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Looking into Community Ecotourism in the Bajo Lempa of El Salvador

Introduction

The Bajo Lempa region of El Salvador, specifically Zone 1, is situated in the coastal south of the country and provides habitats for a diverse group of wildlife. The area is also prone to devastation from hurricanes and flooding during the rainy season from May to October. The habitants of Zone 1 live in between the Bahía de Jiquilisco and the Pacific Ocean, making them extremely susceptible to the effects of hurricanes and experience serious flooding almost every year. Many of the people in Zone 1 live in poverty and do not have the resources to permanently protect themselves from the flooding.

However, there is a high level of community involvement through umbrella organizations including La Coordinadora and Asociación Mangle. Each community in Zone 1 has their own ADESCO, or group of community leaders. Each ADESCO comes together regularly with the ADESCOs of the other communities to address various issues that come up in including ways to supplement the income of the people of Zone 1. An idea that has sprouted from these meetings is the creation of a community ecotourism business consisting of a network of ecotourism stops throughout the zone.

Team Monterey 5 was tasked with helping to facilitate the process of a community ecotourism network as well as reporting their observations and making recommendations in the span of a three week period. The methodology included meeting with the ADESCOs of Isla de Mendez, Aguacate, Ceiba Doblada, San Juan del Gozo and El Llano to gather information concerning the goals, challenges and planning of the ecotourism network. In order to gain an understanding of each community's individual situations, the team traveled to each community and conducted community mapping workshops.

The questionnaires, maps and workshops served as tools for both Team Monterey and the communities in Zone 1. Through mapping and answering the questionnaires, the communities were able to reflect on the feasibility of their goals and aided in creating a plan to present to possible future project funders. Team Monterey has listed recommendations for each community and the community as a whole based on observations from the activities and meetings.

The team found that the communities of Zone 1 are committed to creating a network of community ecotourism in order to supplement their income and responded positively to the workshops and other activities. The communities were provided with an opportunity to gain a realistic view of their communities as well as creating a feasible and sustainable plan for the future. The communities face some obstacles to progress including lack of immediate funding and resources, but there are small steps that each group can take today to begin the process of creating the community ecotourism network. The level of organization between the communities of Zone 1 will make it

easier to continue moving forward, however the ADESCOs and Asociación Mangle will benefit from making a commitment to clear communication between communities to minimize duplication of efforts and confusion about important logistical matters of the project.

Methodology

Upon arriving to Ciudad Romero, El Salvador we had a week worth of meetings with La Coordinadora, the ADESCO of Isla de Mendez, and community members from Zone 1. These meetings helped inform us of our area of concern, the reasoning behind ecotourism in Zone 1. We decided to focus on the following three questions, which influenced our methodology.

How do we give support to community organizations so that they have the capacity to develop community ecotourism in Zone 1?

How do we help the communities in Zone 1 organize themselves in a cooperative for community ecotourism?

Does the capacity exist for a profitable tourist route in Zone 1, taking into count the goals of each community?

In order to answer these questions, we performed the following activities in Zone 1 to gather the appropriate information.

Principal Activities:

1. Meet all the members of the Junta Directiva and Asociación Mangle and other interested parties.
2. Get to know Isla de Méndez and the Bahía de Jiquilisco and participate in tourist activities.
3. Create a questionnaire about community ecotourism for all of the communities in Zone 1, Isla de Méndez, Ceiba Doblada, San Juan del Gozo, El Llano, and El Aguacate. The questionnaire consisted of five questions about the strengths, challenges, and weaknesses in each community.
4. *Community Mapping Activity*. This activity helped each community in Zone 1 understand their vision for community ecotourism. We then analyzed the results of the meetings.
5. Create recommendations in the short term, medium term, and long term for Zone 1 that were based off of the community mapping activity.
6. Based off of the analysis we designed a Workshops on how to plan a future project, in which each community chose one of their midterm to long term goals and wrote out a Basic work plan.

These activities were important in answering our aforementioned questions and contributed to our analysis and recommendations. The primary activity of the

community mapping was essential because this allowed for every participant from the community who came to participate regardless of their literacy levels or education. This was also the first time the communities visualized what it meant to be working with community ecotourism. When asked to draw how they would like to see the community in the future in regards to ecotourism, there was a lot of excitement and enthusiasm.

