, or as a mother; the city as a machine or as an organism; culture as a drama or as a growth; the economy as an engine or an athlete; houses as spoors; roads as circulatory systems, and so forth (Smith, 1992:76).

This study documents the service demands of the ecotourists who come to El Rematé and the landscape changes the new demand for ecotourism products are driving. It is my contention that those individuals and communities which are most adept at intertextualizing their product with the texts endemic to the ecotourist are those who will dominate the ecotourism market and whose vision most future development will follow. Those enterprises that embed themes of popular ecology within the tourism landscape they create will do the best job of attracting ecotourists.

Every landscape is ...a text which may be read to reveal the force of dominant ideas and prevailing practices, as well as the idiosyncrasies of a particular author (Duncan and Ley, 1993:329).

The primary local authors of El Rematé's ecotourism landscape are Martin Sosa and Daniel Cane, proprietors of The Observatory of the Shaman and The House of the Lost Gringo respectively². This study will attempt to show what it is that makes their enterprises successful as well as what is being mimicked by subsequent entrants in the local ecotourism sweepstakes. The eco-camping

² The names of individuals and establishments have been fictionalized to protect anonymity.

services they provide are a product competing in an industry reliant on the marketing of nature. Like a national park or wilderness area, an ecotourism facility is its own best advertisement. This study deals with the text of the advertisement being diffused through the global ecotourism marketplace, the iconic associations created by the presentation of the eco-camping experience in El Rematé, and the contextualized meaning carried home by the ecotourism consumer.

The fieldwork performed during two field seasons, July 1997 and July/August 1998, pursued four main paths. They are:

- Documentation of service demands and consumer preferences of ecotourists in El Rematé. This was achieved through the combined use of a survey instrument, anecdotal evidence, and personal experience.
- Documentation of the opinions of local tourism service providers with regard to major infrastructure developments, El Rematé's future as an ecotourism destination, their involvement in the tourism development process, and its potential impacts on their lives. This was achieved through formal interviews and anecdotal evidence.
- Documentation of changes in tourism services offered (1997 to 1998) with particular attention paid to accommodations. This was achieved through photography, mapping, informal interviews, and observation.

- Documentation of the existing ecotourism landscape with particular focus on the large-scale infrastructure developments (electricity and water). This was achieved through photography, mapping, and observation.

A NOTE ON FOREIGN FIELD WORK

Paths leading through the heart of the Maya Biosphere Reserve are cleared by machete to provide just enough unobstructed passageway for the average-sized Guatemalan to reach the distant *chiclé* trees, the areas of *xaté* harvest, or whatever other resource being sought. Spiders build their webs at a height just above the head of those who most often use these paths. Overall, this is a successful strategy, taking advantage of the insect flightways created by the human clearing.

At an increasing rate and in greater numbers, multi-day tours of the jungle interior are being offered by local guides to taller foreign tourists. The face of a six-foot tall person walking these paths occupies the same space the spiders utilize for their webs. Invisible to the untrained eye, and virtually invisible to any human eye, a six-foot tall trekker will find himself or herself with a face full of destroyed spider web several times an hour.

While it is true that no human interaction with the natural environment is without its physical impact, for a geography student researching the impacts of ecotourism development in the region, the spiders' webs serve as a physical metaphor for the difficulties of objective observation in foreign fieldwork. No matter how diligent the researcher is in attempting to avoid impacting the spiders

hunting strategy, the simple combination of their stature and their presence makes catching webs in the face unavoidable.

Short of choosing to preclude all presence, there seems to be no way for the researcher to avoid influencing their subject, especially when there is so much real and superficial difference between the researcher and the residents of the field site. There are the obvious physical differences, in addition to stature, like skin and hair color. Cultural differences such as personal habits, clothing, and gender interactions do not go without notice. The biggest and most glaring differences are economic.

Residents of tourist destinations are extremely aware of the income differential between themselves and the tourists they serve. Travel to far away places is a luxury which most local residents of ecotourism destinations could never afford yet see others enjoying every day. Many respond with attempts to capture a portion of the tourists' expendable income.

Persistent offers of language lessons, tours to places of biological, cultural and/or historical interest, as well as food, shelter, and transportation create an interpersonal dynamic that skews objectivity. It is inevitable that the researcher becomes perceived and treated as a potential consumer, or at least a word-of-mouth marketer, of the subject's services. Any information obtained from the subjects, especially regarding the development of tourist infrastructure, is therefore subject to a layer of distortion as a result of this economics-based interaction.

Another layer of difficulty is that a short-term self-funded researcher cannot feasibly accept nor reject all of these offers for goods and services. No matter how much attention to fairness and equity is applied in making basic consumer decisions, the researcher's attention will have both real and perceived economic and political impact among potential research participants. Each of these impacts adds another layer of subjective distortion between the researcher and the truth they seek. One can only hope to minimize the researcher's impact on the social and political 'webs' encountered in field study.

El Rematé is a node on a path of adventure. The statement holds true for the tourists, the residents, and especially the researcher. Part of the attraction to spending time in the Maya Forest is that, at least on the surface, it presents the first-world tourist the opportunity to try on a less consumptive lifestyle and to sample from the hodge-podge of nature-inspired spirituality, whether indigenous or brought along by fellow tourists. The eco-camping facility at Palenque, cut from the edge of the jungle near the archeological site and consisting of a few thatched palapas with hammocks slung from them, was a place well suited to the pursuit of this lifestyle. In the late 80's, there was only one facility and a trail led out the back of the campground which followed the waterfalls up to the archeological site.

Ten years later, there are two neighboring eco-camping facilities and the Mexican government has constructed a large museum across the road, set up more guardposts, and paved and restricted access to the waterfall trail. There is a sense

of loss over the fact that the many of the special experiences I had when Palenque was an incipient ecotourism destination are no longer possible now that it is a popular tourism destination. The popularity and successful marketing of the experience I once had in Palenque is driving the demand for the experience by subsequent adventure tourists rendering the original Palenque experience unattainable.

The significance of the personal journey to the field study site is that, even though I brought studied academic and journalistic notions of objectivity with me, my sincere wish to be helpful placed an obscuring layer of subjectivity over my findings. Who I am, including my belief system, revealed or not, shaped my interactions within the community. There is no way to know what someone of a different socio-political stripe or someone with less passion for experiencing places in their incipient stages of tourist development might have found. Having walked through the jungle, and through El Rematé, it is inevitable that some destroyed web be found on my face.

ORGANIZATION OF THE PAPER

The first three chapters set the general stage from which El Rematé is examined. Chapter One establishes the regional geographic setting of the Maya Forest and the ecotourism projects with which El Rematé competes for market share. Chapter Two discusses the lack of a consensus definition for ecotourism and reviews the literature on ecotourism as a development and conservation

strategy. In Chapter Three processes of post-modern cultural criticism are described with focus on the popular ecology that constitutes the conceptual landscape of ecotourism in El Rematé.

The next sections detail El Rematé as a site for the consumption of ecotourism. Chapter Four outlines the major current infrastructure developments as of August 1998 and concludes with a proposal for an ambitious regional transportation initiative. The two flagship ecotourism facilities in El Rematé, their physical plant, their ethos and history, and recent developments are the subject of Chapter Five. In Chapter Six, advertising texts purveyed by ecotourism entrepreneurs in El Rematé are analyzed as popular culture texts.

CHAPTER I

SETTINGS

The geographic location of El Rematé provides the site with the unique advantages that make the El Rematé tourism corridor a prime site for the consumption of ecotourism. In order to understand ecotourism development as it is evolving in El Rematé, this chapter describes the general location of the town and the geographic context in which ecotourism operates.

THE PETÉN

The Petén is at the heart of the Maya forest region, the area of southern Mexico and northern Central America where ruins of the classic Mayan civilizations and tropical forests of contemporary global heritage stature are found together (Primack, et al. 1998; Garrett 1989). For many Guatemalans, the Petén today is what Oregon may have been to the eastern United States a hundred years ago; an attractively undeveloped frontier with an abundance of natural resources and a relative dearth of population and infrastructure. Physically and historically, Guatemala's Department of the Petén has more in common with the Yucatán peninsula and Belize than with the rest of Guatemala. Current immigration to the Petén is largely from highland Guatemala and Guatemala City, from El Salvador,

or consists of former Peténeros repatriated from war refugee camps in Mexico (Schwartz 1990, personal notes 1998).

Guatemala's Civil War raged through the Petén in the 1980s. While one would be hard pressed to find benefit in the social and economic upheaval wrought by any war, the fighting in the Petén served to hold the region's natural resources out of extractive and tourist production (Nietschmann 1990). This has given Tikal area ecotourism entrepreneurs both a highly valued and protected attraction in the form of the intact forest, and the opportunity to learn from other ecotourism sites/sights such as Palenque, Tulum, and Copán as these places progressed ahead on Butler's tourism product life cycle (discussed in Chapter II) (Butler 1980).

The debate on resource use in the Petén is not a new phenomenon introduced by ecotourism. Though tourism income is now greater, historically the Maya Forest "grows the raw material for one of Latin America's most promising systems of extractive reserves: a rich mixture of renewable species, such as *xaté* palms, *chiclé* resin, and allspice" (Nations, et al. 1998:xv).¹ These extractive industries long ago integrated the Petén into the global capitalist economy. Though these industries are still active in the region, the three main threats now

¹ For a thorough description of the traditional culture and economy of the Petén, consult Schwartz's Forest Society (1990).

faced by protected areas in the Petén are community forestry concessions, petroleum concessions, and returned refugee settlements (Ponciano 1998).

TIKAL

Tikal National Park is the central tourist attraction in the Petén. The temples of Tikal are the largest and most magnificent of the Maya sites and have been attracting visitors since 1956 when the University of Pennsylvania began extensive archeological research (Flynn and Bonilla 1998). A field survey of El Rematé ecotourists confirms Flynn and Bonilla's assertion that "the overwhelming majority of tourists who come to the Petén visit only Tikal. . . most other tourist attractions in the region remain untouched" (1998:3). Though tourists commonly claim a desire to get off the beaten path, they do not travel in significant numbers to places where there is no convenient transportation (Zurick 1995). The only two paved roads in the Petén, one from Belize and the other from Guatemala City, merge just south of El Rematé and end 30 kilometers later at Tikal (Figure 2).

EL REMATÉ

As the gateway community to Tikal National Park, El Rematé is well positioned to take advantage of the exponential post-war growth in tourism to Tikal (Figure 3). As the first community north of where the road from Belize

merges with the road from Flores and the rest of Guatemala, El Rematé is the first place through which all Tikal-bound traffic must pass. The town strings along the road for about a mile on the far eastern shore of the largest lake in the region, Lago Petén Itzá, providing the ecotourist with excellent sunsets and an ever-changing hydro-vista (Schwartz 1990). El Rematé also borders Biotopo Cerro Cahuí, one of Guatemala's experimental biotope preserves and an ecotourism attraction itself (Ponciano 1998).

