

Kichwa Ecotourism—Preserving Tradition in the Globalizing World: An examination of the benefits and detriments of ecotourism on an indigenous Amazonian culture.

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Abstract

With holidays abounding in our fast-paced lives, we frequently think about getting away from all of the hustle and bustle. However, how we travel, spend our money, and tour are often times not sustainable and support an industry that cares more about money than the people of countries we wish to travel to, their culture, and the environment. There is a model though that encourages sustainable travel and supports local people, local economies, and local biodiversity: ecotourism. This paper explores one indigenous community's efforts to respond to the economic, cultural, and social pressures and challenges of a globalizing country, and proposes a model that preserves indigenous culture while providing a sustainable source of income. Ecotourism is a process by which indigenous people take control of their lands and future to facilitate the sustainable preservation of culture while increasing standards of living and maintaining local biodiversity.

Research Methodology

My research is primarily based on my firsthand observations living with the women of Sinchi Warmi for eight months in the community of San Pedro, Napo, Ecuador, corroborated by secondary research through academic journals focusing on ecotourism. I collected field notes while there, focusing on the sociological, cultural, and economic impacts of globalization.

Introduction

To preface, it is important to understand that this paper was not written because I believe these women's culture should be maintained for the sake of spectacle or because I think their cultural practices are quaint, but rather because the women I lived with want to preserve their culture and pass it on to their children.

La Fundación de Sinchi Warmis—The Foundation of Strong Women—is a group of indigenous Kichwa women who live near Misahuallí, Napo, Ecuador. Misahuallí is small town lying on the Napo River with numerous tour agencies, stores, hostels, and restaurants. This town is a popular tourist destination for expeditions into the jungle and is therefore a perfect town to be

located next to in order to maintain a site for ecotourism. These women built Sinchi Warmi, an ecological lodge, with the intention of teaching others about their traditions, preserving the environment around them, preserving their traditions and culture, procuring a sustainable source of income, and most importantly for these women, passing this site down to their children. Sinchi Warmi was built with the help of Selva y Desarrollo, a nongovernmental organization based in Spain, and is supported by them, and various governmental and tourist agencies. These women have put an enormous amount of time, money, and energy into their endeavor to make their dream become a reality and are succeeding within a globalizing country where other indigenous peoples are finding it difficult to maintain their traditions and financial well-being simultaneously. Their foundation and eco-lodge allow this balance to happen and, while not perfect, is a model that can be applied to other indigenous people globally to avoid disappearances of distinct cultural practices.

Increasingly within developing nations, indigenous people are finding it necessary to seek an income within the paradigm of an increasingly globalized world. Many people have to give up their traditional culture for urban centers, thus draining the local communities of the ability to transmit their culture and pass it down to generations to come. Within the region of Napo, Ecuador, many indigenous Kichwa people are leaving their communities to find work elsewhere. Ecotourism promotes a sustainable model for the preservation of traditional culture and allows indigenous groups to earn a living without having to find work in a different area that drains the culture of members who practice traditions. However, a danger can abound within ecotourism wherein it can run the risk of commercializing the culture that is being preserved through eco-lodges. The women of Sinchi Warmi though have developed a method of maintaining their culture while procuring a source of income, thus avoiding the potential commercialization we see in other cultures globally: an indigenous-run ecological lodge.

Definitions

Indigenous people are minority groups within a territory; the United Nations defines indigenous communities as people who are “distinct from other settler groups, and want to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories and their ethnic identities” (Zeppel 3). Indigenous peoples should not be thought of as quaint, whose culture must be preserved by limiting the impacts of modernity. Instead, indigenous groups should, if they so desire, take advantage of modernity and use methods such as the Internet and electronics to preserve culture while simultaneously increasing standards of living through exploiting

opportunities and niche markets such as ecotourism. This paper will focus on one group of indigenous peoples – the Kichwa of Ecuador.

Kichwa culture consists of such aspects as dances, folklore, the making of traditional artisanal jewelry, preparation of *comida típica*—traditional food—and the native Kichwa language that is spoken with Spanish. Many Kichwa communities are starting to, or have already, produced sites for eco-lodges and ecotourism. For the purposes of this paper, ecotourism will be defined as, “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people,” (The International Ecotourism Society). I would also add that ecotourism allows for the preservation of indigenous culture, as well as the criteria listed above, keeping in mind that my addition is conditional on the circumstances of my experience and the context in which I lived.