For the most part, only two or three people from each community drew on the map, but they were very open to the comments from everyone else. There was an obvious push in most communities to have youth be more involved in the activity as well. From this activity we learned the main long term goals for each community in regards to ecotourism. This guided us to our second main activity with the community members, a workshop on project planning.

After analyzing all the information from the maps we determined that the communities did not lack ideas or dreams of where they would like their community to be. Instead they lacked the tools to reach those goals. As a result of this observation we held a workshop on project planning. After working with each community we knew that at least one person in each community could read and write, so we organized the workshop for them to write out their project plan based on one of the goals they determined on their map.

To our knowledge, this was the first time an activity like this was done with the communities, and it was very well received. We provided each community with a packet of information (see annex), and they filled in the questions of “What? Who? How? When?” the four basic questions of project planning. We then informed the communities the importance of the answers to these questions before starting a project or asking for funding. The communities had the opportunity to present their community maps and project plans to each other, which was the first time these communities heard of each other’s plans for ecotourism.

We found that these activities allowed for participation from all active participants. Also, these activities primed the start of having the communities hear about each other’s projects for community ecotourism. They also informed our observations as well as the analysis and recommendations section of our paper.

Observations

Openness and Enthusiasm in Each Community

Each town that we visited in Zone 1 welcomed us with enthusiasm and was happy to talk about community ecotourism. For example, when we traveled to E Llano, they had prepared for our mapping activity beforehand and were ready and willing to answer any questions we had. In Ceiba Doblado we found that the community members truly understand the importance and extrinsic value of the tourists that travel past their town on the newly constructed highway.

The participation of young adults in our meetings was also very impressive. They seemed very interested in the development of their community and in the conservation of natural resources. Many ADESCO's within the area also have a youth committee which encourages youth involvement in project planning, education, and community development.

With respect to Zone 1's openness to community ecotourism, we believe that each community is indeed very interested in the concept. It is also known throughout the Zone that community ecotourism can generate alternative means of income, employment opportunities, and also help to conserve the ecosystem of the Jiquilisco biosphere.

Ecotourism is Seasonal

Similar to the agricultural industry, ecotourism is seasonal. It depends on various externalities that are out of human control. For example, hurricanes and tropical storms can discourage tourists from coastal areas during the months of July through October. In the 5 communities that we visited, each named floods during the hurricane season as their biggest obstacle. Of course the rain cannot be stopped, but there are ways to control the effects of rain and flooding. Today in Zone 1, there is little infrastructure in place to prevent damage from floods and storms. This affects the potential success of ecotourism in the area since tourists will not come during this season if there are no well-structured accommodations or means to manage potential floods.

At the same time, many sea turtles hatch from their nests during the winter months of July to October. Releasing of the newly hatched sea turtles is a very large tourist attraction, and if the communities in Zone 1 are busy recovering from flood damage, or worse if they are isolated from floods, they will not be able to host or offer services to tourists. Proper management of storm drains and flood control systems could accelerate ecotourism in Zone 1 and create a consistent flow of additional income.

Stages of Development

All of the communities that we visited are in different stages of development. Isla de Mendez has the appropriate infrastructure to receive tourists at Villa Tortuga, a hostel and restaurant. On the other hand, the other communities do not have the means to feed tourists via restaurants or comedores. Isla de Mendez also has trained community members to be tour guides and park rangers. The only other community to receive a similar training is Ceiba Doblada, which has two park rangers. The other differences in infrastructure include the following: El Aguacate does not have electricity, potable water, or a town hall, while the rest of the communities have a town hall and electricity.

Although the communities are in different levels of development there is the possibility for each community to profit from ecotourism right now. It is not necessary for El Aguacate to have electricity in order to profit from community ecotourism, and it isn't necessary for the communities to have potable water to serve the tourists if there is bottled water available. Community ecotourism can provide many ways to improve the development in each community. (See Annex x.)

Economic Situation

The communities in Zone 1 do not have easy access to funds needed to develop ecotourism in the area. It is difficult to receive funding because the communities must pass through a complicated system that not everyone understands. It is common that the communities do not have a clear or realistic idea concerning how they will receive funding and how much time it will take to receive funding. Generally, communities believe that finding funding will take less time than is possible.

