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Ecotourism in Costa Rica: Empowering Local Communities

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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Honors Capstone Project in Sociology

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Abstract

This paper explores a community-based ecotourism initiative called La Tortuga Feliz, in Pacuare Beach, Costa Rica. This organization founded and run by Western expatriates using a conservation approach provides benefits to the local community while meaningfully involving them in the process.

My research included an extensive literature review, informal and formal interviews as well as participant observation for one month on-site. The objective was to understand what it means to empower and involve local communities in a meaningful way in community-based ecotourism projects.

I will argue that La Tortuga Feliz, although facilitating some benefits to the community, also disempowers the local community, unable to satisfy the community's need of autonomy and equity. The administration has a superiority complex, does not appropriately communicate, and does not trust the community, resulting in overall dissatisfaction.

Although La Tortuga Feliz faces some challenges, they do not appropriately address these challenges. These challenges include a lack of social and human capital, lack of funding, lack of administrative skill and the right attitude as well as failure to adequately address cultural differences.

Community development work is difficult. Fortunately, with the right attitude and knowledge, we can understand what successful community empowerment entails.

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Introduction

There was a time when efficiency and intelligence meant bending the Earth to our will, exploiting resources to reap the benefits. With depleting resources, rising inequality and environmental crises, our world is telling us that efficiency and intelligence must be redefined to incorporate the serious consequences that exploitation of resources can incur.

We participate in a consumer society. Consuming resources without regard to the consequences has caused myriad problems including negative effects on local communities, harm to ecosystems, the endangerment and extinction of various animals, etc. As *green* initiatives grow throughout the world, we see a development in the understanding that we must now begin to consume with environmental and social consequences in mind. We have begun to buy eco-friendly products, support fair trade and other initiatives of local empowerment.

Tourism in developing countries is a type of consumption; it has transformed to reflect our awareness of the changing times. This new tourism is called ecotourism. "Ecotourism is believed to be the fastest growing type of tourism. Many have come to view it as a means of reconciling the conflicts between the needs for protected area conservation and the pressing needs of local people" (Brechin et al. 2003, p. 103).

An understanding of what ecotourism entails is still developing today. There have been various problems in implementing ecotourism that reflect how much we still need to understand about this process. Studying what ecotourism

means in a theoretical sense can only help us so much; we must also learn from case studies and examples of ecotourism businesses.

Ecotourism is a broad topic that involves any type of tourism that works to limit negative consequences on the environment. I argue that it is not enough to take a conservation approach to these tourism projects, but to also involve the surrounding community in a meaningful way. This approach is called community-based ecotourism. Environmental conservation and community empowerment need not be mutually exclusive.

My research brought me to La Tortuga Feliz (LTF), a community-based ecotourism initiative and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) operating on Pacuare Beach, Costa Rica. Before LTF, the locals' primary source of income was poaching sea turtles, killing them and/or harvesting their eggs. In 2004, LTF started a sea turtle conservation project and hired locals as guides, giving them an income alternative to poaching. LTF employs locals using funds generated by international volunteers who come to help with the project¹. Not only does LTF focus on the conservation of endangered species of turtles, LTF is concerned with local community development and empowerment.

Although LTF is successful in terms of conservation and slight improvements to the lives of the locals, I will argue that they have failed at empowering the community. From the beginning, LTF expressed the desire to hand over control of the project to the local community. In reality, the

¹ These volunteers are also called "eco-tourists." The money they pay to LTF for lodging and food funds the project. Although LTF also accepts small donations and has an "emergency fund" set up by the founding organization in Holland, they do consider themselves self-sustainable.

administrative staff has not followed through on this goal and essential steps have not been taken to hand over control of the project to the community in the future. Although the administrative staff (consisting entirely of Western expatriates) has good intentions and sometimes exhibits enthusiasm and other beneficial attitudes, they do not understand how to approach their challenges in an effective fashion.

Breaking down my findings at LTF, I quickly uncovered signs that indicated the community is not being empowered. The administrative staff feels superior to the locals, shown by their lack of transparency and overall treatment. In addition, the relationship between the project and community lacks open and full communication, and the community has not accepted and embraced the project. This signifies the project's failure to empower the community. When an outside organization *invades* a community and claims to work for the good of that community, a genuine effort should be made to fulfill their promises.

Critical and disappointed in LTF at first, I realized why empowerment is so difficult after my extended time on the island. The biggest obstacles LTF faces include a lack of community cohesion and social capital, lack of adequate funds (coming from a decrease in volunteers and turtles), cultural differences and administrative attitudes and skills.

When I started working on this project, I was interested in studying LTF as an exceptional model of successful community-based ecotourism. I now understand the complexities that inhibit good intentions from affecting positive change. How has LTF failed in empowering the community? Why? With this in mind, what does it mean to involve the community in ecotourism initiatives in a

meaningful and practical way? The lessons that we can learn from this model will contribute greatly to the more effective implementation of community-based ecotourism initiatives.

Chapter 1: What is Ecotourism?

Releasing the baby turtles into the water was absolutely magical. Letting all 70 babies out of one tiny bucket meant they were crawling all over one another, flipping over, moving frantically. It was hard for them to find the ocean; they would go off to the side or bump into our white legs mistaking them for the white foam of breaking waves. I noticed one turtle that was on his back, not moving, long flippers sprawled out in utter hopelessness. I knew he had been so active only a minute ago, I laughed at his comical defeat. The next minute they were all gone. The waves took those babies before I could say goodbye. Not one of them looked back. (Fieldnotes, 06/05/11).

“The earliest known use of the term ‘ecotour,’ undefined, seems to have been by Parks Canada in the 1960s. An official international definition was adopted during the UN International Year of Ecotourism in 2002” (Buckley 2009, p. 2). Ecotourism is defined in many ways. In its most simple definition, ecotourism can refer to a type of tourism that seeks to decrease negative environmental consequences in any way.

One of the first people to define ecotourism, Hector Ceballos-Lascuráin, outlines six very helpful characteristics of an ecotourism activity: “(1) Tourism activity is carried out in a relatively undisturbed natural setting; (2) Negative impacts of tourism activity are minimized; (3) Tourism activity assists in

conserving the natural and cultural heritage; (4) It actively involves local communities in the process, providing benefits to them; (5) It contributes to sustainable development and is a profitable business; (6)

Education/appreciation/interpretation component (of both natural and cultural heritage) must be present” (Lück and Kirstges 2003, p. 168). This specific definition can help us understand the goals often set by ecotourism initiatives.

Ecotourism is a conservation effort that explores different ways it can positively impact the area in which it is situated.

Because of its significant international influence, we must take care to develop ecotourism in the positive ways that Ceballos-Lascuráin has outlined. “According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, tourism and its related economic activities generate 11 percent of Global Domestic Product, employ 200 million people, and transport nearly 700 million international travelers per year. This figure is expected to double by 2020” (Christ, Hillel et. al 2003, p. v).

The ecotourism industry responds to a spectrum of differing consumer desires. When some people travel, they seek an experience very similar to what they are used to in their home country. On this end of the spectrum, American tourists may want a toilet that flushes and hamburgers that taste the same. To others, traveling presents an opportunity to get out of their comfort zone, do something that could really challenge their way of thinking and perception of the world, maybe *make a difference*. On this opposite end of the spectrum, these tourists may want to live in an impoverished village without electricity or plumbing.

These two different types of tourists who want opposite experiences can both support ecotourism initiatives in their travels. Ecotourism models can differ in scale, intention, and community involvement. A way of categorizing these models could be nature-based tourism, conservation-supporting tourism, environmentally aware tourism, and sustainably-run tourism (Brandon 1996, p. 1). This categorization reflects the type of intention towards conservation. Reflecting the type of scale, there is mass tourism, or small-scale tourism. Ecotourism projects also range on the way they involve the local community, from no involvement to projects exclusively controlled by the community.

“In 1980, the IUCN issued the World Conservation Strategy, which reflected the views of a growing number of organizations in stressing that protected area management must be linked with the economic activities of local communities” (Honey 1998, p. 16). Modern ecotourism projects focus on involving the local community in more meaningful ways, because of a change in ethical standards. Involving the community is more democratic and more ethically sound. This type of ecotourism model, which integrates conservation and community development, has multiple names such as community-based ecotourism, or an Integrated Conservation and Development Project (ICDP). My interest lies in this community-based ecotourism, which has the potential to accomplish multiple positive benefits at the same time, for the community and for the environment. Unfortunately, community-based ecotourism can be implemented in ways that affect the community or environment in a negative way. Both the negative impacts and the positive benefits are discussed below.

Threats of community-based ecotourism

This romantic idea of achieving community empowerment and environmental conservation in the same initiative is not always implemented effectively. “Unfortunately, the concentration of ecotourism benefits in the hands of a few powerful actors at the expense of the rural poor is more often the rule than the exception” (Brechin et al. 2003, p. 104). Various methods are used to funnel ecotourism benefits back into the hands of the developed countries or the rich in the developing countries. Benefits could also be unequally distributed among the community members, only benefiting a select few and resulting in social problems.

Equally distributing the benefits may be more difficult in practice than in theory. The intention of “hiring natives” and giving locals a chance to experience economic benefits can actually backfire. The *hire the natives* approach can “create a small salaried class of locals” while at the same time enacting exclusionary policies that “negatively impact the economic situation of the remainder of the community” (Brechin and West 1991, p. 394).

In addition to an unequal distribution of resources, ecotourism can also lead to other harmful behaviors. “Tourists visiting Kruger National Park, in South Africa, may believe they are experiencing a pristine wilderness, where lions, elephants and many other rare and beautiful species roam free in a timeless, pristine and people-free wilderness. In fact, Kruger is a manufactured Eden. The people have been removed and the area’s social and political history has been airbrushed out of the glossy tourist brochures. A closer look at Kruger reveals

glimpses into violence and forced evictions carried out to create one of the best-known 'wilderness' areas in the world" (Duffy 2010, p.54). Tourists have a certain expectation, an expectation that has developed a market that responds to such desires. Instead of reinforcing policies that benefit the local community and the environment, the market often responds to tourist desires by building what they want quickly and without regard for consequences. This happens very often with mass tourism. More tourists mean more pollution, more modification to a delicate ecosystem, greater likelihood for disregarding the needs of the community or turning the environment or culture into a commodity.