An eco-lodge then is simply the impetus and physical site through which the above criteria are enacted. Within this paper the usage of the term ecotourism is separate from current usages of the word, and models, of tourism. Both, however, rely on a tourism market. Before ecotourism and its benefits, or potential, are discussed, it is necessary to consider the detriments of tourism, volunteering, volunteer tourism, and even the potential pit falls of ecotourism.

Detriments

Externalities and Responding to Communities' Wishes

Mass tourism is not sustainable and carries with it many problems. Alexander O'Neil in his article, *What Globalization Means for Ecotourism: Managing Globalization's Impacts on Ecotourism in Developing Countries*, identifies several primary problems with the modern system of tourism. One is the degradation of the environment due to mass tourism stemming from the rise of wide-body planes in the 1970s that contributes to an increased burning of fossil fuels—a contributing factor to global warming (O'Neil 507). Of course, this factor is still a part of the model of traveling to experience ecotourism as well. A further research question contributing to the sustainability of ecotourism as a distinct model, separate from tourism, should look at ways travel to and from countries can become more sustainable, and perhaps how a portion of those proceeds can benefit ecotourism and development projects that benefit local communities—in a sense, how those proceeds can be used to respond to local communities' wishes. The other challenge, which is the more significant, is an opportunity cost when resources are devoted to tourism projects, rather than infrastructure that benefit local communities, or even infrastructure projects that do not respond to a community's wishes (507).

Not barring the positive externalities that infrastructure projects have for local peoples such as new roads for accessing new markets and making travel easier, bridges to make a town more accessible to drum up business, and a host of other benefits, most infrastructure projects I witnessed in Ecuador were directed towards what the government believed to be beneficial for the people such as selling primary rainforest—in which people lived—to companies to extract oil. Arguably, most projects—barring extractivism—people I talked to enjoyed, and did in fact benefit from them, but where the issue was, was in the fact that many times the government, both local municipalities and national government, would just build without asking people if that was really what they wanted. The tourism industry, it is argued, should take into consideration the welfare of local peoples and the ecological impacts as well as the economic benefits, and take into account their opinion as well (509).

Commercialization of Culture

Another danger of tourism, and ecotourism, is that they run the risk of commercializing indigenous culture. In *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples*, the United Nations states, “tourism tends to view landscapes and people as consumer products to be bought and sold...cultural practices and activities of indigenous peoples are often transformed into demonstrations, souvenirs and experiences for the consumption of the visitors” (UN 72). From a Western perspective, the jungle and indigenous peoples represent purity and mystery (Hutchins 132). Indigenous culture is sexy nowadays with the Romantic view that innocence within nature is out there, still alive and well. With American culture and movies that romanticize and misrepresent indigenous cultures as quaint and ‘one with the Earth’, this air of mystery and wonder drives tourists to visit natives; the tourism industry then caters to this desire, bringing up an important question: are the people who run eco-lodges expressing their culture how they see fit, or are they expressing it in a way that is consistent with what tourists expect to see? Using the idea that indigenous groups live in harmony with nature as a marketing tool promotes this commercialization and can expand ecotourism into remote places, which disrupt a people’s culture (Wesche 35). Unless a people are enmeshed within the technologies and cultures that globalization has introduced, ecotourism may be more harmful than beneficial.

Increasingly, the Kichwa culture is capitalized on by the tourist industry. Many stores and lodges, including Sinchi Warmi, sell Kichwa jewelry and handicrafts. Culture, it is argued, becomes “trinkets and spectacles devoid of the original spiritual meaning and valued only as commodities to be sold” (UN 73). These ‘trinkets’ are in fact an element of Kichwa culture, but they become merely souvenirs for tourists rather than cultural artifacts with cultural meaning.

Jungle tours in Ecuador offer stops at indigenous-run lodges and are provided with *comida típica*, or typical food, and a traditional dance, much like what Sinchi Warmi offers. The tourist market has provided viability to maintaining a lodge, thus procuring income for indigenous groups, and a place to preserve culture, but tourism can simultaneously reduce culture to a quaint product to be purchased. As there is no solution I have found to this challenge of commercialization, more research should be conducted to determine how to avoid this. Later I list the best way I have found to potentially avoid this, but even when this criterion is met, commercialization of culture still occurs—though to a lesser extent than without that criterion. The appeal of indigenous culture, while inviting commercialization and sustainable ecotourism activities, can also invite a form of volunteering that harms culture.