Other problems observed include a lack of funding towards ecotourism and the high levels of poverty in each community. There is a desire to develop ecotourism because the communities view it as a way to keep youth from leaving the area to find jobs elsewhere. The communities in Zone 1 are aware that funding is needed as soon as possible in order to start taking steps to improve the quality of life, however the lack of knowledge about how to get funding, has turned into one of the largest obstacles to developing community ecotourism.

Resources for a Community Ecotourism Network

The Jiquilisco Bay offers an abundance of resources for a network of ecotourism in Zone 1. The bay and its surrounding area have many natural resources including mangroves, fish, crabs and other shellfish, as well as a diverse population of birds that live in the mangroves. Additionally, each community has unique resources that the others do not have. For example, the community of Aguacate has many fruit-bearing trees that cannot be found in the other communities. Keeping in mind that the communities share many of the same resources while at the same time having unique resources of their own, there is a risk that the communities may exploit the same resources as each other, possibly creating a problem for all of the communities. Many of the communities express the desire to have sea turtle hatcheries, but each community that has a hatchery will take from the profits of the other communities with hatcheries. Because the idea is to create an ecotourism network throughout Jiquilisco, it is possible that using too many of the same resources will reduce the effectiveness of an ecotourism network. There could be a depletion of natural resources, unless the resources are diversified.

Communication and Organization

Each community has an organization that speaks for their own interests. Isla de Mendez, Ceiba Doblado, San Juan de Gozo, and El Llano have ADESCO as their community organization and Aguacate has a committee that notifies the local government. Even though each community has an organizational structure, they are not as organized as they would like to be. We found it interesting that each community brought this up because we observed differently. We saw that each community could more or less motivate their people, as each meeting had sufficient attendance and participation. It seems they want to be more organized but do not know how. The lack of organization may really be a lack of communication between the communities.

We believe that there is a way for communities to share information amongst themselves. For example, Ceiba Doblado and Isla de Mendez had a similar problem with a plague of rats this past year. During our meetings there was no mention that Isla de Mendez used rat poison to control the rat infestation. This example has nothing to do with community-based ecotourism but it does show that there is little communication between the communities.

After meeting with the communities, our group also observed a lack of communication system between Association Mangle, la Coordinadora and the communities themselves. For example, Isla de Méndez has experience working with organizations that receive grants, and also building a turtle hatchery. These are the same skills that El Llano wants to learn, but for some reason they have not been shared.

Our group also noted that no communication exists between all communities in terms of how they see the ecotourism working in the community. El Llano did not know what was happening in other communities in regards to ecotourism. We also observed this with other communities who have no knowledge of what other communities were doing. The lack of communication in the short term and long term can lead to a breakdown of the ecotourism model as they envision all communities working together to create a tourist route with Villa Tortuga being the hub.

Recommendations

Create a strong network

It is recommended that:

- Zone 1 form a strong community ecotourism network to prevent privatization and protect the biosphere of Bahía de Jiquílisco that utilizes each community's unique strengths and abilities but does not compromise the tourism and service offerings of other communities nor deplete the natural resources.

- The Ecotourism Committee in Zone 1 develop excursions that attract recognition and / or revenue to each community in Zone 1 in an equitable and evenly distributed manner.

- The Ecotourism Committee of Zone 1 encourages residents to become personally invested in community ecotourism
 - Example 1: Form a "Beach Ranger Cooperative," wherein each household donates \$0.25 per month toward the salary of a hired individual(s) to protect, guard and clean the beach and/or bay

- Example 2: Through the youth committee, plan volunteer beach and / or bay clean up days (incentives could include a fútbol game following the clean up, pupusas at Villa Tortuga etc.)
 - Example 3: Have fun activities (community dance night, concerts, children's plays through school, etc.) involving the whole community that educate members on the benefits of ecotourism being income generation and conservation focused.
- Asociación Mangle, along with each community in Zone 1, assist each other in creating a strategic community ecotourism plan.
- Zone 1 leads and participates in regular workshops on project planning, conservation, and small business planning.
- Strengthen the ecotourism committee in Zone 1 by including the ecotourism and youth committees as well as the ADESCO's in the planning process.
 - Incorporate professionals into the planning process in order to assist with the proposal writing, ensure that these professional work closely with Asociación Mangle to complete the proposals.
 - Offer consistent trainings to the ecotourism committee that can pertain to, but are not limited to: tour guide, environmental, and leadership trainings

The Role of Asociación Mangle

· We recommend that Asociación Mangle share information to the communities on the following topics:

- How to receive funding
- Which organizations can donate grant money
- How to be trained in being a tour guide and park ranger.