The municipal seat of Flores, thirty kilometers to the south and west of El Rematé, has traditionally been the launching point for trips to Tikal by foreigners (Figure 4). The airport is just outside of Flores and all regional ground transit flows through the terminal in the adjacent suburb of Santa Elena. Though Flores and Santa Elena have attractive tourist amenities like electricity, organized tour operators, bars, and restaurants, unchecked development has obscured most lake vistas, virtually eliminated beach access for swimming, and created the kind of semi-urban hub-bub that detracts from enjoying a sense of pristine nature prized by ecotourists. According to Flynn and Bonilla, "the raw sewage of the 30-plus hotels in Flores . . . drains untreated into Lake Petén Itzá" (1998).

With the deterioration of Flores as a desirable ecotourism gateway and the limited number and affordability of accommodations within Tikal National Park itself, the relatively pristine environment of El Rematé is increasingly competitive

despite the lack of electricity and other amenities. El Remat is rapidly developing the tourist amenities it currently lacks. Five primary forms of ecotourism infrastructure development are currently reshaping El Remat. They are:

- water project
- electrification project
- road expansion/improvement
- construction of accommodation facilities
- marketing.

Figure 4: Ecotour Sign in Flores

These projects (with the exception of marketing) will facilitate the comfort and convenience of a rapidly growing tourist market (INGUAT 1998). Many

tourists and locals fear that an expansion in tourism capacity will result in a diminishment of tourism quality as happened in Flores. Whether this actually occurs or not is a subject for future study. This study focuses on the current incipient stage of development (Figures 5 and 6). The large infrastructure developments, roads, water, and electricity, will be discussed in Chapter Four. The accommodation facilities are the subject of Chapter Five.

ECOTOURISM IN THE REGION

Much of the Petén is managed as part of the Maya Biosphere Reserve, which was created in 1990 as part of the United Nations' Man and the Biosphere Program. The reserve is further parceled into different forms of protected areas managed by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Sundberg 1998). Community-based ecotourism has been a major part of the NGO development and conservation strategy (Beavers 1995a, 1995b, 1995c; Primack, et al. 1998; Honey 1999).

The goal of community-based ecotourism businesses is to create viable economic alternatives within local communities in a manner that conserves the surrounding environment. These initiatives must be profitable and self-sustaining first in order to reach the more long-term goals of conservation and sustainable resource use. In order to accomplish this communities must have access to the market and the quality of the ecotourism experience that they provide must be high enough and priced correctly to attract a sufficient number of visitors to be profitable (Beavers 1995a:68).

Ecotourism development in El Rematé, by contrast, is not community-based but by private initiative. This, in combination with the above mentioned geographic/market advantages, is why El Rematé ecotourism initiatives do not receive assistance from the international conservationist NGOs working in the area. It is thought that, with its natural market advantages, El Rematé will do well enough without NGO assistance and that NGO ecotourism resources are better used to help communities with relatively less existing advantage (Beavers, personal communication 1998).

Conversely, implicit in the recognition that El Rematé's ecotourism development does not require NGO assistance is the fact that El Rematé competes with the community-based ecotourism initiatives for a large, though not unlimited, pool of potential tourism income. If El Rematé captures a bulk of the available tourism income at the expense of the community-based ecotourism, then the community-based projects are bound to fall short of their conservation and development goals. Unbounded by the conservation priorities of the NGOs or the slower processes of community decision making, the private entrepreneurs of El Rematé are free to respond to the rapidly evolving market however they see fit from a business perspective, without regard to conservation goals. The private ecotourism enterprises in El Rematé benefit from regional promotion of ecotourism done by the NGOs and yet do not have to do anything to support the projects. In fact, they could operate an ecotourism facility that in practice is in

Figure 5: New Construction at the House of the Lost Gringo, July 1997

Figure 6: New Construction at the Observatory of the Shaman, July 1997

direct conflict with regional conservation imperatives without diminishing their attractiveness to foreign ecotourists.

Local population estimates (gathered from tourism providers) range from 127 families to 1200 individuals. No official census has ever been made of El Rematé and the first official map is currently in progress (a part of the survey for the water project). With protected areas to the north and the lake to the east and southeast, many residents have small *milpas* beyond the western edge of the village. Employment outside of the tourist service sector is virtually non-existent though some individuals have worked in the chicle harvest and some young men are sent by their families to more populated places to seek out manual labor.

El Rematé is a well situated site for employment in tourism. It is situated within a prime market for tourism consumption, it is becoming more connected with global ecotourism markets, and has many excellent ecotourism resources both internally and regionally. El Rematé is an important site for examining contemporary ecotourism development and consumption. In the following chapter, attention will be paid to a general understanding of ecotourism and the role it plays in development and the global conservation of critical cultural and natural resources.

CHAPTER II

ECOTOURISM: DEVELOPMENT AND DEFINITIONS

El Rematé would not be settled in modern times were it not for the nascent ecotourism industry. As a new site for tourism consumption, El Rematé makes a good case study of changes in a local landscape that result from ecotourism development. Documenting El Rematé at this incipient development stage of its tourist industry serves two purposes. It will leave future geographers with baseline data for evaluating later stages of the tourist cycle as expressed in El Rematé. It could also serve as a model for comparison against the numerous other new ecotourism destinations on the gringo trail currently in the earlier exploration stage of the tourist industry cycle (Butler 1980).

At the foundation of all the diverse definitions of ecotourism is the notion that ecotourism differs from other types of tourism due to an explicit link to the enjoyment of natural features. Is the environmental impact left in the wake of ecotourists any different than that of the mass tourist? Often, the development of infrastructure to meet the service demands of the ecotourism consumer dramatically alters the quality and quantity of available natural settings. For example, if the attraction of a destination is its wildlife, the inevitable road

building associated with tourism development is likely to fragment wild habitat and scare off the very animals whose presence created the demand for roads.

A major contributing factor to the lack of consensus within the study of ecotourism on the impacts of ecotourism is that as a new and rapidly evolving phenomenon, it is difficult to discern between those changes wrought by ecotourism and those derived from other causes. In the example of road-building, how can ecotourism impact assessment separate out the impact caused by tourists using the roads and other users such as new agriculturalists, oil exploration, or other forms of commerce and recreation? The documentation in this study will serve as baseline data for comparison in the future study of the impacts of ecotourism development. This chapter starts with a discussion of the general role of tourism in the economic development process for under-developed economies and concludes with a review of the wide variety of applications for the word ecotourism.

TOURISM AND DEVELOPMENT

Tourism, in general, is a popular strategy for developing economies. Though tourism has been touted as a “smokeless” industry (Nicholson-Lord 1997), a “win-win development strategy” and “non-consumptive use of nature” (Place 1998:107), and “a ‘soft’ option, which can be developed relatively easily and does not require much in terms of specific planning or resources” (Butler

1993:28), its place in the globalization of the corporate capitalist economy makes its potential contribution to environmental sustainability questionable. As Honey notes, "the [travel] industry couples sustainable development with free trade, privatization, and government deregulation," and that in the developing countries where tourism is a significant economic feature, "these prescriptions for open borders for trade and investment permit the penetration of multinational corporations, sometimes into previously closed markets, and are often directly at odds with local efforts to participate in and benefit from tourism" (Honey 1999:32). According to Clancy, "when developing countries promote this trade - the provision of tourism-related goods and services to foreign visitors - they are, in effect, embracing greater integration into the world economy" (Clancy 1999:2).

Thus the tourist is an agent of change in the developing world much "like the trader, the employer, the conqueror, the governor, the educator, or the missionary" which came before them (Nash 1989:37). This metaphor between modern tourists and colonial power is rather appropriate considering Britton's assertion that "the more a Third World country has been dominated by foreign capital in the past, the greater likelihood there is of the prerequisites for establishing a local tourist industry being present" (Britton 1982:345).

AGENT OF ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL CHANGE

Alternative forms of tourism do not challenge the advancing frontier of corporate capitalism, rather, they facilitate the process because,

[in contrast to traditional tourism. . .] alternative forms of tourism penetrate further into the space of residents, involve them to a much greater degree, expose often fragile resources to greater visitation, expose the genuine article to tourism to a greater degree, may result in proportionately greater leakage of expenditure, and may cause political change in terms of control over development (Butler 1990:41).

This is a problem for those who see local control and participation as a key component of successful sustainable development and ecotourism endeavors (Sebenius and Riley 1995; Brandon 1990; Boo 1990). If the tourist is an agent of change and this change can penetrate deep into developing economies, especially those that had colonial relationships with the developed world, it is the tourist and the demands of their high-consumption lifestyles which will shape tourism media in the host sites more than the priorities of the hosts (Honey 1999:36).

Jenkins supports this argument proposing two immutable aspects of international tourism demand:

[. . .] for any host country, international tourism demand is largely an exogenously determined variable, and that the organization and distribution of that demand is primarily related to the satisfaction of tourists' expectations rather than meeting host country's development priorities (Jenkins 1982:232).

The processes by which tourism extends itself are not organic and do not evolve out of the needs or interests of the marginalized local poor who are most in need of benefiting from tourism but are created by "demand from overseas

tourists and new foreign company investment, or from the extension of foreign interests already present in that country” (Britton 1982:36).

ECOTOURISM IN LOCAL ECONOMIES

Place’s work in Tortuguero, Costa Rica illustrates some of this process at work (Place 1998, 1991, 1988). She asserts that the increasing share of the tourism market related to visitation to Tortuguero National Park being captured by non-local and non-domestic enterprises “underscores the lack of power that rural people have to control their own economic development process in the face of a global juggernaut such as tourism” (Place 1998:114). Local people in developing tourist locations feel the brunt of the adverse effects of tourism development such as congestion and pollution and lose access to the forest and other natural resources. Having lost their “subsidy from nature” local people are forced to work for wages in order to pay for resources they used to be able to acquire directly from the forest with an investment of labor and time (Place, 1998:108). Young’s work in Baja California, where new tourism competes for resources with pre-existing commercial fishing, shows that these local changes in resource use driven by tourism to new national parks are not endemic to Costa Rica or to tropical environments (Young 1995).

Zurick does not see tourism development as distinct from, let alone an improvement on, other forms of modern development. “The capital outlays

required to build the mega-hotels, the infrastructure required to transport and service the 400 million people who tour internationally each year, the tremendous revenues that are generated, all fail to distinguish tourism from other forms of modern industrial development” (Zurick 1995:178). According to Honey, ecotourism has not been much of an alternative from conventional forms of tourism. “With few exceptions, it [ecotourism] has not succeeded in moving beyond a narrow niche market to a set of principles and practices that infuses the entire tourism industry” (Honey 1999:394). If Zurick is correct in stating that tourism is not much different than other forms of development, and if, as Honey claims, ecotourism practice does not significantly differ from other forms of tourism, then ecotourism is far from realizing anything but its most benign definitions.