Ecotourism might seem to be a viable solution for conserving the environment and empowering local communities, but can often work against these goals in inconspicuous ways. For example, Hawksbill turtles are hunted for their shells, which are used to make exquisite jewelry. Even though a total trade ban exists for the Hawksbill turtle, which has seen an 80 percent decline in its population, "tortoiseshell remains an important product in international trade, and the tourism industry is one of the main sources of demand" (Duffy 2010, p. 190). The tourism market often demands the very things it intends to protect.

The integrity of ecotourism is threatened by bad intentions, large-scale corporate initiatives and a lack of education on what meaningful development means. Coupling good intentions with the proper knowledge in a small-scale grassroots-based initiative would indicate the possibility for more beneficial outcomes. Community-based ecotourism must really focus on identifying the

needs of the community and working closely with the community to mitigate negative consequences.

How community-based ecotourism can be beneficial

Ecotourism is a way of obtaining revenue and therefore can benefit a community by the subsequent acquisition of resources. These resources have the potential to be distributed to positively respond to a community's needs. The income generated can contribute to raising the standard of living and supporting community development projects.

In addition, a cultural exchange can benefit a community. If the tourists express a genuine interest to learn about a culture, traditions and customs will be maintained in an effort of cultural preservation. The tourists can also benefit from this exchange, increasing their understanding of the world and opening them up to new and valuable experiences.

The majority of cases where local communities “have received substantial benefits from ecotourism while minimizing adverse impacts” consist of communities that have some degree of autonomy (Brandon 1996, p. 29). Martha Honey identifies this idea as the *stakeholders' theory*, claiming that “people will protect what they receive value from” and thus should be involved in the process of economic development from the beginning (1998, p. 14). Working towards giving communities autonomy could increase the likelihood of the community receiving benefit from the ecotourism initiative.

In addition to an increased opportunity to receive benefits, community-based ecotourism that stresses high community involvement and autonomy

reflects our modern ethical standards. As a world that pushes for democratic values, community-based ecotourism stresses the need for self-determination. Continuing to support community-based ecotourism is beneficial because it reflects our progress in society.

Simpson proposes a counterargument, saying that “potential problems can occur when communities are heavily involved in tourism initiatives” and arguing that as long as a community receives benefits from an ecotourism initiative, that this is more important than stressing community involvement (2007, p. 3). This argument does not embody democratic values. In fact, an ecotourism initiative that does not involve the community could be compared to a dictatorship. Dictatorships can positively affect a society, having beneficial social and economic consequences. Does that mean that it is ethical and acceptable? In a world where our ethical standards are changing, ecotourism initiatives should reflect that changing attitude. We have to redefine what it means to *work for the community's benefit*, stressing community-based initiatives with substantial community involvement.

The potential for benefit in community-based ecotourism initiatives can give us hope; but it is only through our understanding of the threats that we can even begin to develop this concept. Kirstges and Lück explain that ecotourism is like democracy, a human invention that has not yet been captivated in its truest form (2003, p. 168). That does not mean that we cannot strive to perfect it, trying to balance economic, social, and political interests to satisfy as many stakeholders as possible.

Ecotourism in Costa Rica

Costa Rica is located in Central America, bordered by Nicaragua on its northern border and Panama on its southern border. The Spanish attempted to colonize Costa Rica in the early 16th century, encountering many difficulties due to the climate and resistance by natives. In 1821, Costa Rica declared its independence from Spain. Ever since the late 19th century, they have worked to develop a democracy; they established their current constitution in 1949. Their economy is dependent on agriculture and the tourism industry. Costa Rica brags high education levels, a relatively high standard of living and political stability, one of the more developed Central American countries (CIA World Factbook 2012).

Tourism in Costa Rica is one of its greatest sources of revenue, earning “more than any single export crop during the last few years” (*Costa Rica* 2012). The growth in tourism in the nineties was mostly in small enterprises: “85% of [Costa Rica] hotels have less than 50 rooms, 75% of the country’s tourism enterprises are small to medium size, and at least 75% of all licensed tour agencies are owned by nationals and long-term foreign residents” (Brandon 1996, p.45). Costa Rica has a reputation around the world for ecotourism: “Thirty-five of the leading travel writers in the U.S. named Costa Rica as the number one ecotourism destination in the world” (Brandon 1996, p. 45).

Costa Rica is a destination for nature and adventure tourism because of its biodiversity. “Costa Rica has nearly half a million species, representing 4% of the planet’s expected biodiversity” (*Costa Rica* 2012). This rare and incredible

biodiversity is worth protecting; Costa Rica is known for their conservation efforts and sustainable initiatives.

Chapter 2: La Tortuga Feliz

I had told Camaron the night before that I'd visit him in the hatchery because he's such a "guerrero," or warrior, and works the 12am-6am shift every day. It didn't seem like he believed me, so when I showed up in the purples and yellows of the sunrise, he was all smiles. I had never seen him smile before; he is the serious type of warrior. He showed me the manta ray that he had caught; he fishes during his shift since the hatchery is 20 feet from the shoreline. "Aqui está sus ojos, su nariz, su boca esta aqui. Aqui Raquel, mira, este punto es peligroso." We fished a bit and I made a fool of myself. He caught his breakfast. He told me he'd take me fishing tomorrow. (Fieldnotes, 06/06/12).

La Tortuga Feliz (LTF) is a community-based ecotourism project on Pacuare Beach in Costa Rica. My research took me to this organization for one month to investigate their ability to contribute positively and meaningfully to the local community.

Before discussing my experience and findings, it is important to have an idea of how LTF formed and how it works now. Other important contextual issues include the demographics of the community, why the project is necessary due to the importance of sea turtle conservation, its relationship with the other NGO on the island named Quelonios, the role of the Costa Rican government on the island, and how LTF compares to other community-based ecotourism models.

In the beginning...

Paul Lepoutre, a businessman from Holland, began the ecotourism project in April 2004 after meeting the locals who were poachers at that time. The project operates on Pacuare Beach on the Caribbean side of Costa Rica. He had been working at a hotel across the river mouth of the island where the project is currently located. Paul decided he wanted to start a conservation project, and recruited his wealthy friend Henk Hansler to work with him and help fund the project. Neither Paul nor Henk knew anything about sea turtle conservation.

Paul and Henk emailed the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to ask for support with funding. WWF jumped on the idea because they don't usually include the local community in their efforts (Robert 2011). They said they would match whatever funding Henk put in. Henk and WWF Holland initially gave \$25,000 each to the project. After administrative costs were taken out, about \$15,000 ended up in the project. Another friend of Paul and Henk's donated the Internet services as well as the project's kitchen. The project is situated right on the beach, in very important turtle nesting grounds. They named the project La Tortuga Feliz.

At first, they started building without informing the community what they were doing. Paul did not pressure the community into doing anything, but eased them into his presence. "Hernan was the first local to take interest in what Paul was doing. He was 15 when he started mixing cement and fetching and carrying for Paul. After Paul gave Hernan his first paycheck, Hernan bought a fishing rod,

which was unheard of on the island. Suddenly other community members started getting interested” (Robert 2011).

As more people became interested in what Paul was doing, Paul remained hesitant to talk about exactly what they intended to do. It was not until later that he began to explain, and even later when he started asking them if they were interested in taking volunteers out on the beach. “One by one, they agreed to help him. At the beginning, Paul said they were poaching and going out with volunteers at the same time” (Daniela 2011). After some time without censoring this behavior, Paul informed the locals that were working with him that they had to make a choice, either they continue poaching or become an employee of LTF².

“They weren’t stupid. About 30 years ago the turtles used to crawl over each other to get on the beach. The locals had seen a major decline in turtles, and they knew it didn’t make as much sense to be a poacher. Being a turtle guide, you get paid every night” (Robert 2011). The community accepted the project without conflict, in a very positive way.

Accepting the conservation effort may have been easy, but changing their way of life proved to be difficult. The transition from poaching to working with conservation was rocky and lengthy. Before, as poachers, they made a lot more money even though it was inconsistent. Chayo informed me of the profit breakdown: “In a nest with 100 eggs, 1 dollar (500 CRC) per egg, you’d get \$100 per nest. If you killed a turtle, it’s about \$4-\$6 per kilogram of meat. One turtle weighs around 200 kilograms.” Now, the guides get paid \$12 (6,000 CRC) for

² The employees either work as assistants (guides), take a hatchery shift, work in the kitchen, maintain the project grounds or do a morning “census” (which entails searching for turtle tracks in the morning).

every shift with a \$4 (2,000 CRC) bonus for every nest they find. “I remember when these guys would show up for shifts to patrol on the beach sometimes and sometimes not. Sometimes they were really unreliable, they were avoiding responsibility. Now, they are sitting in seminars and listening to Power-point presentations. They take exams” (Daniela 2011).

All of the locals were poachers, and some of them still are. The locals differ in the way they explain their pre-LTF poaching habits. Most of them mention that they only killed/collected eggs when they needed to, or only to eat. About half of them expressed that they didn't feel right doing that at the time and were hoping for a way out before LTF showed up.

On a final note, the way that the project started seems to have set the precedent for how things are handled. The administrative staff has always consisted of Western expatriates and has never included the community on an equal level, continuously perceiving them as inferior. Instead of facilitating a dialogue and attempting to genuinely address the needs of the community, Paul and Henk treated the community like children who needed to be told what was best for them. Instead of approaching the community as partners, they built the project first and employed them afterwards.

How it works now

In 2007, Paul Lepoutre died suddenly. Someone from Holland came to take it over, but they were unsuccessful without previous experience working with La Tortuga Feliz. As a result, the founders of LTF asked Robert Adeva to take over, who had been a long-term volunteer and assistant to Paul immediately

before he had died. Before working with LTF, Robert worked in real estate; he had no experience in community development or conservation. Daniela Möller, another long-term volunteer, also assumed a leadership role.