Volunteer Tourism: A Messiah Complex

Volunteer tourism can become more detrimental to culture than beneficial. Volunteer tourism is defined as volunteering on a holiday with a goal of simultaneously aiding a community; it is more rewarding than conventional tourism (McIntosh and Zahra 543). This form of tourism can benefit a community, and the volunteer, by providing a means for cross-cultural learning. But if the approach is such that the volunteer feels the need to “help a poor community” through such visions they have had through a portrayal of a culture as less fortunate and in need, it can create a detrimental dynamic. One volunteer, through Yanapuma, a volunteer organization, provided computers, stationary supplies, clothes, and toys to the women and children of Sinchi Warmi with the goal of alleviating material poverty and experiencing this culture without conventional tourism companies. While this was a kind gesture, this supports stereotypes of the Western rich “haves,” and less-fortunate indigenous “have-nots” (Palacios 864).

The volunteer organization, Yanapuma, lists on their website that volunteers are encouraged to bring stationary supplies and clothes. Volunteering as a tourist, or young person, can be ineffective in order to make long-lasting and meaningful impacts on a community if the volunteer has little experience (863). From my own experience, I know this to be quite true. So, to use the words of a man living in Misahuallí who was against volunteering and was also anti-imperialist, “It’s not volunteers we need help from, that’s the government’s job. When Western volunteers come here, they kill the culture and create beggars.” To be perfectly clear, no one liked this man—the Sinchi Warmis said he was mean and most others stayed away—but I found this quote fitting.

Coming with a slight messiah complex of helping to alleviate poverty through handouts is understandable due to the portrayal of 'third world' countries as poor through phrases like 'starving children in...' and the connotation of 'third world' as underprivileged, and indeed ambiguous. This is detrimental because the volunteer coming with free handouts that impress a people runs a risk of placing another culture upon a pedestal; such was the case when a volunteer came to Sinchi Warmi. This is one of the contributing factors in San Pedro of a desire to acquire more 'modern' items—other pressures are more internal to the country.

The people of San Pedro increasingly feel pressured to become 'modernized'. As a note, I find this the best word to describe the scenario of acquiring a standard of living that is in line with most developed countries' standards, but I am always hesitant to use it as it suggests they are the opposite of modern—primitive. This is not the case, but there are those who do think this to be a given fact.

Among the Colono families, the 'pure blood' Ecuadorians of Spanish-descent, who I interacted with, many of them placed judgment upon Kichwas in the Amazon—that they were uncivilized and a subject of wonder—a savage people, almost animals. These families I interacted with, like many Americans upon my return, gaped with incredulous stares that there existed a people who did not have the same luxuries that they had. The Colonos marginalized the Kichwas as poor and needy rather than as equals who were not as privileged as they were. Many Kichwa people wanted to avoid this portrayal, much like many of us want to avoid the stigma of our class background, educational level, etc. The women of Sinchi Warmi want to acquire what they do not have, which others do have, because of a social pressure to modernize. However, to be perfectly clear, this is not a criticism against acquiring anything, but rather an observation; everyone should have every opportunity to obtain what they want, if they want it. The women of Sinchi Warmi and their families are no exception.

Western standards are increasingly prevalent in the region from volunteers, tourists, television, advertisements, and even government. In San Pedro, there was a slow unspoken race to acquire consumer goods in order to be the one who had the highest standard of living. My host mother bought a new television, satellite dish, refrigerator, bicycle, new cell phone, and cans of Raid to kill insects, while others bought flat screen televisions and even new automobiles. One of the only critiques that can be made is that this pressure leads to spending money on luxury items instead of on food, water, and medicine – a reality that I observed frequently.

However, because the Sinchi Warmis have their worksite, they may go home to watch *The Simpsons*, while having a site to dance, make jewelry, and gossip about the community members. This site, more recently due to more business, allows them the financial well-being to acquire a higher standard of living. These women feel enormous social pressure to acquire more luxury goods, but they maintain a balance because of Sinchi Warmi and their continuing efforts to preserve their culture through this site. In order to avoid a commercialization of culture, and detrimental volunteering approaches that ecotourism may lend itself too, ecotourism, if approached responsibly, can become an alternative model that is more beneficial to indigenous preservation of culture than detrimental. Their model allows balance and choice to lean towards modern amenities and luxury items, or choose to live without these items. It is this choice that ecotourism has provided that is so extraordinary for where they live.