Perhaps it is the large role tourism and ecotourism play in developing economies in the less-developed world that makes the economic benefits of ecotourism a strong selling point among international conservation NGOs. Briggs’ contention that those in the ecotourism movement are ‘golden-greens’ practicing market environmentalism is emblematic of this perspective. He notes that “this not only gives ecotourism the moral high ground, but also a natural constituency among less-developed nations that are looking for ways to preserve their natural and cultural heritage as well as find a stable source of hard currency”

(Briggs 1992:219). As Matley shows the economic promise of tourism is not a new idea.

The flow of tourists has been accompanied by a flow of money. It has brought income and employment to many countries and regions where other resources are scarce and the prospects for increased employment in agriculture or industry poor. Tourism not only provides foreign currency earnings and thus contributes to the balance of payments, but may provide improved amenities for the local population through the development of transportation, hotels, restaurants, and stores to serve the tourists. Tourism may provide an infrastructure which forms a base for the development of a more diversified economy and the growth of other industries (Matley 1976:1).

ECONOMIC EFFICACY OF ECOTOURISM

Even when portions of the ecotourism trade do manage to trickle-down to local people, they are not often able to make the most of it. As Boo describes, “the potential benefits of ecotourism, both economic and environmental, are yet to be realized. The vast majority of parks are not in a position to gain financially from tourism because they do not provide adequate means for tourists to spend money” (Boo 1991:188). Weaver, on the other hand, worries that the “danger exists that the increasing prevalence of the financial rationale for ecotourism may become an obsession which supersedes due consideration for the intrinsic ecological value of such natural phenomena” (Weaver 1998:25). Boynton believes that ecotourism, by definition, “is based on the belief that threatened habitats and disappearing cultures will only survive if they are economically viable (Boynton 1997:18).

The economic viability of an ecotourism product does not ensure economic prosperity or even stability in the domestic tourism industry as the example of the Costa Rica park service in the early 1990's shows. Despite exponential growth in tourist visitation to national parks, the park service was virtually bankrupt by 1992 (Ashton 1992:68).

TOURISM CYCLES

Without careful consideration of the social consequences of tourism development, a denigration of the landscape may ensue which would no longer be able to attract visitors or support the local population (Ringer 1998:1). Wheeler is even less optimistic about the promise of ecotourism development. He suggests that the cuckoo is a more appropriate symbol than the golden goose (Wheeler 1994).

Butler's concept of a tourist area cycle of evolution has been assisting tourism researchers in sorting out the differences in the stages of tourism development for nearly twenty years (Butler 1980, 1990, 1993; Zurick 1992, 1995; Cooper 1994; Weaver 1998). The model is based on the product cycle concept and defines six main stages (Figure 7). They are:

1. a stage of exploration when a place is visited by few travelers and tourism facilities are virtually nonexistent;

Figure 7: Tourism Life Cycle from Butler (1980)

2. and provide limited lodging and meal services to them;
3. a development stage when tourism catches on, facilities become more developed, and the place is advertised in the travel promotional literature as a tourism destination;
4. the stage of consolidation and entrenchment when the local economy turns almost exclusively to tourism as its primary catalyst;

5. a stage when stagnation sets in, local environmental or social carrying capacities are exceeded, and artificial attractions appear; and
6. a stage of decline when the place loses its appeal in the tourism market (Butler 1980).

Some destinations can experience a seventh stage of rejuvenation of the tourist market but this is not as ubiquitous as the other six stages and requires a more specialized set of circumstances. Excepting these special cases, the direction of tourism development travels through these stages in a linear though not necessarily constant fashion. This has already been born out in other tourism sites in the region such as Palenque and Copan, and more locally in Flores. El Rematé, in general, is still in the early stages of tourism development. The flagship enterprises are rapidly moving through to later stages and are already showing the increase development and consolidation associated with this model of tourism development.

DEFINING ECOTOURISM

The many general definitions of ecotourism include: ecotourism is a popular form of travel, ecotourism takes place mostly in the less-developed portions of the world, ecotourism is a popular conservation strategy, ecotourism has currency as a development strategy, ecotourism is a fast-growing sector of the

trans-national corporate capitalist economy and aesthetic, ecotourism destinations are growing in number, size, and distribution.

Some of the above listed components of ecotourism can be verified, even quantified and mapped. Others on this abbreviated list of definitive statements regarding ecotourism are less concrete and form the aesthetic cycle of ecotourism, the feedback loop between the ecotourist and the ecotourism experience, nature and culture, and the haves and have-nots. Some elements of ecotourism are in conflict with each other.

The only thing that all ecotourism definitions have in common is that ecotourism is travel related to the enjoyment of nature. Beyond that there is no consensus definition of ecotourism. The definition of nature itself is highly contested territory (Cronon 1994:819a) with each individual maintaining multiple meanings for the term, some generated by ecology and others greatly mediated through popular culture. Ecology, media, and culture, too, are all extremely flexible concepts. However, this mutability and multiplicity inherent to any definition of ecotourism has not limited attempts at characterization.

Ceballos-Lascurain is credited with having coined the term ecotourism (Boo 1990; Ceballos-Lascurain 1996; Weaver 1998; Zurick 1995).

[Ecotourism is. . .] tourism that involves traveling to relatively undisturbed or uncontaminated natural areas with the objective of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery and its wild plants and animals, as well as any existing cultural manifestations (both past and present) found in these area. In these terms, nature-oriented tourism implies a scientific, aesthetic or philosophical approach to travel, although

the ecological tourist need not be a professional scientist, artist or philosopher. The main point is that the person who practices ecotourism has the opportunity of immersing himself/herself in nature in a manner generally not available in the urban environment (Ceballos-Lascurain 1996:20).

The Audubon Society and the Center for the New West have a working definition for ecotourism that adds an element of purposefulness. The ecotourist, by this definition, seeks to “understand the cultural and natural history of the environment” (Briggs 1992:218, Whelan 1991). It is not enough to simply enjoy nature, the ecotourist must participate in constructing progressive meaning from the ecotourism experience and participate in the protection of the resource and development of the economy. Their travel must include the goal of “maintaining the integrity of the ecosystem and providing economic opportunities” so that local individuals in ecotourism destinations can afford to participate in the conservation of natural resources (Briggs 1992:218).

Muñoz expects the ecotourist to behave as a scientist in which the ecotourism product is “carefully studied, modified, simplified, understood, taught, and improved” (Muñoz 1992:116). This is a lot of responsibility to expect from people who are on vacation and have traveled far at significant personal expense to engage in the consumption of leisure. Even professional conservationists have a hard time adhering to such strict and exacting standards. According to Costas Christ of The Ecotourism Society in an interview with Honey, not even the “committed of the committed” were able to live up to the definition, “responsible

travel to natural areas which conserves the environment and sustains the well being of local people,” in their own practice (Honey 1999:21).

Honey is slightly less demanding of ecotourists, satisfied so long as they “strive to be low impact” in their travel to fragile and pristine protected areas (1999:25). It “helps” if the ecotourist engages in some form of conservation pedagogy and “provides funds for conservation; directly benefits the economic development and political empowerment of local communities; and fosters respect for different cultures and for human rights” (Honey 1999:25), but these things are not actually required.

The view of industry is even more forgiving, asking from the ecotourist very little in exchange for the “eco” moniker. The corporate view of ecotourism, as espoused by Clark, is founded on three things:

1. Freedom of choice for the traveler and tourist;
2. Self-regulation to keep costs down and fair competition working to the advantage of the consumer; and
3. Increased sensitivity to local populations including history and culture, and to scenic aesthetics as well as heritage sites (Clark 1992:59).

The Queensland, Australia tourism board defines three different forms of ecotourism depending on the level of intensity:

1. *Self-reliant ecotourism* involves individual travellers or groups of less than ten, visiting relatively remote areas using non-motorized transportation; services are non-existent.
2. *Small group ecotourism* is somewhat more open in terms of utilizing less remote locales (but still off the beaten track) and larger groups; rudimentary services may be available.
3. *Popular ecotourism* involves larger numbers of tourists using mechanized transport to gain access to readily accessible natural attractions; usually a significant level of service is required (Weaver 1998:17).

There are other sub-categories of ecotourism such as Low Impact Eco-Tourism (LIET) which is further subdivided into eight goals for LIET and six characteristics of LIET (Lillywhite and Lillywhite 1992). Clearly, there is an ecotourism definition suited to anyone who needs one and fitted for everyone who uses one. Rather than add another small voice into the ecotourism definition fray, this project aims to document ecotourism as it is practiced by ecotourists and implemented by ecotourism service providers in El Rematé.

CONCLUSION

Ecotourism is a critical agent by which a peripheral place like El Rematé is integrated into the globalizing capitalist economy (Peet 1991). Thus El Rematé's

development as an ecotourism destination presents all the promise and problems associated with conservation of natural resources, economic development, and social change. The relatively pristine reality of El Rematé's present material landscape is yielding to the effects of a conceptual landscape founded on popular ecology and the pristine myth.

As Eyre states, "North American and European tourists seeking the exotic experience add their quota to the increasing human pressure on the many fragile ecosystems enshrined in the region's existing national parks, and encourage the establishment of new ones" (1990:16). If the impact of tourists is great enough to encourage the establishment of new national parks, then certainly their consumer preferences will drive the development of tourist facilities in and around parks like Tikal. Therefore, the next chapter will briefly look at the intersection of tourism, post-modern consumer culture, and media transmission.

CHAPTER III

POPULAR ECOLOGY AND MEDIA TRANSMISSION

The large scale physical infrastructure development in The Petén consists of expanded and improved roads, potable water delivery, and electrification. On a smaller scale, enterprising groups and individuals are improving their storefronts, their advertising signage, their products, and their connectivity with the global economy. As tourism media shapes landscape change in El Rematé and other budding eco-tourism destinations, we can measure the distribution and type of change against maps and photographs. The cultural exchange facilitated by tourism is not so easily documented.

THE MEDIA VIRUS IN THE MATERIAL LANDSCAPE

The conceptual landscape derived from tourist consumption of eco-tourism becomes the place where the meme, or media virus, of popular ecology gets transmitted. Once the seed of the idea of popular ecology is planted in the conceptual landscape, it then travels the information superhighway eventually reaching the minds of the tourists and international conservationists who will be shaping the material landscape of the ecotourism destinations through their consumption of tourism and setting and implementing of conservation policy,

respectively. This project has identified some elements of the El Rematé material landscape that have been strategically created and positioned with the intention of affecting the conceptual landscape. While it is possible to photograph and map the tourist facilities in El Rematé and to point out which elements function as advertising text, it is more difficult to show exactly how these texts travel.