Robert is currently the director of the project, closely collaborating with Daniela. They asked former volunteers Justin and Alessia Jensen, newlyweds who actually had met at LTF and were living in Italy, to help out with the project. They returned in spring of 2010. These four people made up the administrative staff when I visited in the summer of 2011. They are all Westerners coming from privileged backgrounds, with no formal education in community development or conservation, working as long-term volunteers³.

From the beginning, four goals were asserted and pursued in the formation of La Tortuga Feliz. The first goal was the conservation of the environment and the protection of sea turtles. The second was to “give people from richer countries the opportunity to experience this, to get out of their regular way of being. The hope is that out of all of the people that come through, there may be some decision makers in large organizations maybe one day and that their experience here may affect the decisions they make in these large organizations” (Robert 2011). The third goal was to improve the living conditions of the local community. The fourth goal was to hand over the project, making sure it was self-sustaining, to the locals.

The first three goals of LTF have been completed. Didiar Chacon, biologist for LTF and Latin American Coordinator of the Sea Turtle Program of

³ Although they do not receive monetary compensation for their work, they do allocate money from LTF's budget to suit their “needs.” This may include doctor visits, airplane tickets, etc. I pursued access to LTF's budget, however, was unsuccessful in my attempts.

WIDECAST (Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network), asserts that LTF is a successful conservation project. The project also successfully facilitates a meaningful experience for international volunteers. The project has also slightly improved the living conditions of the local community. The last goal of handing over the project to the locals is not being realized, and no steps are being taken to develop this goal.

La Tortuga Feliz introduces new volunteers to the project in an in-depth orientation process over the course of 2 days, around 2 hours each day. Volunteers get hatchery and patrol shift training. At this time, one of the administrative staff educates the volunteers on conservation and rules of LTF. Volunteers learn facts about why turtle conservation is important as well as rules like wearing dark clothes at night and using infrared headlamps on patrol. A strict policy prohibits volunteers from using drugs or alcohol while working for LTF. Unfortunately, they do not have an orientation process that includes learning about or introducing the local community.

All the guides demonstrate understanding about how important the project is, the importance of conservation. “For ecotourism to promote conservation, local people must clearly benefit and understand that the benefits they receive are linked to the protected area” (Brandon 1996). At LTF, the local employees have a great understanding of the project’s importance, and what conservation means. Through training and consistent participation, the local employees have adopted a lifestyle that better suits the environment.

The locals don't actually have another employment option. "For the people here, there isn't another economic opportunity, we have to work with the turtles" (Hernan 2011). The land is not suitable for most crops or for big farms. The majority of the community members that do not work for LTF are either known poachers or are rumored to poach every so often.

Positive community development efforts by LTF include helping to repair a pre-existing health clinic, every so often providing scant resources to the school⁴, the creation of a soccer field, giving money to the Association, and attempting to teach English to the community. The organization is a source of consistent income, which is very beneficial for the locals. LTF saves money so employees can be given jobs to do during the off-season.

Aside from the community center, the school and the clinic, there is no other infrastructure or public buildings on or around the island. A foreigner, unaffiliated with LTF, built the community center, commonly known as the "Casa Comunal." Near the Casa Comunal is the soccer field. No one in the community except Ronald uses the Casa Comunal, and use of the soccer field is incredibly rare. The Casa Comunal is used by LTF for training sessions with the international volunteers.

La Tortuga Feliz wanted to give the locals more say in the decision-making process, and thus created the "Association." Along with 30,000 cólonos that the Association gets every month from LTF, they also get money from Quelonios. Last year, Quelonios gave a large sum of money to the Association. A

⁴ The closest school is about an hour's walk from LTF, and I never visited. LTF has helped buy school supplies or have given Christmas presents or paint to the school. The school goes up to 6th grade and is funded by the government.

big chunk of that money went to rebuild the clinic because the doctor was going to stop coming if renovations were not made. Out of 2,000,700 cólonos given to the Association from Quelonios, 600,000 cólonos went to the rebuilding of the clinic (Ronald 2011). In addition, the Association is responsible for paying the wages of the workers.

The community claims that Robert controls the entire Association, a fair claim because Robert is Treasurer of the Association. Ronald, a local employee of LTF and the President of the Association, claims that he does not allow Robert to make all of the decisions. Ronald asserts, “People say that, but it’s a lie. What happens most of the time is Robert likes to fight. I don’t, I like to dialogue. Most times, it’s better to just keep my words to myself. But that doesn’t mean he controls the Association. He is, however, very untrusting of us. Because he is the Treasurer the money comes from him, and then, because he is the Treasurer, the money leaves through him.”

Unfortunately, the community expresses significant dissatisfaction with the way LTF is being run. According to Miguelito, “About three years ago we were doing well. We were given good resources; they were helping the community. Things have taken a turn for the worse, now Robert is not concerned with the community. Everything’s going to fall apart.”

Demographics

Defining the community on the island is a hard task, a topic I will explore in more detail later on in the paper. I wanted the community that I talk about to coincide with what others on the island viewed as a community. This is why I

asked the community members to help me define who was in the community from their perspective. When asked how many people are in the community, most people answered that there are around 20 people. I worked with a couple community members and the administrative staff to compile a complete list, which included 27 people. No Westerners are included in this count.

Out of these 27 people, 3 are below the age of 18 (11.1%). There are 3 women in the community above the age of 18 (11.1%) and 21 men in the community above the age of 18 (77.8%). Out of those men, only 4 (14.8%) are married. Two of these men live with their Costa Rican spouse on the island (meaning two of the women in the community are married, the other is widowed). Of the two other married men, one is married to a foreigner and the other is married to a woman who refuses to live on the island with him. La Tortuga Feliz employs 9 people in the community, or 33.3% of the community. Approximately the entire island has completed elementary school, up to 6th grade. Only one person, Ronald, has gone farther than that (3 years into secondary school). Only five people in the community can adequately read and write in Spanish (18.5%), and no one knows English.

Importance of saving sea turtles

The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) has compiled a red list based on research that categorizes animals in their endangered status. The Leatherback sea turtle and the Hawksbill turtle are categorized as critically endangered, while the Green turtle is classified as endangered. The categorization of the red list starts with “least concern,” to

“near threatened,” to “vulnerable,” to “endangered,” to “critically endangered,” to “extinct in the wild,” to “extinct” (*The IUCN Red List* 2011).

The police do not come to the island often, and only come when LTF offers them coffee and money for gas (Robert formal interview). Due to the infrequent visitation of police, poaching still occurs and negatively affects the conservation project. The poachers take the majority of the nests. In 2010, 33% of the Leatherback nests went to the hatchery while 67% of the nests were poached⁵. Four hundred twenty two Leatherback nests and 10,747 Leatherback eggs were collected with 3,263 released babies. For the Green turtles, 80 nests (40%) were brought to the hatchery and 118 (59%) were poached in 2010. Out of 8,754 eggs, 7,169 baby Green turtles were released. Out of every 1,000 babies released, only 1 turtle will reach sexual maturity⁶ (“LTF Informe de Trabajo” 2010). Although the poachers collect most of the eggs, LTF is still making a considerable and important conservation effort.

LTF’s presence is also important because poachers in Costa Rica are not effectively punished. “We’ve seen poachers taken away in handcuffs and they’re back in 2 days. This happens all over the place” (Judy 2011). Because the government fails at regulating this problem effectively, this conservation effort offers necessary aid to the protection of sea turtles.

La Tortuga Feliz is an accomplished conservation project. “You can close your eyes and imagine if LTF wasn’t here what would happen with the nests and the eggs and the turtles. So yes, they are successful” (Didiar 2011).

⁵ This number includes all the nests that were laid on the stretch of beach patrolled by LTF.

⁶ Sea turtles reach sexual maturity at approximately the age of 25 yrs.

Quelonios

ASVO (Asociación de Voluntarios para el Servicio en las Áreas Protegidas) is a Costa Rican non-profit non-governmental organization that runs a project called Quelonios on the island where LTF is situated. They started up after LTF, and they bring in their own volunteers. Quelonios does not have a permit to do patrols on the beach; they send their volunteers on patrols and participate in watching the hatchery through LTF. Justin claims that they have done illegal patrols in the past to entertain their guests. They give money to the Association, paying half of almost every expense. They contribute substantially and consistently with finances, although they are inconsistent with the time and energy they offer.

This inconsistency has created a tense and negative relationship between Quelonios and La Tortuga Feliz. The locals who work for LTF as well as the administrative staff express dissatisfaction and lack of trust for Quelonios. Quelonios volunteers often show up late for shifts, or sometimes not at all. They do not respect the rules; for example, they may bring dogs or use white lights on patrol, both of which can scare the turtles. This level of noncompliance is very harmful to a conservation project.

A Quelonios volunteer named Saray Lima explained that if Luis thought they worked hard the night before, he sometimes “won’t send us to do the 10-2 hatchery shift that we are scheduled for.” Saray believes that part of the reason they might do this is just to give Robert and Daniela a hard time. She said the people at Quelonios are always talking bad about Robert and Daniela.

When asked whether or not they are trying to improve relations with Quelonios, the administrative staff of LTF expresses exasperation and impatience. On the other hand, the director of Quelonios, Luis Solano, says that it is hard to work with Robert and Daniela; expressing that Quelonios has tried to communicate and offer their help in various ways but LTF refuses to work with them. Both organizations feel like they have tried hard to fix the relationship and communicate while the other organization has been inapproachable and inconsiderate. Luis has expressed very intelligent ideas for initiating community development, however there is no evidence beyond his claims that he has actually tried to do any type of community development.

LTF and the local LTF employees dislike the project for creating more complications and conflict⁷. Quelonios employs one member of the community, Miguel. Minor and Andre hang out at Quelonio's home base, but are not hired by the project. Gabriel Solano, a local, and his American girlfriend sometimes volunteer at Quelonios.

Role of government

The Costa Rican government does not help LTF, and has a very limited presence on the island. There is no local government that influences the island in any way. The locals are not involved in state-making decisions; if they did choose to vote, the closest place to vote is in Parismina, 2 1/2 hours away (Robert 2011).

