

Careful Planning Guides Ecotourism Development in Punta Laguna

Monkey Business: Mixing Tourism with Ecology

by Veronica H. Long

"Let's go see the monkeys!" shout three barefoot Mayan boys. These young inhabitants of the small community of Punta Laguna, in the jungle of the Yucatan Peninsula, are eager to accompany visitors to view wildlife and ruins.

While mass media hums with voracious sales promotions and intellectuals debate whether it is appropriate, ecotourism has changed from ultra elite to bawdy bandwagon. Meanwhile, deep in the jungle of the Yucatan Peninsula, local resident Serapio Canul, with the support of a local conservation group, Pronatura Peninsula de Yucatan (PPY), diligently works to nurture the growing stream of visitors who stray off the Cancun tourist route in search of tropical birds, spider monkeys, and a glimpse of an authentic Mayan community.

The Punta Laguna ecotourism development project is an example of a new trend that integrates conservation with development. Many international conservation organizations, NGOs (non-government organizations) and governments view ecotourism as the panacea of conservation/development woes. Too often, however, economic development occurs at the cost of environmental conservation -- or vice versa.

Many critical conservation areas are also inhabited by poor rural communities whose members often have no choice but to rely on natural resources, often in unsustainable ways, for survival. Ecotourism provides a way in which development can take place although the needs of the environment are often put first -- thus the ecological needs of a troop of spider monkeys, for example, can set the terms of development. This, however, is not necessarily beneficial to local residents. Punta Laguna has been successful at considering the needs of both the natural environment and the people who dwell in it.

A labor of love

Punta Laguna is 1.5 hours by road from the popular megaresort of Cancun on Mexico's Caribbean coast. The *laguna*, or lake, and the tropical semi-evergreen forest that surrounds it, are in a remarkable state of preservation. The current sanctuary area comprises approximately 475 hectares (1,074 acres).

Maya is spoken in the community and only the men and some of the boys are fluent in Spanish. They live mainly from traditional forms of subsistence farming, including slash-and-burn agriculture and vegetables grown in hollow tree trunks raised above the ground. The Mayan agricultural calendar is observed, and many ceremonies and rituals are still practiced. A small archaeological site dating from the Mayan post-classic period suggests the antiquity of Mayan occupation.

The community is very poor and lacks modern facilities. Water is drawn from a sink hole, or *cenote*, a natural limestone well. There is no electricity, no school, nor any health facilities. Striving for better living conditions has had a destabilizing effect as older children, and some of the men, leave the community to look for work in resort construction or in hotel jobs on the coast. There is also great pressure to introduce cash-earning activities, such as cattle-ranching, which are harmful to the physical environment.

Normally, conservation initiatives come from outside organizations. However, in Punta Laguna the initiative was taken by a member of the community, Serapio Canul. Ten years ago, when the Mexican National Institute for Anthropology and History (INAH) named him official guardian of Punta Laguna's small archaeological zone,



Serapio Canul and sons

Canul began to protect the ruins -- and their resident wildlife. His success, particularly with a troop of spider monkeys, began to attract outside attention. The then Mexican Secretariat of Urban Development and Ecology (SEDUE, now reorganized into SEDESOL), recognized him as the official caretaker of the area's wildlife.

Punta Laguna, like most communities in the Yucatan peninsula (comprised of the states of Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo) has been affected by the growth of tourism. Many tourists pass by as they travel between the famous Mayan ruins of Coba, Chichen Itza, and Tulum. Canul has consistently refused requests to trade in animals, tropical plants, or timber. In the course of his work he has to deal with vandalism, abuse and even threats of physical violence from outsiders. His resistance, along with opposition to any hunting within the sanctuary has also threatened his relations with members of his own community who are desperately poor and whose only source of meat is wild birds and animals.

Strong example

However, the growing interest in Punta Laguna by tourists has vindicated Canul's firm stance: The community has had a change in attitude and is now willing to cooperate with his conservation efforts.

The Punta Laguna nature tourism development project began when PPY learned of the effort of this small community to conserve its wildlife and began to investigate the procurement of protected-area status for the region. PPY recognized the threat to the area caused by the depressed economic state of the residents. A plan to develop the existing small tourism activity was established.

PPY is one of several state chapters of Pronatura, a Mexican NGO dedicated to conservation. It receives support from private donations, in-

ternational conservation organizations and government agencies. Its office, in Merida, Yucatan, operates projects in many parts of the Yucatan Peninsula, one of which is the Punta Laguna Nature Tourism Development Project.

While Canul and other community members worked to clear trails, PPY staff worked on a management plan and funding proposal. Modest funding donated by Calica, S.A., was used to build a rustic visitor reception area where nominal entrance donations are accepted from visitors. A brochure introducing the area and explaining the project was developed in English and Spanish. The brochure was also aimed at sensitizing visitors to the physical environment and to better understanding the local community.

Word-of-mouth advertising has increased tourist visits to Punta Laguna which further validates the efforts to protect the area. In addition, *National Geographic* followed an October 1989 article on the Maya culture with the filming of Canul and the spider monkeys for a television special. One tour guide reported that after she had taken her group to many famous sites in the peninsula, tourists reported their visit to Punta Laguna as the highlight of the trip.

Words of caution

For all the possible benefits, ecotourism can get out of control if not properly managed, and can incur many ecological and sociological costs. In most cases, tourism development is approached enthusiastically with the motto "the more the better." The natural impulse of a local populace desperate for economic returns, combined with the current explosion of interest in ecotourism, can be disastrous.

Rapid success, although important for validating the project in the eyes of the community members, posed a dangerous situation as the infrastructure for large-scale tourism was not

yet in place. Increasing the number of visitors to Punta Laguna meant an increasing, possibly negative, impact on both the physical and social aspects of the area. Trails could become overused and a large number of tourists in the area could affect the wildlife. Canul himself was so anxious to satisfy tourists that he built wide comfortable trails and sought out the monkeys when he knew they would be feeding.

Community involvement a key

In order for tourism development to be appropriate for and accepted by Punta Laguna residents, resident participation was encouraged. Most aspects of the project were initiated by Canul and other men in the community. PPY staff members were very careful to allow the project to be a community-led effort giving only technical advice, environmental education, and other support. One part of PPY's approach is to implement project plans on an incremental basis. Tasks are carried out at a rate at which residents can understand and adapt.

Although not without its share of the challenges that often accompany tourism development, the Punta Laguna project can attribute some of its success to careful project management. In the quagmire of controversy about ecotourism, Punta Laguna stands out as a successful example of appropriate nature tourism development. ●

Veronica Long is a Ph.D. candidate in Geography at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. Her specialization is the social impact of tourism development. Her past research projects have involved techniques to mitigate impacts of tourism on local residents in the Bahias de Huatulco megadevelopment in Oaxaca. She has also participated in the Bali Sustainable Development Project in Indonesia and has received research funding from the Organization of American States.