The roots of appropriate land use perspectives derived through popular ecology can be traced to Denevan's "pristine myth" or the false notion that the pre-colonial Americas were sparsely populated and underexploited (Denevan 1992). The stories relayed back to Europe by Cortés and the conquistadors provided the colonialists with a rationalizing text by de-legitimizing native populations and the landscapes they had created. "Where natives had seen agricultural lands, Spaniards saw wasted lands" (Sluyter 1999:389). What the conquistadors did initially in rhetoric, later Spanish colonists accomplished in fact, establishing the material-conceptual feedback loop described by Sluyter (1999). Modern ecotourists and international conservationists keep the feedback process alive (Willems-Braun 1997, Bertolas 1995). Like the earlier colonialists, the post/neo-colonialists see the American tropical forests as pristine wild places when they are in fact extremely managed environments with a high degree of human interference. So long as the myth remains intact as a text in development discourse "the hope embodied in the concept of 'sustainable development' will remain an unrealizable contradiction in terms, an irrational figment of a Western

vision that axiomatically privileges the very goals and practices that have precipitated the global environmental crises that led to the concept's emergence" (Sluyter 1999:395).

As Denevan (1992), Sluyter (1999), Peet and Watts (1993), and many other contemporary geographers are demonstrating, misrepresentation of nature in the service of power (whether deliberate or inadvertently through misperception) has been a critical facet of cultural production for centuries. Post-modern cultural theorists have attempted to describe the way cultural productions of reality have begun to take precedence over the real in contemporary consensus consciousness. This chapter will briefly outline some of the key elements of the contemporary production of reality in order to understand how it is that popular ecology shapes ecotourism more than the 'real' ecology that operates in the forest. These pieces must be in place for the semiotic analysis of some important signs identified in the El Rematé ecotourism landscape in Chapter Six.

TOURISM MEDIA

The use of the term media here follows the perspective that media are quite literally the 'extensions of man' (McLuhan, 1966). A hammer is essentially a hand rendered harder and with more leverage; clothing is extra skin. Our media reflect our needs and are rooted in our physical nature. Electronic media provide us with extensions for our mouths and ears (the telephone), our visual systems

(television), and possibly our neural networks (artificial intelligence). As our modern human culture grows in complexity, so too do our media.

When most people use the term media, they mean to indicate either high-tech modern electronic media (radio, television, internet) or the journalism, commercial, and entertainment programming that constitutes the content of the electronic media. Tourism media are the extensions of tourism. Some forms of tourism media include construction of tourism facilities, tourism marketing, and development of tourism infrastructure (water, electricity, transportation). The agency of tourism media is evident in the ecotourism landscape of El Rematé, El Petén, Guatemala.

INTERTEXTUALITY IN ECOTOURISM

Tourists are attracted to those tourism enterprises which best intertextualize their product within the popular discourse of ecotourism. Intertextuality, as applied to popular culture studies, refers to the reading for signs of texts within other texts. Text here is given a broad definition, one that can encompass cultural artifacts as diverse as a cosmology and a landscape.

This expanded notion of texts originates from a broadly postmodern view, one that sees them as constitutive of reality rather than mimicking it- in other words, as cultural practices of signification rather than as referential duplications. For, just as written texts are not simply mirrors of a reality outside of themselves, so cultural productions, such as landscapes, are not 'about' something more real than themselves. But although not referential, such practices of signification are intertextual in that

they embody other cultural texts and, as a consequence, are communicative and productive of meaning (Barnes and Duncan 1992:5-6).

Intertextuality is useful in understanding how the service demands of international tourists, specifically ecotourists in this case, drive the scope and type of development in new destination locales. Though understanding how these demands are generated through the consumption of mass media texts in the home country is an important and underserved area of geography and tourism research, this study focuses on the other level at which intertextuality is at work in El Rematé.

The demand for ecotourism products is shaped not by an understanding of ecology or by adherence to best practice sustainable development guidelines but by media texts which reflect the popular ecology of the greenwashed texts of the environmental discourse in contemporary popular culture. The type of ‘environmentally friendly’ experience coveted by ecotourists is not contingent on the relative environmental sustainability of the product consumed. As long as a strong association is established between the ecotourism product and popular texts such as conservation, ancient Mayan culture, and adventure travel, tourists will consume the product. Even when the tourist is attempting to adhere to a strict definition of ecotourism in their travelling practice, they are not present long enough to scratch through the surface of an effectively presented eco-façade. For example, The Observatory of the Shaman and The House of the Long Gringo are

constructed with materials and methods that are quite different on an environmental sustainability continuum (Figures 6 and 7). One uses highly-processed non-local materials and power tools while the other utilizes a low-tech approach with locally harvested materials. Despite the significant physical differences, survey responses to questions on the importance of environmental factors in choosing accommodations showed no statistical difference between respondents at the two establishments (discussed in Chapter IV).

APPROPRIATION OF ECOTOURISM TEXTS

The ability of local ecotourism entrepreneurs to effectively appropriate texts of popular ecotourism discourse operates much the same way that local individuals and groups in the Petén have adopted conservationist discourse (Sundberg 1998a). Sundberg argues “that NGOs (Non-Governmental Organizations), as prominent social and political institutions in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, are able to construct *truths* about human-land relationships. In assuming to speak for nature, the NGO discourse frames the way environmental degradation is conceptualized” (Sundberg 1998a:93). By positioning themselves as the authentic keepers of ‘forest culture’ some local individuals have legitimized their status as the appropriate models for local resource management in an international conservation area. Ecotourism service

providers in El Rematé position themselves as legitimate keepers of local knowledge in much the same way.

Milne (1998:41) notes that “proponents of community participation in the tourism development process often ignore the well-known tendency of local elites to appropriate the organs of participation for their own benefit.” In like fashion, the ecotourism entrepreneurs of El Rematé have used the same appropriation of internationalist environmental discourse to privilege their enterprises over others within town and to advantage the town collectively relative to other potential destinations in the region.

REPRODUCTION AND AUTHENTICITY

Benjamin (1998) points to the modern capacity for the mechanical reproduction of art as a turning point away from genuine authenticity upon which the ‘authentic forest dwellers’ identified by Sundberg (1998a) trade. He asserts that “the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (Benjamin 1998:282). Prior manual modes of reproduction originated in the service of ritual and the authenticity of the reproduction is thus based in ritual. Consumers of mechanical reproductions are further removed from the original so that the work of art becomes emancipated “from its parasitical dependence on ritual” (Benjamin 1998:284). With photography and other mechanical modes of reproduction which distribute images en masse, “a different nature opens itself to

the camera than opens to the naked eye . . . an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored” (Benjamin 1998:286).

Thus begins a process of production that distances a consuming public away from nature as nature until, according to Deleuze and Guattari, people become mere “desiring machines” in which “there is no such thing as either man or nature now, only a process that produces the one within the other” (Deleuze and Guattari 1998:207).

With the means of cultural (re)production consolidated in the hands of a diminishing number of giant multinational corporations with diverse holdings in manufacturing and media, desire for leisure, status, and experience is fed back to the consumer as commodity. In modern capitalism, commodity has become integral to and inseparable from culture (MacCannell 1976). As Jameson observes, “the prodigious new expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing those very precapitalist enclaves (Nature and the Unconscious) which offered . . . critical effectivity” (Jameson 1991:41). The consumer does not critically assess the authenticity of the commodity so long as it appears sufficiently ‘real’. This makes the work of the ecotourism marketers relatively easy.

This process of desire commodification has subsumed reality in favor of cultural production of reality. As McCaffery notes, the ‘real’ experience of the tourist is now merely a pretext for reliving the experience later through

photographs, videos, and postcards commemorating the original experience (McCaffrey 1991).

These new realms of experience- theorized by Guy Debord's Society of the Spectacle, Baudrillard's 'precession of simulacra,' and Cood and Kroker's 'hyperreality' and metamorphosed perhaps most vividly by Gibson's 'cyberspace'- have become integrated so successfully into the daily textures of our lives that they often seem more 'real' to us than the presumably more substantial 'natural' aspects. Indeed, these reproduced and simulated realities, whose objective forms serve as a disguise for their subjective content have begun subtly to actually displace *the real*, rendering it superfluous (McCaffrey 1991:6).

A JUNGLE OF THE REAL

Baudrillard uses the highly geographic metaphor of the map having replaced the territory creating a "desert of the real itself" (Baudrillard 1994:1). The intent of the metaphor is to convey the sense that our cultural reproductions of the real and authentic have, through uncritical consumption of them, created a cultural landscape that effectively delegitimizes original texts of nature (nature itself) in favor of the commodities of nature such as an ecotourism site.

For example, ecotourists come to Tikal to experience pristine nature and a vanished civilization. Though the origins and evolution of the original texts, the forest and the Maya, are highly contested the ecotourist uncritically consumes the reproduction of those texts, that of a pristine forest and a vanished civilization. Despite the power of the metaphor, from a geographer's perspective, Baudrillard's 'desert of the real' exemplifies its own accusation, undervaluing the real abundance and diversity of natural processes taking place in the desert in

favor of the post-modern construction of the meaning of desert. A desert is not void of life, it is merely dry. And while it may be true that the map has replaced the territory in contemporary consumer culture, Baudrillard underestimates the considerable success with which contemporary cartographers are able to effectively represent the real world. Though no single map, or any form of reproduction for that matter, can achieve complete mimesis, a set of maps, especially when accompanied by other forms of geographic analysis, can create a high degree of understanding of the territory mapped.

SIGN READING

Given that the ecotourism landscape of El Rematé is a mediated text subject to the treatment given nature in the popular culture of the consumer nations, signs of popular ecology in the material landscape can be read and decoded for their symbolic meaning by way of semiotic interpretation. Semiotics is a popular post-modern critical tool with broad application used increasingly by tourism researchers to help identify and distinguish the constructed meanings upon which much tourism and its marketing depends. Culler (1981), MacCannell (1982), and Urry (1990) have all used semiotics, the interpretation of signs and symbols, explicitly in their deconstruction of tourism consumption. In Chapter Six, the semiotic approach to reading a media text will be applied to signs of popular ecology identified in the ecotourism landscape of El Rematé. Next, in

Chapter Four, attention will be turned to the infrastructure development taking place in El Rematé and a brief explication of the results of a survey of ecotourists visiting El Rematé in the summer of 1998.

CHAPTER IV

ECOTOURISTS AND DEVELOPMENT IN EL REMATÉ

As mentioned in Chapter One, El Rematé is experiencing a rapid landscape change at the hands of new infrastructure developments. This infrastructure development is organized and operated by the national government, international NGOs or both, depending on the project.

New infrastructure in a previously remote and isolated place on the periphery of the global economy presents problems and opportunities and generates both support and trepidation, within and between communities and sometimes within and between individuals. Interviews were conducted in August of 1998 with El Rematé residents from a spectrum of ecotourism related occupations to ascertain local sentiments towards the new infrastructure initiatives. In the first part of this chapter, those findings will be presented.

In the second part of this chapter, results from the survey of ecotourists staying in El Rematé during the summer of 1998 are discussed. The interviews, survey data, mapping, and documentary photography will all be used as baseline data for a future study on the evolution of the El Rematé tourism corridor. Much of the information gathered in fieldwork is not valuable outside of the time-based

comparison. That which is relevant to El Rematé as a site for the expression and study of signs of popular ecology will be reported here.

