
Panama: Eco-tourism alternative developed by the Kuna people

Panama has lost 60% of its forests in a deforestation process during which, according to the latest report by the Forestry Service, some 50,000 hectares of forest disappear each year.. The reasons leading to this situation are multiple and complex, ranging from external to internal causes. Although official circles usually accuse the poor peasants for the disaster, in fact it is the last link of a long chain of causalities originating both from unjust national policies and from the impact of the globalisation process and its multiple actors.

In spite of the fact that the issue warrants a deep analysis, in this article we will only concentrate on a type of alternative to traditional deforestation processes that seeks to promote activities serving to sustain local populations, while ensuring forest conservation. Although we are aware that it is a controversial subject, we will focus on the Kuna indigenous people's experience in the development of a type of eco-tourism, defined as how to "travel in a responsible way towards natural areas, conserving the environment and improving local community welfare."

The Kuna people have a long tradition in matters of political organisation and self-government in their territory, known as Comarca Kuna Yala. Their autonomy extends as far as their own vision of an increasingly popular business: cultural and nature tourism. Many Kuna have decided to develop tourism in such a way as to avoid it altering their customs or their environment, but rather integrating it to them. In one of the regions near the source of the river Chucunaque, that runs across the whole of the Darien Province, the communities are being trained to administrate and self-manage their resources for self-sustainable development.

For the Kuna communities, the word 'tourism' has many connotations, and the old people, when thinking back, see it as a bad experience, referring to the foreign hotel concessions some years ago. The Kuna's idea is to use natural and cultural resources as tourist attractions, differentiating between this system and traditional beach and sun tourism that has been developed in the western part of the Kuna Yala geographic zone.

In this respect, indigenous tourism is based on this conception and not as a cultural or ethnic tourism package, where the indigenous communities are part of a tourist distraction, as an object of visits. After all, the populations close to an eco-tourist resource are those who know the most about those ecosystems. A former hunter can become an excellent guide, game-keeper or any other figure related with conservation and interpretation.

The Kuna have even built a hotel in Nusagandi, a wooded mountain zone, under their jurisdiction and with guides trained to identify the flora and fauna, especially the birds. They have also designed interpretation tracks (a "medicine track," for example). Although there is surely a lot to be learnt and to improve, the subject has been emphatically discussed to enable such initiatives to benefit local population groups.

Article based on information from: Desarrollo del Turismo Naturalista. Kuna Yala : Caso Nusagandi, <http://www.guyunusa.com/resumenarticulo.php3?numero=9> ; Boletín Ambientema, julio 2001,

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