⁷ After talking badly about LTF, Chayo admits that "At least LTF keeps us as a community. That is the only thing that they have respected. If Quelonios was in charge, they would promise things and not fulfill them, pitting the community against one another. All Quelonios cares about is owning the beach and making money." There are rumors that other projects started by ASVO have tried to undermine neighboring projects and steal titles to beaches and business from them. Some community members and the administrative staff referenced this rumor, expressing mild concern.

Only Miguelito bothers to make that journey. Parismina is also the town with the nearest police force, part of the reason why the police have an inadequate presence on the island.

The government does send a doctor to a health clinic located about a half hour motorized boat ride from the island. A doctor comes every two weeks, and free basic health care is offered to the locals from the government. A government-funded public primary school is located an hour's walk away from LTF.

Criticizing the LTF model against other ecotourism models

Improving community-based ecotourism involves learning from the existing literature. The best models will evolve to fit changing ethical implications and discovery of new methods.

A study of small-scale tourism by Heidi de Haas on Niue, an island in the South Pacific, asserts that a community-based ecotourism initiative can only be deemed sustainable if it is environmentally sensitive, socially and culturally appropriate and economically viable. Although Niue was socially and culturally appropriate, involving the community in a meaningful way as well as respectful of the environment, the program could not attract enough tourists to be economically viable. The article talks about how small-scale tourism can be beneficial in our modern society since it can contain the “impacts of tourism and keep ecotourism sustainable in the long term” (De Haas 2003, p. 324).

De Haas' study does a good job at illuminating the possibilities of small-scale community-based ecotourism for success. The initiative is incredibly positive and beneficial, with the only major problem being the economic viability.

It is important to note how easily the factors of environmental sustainability, socio-cultural appropriateness and economic viability can influence one another, resulting in difficulties when attempting to achieve this balance. Although LTF is economically and environmentally sustainable, they have trouble with socio-cultural appropriateness. De Haas defines socio-cultural appropriateness as involving the local community in “tourism planning, development and decision-making” (De Haas 2003, p. 322). LTF is not doing this.

A community-based ecotourism project in Ecuador named Kapawi has seen successful for myriad reasons including great financial backing, a powerful and well-educated foreigner who runs the project and who is extremely integrated with the community, and a sustainable design. Daniel Koupermann, the project founder, even briefs the tourists on the indigenous people (Achuar)’s customs and culture upon arrival (Wood 1998, p. 11). This example reflects the importance on being respectful and appropriately integrating the community in the project. In contrast, the foreigners at LTF are not integrated with the community, and do not brief the tourists on the local community. More appropriate integration would bring more success to LTF.

Jill Belsky’s study of Gales Point Manatee in Belize, a community-based rural ecotourism project, involved the community but failed to disperse the benefits. Like LTF, outsiders with seemingly good intentions controlled the project. Contributing to their problems included limited access to the project’s resources for poorer people in the community, external issues like political problems and a lack of communication and understanding that contributed to

feelings of tension (Brechtin et al. 2003, p. 96). Like Gales Point Manatee, LTF also limits access to their resources for community members and has problems of miscommunication.

In some instances, local communities have successfully started their own initiatives. An indigenous Quichua community in eastern Ecuador named Capirona developed its own project. It recognized important concepts completely on its own, like the equal distribution of the positive benefits of ecotourism. They have collaborated with regional and national Indian organizations as well as travel agents in Quito to help develop the project. “Capirona offers an example of how a community with little capital can get involved in ecotourism by themselves with minimal impact and total control over resources” (Brandon 199, p. 50). With sufficient communal cohesion, good intentions and good practices, this kind of communal autonomy should be something that we strive for.

There are definitely important attitudes, intentions and methods that will contribute to the success of a community-based ecotourism project. Examples of these universal ways to achieve successful ecotourism include equally distributing resources, consulting with a community about their needs and ideas, and showing respect as the previous examples have indicated.

The Annapurna Conservation Area Project focuses on meaningful community involvement coupled with a conservation effort. This case study is important because it took a skeptical community and transformed them into playing an active, enthusiastic role in conservation. Their “bottom-up” approach means that they value the contributions of the locals. Community organizations

and committees are so involved that they are viewed as partners that are “receptive to new and different ideas and are prepared to try innovations, while the villagers in general have shown a high level of commitment to community projects” (Brechin and West 1991, p. 168). Working with the community has been successful, partly because of the way the community has responded. Unfortunately, the Pacuare community has not responded as positively with La Tortuga Feliz. Whereas social capital and community cohesion is prevalent in the Annapurna Conservation Area Project, LTF’s lack of social capital has contributed to negative effects.

Working close with the community is good for business and it makes ethical sense. Local communities should have autonomy; they should have some sense of self-determination. Many international agreements support this view, for example the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. La Tortuga Feliz supports this idea of self-determination, claiming to place a significant emphasis on involving the community. Unfortunately, this has proved to be harder than they thought.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Along with participant observation as an international volunteer, I also conducted formal and informal interviews. I interviewed 34 people formally, audio recording 32 of those people. For these formal interviews I followed a structured outline of questions (see Appendix). I will also include in the Appendix a List of Characters, where I will include a short description of each participant in

my research. Along with formal interviews, I also conducted informal, unstructured interviews, with little to no structure. I also conducted a survey of 14 people to help identify how the fundamental needs of the community were being met before and after the creation of La Tortuga Feliz.

I stayed on the island for one month, interviewing as many people as possible. I was lucky enough to interview the entire administrative staff, all of the La Tortuga Feliz employees and many of the other locals and volunteers. After collecting this data, I looked for recurring themes and grouped together the effects of the LTF on the community, the ways in which LTF was disempowering the locals and the challenges faced by LTF in realizing their full potential. Before I give you their story, let me give you my story.

The prelude

After the petty judgmental years of high school, I was eager to take on life and push myself to new levels. I took a gap year; I wanted to see the world outside of the United States for the first time. I traveled to Perú, Honduras, El Salvador and South Africa. Watching kids play in heaps of trash, people living in incredibly small make-shift shacks with trash bag roofs and others struggling to find meals, I came face-to-face with the “inequality gap” that we learn about in school. It’s real. It smells bad. It looks sad. It makes you feel so small and helpless that all you can do is cry. An ideological do-gooder exploded out of me.

My interest in community-based ecotourism started on a six-hour rainforest river trek in a hand-made dugout canoe. Stan LeQuire, my father, was researching this locally started and locally managed NGO named MOPAWI

located in a *very* isolated and remote part of Honduras. I was lucky enough to accompany him. I took my first bucket shower, saw ancient petroglyphs while on a canoe steered by four locals using long wood poles, and had three homemade meals a day made by a beautiful woman named Elma.

On that trip, I fell in love with community-based ecotourism because I saw the different levels of possible benefits. On the one hand sits the traveler, learning about the world in a beautiful, new, and sometimes challenging way. Tourism can inspire and educate. The “eco” part of this type of tourism means that the tourist organization works with the environment. Tourism can protect and conserve. “Community-based” ecotourism works to benefit the community. Tourism can empower.

Early on, this was my idea of ecotourism: Real dreamy and romantic. The money I spent on my life-changing adventures gave some remote indigenous tribe the next meal on their plate. On the surface, in the beginning, I could not perceive anything wrong with the concept of ecotourism.

I pursued multiple opportunities to travel throughout college, observing different types of tourism and community empowerment. I learned about difficulties communicating across cultures; I learned what it is like being a foreigner and wanting to “make a difference.” While in Ghana my junior year, I studied how different foreign NGOs (tourist-based and otherwise) empower local communities. I started to understand what local community empowerment can look like.

While contemplating capstone topics, I decided I wanted to study a community-based ecotourism initiative in Costa Rica called La Tortuga Feliz (LTF). It seemed like a great model that was doing a lot of positive work with the community. Their goal to eventually hand over control of the organization to the local community especially piqued my interest. I thought to myself: *What better way to empower the people than to give them all the power?*

I had been to LTF the summer of 2010, planning to stay for two weeks but leaving after three days. I went with my sister, and she very much disliked the experience. The humidity, hard work, isolation and the wildlife that came out at night disturbed her to the point of a mental breakdown. I, however, enjoyed everything. It was a satisfying challenge to work so hard on an isolated island. The local community was easy to get along with, I felt at home.

We had to leave. My sister was having severe panic attacks each night. We knew after the first night that we should leave, but the program only went to town twice a week and they weren't willing to take us back any sooner. We had to push through two more days. Robert Adeva, the director of the project⁸, was incredibly rude to us, claiming that we were having an enormously negative impact on the project because they had counted on our commitment. At that time, there were about 15 other volunteers at the project. Rob did not even consider giving us a refund, and was very hard to talk to. After my sister tried to ask him

⁸ Even though Rob is the authority figure at LTF, the leader of the administrative staff, he insists that his title is "long-term volunteer." I do not believe that this title suits him, since the other members of the administrative staff, also "long term volunteers," answer to him and are sometimes reprimanded by him for making decisions without his permission.

for at least some money back, she returned to me sobbing, hurt by his attitude and insensitivity.

Before making reservations to stay with LTF for the summer of 2011, I emailed Rob. He didn't remember me, and I did not reference my previous stay. Rob told me that my interviews would be no problem; he was willing to work closely with me to make my research work. I asked him what they were doing to hand over control to the locals. He informed me of bimonthly community meetings to share the decision-making process with the locals.

From San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica, it is a two and a half hour bus ride east to Bataan, a sparsely populated *pueblo* in the middle of nowhere. Once there, Rob met me off the bus, and we waited for other volunteers that never came. Rob told me they were having problems with the website; with missing emails and faulty hyperlinks, he informed me there was a shortage of volunteers. After a thirty minute taxi ride down a rocky road and a forty-five minute motorboat ride, I arrived at the LTF home base on Pacuare Island.