INTERVIEW RESULTS

The water project is a dramatic improvement of the existing inadequate system. The electrification project, on the other hand, is a brand new utility that presents a host of potential problems and possibilities. The water project began as a grass-roots initiative organized locally with the material support of business and community leaders. Once the project broke ground (Figure 8), the municipal authorities in Flores took control and handed over control of the project to Cooperación Española (CE), a Spanish NGO. Signs on the highway (since vandalized) have advertised the good deeds of CE for over a year while no ground has been broken and a ground survey is only in progress.

In interviews, several local citizens expressed anxiety over the perceived aims of the water project. The citizens of El Rematé have needed better access to potable water for a long time. These needs were ignored by the authorities until recently when the potential for tourist income became real. Locals fear that the water system will be constructed not to serve them, but to serve the new larger-scale tourist hotels being planned. Some residents also expressed a fear that the draw on the lake will exacerbate an already receding shoreline, negatively impacting El Rematé's natural aesthetic attraction.

Figure 8: Water Project Survey Crew

Many local people are active in the effort to bring electricity to El Rematé (Figure 9). Local interviews identified several positive and negative impacts associated with the arrival of electricity. On the positive side:

- Refrigeration (both for homes and restaurants) will increase health and economy of maintaining health
- Lights will allow school age children more study time
- Television and computers will increase global connectivity
- Street lights will make the road safer
- Tourists demand cold beer and healthy food and with electricity, the community will serve more tourists and more people will have jobs

- El Rematé will “twinkle like the stars when lit”

Figure 9: Electricity Project Community Meeting

The negative associations of electrification were based on aesthetic, social, and environmental issues:

- The lights will dim the stars
- There will be bars and music disturbing the night peace
- Tourists will expect more developed world comforts which El Rematé will not be able to provide
- The town will grow and therefore so will crime, prostitution, and drinking.

As of August 1997, the power line was 18km away in the town of Paxcaman and scheduled to arrive in El Rematé by January 1998 (Figure 10). As

Figure 10: End of Electricity Line, Paxcaman, July 1997

of July 1998, the poles were installed but the line had not yet been stretched and most residents had not paid the deposit on or installed the required meter.

Between August 1997 and July 1998, pavement on the road to Belize was extended 5km. Several safety improvements were made on the road from Flores, most notably the installation of guardrails and reflective signage. In July 1998, using earthmovers on loan from the Government of Japan, improvements were made on the often impassable north shore road (Figure 11). Plans are in place to eventually pave the entire length of both roads.

ECOTOURISM SURVEY

A survey instrument was developed to gather demographic and consumer preference data for ecotourists visiting El Rematé during July and August 1998. Eighty-eight visitors to the House of the Lost Gringo and the Observatory of the Shaman were first asked to rate the importance of three factors in selecting their vacation destination. The three factors were natural features (forest, beach,

Figure 11: Road Improvements, North Shore Road

wildlife, etc.), cultural features (temples, indigenous culture, etc.) and environmental sustainability.¹ These questions, in conjunction with the demographic data, were asked in order to establish where the ecotourists in El Rematé fit into the spectrum of definitions for ecotourism. Nearly all respondents at both establishments expressed a strong preference for both natural and cultural features.

General demographic information from the sample of 88 self-defined ecotourists staying in El Rematé in July and August 1998 indicated that the average age is 28.5 years, the average trip length is 56.6 days, the average total budget is slightly under \$2000 (including transportation to and from home) or around \$35 per day. Nearly all were from either North America or Western Europe and most of the ecotourists surveyed had professional occupations or were students. The predominance of educators and students from highly developed and mediated nations underscores the notion that ecotourists in El Rematé are active participants in shaping the global debate on natural resource use.

The respondents were then asked to rate the demand for 10 tourist accommodation services (refrigeration, private bath, vegetarian meals, air conditioning, electric light, beer/liquor, hot water, flush toilet, recycling, and shower), keeping in mind the potential impacts of providing the service. This was

¹ The common currency of the term environmental sustainability was grossly overestimated. Many respondents stated that they had never heard the term and could only guess at its meaning. It is assumed that others also did not know what environmental sustainability was but did not say so. Therefore the results from this question were discarded.

to establish whether the stated consumer preferences of the ecotourists correlated to their actual ecotourism consumption.

It was expected that there would be a discrepancy in responses to the questions regarding impacts of tourism services between the two main facilities at which the sample was generated. Ecotourism consumers at the House of the Lost Gringo are creating demand for a more resource intensive product less consistent with traditional local methods. The House of the Lost Gringo, with its more developed presentation and services and non-local food, construction methods, and materials was expected to generate responses that would indicate a lower commitment to the higher-end ecotourism ideals regarding environmental responsibility. Conversely, ecotourism consumers at The Observatory of the Shaman are creating demand for a product that uses more sustainable materials, architecture, and construction methods. With its allegedly indigenous construction and aesthetic The Observatory of the Shaman was expected to generate survey responses that would indicate more commitment to putting the grander sustainable development ideals of ecotourism into practice.

All the survey responses were very favorable to the environmental ethos espoused by ecotourism proponents. There was, however, no significant

Figure 12: “How important are natural features in your choice of destination?”

difference in the responses from the two facilities.² The responses to the questions, “How important are natural features (forest, beach, wildlife, etc.) in your choice of destination?” shown in figure 12, and “How important are cultural features (temples, indigenous culture, etc.) in your choice of destination?” shown in figure 13, indicated that there is no significant difference in responses at the two different establishments.

The Observatory of the Shaman makes much of the fact that they provide a healthy vegetarian meal each night, often using exotic local produce. Though

² Chi-square tests were run on each of the survey questions to statistically determine if there was any difference between the two groups (Ebdon 1998). The null hypothesis was that there is no significant statistical difference between the two groups. The threshold of significance was set at .05 so that any categories which score lower than .05 would be those which prove the alternative hypothesis, that there is a significant statistical difference between the groups.

Figure 13: “How important are cultural features in your choice of destination?”

the House of the Lost Gringo provides some vegetarian food, it is only an option to the meat based main course. Nevertheless, survey responses on the demand for vegetarian meals showed no significant statistical difference between The Observatory of the Shaman and the House of the Lost Gringo (Figure 14).

Private bathrooms are not ubiquitous in accommodation facilities on the gringo trail. Each of the rooms at the House of the Lost Gringo has a private bathroom. The Observatory of the Shaman has a central collective shower and toilet facility. Despite this important difference in service provision, responses from ecotourists surveyed at The House of the Lost Gringo and The Observatory of the Shaman (Figure 15) showed no significant difference.

Figure 14: Vegetarian meal demand

Figure 15: Private Bath demand

Remarkably, even when one facility provided a service that the other did not (private bath in the case of The House of the Lost Gringo, vegetarian meals in the case of The Observatory of the Shaman) there was still no significant differential in the responses. This is a strong indicator that ecotourists do not bother to ensure that their own environmental standards are met when consuming ecotourism service products.

By contrast, the demand for electric light was the only service demand which scored differently between the two groups. Based on the fact that the Observatory of the Shaman relies on candles and House of the Lost Gringo provides gas generated battery powered electric light, it was expected that the survey data would reveal a significant statistical difference between the groups. This makes electric light the only category to meet the initial expectations of the survey by showing that the two groups are indeed statistically similar in their demand for this one creature comfort. Determining whether this expressed difference in preference for electric light is a real aesthetic choice on the part of ecotourists or a statistical anomaly will require follow-up research. Of the ten services surveyed, the difference between electric and candle light is most visibly expressed in the aesthetic landscape of a facility. The availability of hot water, refrigeration, or a shower, for example, does not significantly alter the ambience of an ecotourism facility to the degree that electric light does. If the data on electric light demand is not a statistical anomaly then perhaps this reinforces the

proposition that tourists are indeed making their consumer choices based on aesthetic perception rather than on the development and conservation ideals of ecotourism.

As mentioned previously, the original intent of the survey was to show that ecotourism demand at the flagship facilities would reflect the real differences between the two ecotourism products. Instead, survey results revealed (with only one exception, electric light) that the stated consumer preferences of ecotourists in El Rematé are remarkably similar. Exactly how ecotourists with the same stated consumer preferences choose between two very different accommodation facilities is a matter for follow up study. One possible answer is that even though ecotourists are defined as being more environmentally responsible in their travels than other tourists, they do not necessarily ensure that their practice meets their own standards.

Local citizens are ambiguous regarding the future benefits of El Rematé's infrastructure and tourist development balancing the hope of economic benefit with the real potential for undesirable environmental and cultural impacts. The ecotourists in El Rematé do not insert the principles of the discourse of ecotourism into their service demands and practice, at least not those who traveled to El Rematé in the summer of 1998. These two factors, linked because it is ecotourist demand that drives the infrastructure development, will dramatically reshape the El Rematé tourism corridor in the coming years.

CHAPTER V

ECO-CAMPING FACILITIES

At the forefront of El Rematé's tourist service development are its eco-camping facilities. According to Ecotourism Society's Green Evaluation Program, accommodations are an area of the ecotourism service sector in which there is a large discrepancy between expectations driven by the culture of concern for the environment among ecotourists and the real environmental impacts of providing the services ecotourists demand (Norman, et al. 1997). Eco-camping facilities market themselves as a place where this gap is consciously narrowed. Like most marketing texts, the reality rarely lives up to the advertising.

There are two flagship eco-camping facilities in El Rematé and several new imitators. One, the House of the Lost Gringo, owned and operated by a US citizen, is modeled after a small inn in Florida and is constructed using materials and methods more common in the developed world. It has private rooms and baths, electric light from a gas generator, and mildly spiced food.

The other, the Observatory of the Shaman, is subtitled "School for the Natural Arts and Sciences" and consists of several open-air bungalows with hammocks. Construction materials are grown and mined on or near the premises using allegedly ancient methods. The owner/ operator is a former jungle guide

who built his facility with the expressed purpose of sharing Maya resource management ideas with the rest of the world. Every facet of the facility reflects this goal.

The civil war in Guatemala held the Petén out of ecotourism production during the early stages of the industry's development. So, while other popular destinations on the Gringo Trail, such as Palenque or Tulum, are reaching higher stages of Butler's tourism cycle (1980) those in the Petén are still at the early exploration or incipient development stages. This differential has allowed the early entrants into the Tikal accommodations business to incorporate the lessons of the pioneers of their industry.

The appeal of the House of the Lost Gringo lies in Mr. Cane's knowledge and application of the fact that even the most intrepid adventure traveler sometimes, and most tourists all the time, wish to be taken care of comfortably. Mr. Sosa, though first in the Tikal region, relies heavily on the ready made market for the Maya experience created by his predecessors in Palenque and Tulum. While their NGO supported competitors in the Petén, who have not likely ever traveled themselves, are just learning that they need to provide the cleaner bathrooms and richer menus ecotourists are accustomed to (Beavers 1995b), Mr. Sosa and Mr. Cane are already doing so. This allows their developmental resources to go towards further refining their product and marketing it to an even broader audience rather than the generation of basic service provision.