Ecotourism

The Sinchi Warmi Model

The key features of Sinchi Warmis' model is as follows:

(1). Locally-run: The site is locally-run by the women who each own a share of the property that the eco-lodge is built upon. This is essential because in the end, the Sinchi Warmis have the ability to run the lodge how they see fit, and practice their traditions such as jewelry-making, the Kichwa language, dancing, music, and *comida típica*—traditional food such as plantain, yucca, tilapia, and much more—in ways that they were taught by their parents. Concurrently, they elect a president amongst themselves every two years—a form of local democracy that grants legitimacy to the president of the organization and members that it is inclusive and fair. Another aspect is that the amount of money each woman earns is equivalent to the amount of time worked.

Tourism can create a source of revenue and wellbeing as long as indigenous people are in charge of decisions (UN 73). The women of Sinchi Warmi are in charge of everything that happens at the worksite. Other Kichwa communities that have ecotourism operations formed in order to organize and take control of tourism that was run by outsiders who would bring tourists in unannounced, which led to a commercialization of culture (Beahm 70). Many communities try to start a locally-run ecotourism operation, but do not succeed. A lodge, or indigenous-run institution is a form of security that helps keep culture a part of

indigenous lifestyles rather than outside parties. Profiting from a growing tourist market is what the Sinchi Warmis are doing, and without this market, they would have a very limited income from growing and selling crops, sporadic labor in construction, or even no work whatsoever. Indigenous-run eco-lodges grant power to indigenous groups, and in the case of the Sinchi Warmis, to indigenous women. Their model has the potential to empower women globally and allow for the preservation of indigenous culture while allowing for an avenue of financial well-being without making a trade-off that has the potential to hamper efforts to transmit and preserve culture.

(2). Sustainable: The Sinchi Warmis maintain numerous Chakras, a native shade-grown polyculture garden. Large-scale agriculture—mostly monocultures—yields more profits than smaller chakras, and the more of a crop one has, the more money the farmer will receive when they sell it to the local buyer. Short-term monetary gains on monocultures like corn and banana are alluring to people who do not have the same economic opportunities as urbanites, but as alluring as this is, it requires the deforestation of swaths of land and a disregard for sustainability that chakras maintain. Chakras, because they are shade-grown, provide habitat for organisms in the rainforest. Though they are not as good as old-growth forests, they provide much more habitat and recycle nutrients more than sun-grown monocultures. Further, if a disease wipes out that one crop species, that farmer's income and sustenance vanishes. The Sinchi Warmis' lodge grounds contain over ten chakras that maintain sustainable agriculture and provide materials for their art. The fact that the Sinchi Warmis can procure an income from ecotourism is an incentive for them not to cut down chunks of forest that they can use for supplies, food, and giving tours in.

(3). Support: The Sinchi Warmis are supported by tourist agencies that bring tourists to their eco-lodge, and local governmental workers who help with projects and supply tools for various projects. What they have is support, which is key, because without local recognition, marketing, and inflow of tourists from agencies, there would not be a viable lodge. Without support or recognition there are no tourists. Without tourists, there is no lodge.

Shifting Sands: Responses to Change

A developing Ecuador creates a need to assimilate financially into the domestic economic system, which disrupts cultural preservation. The percentage of people classified as poor in Ecuador as a whole is about 25.55% while the poverty rate in rural Ecuador is 42% (INEC). Larger cities have jobs that smaller towns just do not have. Unless people worked at a lodge, or had a job that was steady, such as in restaurants, stores, tour agencies, or taxi drivers, the only jobs left were generally for extra hands in construction, which were dominated, if not monopolized, by men. There is more opportunity within larger cities for jobs. Of the total population, in 2014, 63.5% lived in urban environments (The World Factbook).

Two young Kichwa men that I knew, left their communities in search of work and moved to several places around Ecuador, one working construction, the other became a soldier in the military. Andy, the soldier, has parents who cannot financially support him. The strain on his family is due to a need for financial stability that is increasingly harder to come by in rural areas in Napo—the majority of Napo comprised of ethnic Kichwa people. It is necessary to have a source of income to obtain basic services and amenities such as electricity, purchasing candles and matches to have light if there is no electricity, transportation, cooking gas, and food. As a country shifts to a more globally connected economy and stronger central government, indigenous institutions, whether they be economic or family related, are weakened by a stronger central system that undermines significance of indigenous norms (UN 63).