Business Time: The role as a researcher

Sure enough, there was only one other volunteer at the project beside myself, an Israeli boy about my age. Immediately after arriving on the island, I went about talking to the locals and working to lay a foundation of friendship and trust. The previous summer, I had talked to three locals: Chayo, Miguelito, and Patricia. I was delighted that all three of them remembered me. The locals warmed up to me immediately. My Spanish was good enough to communicate, but I needed practice. They were patient.

I noticed right away that there seemed to be fewer families on the island than I remembered. The last time I was there I had seen more women and children. After asking around, it turned out that two families had left the island. Now, there was *one* local woman active in the community and *three* children. In addition, when I had visited before, the locals had not expressed dissatisfaction with the project. It may have been my limited interactions with them over three days, but this time the locals complained non-stop.

I wanted to be open about my intentions for interviewing people. I mentioned it to everyone at the very beginning, so they could get used to the idea. I did not start formal interviews until about a week and a half into the project. I consistently made clear to all research participants that I would not share any of the information they gave me with other people on the island, that it was for a school project.

The volunteer work on the island consists of one four-hour shift each day. The shift entails either patrolling the shoreline for turtles with a local or guarding and maintaining the hatchery. In addition to formal shifts, each volunteer is assigned various chores over the week and group chores are also completed. This system works well with ten people. When there were only two volunteers, each volunteer had two shifts a day and each member of the administrative staff would also take on one shift a day⁹. Usually, the administrative staff would not go on patrols or have a hatchery shift but would be in charge of other behind-the-scenes tasks.

⁹ This excludes Robert. I never saw Robert do any work on the island besides drive the boat to and from the project and Bataan.

Patrol shifts involve walking over 9 km in the sand at night looking for turtles. A local guides the patrol; they are technically called “investigation assistants” or “assistants to the biologist.” If a turtle is found on the beach, their measurements are taken; tag numbers and shark bites/wounds are noted. Infrared lights are used on the beach; bright lights scare the turtles. Mainly Leatherback turtles and Green turtles nest on the beach, with the occasional Hawksbill turtle. If the turtle starts to lay her nest, the eggs are collected.

While patrolling, it is certain that poachers will be encountered. The poachers and LTF have an agreement, whoever finds the turtle first “owns” the turtle. It is common to see a turtle and then see poachers next to the turtle. We are just supposed to keep walking, acknowledging that those poachers “own” the turtle. In the case of the Leatherback, the poachers only desire the eggs. Because Leatherbacks feed on poisonous jellyfish, the locals believe that the meat of the Leatherback turtle is poisonous¹⁰. In contrast, if poachers find a Green turtle or Hawksbill turtle, they will wait for the turtle to lay eggs and then kill the turtle. Costa Ricans consume all types of turtle eggs and the meat of the Green and Hawksbill turtle. In addition, the shell of the Hawksbill is incredibly beautiful, and used to make jewelry.

The hatchery shift entails guarding the hatchery, where all of the nests that have been gathered are re-buried. During my stay, we had an average of about 30 nests in the hatchery at any given time. The nests were closely monitored. A standard protocol for hatching nests involves measuring baby turtles, writing down observations and releasing them into the ocean at an appropriate hour.

¹⁰ This is not true.

I sat in on three employee-training sessions during the first couple days of my stay at LTF. The project's biologist talked to all of the employees about the conservation of sea turtles. It was really encouraging to see them taking notes, taking tests, raising their hands to answer questions, looking studious and interested in the material. This positive glimpse of the project did not last long. My first interviews were with Justin, who is part of the administrative staff, and Didar, the biologist, both of whom did not have negative things to say about the project. It was only after my fourth day there, talking to an employee named Chayo that I began to see the real LTF.

Every single inhabitant of the island had something negative to say about the project. Once they started feeling comfortable with me, they would not stop complaining. A couple of the locals were a bit more reserved or hesitant to say bad things about the project. The majority, however, expressed their discontent.

I noticed immediately a big discrepancy and disconnect in what the locals felt and what the administrative staff felt. I identified excessive issues of miscommunication, lack of understanding and inability to handle cultural differences. It was frustrating for me to see problems where, as an outsider, I could perceive an easy solution. I did not want to interfere in the conflicts, desiring to remain neutral. Even if I had a strong opinion about something or thought I could help, I kept it to myself.

Unfortunately, I found that nothing was being done to accomplish the goal of handing over control of the project to the locals. The administrative staff of all Westerners controlled the entire project. An "Association" was set up with the

intention of increasing local participation in important decisions. Upon later inspection, I found that “local participation” in this context meant one local making decisions with Robert, the program director. I felt deceived.

After feeling outraged that no one was taking steps to hand over control of the project to the locals, I decided to take things into my own hands. I asked other volunteers if they wanted to help me teach English to the locals. I went around to all of the LTF employees and informed them of our first English class¹¹. About half of them seemed to not care while the other half seemed excited about the class.

The first English class turned out to be three volunteers and one local, Carlos. I continued English class every day, and continued asking the locals to attend. I did not want to push them too hard; I wanted to see how much interest they had of their own prerogative. I kept asking the locals to come, changing the time of the class in case that was keeping them away. After a week and a half, when the locals barely responded to me informing them of the class, I decided not to ask them anymore. After the first day, I continued the classes with Carlos and sometimes with Erin, another volunteer. She had wanted to practice her Spanish; the sessions became me tutoring them both at the same time or just me tutoring Carlos.

I also gave Patricia, the local cook at the project, private English lessons while she prepared lunch for the volunteers. I created my own curriculum and spent about one and a half hours with her each day for the last two and a half

¹¹ Rob told me he did not want poachers or non-LTF employees to be taught English. Although I wanted to offer the class to everyone on the island, I decided to respect his wish to prevent conflict.

weeks I was there. I even gave Patricia homework, which she found time to complete. She was a great student, very hardworking and intelligent.

One day, Patricia was looking upset when she blurted out that she didn't feel like she was making any progress and that she probably couldn't learn English. I gave her a big hug, looked deep in her eyes to attack all the little bits of insecurity she felt. "You are incredibly intelligent, Patricia. You have done far better than I thought you would have, and than most other people do. Learning English is very difficult. The language just doesn't make sense." I flipped through the book we had been using, showing everything we had done. "You amaze me." A soft, beautiful smile crept its way along her glowing face.

The food at the project was really hard to get used to. Because we did not have a fridge, I was forced to take on vegetarianism. The portions were small. I always felt hungry, and there was pretty much nothing I could do. At times my energy felt dangerously low. Especially when I had to do the late night patrol.

Throughout the duration of my stay, I always made an effort to make each local feel like they were worth something. Even if I had to rush somewhere, I would stop to say hello and ask them how they were doing. The volunteers *rarely* interacted with the locals outside of going on patrol with them¹². In contrast, I would visit Chayo to play cards for hours at a time, I organized some group fishing trips, I milked Culebra's cow with him. In many ways I feel like I bridged

¹² Here I am referring to the short-term volunteers. The long-term volunteers, or administrative staff, would interact with the locals. These interactions were predominantly work-related. For example, the long-term volunteer with the best relationship with the locals was named Alessia. After volunteering on-and-off for over six years, she still does not feel comfortable going into the front yards of the locals' homes.

the gap between the locals and the volunteers, facilitating more opportunities for friendship and cultural exchange.

It was incredibly difficult to get to know the locals. I wanted to spend time with them and talk to them, but the implications behind my friendly behavior created tension. As an engaging, young, American lady on an isolated island populated predominantly by single, lonely men, it was hard to avoid uncomfortable situations and misunderstandings.

Very often I found myself feeling uncomfortable and wary of attracting unwanted attention. On one occasion, I went to Carlos' house to get a lemon and Jorge told me I better "watch out," that it's "dangerous" for me because too many people are getting crushes on me. I turned bright red and felt my heart sink to my feet. The majority of the men made me feel uncomfortable on a daily basis. As time progressed, I found myself feeling more at ease. The men started to understand the nature of our friendship as well as respond positively to the way I asserted myself.

I was really able to develop trusting, positive relationships with the locals. One day, Jorge stumbled into the LTF home base with a deep wound. I washed and dressed his wound for him. The locals did not hesitate to ask me for help, Carlos asked me to help him make a sign for the jewelry he was selling to volunteers. I also constantly asked the administrative staff if they needed help. I would do extra work for them, like paperwork or cleaning the cabins. I developed a reputation as being a reliable and eager-to-help volunteer and friend.

I learned how to laugh at myself when I went fishing with Hernan. Hernan was so patient with Sinead, another volunteer, and I. We were the two white girls who couldn't catch anything! He pierced crayfish after crayfish on our fishhooks. Every time Hernan and André laughed as I entangled myself in twine, I made sure that instead of getting frustrated I would tell myself that I was just entertaining them. After we were done, Hernan offered to let me have all of the fish he caught. As I cleaned and gutted fish with him, my distress at this unnerving experience was outweighed by delight to see his pride in sharing his skills with me.

It was hard to hear the locals complain about aspects of the project that I also found frustrating and negative. I tried to remain neutral throughout my time there, not necessarily agreeing with them to make them feel even worse about their situation. I did not want to exasperate relations between the community and the administrative staff. At the same time, I wanted to comfort them and show them that I believed them and understood their plight. I also wanted to get close to them so they felt like they could trust me. The locals always opened up to me easily as did the administrative staff, revealing that my neutrality and good intentions was clear.

I was sure to interview as many people as I could and constantly be working on reinforcing friendship and trust. There was a family, Los Mapuche, who lived way down the beach, but I knew it would take me about an hour to walk all the way there and another hour to walk back. Was it worth it to cut out such a big chunk of my day to go see them? Time and energy is *incredibly*

precious on the island; I didn't want to go. While brainstorming options, I realized the trek would be much faster on horse.

Every morning, a local named Ronald looks for turtle tracks while riding on his horse. I asked him if I could tag along. That would entail waking up at 4AM. A small sacrifice. What a great morning. He made me an incredible breakfast in his house, deep in the jungle vegetation. The sun was hidden behind all of the green; its slow rise was marked only by the subtle color changing of the sky. He had shelves and shelves of books. Our ride consisted of happy silences contemplating the beauty of the morning beach, talking about articles he had read recently or the existence of extra-terrestrials. I learned a lot about this beautiful old man, whose sarcastic sense of humor and extensive knowledge of the *naturaleza* reminded me so much of my father. When I told him that, he tossed his head back in comfortable laughter, and we both felt at home.