The two flagship enterprises in El Rematé have achieved their status for two main reasons; 1) their early entry into the industry, and; 2) their success at intertextualizing the product they offer with texts ecotourists are familiar with and fond of already. With the success of the Observatory of the Shaman, the House of the Lost Gringo, and the industry as a whole have come competitors and imitators. These new facilities, in turn, intertextualize the Observatory of the Shaman and the House of the Lost Gringo. What separates the referenced from the reference in this case is a matter of available capital resources and location.

The owners of the eco-camping facilities in El Rematé were asked to how their facilities came to be. No definition was given of what was meant by “how the facility came to be” in order to best elicit their perception of the process. These creation myths, like all myths, are based on but not bound by the truth (and thus may contradict more empirical data in other parts of this paper). The truth (or coherence) of the stories is not nearly as important or pertinent to the development of ecotourism as the fact that the myths provide the templates both for the tourist experience and for newer ecotourism entrepreneurs. In the case of each facility, a description of the facility, recent developments, and service provision will follow the creation story.

THE OBSERVATORY OF THE SHAMAN

Creation Story

Martin Sosa left seminary school at the age of eleven because, as he is proud to claim, "no school can teach what the forest can show you." For disciplinary and economic reasons, his family sent him to live with his father who was cutting chicle in the Petén. Martin came to know the forest well and began working as a guide for the archeologists who were studying the Mayan temples.

In 1987, with his seven brothers and his father, Martin Sosa started the first artisan workshop on the lakeshore. With hand tools, they made small carvings of animals from the forest and icons of the stelae at Tikal using locally harvested wood. These were sold to tourists who stopped to see the lake on their way between Tikal and Flores.

Later, they built six bungalows and a kitchen to serve the tourists and started the work of making The School for Natural Arts and Sciences. The camping facility (bungalows and hammock space) was made to teach people "the natural ways." Kids would bring tourists who stopped at the artisan huts up from the road where they were provided with information about tour guides and other services. There was no tourism in El Rematé at that time; now there are a thousand families here working with the tourism and "we educate the people without the help of the government"(Field notes)

Like Mr. Cane, Mr. Sosa sees his enterprise as a model for local citizens to get involved in the tourism trade. He feels that by involving local people in the

tourist trade it gives them something to do other than cutting down the forest.

If local people do not find a place for themselves in the tourism now, Sosa suggests, the big hotels that are coming will outbid them and the forest knowledge will not be passed on. The knowledge and money has to keep moving.

"This school for natural arts and sciences has always been here," invokes Mr. Sosa after a meal of vegetarian cooking of a quality rarely available in Guatemala. "The first peoples here sat where you are and saw what you see. After generations they knew the cycles and they began to do work with them. We must continue to do this. Tikal brings you here but the nature is what you will learn."

"It is important that the development be natural," says Mr. Sosa, "Economics must have interest in ecology. Interest in ecology brings people to Tikal. The more people know and are interested and involved, the harder it is for the Army to go back to war."

Mr. Sosa concludes with a condemnation of the international conservation community that underprivileges the status of local people. "The resources of the forest cannot be sold. The international NGOs cannot know the forest . . . the real ecologists are the poor people who have to live in nature. The international ecologists bring the Army and security with them."

The Facility

The Observatory of the Shaman is the first accommodation tourists encounter on the road from Flores to Tikal. Perched atop the cliff opposite the road from the artisan huts and the public beach access, visitors to The Observatory of the Shaman are treated to a world-class vista of Lago Petén Itzá, a pair of semi-domesticated monkeys, and a deliberate attempt to make primitive living comfortable and appealing. Though quite comfortable, it's reputation is built on the owners effective attempt to create a space in which tourists feel as though they are experiencing the lifestyle of the ancient Mayan cosmologists who, as the owner will tell you, created the features that attracts tourists to the region.

All the structures have thatched palm roofs. The bungalow walls are made of long sticks covered with stucco made from limestone mined on the premises (Figure 16). The white stucco is then decorated with images from the stelae at Tikal. The material for the roofs is harvested on private agroforestry land from 8-15 year old trees. According to the crew boss, the trees are difficult to establish but are extremely hardy once the root system is full. Roofing material can be harvested annually and after 3-5 years, evidence of disturbance is gone. These roofs last from 5-15 years depending primarily on maintenance and weather.

As of the first field visit in July 1997, there were 7 open-air bungalows, a communal bath with three toilets, three showers, a sink and mirror, a kitchen area, a large dining area, and a garden. Each bungalow has a bed, a hammock, a chair

Figure 16: Bungalow at the Observatory of the Shaman

and a table. The dining area doubles as a social space outside of meal time and enjoys a spectacular westward view across Lago Petén Itzá. During the first field visit, a new larger roof was being installed over the dining area.

Recent Developments

In the interim between field visits, the kitchen was expanded and given a new larger thatched roof. Two more expansion projects were begun in the summer of 1998. The first was the construction of a large covered area where numerous hammocks will be slung for use by tourists who are willing to forgo any privacy in exchange for reduced lodging fees and an extremely open social

setting. This is an attractive and increasingly popular accommodation option for ecotourists with a limited budget.

The other new project is the addition of a bar, a lake-viewing deck and a small multi-purpose store. None of these additions alone will have much impact on increasing Mr. Sosa's profile in the alcohol or sundries markets. Taken as a whole though, this attempt to vertically integrate so many tourist service demands in one facility significantly adds to their ability to capture a more comprehensive sector of El Rematé's tourism market.

Services

In the dining area is a large framed map of Guatemala and a notice board advertising other tourist services and destinations. Mr. Sosa rarely leads trips anymore but still offers to organize all manner of jungle excursions from multiple-day hiking journeys through the Maya Biosphere Reserve to evening canoe or horse jaunts.

The primary service provided is access to the surrounding jungle and exposure to allegedly ancient Maya modes of environmental interface on display in the architecture. The open air structures allow for substantial interaction with the surrounding forest fauna. The chorus of insects and amphibians at night, lizards and butterflies in the roofing, and monkeys (one howler, one spider) in the dining room contribute concretely to the tourists sense of being immersed in nature.

THE HOUSE OF THE LOST GRINGO

Creation Story

In 1972, Daniel Cane, an owner of a small zoo in Florida, flew over Lago Petén Itza during a tour of Tikal. In early 1975 he returned, this time overland by car. Hearing of a land give-away on the far side of the lake, he leased some property and built a cabin. He soon realized that there was a need for tourist accommodations for the European/VW bus crowd and started a campground which consisted of a restaurant, bungalow, and camping. In December of 1975, he sold the Florida zoo.

In 1981, the Civil War arrived. There were no customers and the lake had risen 3 meters making road travel difficult. He married a local Guatemalan woman and in 1983, they had a daughter. They were losing money and hoped the war would end soon. The locals thought he was crazy at first but eventually they were frequenting the restaurant.

Soon it became apparent that the war was not ending and in June of 1984 the campground was sold for \$15,000. They returned to Florida and spent the next 6 years travelling back and forth between the US and Guatemala.

Shortly after the creation of the Maya Biosphere Reserve and the publication of *National Geographic's* Ruta Maya issue, they returned and built their current house. By 1990, the Army began losing ground and with democracy, the tourists returned. Later that year they bought the neighboring property. By

1992 they were renting apartments by the month to conservation workers and Peace Corps volunteers.

In 1994 they began renting 2 rooms and began investing in more rooms. There are now 10 rooms. During this time two other facilities, the Observatory of the Shaman and The El Camino Real, also began construction. Between 1975 and 1991, Mr. Cane's facility was the only accommodation in El Remat.

The Facility

Visitors to the House of the Lost Gringo can rely on top-quality service and a clean, comfortable setting. This facility is offered as a place where the most difficult and annoying parts of traveling in this part of the world are kept at bay. It appeals both to tourists who want to maintain the comforts of home (see figure 17) as well as those whose journey is an attempt to immerse themselves in a more simple life style but could use a good shower just this once.

There are currently 10 double occupancy rooms each featuring doors, screens, beds, chairs, a hammock, a light, and a private bath with running water and shower. Most rooms face onto a common yard with planted grass and some food and shelter plants to attract birds. On the end of the yard opposite the main building is a small beach/lake access. A gas generator provides electric light and refrigeration for the kitchen. The kitchen serves a set course meal each night, a la carte during the day, and offers a box lunch in the morning for those spending the day in Tikal. The entire facility is fenced and the foyer leading to the front gate is

Figure 17: Room at the House of the Lost Gringo

used to advertise tourist services, other gringo trail destinations, and includes some useful information on how to maximize an ecotourist visit to Tikal.

Recent Developments

The expansion project, which consisted of the construction of the new rooms, the entrance area, and the restaurant, took place in the summer and fall of 1997. Although this was not the only accommodation facility to make significant structural improvements during this time, it is the only one to use primarily power

tools and construction methods more common to the United States than Guatemala.

Mr. Cane invested in high quality machined lumber shipped from the capitol, Guatemala City. These materials and methods required the hiring of only 2 - 4 day laborers per day over the course of the construction. The House of the Lost Gringo is the only establishment in El Rematé constructed in this fashion. The methods employed by Mr. Cane are in contrast to the dominant local style which is a skeleton structure built of medium size poles topped with a thatched roof. Walls and doors are virtually non-existent and never solid. This method requires lower capital and higher labor investments. Whether driven by limited resource availability or the desire to maintain the more rustic aesthetic found attractive by ecotourists, most structures in the area are constructed in the same simple style. Thus, the House of the Lost Gringo stands apart from the local architectural standard and cultural norm.

Services

In addition to accommodations and meals, The House of the Lost Gringo provides several useful services to its clients. Some of these services are common in the industry and in the area while others are unique to this facility and its attention to North American and European standards of comfort and convenience.

After the evening meal, Mr. Cane, like Mr. Sosa, makes himself available as a source of anthropological, archeological, and historical information regarding

Tikal. For tourists planning to visit Tikal National Park the next day, Mr. Cane provides connections with local mini-van drivers, box-lunches, wake-up calls, and other conveniences. For the occasional multiple day guest, a pair of mountain bikes is available for exploring the town. Tourists can also make connections with private guides for trips to Ixlú, Yaxha, and other smaller and more remote sites in the Maya Biosphere Reserve.

Mr. Cane exploits the knowledge he has accrued as the area's most tenured Gringo to cater to his clients desires for unique ecotourism experiences. This facility also attempts to provide every tourist ammenity local conditions allow. It is in the balance between the unique ecotourism experience and the high level of comfort and convenience that the success of the enterprise lies.