This is one of the reasons the Warmis created the worksite of Sinchi Warmi: to gain income and not have to make a trade-off between culture and income and to pass this site on to their children. The primarily young men, who leave, leave the community setting and traditional culture for cities and industry hoping for a steady and higher income. Traditional culture is passed down through generations, but if the children leave, the knowledge will not be passed down (65). The need to pay for rent, food, water, and other basic services, exert pressure on the Kichwas and make it a necessity to have some sort of income. This pressure can lead to a drain of culture if the youth of the community decide to leave. To be clear, everyone should have the opportunity to follow their own path, but the reality is increasingly a lack of opportunities to choose from. The women of Sinchi Warmi give an incentive to their children to stay in the community with a stable worksite and job when they grow up—two children have already joined as official members. This sense of stability and pride in their culture gives the youth both a financial reason to stay and a sense of attachment that glues them to the worksite, which has become a second home. This lodge has created an even more tight-knit community, provided stability, and guaranteed safety.

Ecotourism, Safety, and Exploiting a Growing Market

Safety is a major benefit of preserving indigenous communities and the lodges that the Kichwa run. Kichwa communities are fairly safe from criminal violence, in comparison with larger areas, especially those with a market for tourism and tight-knit communal bonds. The crime rate against women in urban areas is 61.4% while the crime rate in rural areas is 58.7% (INEC). Larger cities have higher crime rates than smaller rural communities however small the difference may be. However, crime in the sense that there is thieving, or muggings, is virtually unheard of in San Pedro—the community the women live in—and Sinchi Warmi, unlike in larger metropolises or other communities. One can walk around at night inside the community and not become a victim of violence. Similarly, domestic violence occurred regularly in San Pedro, but the women united, formed their foundation, and kicked abusive husbands out. Everyone knows one another and is a part of the community. Safety, within this indigenous community, is why maintaining communities like San Pedro and sites like Sinchi Warmi are so vital in a globalizing world: this safety is conducive to business because having a successful eco-lodge that brings in income is an incentive to maintaining safety. The worksite is a haven for cultural activities; it propagates communal support and strength, and through these, financial worries that permeate the women's lives are alleviated a bit. Bonding together through this lodge has created a safer space, tighter community, and income due to the growing tourism market. Concurrently, a recent article in *The Economist* stated that, "Friends and relatives can lend money, pool risk, mind children and bring news of job openings" ("With a little help from my friends"). Further, they quote a study conducted by the London School of Economics that, "found that when a group of Bangladeshi women were given business training and free livestock, not only did they move up the income ladder, but their friends' lot improved too" ("With a little help from my friends"). This anecdote is corroborated by the Sinchi Warmis who received cooking and hospitality training in preparation for their grand opening. This training has helped to make their lodge one of the most well-organized and professional in the area. As of now, they are one of the only indigenous- and community-run eco-lodges listed on many tourist brochures in the Napo region.

Ecotourism is a growing market; this growth increases its viability for sustainability. In 1988, it was estimated that there were around 157 to 236 million eco-tourists in the world (O'Neil 515). The World Tourism Organization, in 1996, predicted that an 86% increase in world tourism would be from such sectors as ecotourism (516). According to Index Mundi, Ecuador's influx of tourists has increased in from 627,000 people in 2000 to 1,141,000 in 2011 (Indexmundi). As this market

grows, it becomes more viable than before, and offers opportunities to profit through it—exploiting this niche market is just what the Sinchi Warmis have done.

Conclusion

Globalization is multidimensional; the avenues of a globalized world offer opportunities to preserve traditional culture, but through these same avenues, culture can become a commodified product. Indigenous people are finding that their worlds and ways of life are facing stark realities of financial assimilation and cultural drain, but cultures need not sacrifice traditional culture for the 'modern'; they can balance these two aspects. The Sinchi Warmis are balancing tough financial and societal pressures with their culture because of their eco-lodge and the viability of exploiting the niche market of ecotourism. If a culture is to maintain heritage and practices, governments must be willing to support endeavors such as Sinchi Warmi; indigenous peoples must run these lodges to ensure their culture is under their control, not an outside party that may want to use the site and culture to their own advantage. Sacrificing heritage and traditional culture is a loss, not just of that country, but also of the global community. Indigenous cultures are not artifacts in a museum that must be sheltered and not allowed to escape their context because they are quaint. They are unique cultures that have a place in a global community. The work of these women, and indeed other Kichwas with their own lodges, are organizing to create a space for their culture in a globalizing environment, and it is through ecotourism and indigenous-run lodges that indigenous groups and their culture can be maintained and passed down. When we travel sustainably and support ecotourism, we support local economies, biodiversity, and contribute to a people's dream of keeping tradition alive.

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