I heard every local complain at least once about the administration, especially about Robert. When evaluating Robert's performance as a leader, one situation in particular really stands out. There was one day where a volunteer named Joyce was very distraught, crying and telling me that she *had to* go home. She had been in the midst of intense family drama and really felt like she needed to talk to her family. A couple months prior, she hadn't even been sure she could still come to LTF, and informed Robert. He told her that they could not refund her money, and that she would be breaking her commitment.

I calmed Joyce down, and told her we would find a way to call her sister. We got a phone card from Daniela and started looking for a phone to use. When

we asked Robert to help, he was incredibly rude to us. He told us that they “didn’t offer that kind of service,” in a voice that had rude undertones accompanied with a childish glance. Her voice shaking, Joyce explained, “I understand, but something came up and I really need to call home.” Rob replied, “Something came up for us too, you arrived a week late...” This irrelevant and demeaning comment enraged Joyce, and we turned to walk away. He was incredibly insensitive to her family emergency and emotional state. Later, we heard him yelling at Daniela for giving us a phone card. It ended up not being a big deal, we used Patricia’s phone. It took about an hour to find service, but it was well worth it, and Joyce was emotionally stable the rest of her stay. Later on, I apologized to Daniela for getting her in trouble. She apologized for Robert; she knew that he had offended Joyce. “He just doesn’t have social skills,” she said. Robert definitely lacks important social *and* leadership skills that have interfered in myriad ways with the success of the project.

Examples of Robert’s incompetence kept surfacing in interviews and personal observations. On the other hand, my interviews with Robert were very positive. He seemed to have good intentions and some good ideas. It was hard for me to reconcile these two completely different images of Robert.

With a week and a half left to go in the program, Robert told me Alessia had been nervous about me, calling me a “Recipe for Disaster.” They had been nervous that with my good Spanish and ability to connect and relate to the locals, I would side with the locals. Robert said, “We know what they think of us.” Robert told me that I proved them wrong; he felt like I really got it, really

understood the way things are. He praised my ability to internalize both the perspective of the locals *and* that of the Westerners.

Within the last couple days of my stay at LTF, Alessia and Daniela asked me to sit down with them and share my observations and suggestions. They believed I had completed effective research and felt my opinion was valuable. I was blown away by this expression of approval and respect. Justin and Robert ended up sitting down with us as well. I talked very vaguely about my findings and made a few suggestions, careful to not say anything specific. For example, I told them how many conflicts seemed to be based on miscommunication, and how the locals felt ignored. Among my suggestions, I told them they should have increased transparency, and encourage interaction with the locals. They agreed with everything I said, and told me that they knew a lot of what I was telling them but it was good to hear it again.

Overall, my research had gone very smoothly. I felt like I had gathered a great amount of data, had been able to see both perspectives well, and had stayed a neutral party. I had succeeded in understanding how LTF was trying to work with the community and how they were failing to empower them. Even though there was much gossiping and negative comments, I felt like I was able to sift through it all and get a good idea of what was really going on at the project. I felt like I had made valuable connections with the locals. Even though I felt like I could have done more to resolve problems and conflicts, I was glad I did not interfere. I felt like I did make a difference because I had listened to the locals and showed them that someone cares about them. Also, I had bridged the gap between

the volunteers and the locals. I had made incredible progress teaching English to Patricia and Carlos.

A Heartbreaking Farewell

Six AM and I was anxious to leave the island with my backpack of positive memories. I was smiling big. The island was quiet and peaceful, the large palm trees waving goodbye in the wind. Chayo, a local who became one of my best friends, came up to me. “Chayo! I’m going to miss you!” I said in a hushed, excited voice. He looked up at me slowly, hurt and confused. “Why did you tell Robert everything? We trusted you. How could you do such a thing?” He looked like he was going to cry. I blushed and fumbled for words, tremendously embarrassed.

He told me things were going to be worse on the island because of me. Thinking that he was referring to my meeting with the administrative staff, I assured him that I didn’t tell Robert anything that anyone said in particular. I was so confused and distraught, and the boat was humming, telling me it was time to go. I was tired of dealing with drama, tension and conflicting stories. I scrounged the last reserves of my energy to hold back hysteria and tears. “Just please don’t tell Robert what I’m telling you *now*,” Chayo said, looking up at me nervously. “Of course, Chayo! I would never!” I looked deeply into his eyes, so I could pack authenticity behind what I meant, searching for the trust and love he had for me only a day ago. My last hug felt bitter and painful.

The day before I had left, *hours before* the meeting I had with the administrative staff, Robert had scolded the employees. Chayo told me that

Robert had reprimanded them for talking to me, telling them that they shouldn't say bad things about the project in the interviews. He told them he didn't want the volunteers to have a bad image of the project. I had never told Robert what the locals had told me in their interviews. Unfortunately, that was the impression that Robert had given them. Robert either intentionally or unintentionally ruined my reputation with the locals, giving them reason to believe I had violated their trust.

The entire experience put into context my romantic ideas about ecotourism and community development. Just like every other issue, there is no easy fix and good intentions don't always lead to good results. It has been an endless endeavor to make sense of everything that happened. Community development is difficult and complex.

Chayo woke me up, knocking on the door to the cabin at 11:30PM. "Come quick, there's a Leatherback just outside, and she's about to lay eggs!" "Really, Chayo? I'm so tired." "Raquel!" "Ok, I'm coming." He hadn't even been on a patrol shift; he had been "off-the-clock" and just strolling along the beach. "Go to the hatchery and get the supplies, meet me at mojón 15!" I smiled as fatigue dissolved into happiness, realizing that Chayo understood that I was there for him whenever and why he might need me. (Fieldnotes, 06/06/12).

Chapter 4: La Tortuga Feliz Effects.

The existence of La Tortuga Feliz has had positive and negative effects. I am mainly concerned on the effects LTF has had on the community¹³. LTF has

¹³ I will evaluate the "fundamental needs" and "measures of positive change" as defined and explained by Montoya & Drews in *Livelihoods, Community Well-Being, and Species*

not greatly influenced the community's access to its fundamental needs, and has largely failed to address positive change in the community.

Fundamental Human Needs¹⁴

Montoya and Drews (2006) define the fundamental human needs in three categories, organic needs, existential needs and transcendental needs. Organic needs consist of *subsistence*, or “the need for nutritious food and drink,” *protection of person and place, affection and communication*, or the need for social interaction within the community, and *liberty of movement and expression*, or “the need for the freedom of physical movement and expression.” Existential needs consist of *understanding*, or “the need for acquiring, manipulating, and applying information and knowledge, *creation*, or the need to express and invent in creative ways, *participation* in determining their own destiny, *leisure*, and the need for *identity*. Transcendental needs include *transcendence*, or “the need for exploration, growth, and expansion beyond one's own organic and existential limitations in spatial, temporal, and spiritual terms” (p. 15).

For the most part, the fundamental needs of the community are being met. When asking for the people to compare their life before La Tortuga Feliz and after LTF's presence, they perceived no noteworthy differences. They report good access to food, health services, as well as good relationships between community members and a strong sense of identity. It is also reported that drug use and crime

Conservation. It is important to note that no organization can perfectly respond to all the community's needs and affect all aspects of positive change in the community.

¹⁴ This information is based on formal and informal interviews as well as a survey I conducted on 14 people in the community. The survey questions can be found in the Appendix.

are not too out of control. Unfortunately, not many people have transportation, most have only completed school up to sixth grade, and they don't feel involved or able to participate in their community.

The majority of employees say that the pay they receive from LTF is not enough. Patricia says, "The money we get from LTF doesn't pay our bills. It's not enough. There is money here, but it's not enough." Many of the employees have other forms of income, selling coconuts, souvenirs, or receiving money from the government¹⁵. With this alternative form of income, however, the pay is regular, and they now work legally; they no longer have to worry about getting arrested.

The administrative staff believes that they have helped increase the local employees' capacity to handle their finances. Some of the locals have coconut trees on their properties, one of the limited ways they can acquire extra cash. "On Coconut Day, when they sell their coconuts, they'd be drunk for two weeks straight. We didn't give them their money until they were sober; we basically had to watch their money so they would survive. Now they take on more responsibility as compared to before, they show up for their shifts, they do well."

Every member of the administrative staff claims that living conditions have improved for the locals. Alessia points out that, "When the project started, they were living in houses made out of black trash bags, shelters like that. Now they have houses made of wood, some of them have boats or TVs." In response, Patricia argues that their situation is a lot like Cuba's. "With Fidel Castro and communism, the people aren't dying of hunger. They have jobs; they have houses

¹⁵ Miguelito used to work at a post office. After he retired, he started receiving money from the government. Jorge has a bad leg, and receives money from the government because of this "disability."

and clothes, but everything they have is limited. We won't die of hunger here, but we aren't developing either. Everything is limited."

In regards to the basic need of health, which falls under *protection of person and place*, LTF helped rebuild a health clinic in the beginning, in order to keep it operating. Unfortunately, some community members argue that the clinic is impractical. Carlos says that he has a bad back so he can't go that far by his boat. "It's hard because it's 4 km away, I have a bad back, and the sun is too much. All these things with a boat without a motor is hard." Gabriel also says that the clinic is too far from the community. Although this is a reasonable criticism, we must take into account the level of isolation and the difficulty in "developing" a place like this and providing services to this community.

"Because of the influx of cash and strangers, growth in tourism is often associated with growth in crime, particularly in areas where tourists are significantly wealthier than local residents" (Buckley 2009, p. 219). Although crime levels do not pose a real threat, the island has seen a slight growth in crime since the arrival of LTF. "Crime" in this sense refers only to petty crime and has been directed almost exclusively towards volunteers¹⁶. The instances of petty crime have been impeded by the installment of a fence surrounding LTF's headquarters.