Communities can also take the responsibility on how to learn how to receive funding from organizations.

Annex 1:

Metas Recomendadas para Las Cinco Comunidades en Zona 1

San Juan del Gozo

Metas a Corto Plazo (que se pueden realizar en un año a partir de ahora)

- Ruta en cayuco a los manglares de la bahía y en la laguna (si no está prohibido)
- Vender bolsas de marañones
- Colocar letreros en la calle para anunciar a las pupuserías o panaderías, después de ir en paseo en cayuco. Por ejemplo: ¡Come una pupusa!
- Capacitar a los individuos interesados en ser guías turísticos en la comunidad

Metas a Mediano Plazo (Tres a seis años)

- Comprar lanchas con motores que pueden llevar a los turistas a la bahía
- Mejorar la calle hacia la bahía
- Construir un comedor

Metas a Largo Plazo (Seis años o mas)

- Crear un hábitat natural para proteger a las iguanas y tener guías turísticos o guarda recursos que les enseñen a los turistas
- Obtener acceso a la laguna a través de un acuerdo con los que tienen acceso

Los Llanos

Metas a Corto Plazo (que se pueden realizar en un año a partir de ahora)

- Organizar un comité de ecoturismo dentro de la comunidad
- Investigar quiénes tienen acceso al mar
- Crear huertos caseros
- Capacitar a personas interesadas en ser guías turísticos en la comunidad
- Tener un comedor en una casa que esté accesible desde el camino

Metas a Mediano Plazo (Tres a seis años)

- Acceso al mar
- Vivero de tortugas
- Estanque para peces
- Estanque de camarones

Metas a Largo Plazo (Seis años o más)

- Muelle
- Levantar la calle
- Casa comunal
- Rancho hotel con piscinas
- Casa de para los turistas

El Aguacate

Metas a Corto Plazo (que se pueden realizar en un año a partir de ahora)

- Organizar el Comité de Ecoturismo
- Recoger fruta (mangos, coco, marañón) para vender en bolsas a los turistas o traer turistas para recoger fruta por sí mismos
- Alquilar bicicletas para pasear por el camino, ver los árboles frutales, el paisaje, etc.
- Vender jugos a los turistas
- Capacitar a individuos interesados en ser guías turísticos en la comunidad

Metas a Mediano Plazo (Tres a seis años)

- Vender jalea de frutas
- Vender mantequilla de marañón
- Vender vino de marañón
- Electrificar a la comunidad
- Crear una ruta en cayuco dentro de los manglares

Metas a Largo Plazo (Seis años o más)

- Acceso al camino privado
- Estanque de camarones
- Levantar las calles
- Microempresa de frutas

Ceiba Doblada

Metas a Corto Plazo (que se pueden realizar en un año a partir de ahora)

- Organizar los comités de ecoturismo
- Abrir el embarcadero de nuevo
- Tener ranchos en la playa con hamacas y cobrar a los turistas por el uso de ellas
- Vender cerveza en la playa
- Poner comedores en casas cerca del camino
- Tener campañas de limpieza en las cuales se invite a la gente a limpiar las playas
- Capacitar a individuos interesados en ser guías turísticos en la comunidad

Metas a Mediano Plazo (Tres a seis años)

- Limpiar el drenaje
- Tener su propio vivero de tortugas
- Limpiar los manglares para que sea un área libre de basura

Metas a Largo Plazo (Seis años o más)

- Tener unas cabañas

Isla de Méndez

Metas a Corto Plazo (que se pueden realizar en un año a partir de ahora)

- Invitar a otras comunidades para que participen en sus proyectos
- Mejorar los baños en Villa Tortuga
- Hacer un mapa de las rutas
- Colgar fotos de las otras comunidades y las actividades que se pueden realizar

Metas a Mediano Plazo (Tres a seis años)

- Arreglar Villa Tortuga
 - suelo, bicicletas, camión, techo, piscina
- Arreglar cabañas

Metas a Largo Plazo (Seis años o mas)

- Construir un drenó
- Construir un muelle
- Mejorar la calle al mar