Under a less restrictive set of geographic constraints, this facility would have all the conveniences ecotourists are accustomed to at home. For example, the House of the Lost Gringo is the only facility in El Rematé which has a reservation system. Even though the reservation must be made through the erratically available community telephone and that the person taking the message may not speak English or know what a reservation is, the service is offered nonetheless. With the arrival of electricity, the reservation system will be online and guests will be provided internet access.

CONCLUSION

The operators of all of the new tourist facilities on the El Rematé tourism corridor are taking their inspiration and their template from either Mr. Sosa, Mr. Cane, or both. They were the first ecotourism entrepreneurs in El Rematé and their success is spawning much imitation in style and form. The expansion projects at the respective flagship enterprises indicate that these two models of development are likely to continue pushing forward as the dominant models for ecotourism and remain an inspiration to both competitors and clients.

CHAPTER VI

SIGNS OF POPULAR ECOLOGY

Five signs of popular ecology are described as they exist in El Rematé as of the summer of 1998. Signs of popular ecology are symbols of ecology as expressed in popular culture forms which appear in the ecotourism landscape of El Rematé. The ecology expressed in these signs is an understanding derived from modern media and may lack congruence with ecology as it functions in the forest.

SIGNS: THE ROAR OF THE JAGUAR

Each evening at The Observatory of the Shaman, a vegetarian meal is served to the assembled tourists. The ingredients for the meal come from three sources, the market in Santa Elena, the organic garden on the premises, and from the surrounding jungle. Being that healthy and flavorful vegetarian meals are difficult for tourists to encounter on The Gringo Trail, the evening meal has become an important part of the attraction and reputation of the facility. To Mr. Sosa, the evening meal is merely the appetizer for his after-dinner 'lecture'. What follows is an example of the type of presentation offered by Mr. Sosa.

"There are the seven senses," one of the lectures begins.

“There are the five we all know. . . the taste. . . , smelling. . . , the touch.”

He wipes at his arms, “hearing with the ears. . . ,” touches his earlobe, “and the vision.”

As he says “the vision” he points just forward of his temple and opens his eyes wide, grinning as if what we should see with this vision is a future that is amazing and beautiful.

“Then the sixth is the intuition and the seventh is inside here,” he rubs his puffed out belly, “the roaR of the jaguar!” He rubs and puffs some more and then lets out a slow and building growl followed by a knowing chuckle and a pull from his beer.

These after-dinner lectures form the pedagogical foundation of his school for the natural arts and sciences. It is in these times that the guests learn about the mythic Maya ethos espoused by Mr. Sosa as critical to the future of global conservation efforts. According to Mr. Sosa, the site where he constructed his eco-camping facility is the place where the early Maya astronomers and cosmologists made their initial observations on the motions of the stars and the planets upon which their calendar and society were subsequently based.

Everything about the facility, of which these lectures are emblematic, is designed to recreate a sense of how the Maya proto-priests lived when they were there, from the menu, to the glyphic icons from the stellae of Tikal painted on the bungalow walls (Figure 18).

Mr. Sosa continues, “The jaguar does not hunt. He only walks through the forest in a fifty kilometer circle. Like this.” He makes a circuitous gesture. “When the animals of the jungle know it is their time to go on to somewhere else, they place themselves in the jaguars path at the right time and he takes them.”

Figure 18: Jaguar Priest Icon in Bungalow at Observatory of the Shaman

Mr. Sosa does not need to relay accurate information regarding local ecology and anthropology in order to have the desired effect. His objective is to insert his vision of “the natural ways” into the global debate on natural resources and conservation. He is like any other advertiser in the global media milieu in that image is everything; he differs from them in that he is using the product to sell an image rather than an image to sell a product. His use of the term “eco-

camping" is a good example of his appropriation of popular ecological themes in the service of marketing his educational product.

Camping is commonly associated with temporary primitive living without utilities or permanent structures in a non-urbanized locale. In other words, when an ecotourist thinks of the word camping, they think of sleeping under the stars or in a tent, a campfire cookout and a natural setting. Even though the structures of the eco-camping facilities are much more permanent than a tent, the more open and primitive lifestyle promoted by the architecture resonates well with the ecotourists' enjoyable perception of camping while minimizing the inconvenient aspects. As accommodations, eco-camping facilities differ little from other places known as hotels, *huespedes*, bungalows, or cabañas.

The eco-camping aesthetic environment, as arranged by Mr. Sosa, gives the ecotourist the sense that they are experiencing an authentic recreation of the ancient Mayan lifestyle. So long as the experience effectively references the texts they have traveled with the hope of encountering, such as tropical forest ecology and Maya cosmology, they will find the experience enjoyable and remarkable. The authenticity of the experience will escape unexamined and be taken for granted.

When a tourist from Europe sits petting the monkey on their lap while watching a colorful sunset reflected in the lake and listening to someone who looks like a shaman speak of "The Natural Ways," they are thinking that they are

getting a great value for the money they spent (Figure 19).

Figure 19: Monkey and Tourist, Observatory of the Shaman

It matters little to the tourist that the monkey was repatriated from a private zoo and hangs out at the Observatory of the Shaman because she was rejected by the local wild population, or that the storyteller is as much of a businessman as an educator. They read the text uncritically. Moreover, when they relay the text, in their own storytelling and postcard writing, it is Mr. Sosa's version of 'the natural ways' which thus enters popular discourse regardless of its consistency with real forest ecology.

Mr. Sosa cleverly positions himself as an authentic bearer of the indigenous ecological knowledge ecotourists seek in their travels, much like the

self-positioned local experts in the conservation discourse described by Sundberg (1998a). To the uncritical consumer of his ecotourism product, Mr. Sosa becomes an effective version of the wisened shaman. When the ecotourist returns to their heavily mediated homes in Bonn, Brussels, Boston and the like, and during the rest of their travels on The Gringo Trail, they relay the stories they heard from Mr. Sosa to their friends, students, co-workers, and fellow ecotourists. These are people who are interested in and possibly very active in the global debate on conservation and the use of natural resources. By creating a high-quality ecotourism product that will be long remembered and talked about by those who consume it, Mr. Sosa inserts his vision of the optimal form of human/nature interface into the global environmental discourse.

Every aspect of the Observatory of the Shaman and the experience of staying there is intended to be a showcase for indigenous Maya resource management practices. The varied origins of El Rematé's residents make the use of "indigenous" in this case problematic. Nonetheless, it is indigenous Mayan methods of construction and decoration that are on display here. The layout and construction of the facility is structured to accomplish two interlinked goals: 1) To demonstrate "the Maya way"/"The Natural Ways" and, 2) to make the ecotourist as receptive to the experience as possible.

Contemporary literary theorists and cultural anthropologists have, according to Barnes and Duncan (1992), expanded the concept of text to include a variety of cultural productions including landscape. As a landscape text, The

Observatory of the Shaman depends on its relationship with other culturally produced texts. Therefore, its strength lies in its success at intertextualizing other aspects of the ecotourism experience. Their long tenure in this new industry has given Mr. Sosa and Mr. Cane a number of attractive ecotourism texts to draw upon to create their contribution to the global post-modern milieu.

Places are intertextual sites because various texts and discursive practices based on previous texts are deeply inscribed in their landscapes and institutions. We construct both the world and our actions towards it from texts that speak of who we are or wish to be (Barnes and Duncan 1992:8).

Mr. Sosa is able to further the range of his teachings on “the natural ways” because he intertextualizes other successful ecotourism texts and more specifically because his presentation and rhetoric are designed to fit seamlessly with the consumptive desires of adventure tourists and ecotourists.

SIGNS: THE BROCHURE

Tourists to the region have traditionally lodged in the municipal seat of Flores or Santa Elena where the bus station and airport are located. Although El Rematé has many ready-made advantages over other destinations and gets positive coverage in the guidebooks, it is not as well known as many of its competitors.

In order to remedy the gap between El Rematé’s current level of visitation and potential market share, Mr. Cane has created a colorful brochure entitled “Free Guide to El Rematé.” The brochure is distributed to other regional

ecotourism locations via supportive guests staying at The House of the Lost Gringo. Mr. Cane conceptualized, spearheaded, and organized the production of the brochure. He felt that a collective advertisement increasing consumer awareness for the town of El Rematé as a whole would be more effective than only advertising his facility. Also, a collective effort would, in theory, be cheaper and easier for each of the individuals involved.

After the initial publication of the brochure, Mr. Cane found that the original enthusiasm for the project on the part of the other participants waned when the bill came due. He also did not receive the agreed upon assistance with distribution. In response, Mr. Cane has included an additional insert into those brochures he distributes that gives more detailed information on the services and fees at The House of the Lost Gringo.

At the top of the front page of the tri-fold brochure is a four-color cartoonish caricature of the town from a north-facing perspective (Figure 20). In the foreground are several thatched palapas, two docks on the lake, a small paddle-boat, some jumping fish, a lizard and a turtle. In the background are lush jungle vegetation and the tops of two temples. Notably missing from this picture is the highway or anything that would indicate that El Rematé is anything but a rustic natural paradise. The text below the picture reinforces this image of an underdeveloped ecotourism paradise.

On your way to Tikal stop and visit or stay in the village of El Remate [sic] located on Lake Peten Itzá, it is known for its expert wood carvers and clear water beaches. Tourist facilities are just beginning to be

developed. You'll find friendly people and comfortable tourist accommodations.

Figure 20: Front of El Rematé Brochure

On the first inside page, underneath Mr. Cane's stapled-in insert, is a smaller version of the cartoon, a population count, and brief descriptions of the six facilities that agreed to participate in the original project (Figure 21). On the other two inside pages is a map version of the front-page cartoon. Under the heading 'Activities' at the top of the page is a caricature of the common 'Death Voyage of a Maya King' icon with cartoonish jungle animals and a tourist at the

Figure 21: Inside of El Rematé Brochure

front of the canoe replacing all but one of the original figures. The four 'activities' headings are El Biotopo Cerro Cahuí, Lake Petén Itzá, Ixlú Mayan Site, and Local Individuals.

Again, like the local conservation workers described by Sundberg (1998a), local individuals are positioned as the bearers of the authentic ecological knowledge and gatekeepers to the unique "rainforest activities" ecotourists seek out. This may be true of some or even many local individuals. Other local residents are new to the area and/or have little or no direct relationship with the local rainforest, except in terms of marketing their proximity to it to ecotourists. Regardless of their actual level of knowledge, interest, or participation in rainforest ecology or Maya anthropology, local individuals are marketed as definitive experts.

Like the content of Mr. Sosa's after-dinner lectures, the ecological and cultural themes introduced into the ecotourists vocabulary by this brochure and the activities it advertises enter into the global debate on natural resources regardless of their veracity or appropriateness. The content of conservation discourse thus becomes more influenced by the popular ecology upon which ecotourism marketing is based rather than the real ecology operating in the forests the international conservationists are trying to protect.