The needs that have been largely left unanswered are *understanding, creation, participation* and *transcendence*. Although some of the community members have acquired new knowledge about turtle conservation and have been

¹⁶ When asked about serious crimes like homicide, people laughed at me in the interviews.

able to apply that knowledge, their need for *understanding* is only being attended to in this limited way. Carlos and Hernan make jewelry to sell to the international volunteers, an endeavor that reflects the human need of *creation*. The administrative staff of LTF have expressed their desire to send Carlos to a jewelry workshop and to pay for it, so that Carlos could be empowered to make even more jewelry and cultivate this gift he has. When evaluating Carlos and Hernan's situation, I decided that as a whole the community does not feel encouraged or empowered to be creative. Since LTF has not fulfilled their promise to send Carlos to a jewelry workshop, we can say that LTF has not sufficiently encouraged him.

LTF created the Association to help the community *participate* in the project¹⁷. This Association has failed to allow the community to meaningfully participate. All of the locals are disappointed with the Association; they say that the Association is very limited in what it can actually do. Even Robert confesses, "The truth is that the Association isn't working. It's because we need people in the Association that live in the area and know how to read and write, and we don't have those people." Instead of encouraging the illiterate members to participate in the ways they can and still consulting them on major decisions, these members are left out of the entire process. Only three community members actively work with the Association, and these people are very dissatisfied with it and feel like they

¹⁷ Because Montoya and Drews talk about participation in the sense of "taking control over one's condition and destiny," I only talk about participation in the context of the locals' involvement with LTF (2006 p. 15). LTF is the only force on the island that brings the community together. The island does not have a church; they do not have unifying organizations or structures. They do not have local government, community meetings, or even social community events.

cannot make an impact or participate in the decision-making process. Association meetings are rare and only open to very few people.

Lastly, the fundamental human need of *transcendence* is ignored. When looking towards the future, the locals feel dismal and some even express their desire to leave the island. Those that want to stay feel attached to the island because of their long history, because it has become their home. The locals are not concerned with creating a better future for the next generation. They feel largely disrespected and disempowered.

On the other hand, the LTF employees experience some *transcendence* because of how much they value the work they do. All of the local employees have expressed their satisfaction with working with the turtles and assisting in the conservation. Their excitement about the project and working with international volunteers is inspirational and encouraging. They understand that the work they are doing is important and they feel good doing it. Working with the international volunteers, the local employees feel happy when they can share the beauty of saving sea turtles with the volunteers. Although the locals express that they would like to have more interactions with the volunteers and do not feel permitted to do so, they do feel respected by the volunteers and feel that overall positive interactions have contributed to a positive cultural exchange¹⁸.

¹⁸ In other ecotourism models, locals have expressed negative interactions with international volunteers. A great quote from a local employee at a volunteer project summarizes this experience effectively: “Volunteers are sometimes rich kids who have nothing better to do. They don't know anything about the developing world, and they are just big guys who think they can develop things in one month's time... You have to learn from each other, and not think that your culture is better than their culture” (Sin 2010, p. 988)

In summary, all of the organic needs and some existential needs (the need for *leisure* and *identity*) of the community are being met, but not greatly varying from the conditions they experienced before the formation of LTF. La Tortuga Feliz has generally neglected the needs of *understanding*, *creation*, *participation* and *transcendence*. From these findings, we can conclude that LTF has not substantially impacted the fundamental human needs of the community.

Measures of Positive Change

In addition to analyzing the response to the fundamental needs of the community, we can also analyze four measures of positive change in community development projects linked with conservation: sustainability, equity, autonomy and security. These measures overlap some with responding to fundamental human needs, however I believe these measures take those ideas a step further, explaining how answering these fundamental needs can contribute to community development and empowerment.

Sustainability

Sustainability is broken down into three subcategories: stewardship, synergy and greater local capacity. *Stewardship* refers to the community's ability to manage the natural resources. *Synergy* identifies the community's ability to attend multiple needs by an increased use of skills, knowledge and capacities of the community members. *Greater local capacity* refers to the community's ability to respond to fundamental human needs over time (Montoya and Drews 2006, p. 21).

In regards to stewardship, LTF has helped increase the community's capacity to maintain a sustainable ecosystem. The Association has a title to patrol the beach, individuals have certifications as guides, and a good proportion of the community is participating in managing the natural resources effectively.

The community members are committed to the conservation effort. As Robert recounts, "Some of the guides are short-sighted. Last year during training we noticed, and the biologist said if they wanted to keep their jobs they had to get glasses. This time I noticed the new glasses that they got, it shows they're interested in keeping their jobs."

Unfortunately, poaching still occurs and not everyone is involved in the synergy of the conservation effort. With decreasing funds available, the synergy has also decreased with fewer patrols being sent out.

Greater local capacity for the long term is also not being addressed effectively. Future generations are not being adequately attended to, and with only three children on the island the future looks dismal. On the other hand, Daniela, part of the administrative staff, has tried to involve Soley, Patricia's young daughter, in the conservation effort when possible. They have also helped the local school, giving them some resources.

Equity

Equity is broken down into three subcategories: collaboration, additive potential, and equity of needs satisfaction. Greater *collaboration* among stakeholders refers to improved community relations and communication.

Additive potential refers to greater investment in social, cultural, political and

human capital. *Equity of needs satisfaction* includes an increased involvement in community affairs by all community members (Montoya and Drews 2006, p. 21).

La Tortuga Feliz is doing very poorly in promoting equity. There is not a great collaboration among community members and external agents. LTF has failed at communication and community relations, demonstrated by the overwhelming dissatisfaction in the community. Nothing is being done to invest in social, cultural, political, or human capital. No community organizations or community events are held, nor have they been held in the history of the island. The attempt to involve the community in the Association has also failed. The integration of the youth into the community is non-existent. Fortunately, women's rights are not an issue; the only woman active in the community, Patricia, is treated respectfully and equally.

Autonomy

Autonomy is broken down into two subcategories: decision-making and accountability. The community members should be involved in *decision-making*, their voice should be respected and heard and they should be allowed to influence important decisions. *Accountability* refers to the transparency in community governance as well as the ability for the locals to take responsibility (Montoya and Drews 2006, p. 22).

The voice of the employees is not heard, and they do not have influence in important decisions. The three community members that are involved in the Association are the most influential, and even these people do not feel like their opinion is respected or that they have control in decision-making. The

administrative staff as well as Ronald, the most educated and literate man on the island, actually believes that the other community members should not be allowed autonomy. Ronald says, “The people elected me to be their president. Why would I ask them what they think? I don’t have to do that.” Ronald looks down on the other people on the island.

Security

Security refers to vulnerability reduction and adaptability. *Vulnerability reduction* means that there are fewer environmental and socio-economic threats. *Adaptability* refers to the community’s ability to respond to changing circumstances, which usually involves a healthy and diverse economy (Montoya and Drews 2006, p. 22).

The locals are thankful that they are no longer working illegally. Patricia says, “It is good that they came because we didn’t have to poach illegally anymore. We could be legal people, we didn’t need to hide anymore or be afraid that the police would come and put us in jail.” Unfortunately the local economy is not productive, there are no small to medium sized businesses and the community would have a difficult time adapting to changing circumstances.

In conclusion, La Tortuga Feliz has been attentive to a very limited scope of improving community well being. Although La Tortuga Feliz has increased local capacity to manage their natural resources, they have not developed local capacity in a greater sense. In regards to equity, LTF does not adequately collaborate or communicate with the community, taking no initiative to develop social, political, cultural or human capital. LTF does not encourage the autonomy

of the community because they are not a transparent organization; they disrespect local opinion and leave locals out of the decision-making process. LTF has reduced local vulnerability by offering them a legal source of income, but has not paid attention to developing a diverse and healthy local economy that could adapt to changing circumstances. Taking these findings a step further, I will argue that LTF is disempowering the community in a few notable ways, mostly relating to their inability to develop autonomy and equity.

Chapter 5: Critical Analysis of Psychological Disempowerment

Overall, La Tortuga Feliz has done amazing work regarding environmental conservation, however, only brushing the surface of empowering the community. Interviewing the locals revealed major sources of discontent with the program. Coupled with participant observation, it seems that LTF has disempowered the community in many ways. By reinforcing an idea that the Westerners are superior, not being able to communicate properly, and not trusting the locals, a negative relationship has been created which means a lack of acceptance of LTF by the local community as well as overall dissatisfaction. As mentioned before, community-based ecotourism not only seeks to bring benefits to the community, but also attempts to involve the community in a meaningful way. Therefore, if the local community is disempowered, it is difficult to see how LTF can be a positive ecotourism model.

Superiority Complex

*“You should hear the way Jorge talks about this one time Paul trusted him. It was Jorge’s proudest moment, to prove to Paul that he was trustworthy. It’s probably one of the highlights of Jorge’s **life**. When he tells that story, he literally glows.”*

It’s true. As I listened to this 52 year old local tell his story, he could hardly stop smiling as his face turned a comfortable pink. He wouldn’t even look me in the eye; looking off to the side as if watching a projected image on the floor only he could see, vivid colors dancing around reminding him of every precise moment and feeling. As a newly converted ex-poacher turned conservationist, Jorge had been leading volunteers to collect nests for only a short time. During a shortage of volunteer hands, Paul trusted him to go out by himself and collect nests. Jorge could have easily reported no nests found and brought the nests back to his house receiving over 15 times the money per nest on the black market. Instead, he brought five turtle nests back to the hatchery that night, an incredible feat as each nest weighs about 50lbs. He woke Paul up at 2am to see what he had done; Paul’s excitement and gratitude lifted Jorge’s spirit like never before. That night, Paul and Jorge both discovered what Jorge is capable of. (Fieldnotes, 06/28/12)

Before, when Paul was here, the locals were treated more like equals, at least like *friends*. They played dominoes together, Paul socialized with them, trusted them, gave them opportunities. He believed in them, and they felt that. A while after Paul died, they put up a fence and the locals say they are prohibited to enter the camp. All of the locals refer to the time of Paul as being much better and feeling more like a close-knit community.

