
Costa Rica: The “eco” disguise of tourism threatens last pristine forests

Eco-tourism is perhaps the most over-used and mis-used word, not only in the travel industry but also in the “development” schemes of governments. But most of the time it just means tourism, the “smokeless industry” to which many southern countries, facing debt burdens and worsening trade terms, have turned in the hope that it brings foreign exchange and investment. Simultaneously, leading international agencies such as the World Bank, United Nations agencies and business organisations have been substantially involved to make tourism a truly global industry.

However, tourism in developing countries is often viewed by critics as an extension of former colonial conditions because from the very beginning, it has benefited from international economic relationships that structurally favour the rich countries in the North. The unequal trading relationships, dependence on foreign interests, and the division of labour furthered by the new economic globalisation schemes have relegated poor countries in the South to becoming tourism recipients, enabled transnationals to gain commercial access to ecologically sensitive areas and biological resources, and accelerated the privatisation of biodiversity, all to the detriment of local communities' land and resource rights and the natural environment.

That is what is happening in Costa Rica. Government projects are going on to give concessions on pristine land sea areas for the construction of tourism complexes. A new Executive Decree was passed on May 2004 (Decree N° 31750-MINAE-TUR) which --among other things-- allows the construction of buildings up to 14 m high and --following some requirements-- the logging of forest areas to make way for “ecotourism” projects. It even legalises the range of impacts that tourism projects could have on forests: up to 15% of the granted area on primary forests, and 25% on secondary forests.

The Costa Rican Federation for Environmental Conservation (FECON), has lodged an appeal on the grounds of unconstitutionality (see allegations of Fecon at <http://www.feconcr.org/frameset/content2.htm>) on 11 June, 2004. As a result, a provision ordered to halt the logging carried out by the company Proyecto Playa Dulce Vida S.A. However, the resolution arrived late since the company had already cut down the forest.

A broad group of Costa Rican and Guanacastecos (people living in the province of Guanacaste, who keep a strong sense of independence) have discussed about tourism and defined what they do not want. And it is clear that they do not want tourist mega projects which turn beaches, peninsulas and forests into tourist enclaves. They do not want tourism that pollutes and destroys ecosystems, affects the balance of wild areas, privatizes roads and beaches, gives priority to the affluent tourist over the local visitor, takes over the water of communities to irrigate golf courses.

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