SIGNS: THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Ecotourists in El Rematé are mostly students, teachers, and other people who read for work and or pleasure on a regular basis. Waiting for and riding busses, lying on the beach, resting during a day trip to the temple ruins, and the lack of television all provide the traveler with ample opportunity for leisure

culture, like those described in Garrett's Ruta Maya article, regardless of whether they are authentic forest dwellers or frontier opportunists from the capitol or highlands. The mediated interpretation of the cultural and ecological landscape published by *National Geographic* is authenticated by the practice of the ecotourism service providers and ecotourists.

SIGNS: THE VOYAGE OF THE "DEATH VOYAGE OF A MAYA KING

On the side of the first bungalow one sees upon entering the Observatory of the Shaman is a wall length mural of a canoe bearing seven human and animal figures as passengers (Figure 22). Mr. Sosa likes to reference the painting as an example of the perfect numerological synchronicity of Maya art, science, and

Figure 22: "Death Voyage of a Maya King" Rendered on Bungalow Wall

religion.

Each passenger in the canoe is assigned a celestial body and day of the week in Spanish. “First you have the dominant sun, Domingo, the sun day. . . Sunday. Then Lunes, Monday, the moon. After that Martes or mars day, then Miercoles is mercury, Jueves-jupiter, Viernes-venus, and finally Sabado, saturn day.”The text he is describing is the “Death Voyage of a Maya King” icon. This is the same icon Mr. Cane caricatures inside his brochure. More significantly, it is the same Tikal text featured in an inset on page 468 (Figure 23) of *National*

Figure 23: Original Icon from Tikal in *National Geographic* Ruta Maya Issue (Garrett 1989)

Geographic's La Ruta Maya special issue (Garrett 1989). Above the photo and drawing of "The Death Voyage of a Maya King" the text of the feature story boldly asserts Tikal's stature as the predominant Maya site. "As Olympic athletes measure performance against the record books, historians compare other lowland Maya sites with the Peten's Tikal" (Garrett 1989:498). Whether or not Mr. Cane or Mr. Sosa derived their text directly from the National Geographic who got it from the University of Pennsylvania Tikal Project who found it in the tomb of King Double Comb, the dead Maya king who ruled Tikal in the eighth century (Garrett 1989), these three reproductions of the icons form a media loop that helps market ecotourism at home and shape the landscape in the destination.

The "Death Voyage of a Maya King" icon is essentially a cultural artifact and yet it is used by Mr. Sosa, Mr Cane, and *National Geographic* to suggest a connection to the importance of understanding "the natural ways" of Maya resource management and position themselves as authentic and attractive gatekeepers of access to his knowledge. By conflating cosmology, art, archeology, and natural sciences, those interested in reifying the status of ecotourism in the region generate multiple opportunities to strike an association in the minds of potential consumers and marketers of their ecotourism product.

SIGNS: LA RUTA MAYA

In October of 1989, the President of Guatemala invited government officials from Mexico, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador to discuss a regional plan that “would increase environmentally oriented tourism and sustainable, non-destructive development to provide jobs and money to help pay for preservation” (Garrett 1989:436). At the end of this historic meeting, the first instance in modern times that all five nations gathered to discuss common problems, the leaders voted unanimously to support a collective tourism development project to be known as the Ruta Maya project (Garrett 1989).

Their plans were ambitious especially considering the long history of disharmony among Central American nations. The plan included a unified regional tourist visa, a Eurail-type transport pass, and the construction of cable ways or monorails through environmentally sensitive areas

An Elevated People Mover (EPM) based transit system, as described by Garrett (1989), would help to concentrate impacts in already established hubs such as Cancun and Flores/Santa Elena allowing for less tourist impacts in the protected areas while improving the efficiency and ecology of the transit systems (Figure 24). Daily visitation follows a regular cyclical pattern (to the ruins in the morning, return to the accommodations at night) that could easily be served by a fixed rail schedule. Though the initial construction phase would create some habitat interruptions, once built, the EPM could move large groups of tourists through the protected areas and to the various attractions of the region without the

habitat fragmentation and intrusive settlement brought on by road building. So far, none of the plan has come to pass, except for the increase in visitation. Every morning tourists in El Rematé are awakened from their hammocks and the night concert of the jungle by the fleet of speeding mini-busses that shuttle tourists in

Figure 24: Artists Conception of Ruta Maya Tram (Berke in Garrett 1989)

Flores to Tikal to catch the sunrise vista from Temple IV. The noise pollution created is one of the most immediately noticeable adverse effects of the expansion of Tikal's tourism market felt by ecotourists staying in El Rematé.

Bus is the primary mode of transport used by ecotourists on the gringo trail. Ninety-six percent of ecotourists surveyed in El Rematé traveled by bus and only six percent used a private automobile during their trip. The popularity of bus and mini-bus transit is more a function of the lack of alternatives than an

endorsement of the transit mode itself. Tikal is not yet wedded to an expansive and expensive road system. If the exponential growth of tourism to the region continues, the capacity of the regional transportation will have to be expanded. Expansion of the road system would drive many developments that would be at odds with the goals of the international conservation areas namely providing increased access for those who would extractively exploit the natural resources and further expand the agricultural frontier into protected areas.

This points to the crux of the problem of ecotourism development in the region. Local, regional, national, and international political players all see ecotourism as the best answer to the critical development and conservation questions plaguing the forest and those who rely on it. As the problem of transportation exemplifies, the ecotourism market is likely to respond with the most expedient and convenient solution (expanded bus transit). An integrated, environmentally appropriate transportation system would better meet the stated goals of ecotourism but is not likely to be adopted so long as ecotourists continue to spend their money without being more critical of the environmental impacts of their spending decisions.

CONCLUSIONS

Though the exponential growth of tourism to Tikal is not likely to slow, the success of any ecotourism concern is by no means assured. El Rematé has

three important market advantages over the community ecotourism projects supported by international NGO's mentioned in Chapter One;

1) Development of ecotourism facilities in El Rematé has been by private initiative. Though lacking the institutional support of either NGO's or the government, El Rematé's ecotourism enterprises are not bound to time-consuming community decision making processes or subject to the conservationist paradigm (except for marketing purposes) and are therefore better able to respond to the evolving nature of the burgeoning ecotourism industry;

2) El Rematé has several built-in geographical advantages such as proximity to Tikal National Park and Biotopo Cerro Cahuí at the edge of the Maya Biosphere Reserve, it's location just north of where the only two paved roads in the region become the one paved road to Tikal, and the sunset vistas of Lago Petén Itzá; and

3) Those who operate the flagship ecotourism facilities in El Rematé, the Observatory of the Shaman and the House of the Lost Gringo, have proven to be very adept at creating intertextual associations with the discourse of popular ecology.

Because the Petén is largely held in protected status, many communities have turned to ecotourism as an alternative for the former extractive industries. So while the region's community ecotourism projects struggle to develop a market capable of substituting for the income generating practices used before they were rendered inappropriate by the international conservation community, El Rematé is

capturing the ecotourist dollars coveted by the community supported ecotourism projects encouraged by the NGOs. Ecotourists to the region, whose tastes and consumption are shaped by the texts of environmentalist discourse from their heavily mediated home environments, are having their taste for popular ecology satisfied in a place that is not bound to sustainable environmental practices.

The ecotourism entrepreneurs of El Rematé put the 'eco-' associated with economics into ecotourism, or as Lew describes,

. . . it is the practitioners who make ecotourism a tangible experience for their clients and destinations. In putting ecotourism into practice, they ensure that the often overlooked element of a bottom line profit margin is calculated into the definition of ecotourism" (Lew 1998:93).

El Rematé can take advantage of participating in the ecotourism discourse without the costs associated with adhering to or even attempting to meet environmental sustainability standards. As Butler states, ". . .the final verdict on the sustainability of an operation cannot be made for many years, but verifiability has rarely stopped the marketing of a concept and associated developments" (Butler, 1998:28). There is no reason that El Rematé would not progress along Butler's tourism cycle and eventually reach the stage of decline where tourism itself diminishes the quality of the tourist experience. Local residents are already aware of the diminished aesthetic quality of El Rematé's starry nights rendered by the arrival of electric light and the threat to the lake amenity posed by the water project.

These real concerns of local residents rarely enter the mind of the vacationing ecotourist. Ecotourists are attracted to the region because of the link between natural and cultural features. Their desire to consume these images and experiences is shaped through the modern electronic media they consume at home. Modern media forms, such as National Geographic, may start the process using an authentic Mayan icon like “The Death Voyage of a Maya King” but by the time this image reaches the consumer, it is rendered inauthentic through its mechanical and electronic reproduction (Benjamin 1998) and its use as an advertising text. Thus, when the ecotourist arrives in El Rematé, their consumer decisions and the resulting development these decisions drive will be shaped by inauthentic reproductions of the images they have come to see. In this conflict between the authentic ecology operating in El Rematé and the inauthentic popular ecology of the ecotourist, it is the authentic ecology that will suffer. Besides the diminishment of the relatively pristine ambience caused by tourism development, the authentic ecology will suffer at the hands of communities who will put pressure on the forest resource in response to the inability of the community supported ecotourism projects to compete against places like El Rematé in an unregulated market.

There are many steps between the conceptualization of an idea by one person and its perception by another. At a minimum, an idea must travel from conception to verbal or written text, be read or heard by the receiver, translated

from text to imagery, and finally perceived. At each step in the process, there is the potential for a new layer of distortion in meaning.

Each of these potential meanings is culturally mediated. Thus, communication between members of different cultures is subject to an extra dimension of meaning. This distortion is often intentionally compounded in the pursuit of power, wealth, and control. Communication across cultures is an especially difficult proposition when dealing with contentious issues such as conservation and development.

Nevertheless, it is hoped that this study will aid in attempts by future geographers to assess the impacts of ecotourism development in the Petén and elsewhere. I have taken advantage of the rare opportunity to capture El Rematé's ecotourism development in its incipient stages. At this point, some time must pass before there is any real evidence that El Rematé will develop as Butler suggests or that El Rematé will indeed render the conservation and development objectives of the community supported ecotourism projects ineffective. The role that these signs of popular ecology will play in El Rematé's development can only be suggested at this time. However, with the baseline data of this study in place, future geographic study can be conducted on the evolution of ecotourism development: how the landscape has changed with the addition of electricity, potable water, roads, and more tourist accommodations; how the culture changes as it is further integrated into the late-capitalist global economy; and how the consumer preferences and practices of ecotourists respond to these changes.

So long as effective signs of popular ecology are presented to the ecotourist for their convenient consumption, the impact of their consumption will remain unexamined and ecotourism will continue to be a lofty ideal which does not bear out in practice. Mr. Sosa, Mr. Cane, and their successors use the ecotourism ethos to their advantage. In this case, as in so many others, the 'eco-' in ecotourism is a function of economics, not ecology. Real progress on the environmental sustainability of ecotourism in El Rematé will not happen when such improvement interferes with the ability to provide a lucrative tourism product.

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