When a foreign organization comes into a community and develops a conservation project, they must approach it with humility and an attitude of cooperation. La Tortuga Feliz has a superiority complex that inhibits these important attitudes, bringing negative psychological consequences to the community. Their treatment of locals and lack of transparency reflect this superiority complex.

“They think only about themselves, they don’t even ask us what we think.” Hernan goes on to say that the community is afraid to speak up and/or feel like their opinion would not be taken into account for if they did speak up: “If you have a different opinion than that of Robert or Daniela, Robert will tell you, ‘Then you don’t have a job, you don’t work for me anymore.’ “ The only person that was actually fired by LTF was a man named Minor, a local that apparently had an anger problem. Although this fear of losing their job might be unwarranted, the feeling in the community that their opinion doesn’t count for anything is reinforced in subtle ways.

When Henk, founder of LTF, visits the project, the locals say that Robert does not want him interacting with the locals. They do not understand why Henk would not talk to them. Although he does not speak Spanish, someone could translate. This adds to local frustration and the idea that their opinion does not count for anything. When they do approach the administrative staff about an issue that they might have, they are not given appropriate attention. Ronald explains that Robert just wants to argue; he never really listens to them.

Chayo, one of the most beloved locals of the administrative staff and international volunteers, is probably the most poorly treated. His job consists of “guarding” the “school” 24/7¹⁹. He does not have the “freedom to leave or go anywhere.” In the previous month before my visit to the island, Chayo reported the times that they let him leave the school: to do work at the project headquarters, to go into Bataan to take care of some legal issues, and go fishing once with Camaron. Keeping him at the school makes Chayo angry and depressed. One day, Robert ordered that he clean the pool (this pool is only allowed to be used by Robert, according to Chayo). Chayo complained that this task hurt his back severely; it took him a couple days to recover. “A dog is worth more than a human being on this island. Robert is more concerned for the dogs than for us; he brought one of the dogs to the hospital when the dog was sick and paid a lot of money for it to just die. If we were sick, we would die here because he doesn’t care about us.”

La Tortuga Feliz completely excludes the community from decision-making processes and rarely asks them how they feel or what they think. The Association was founded by LTF to give the community a more active role in decision-making, but excludes the vast majority of the community. Everyone in the community except Ronald, President of the Association, agrees that it is controlled by Robert and does not effectively respond to the community.

From the staff’s perspective, they claim that the locals are unable to take on responsibility. It is quite possible that the locals are forced into that inferior

¹⁹ Paul built a school for LTF’s use. They wanted to teach Spanish to the volunteers here, and wanted another place for volunteers to stay if there were too many volunteers and not enough cabins. It is now being used exclusively as housing for Justin and Alessia.

role, conditioned to feel unable to take on responsibility. The superiority complex of LTF creates a vicious cycle that conditions the locals into a submissive role.

The locals do not understand what is happening to them, so they can't fight back.

This is shown in the way they talk about these issues, the way they are scared to approach the administrative staff, the way they feel powerless and disrespected.

In addition to treating the locals as inferior, the project's superiority complex is marked by inadequate transparency. While interviewing Ronald about LTF, Ronald admitted that he couldn't answer a lot of my questions because he doesn't know what goes on internally in the organization. He expressed resentment at this lack of transparency. He also explained, "What happens here is many people believe that the Association should interfere in LTF, to make things better. *How can it interfere in something it knows nothing about?*"

Alessia complains that the locals hear how much money the volunteers pay to stay at the project and assume that LTF should have more money. Daniela also says, "They don't understand that LTF is a non-profit project. They don't get the concept. They believe everyone is stealing from them, and they are very skeptical. They aren't involved in the financial management so they don't know the transport costs we have, maintenance, food costs, how we have to save money for the off-season." This skepticism and distrust from the locals originates from the lack of transparency. Why can't the locals have access to this information? If the locals don't *get* the concept, shouldn't the administrative staff make more of an effort to try and appropriately explain the concept to them?

In summary, the locals should be treated like equals. When evaluating the locals as trustworthy and capable, authentic concern may arise. Cultural “laziness,” lack of education and reluctance to take on responsibility could get in the way of managing a non-profit ecotourism organization. On the other hand, these concerns are not applicable to many of the community members who show commitment, leadership abilities, and incredible potential. Even people who might not be as responsible or “capable” still have opinions that should be respected and abilities that could be recognized. These locals could also be trained to contribute more positively to the project. Once the locals are *treated* like equals, they can be empowered to start *acting* like equals.

Lack of Communication and Trust

The lack of communication and trust on the part of La Tortuga Feliz has lead to negative psychological effects, attitudes that may sometimes be traceable to a superiority complex. Myriad examples of miscommunication, suspicion and unfulfilled promises leave the community feeling resentful and ignored. “They don’t do things out of love, only in the interest of money. They don’t trust us, they don’t care if we develop or not.”

In order to take on more responsibility and be more active in the organization, it is important that the locals learn English. Although the administrative staff claims they have tried to get English classes going, the locals feel that an authentic effort has not yet been made. “Since the project started, we were promised that an English teacher would come and teach us English. Where is he? After seven years, you know what I think it is? I think Robert doesn’t want

us to learn English because then he'd have to watch what he was saying. He doesn't want us to know what they are saying between themselves." Unfulfilled promises lead to a lack of trust on the community's part, in turn leading to hostility.

Robert promised to give Miguelito one of LTF's old boats. They agreed that Miguelito would pay for the boat with his labor. According to Miguelito, he was repaying the boat until one day Robert told him that he would register the boat as being stolen unless Miguelito paid him right away. Miguelito had to get a loan to pay off the rest of the boat, claiming that Robert had violated the contract they had entered. Miguelito expressed frustration and animosity at the situation. Alessia enlightened the other side of the story, saying that Miguelito did not understand the concept of a loan. When he was let go due to health problems, he still had to pay off the boat. While Miguelito already viewed the boat as belonging to him, Robert still required the remaining payment. Robert had introduced this Western practice of loaning money without properly addressing Miguelito's inability to understand this divergent cultural attitude.

When the locals have tried to assert their autonomy, their efforts have been crushed. Patricia explains that Hernan was taking the volunteers on crocodile tours and charging them \$2. "Robert said it was too much money, and he said that he would help Hernan recruit volunteers for this activity. Robert formed a list of services and handled the money himself, but he charged the volunteers more money! Robert was taking most of the money for himself, so we decided we did not want to work with him." Hernan and Robert had different accounts to this

issue as well, reflecting a miscommunication that ended up discouraging a local entrepreneurial attitude. We can see that in this instance, lack of communication cultivated a feeling of inferiority.

There are countless examples of miscommunication and trust. It is sad that after 6 years, Alessia still does not feel comfortable enough to enter the front yards of people in the local community. Instead of going next door to ask Carlos if he can work the hatchery shift tomorrow, I hear Daniela loudly yelling over the fence. He responds yes from inside his house, they do not even make eye contact and smile. The administrative staff and the locals barely socialize; they do not participate in activities together. They are not friends. They are not equals.

This lack of trust indicates a lack of respect that further alienates the community from LTF. Rising levels of petty crime provoked the installment of a fence around LTF headquarters. Although the people committing these acts of petty crime are poachers and are not a part of the island community, the community is being treated like the criminals. The locals are not “allowed” to go beyond the fence unless they have a reason. The locals feel discouraged to interact with the volunteers and be a part of the project. Petty crime may have been controlled, but the social implications were not considered.

The volunteers recognize the potential that the community has to take on responsibility and play a more active role in the project. “I don’t think it’s right that people like Carlos and Chayo want to do more and have the capacity to do more, but aren’t allowed. They’re just stuck where they are, when LTF should be

finding ways to get them involved” (Erin). Instead of recognizing this potential and cultivating it, the project psychologically disempowers the community.

The community has a right to meaningful participation, to determine what is happening in their land. McAllister defines this right as meeting four specific criteria: “(1) access to information and education about the issue involved; (2) inclusion in an open decision-making process; (3) the ability to appeal decisions to an independent body; and (4) review of the project’s success” (1999, p. 202). LTF does not meet *any* of these criteria adequately. The only ways they respond to their right to meaningful participation is by training the guides and giving them very limited access to information concerning the conservation effort. The community does not participate meaningfully, due to LTF’s superiority complex, lack of communication and lack of trust.

End Result: Lack of Acceptance on Community Level

“If the person in charge cared about the community, he wouldn’t be acting like this. They would ask us our opinions, they would ask what we think” (Culebra). The negative psychological effects mean dissatisfaction with the project and lack of acceptance by the community. This project was founded on the idea that working with the community is important. A volunteer points out that, “You can’t really do anything when the community doesn’t like the people in power. They won’t want to work with them to find solutions to their problems” (Saray).

Although the community cannot directly perceive the existing superiority complex, lack of communication and lack of trust, they feel it. They might not be

educated to understand the source of their disempowerment, but they understand something is terribly wrong. They feel disrespected. They feel fear to voice their opinions.

Chapter 6: Challenges Faced by LTF Limiting Project's Success

La Tortuga Feliz's inability to effectively empower the community lies in a couple different factors. These factors include a lack of a community, lack of funds, cultural tendencies, lack of human capital and the administrative attitude and skill level.

Lack of Community

A difficult aspect of life on Pacuare Island is that it might not even be considered a community. Carlos, a local employee of LTF, says, "Nobody helps you here. If you get sick here, you die here, because no one helps you." The feel of the community, as evidenced by multiple interviews and personal observation, is more like every man for himself. Though people are friendly, friendliness exists on a surface level. For example, although people may say hi to one another, they do not actually know that much about each other or interact past small talk.

There is a lack of public structures, community events are not held, and community organizations have never been created. In addition, there are few families on the island, which contributes to an awkward dynamic. Alessia says, "Without families it's hard to call it a community. I'd say it's more a group of individuals. Without women and children, the community is unstable."

Social capital was never prevalent on the island, and LTF has failed to cultivate it. Montoya and Drews (2006) define social capital as “human relations, contacts, networks, alliances, trust, reciprocity, and shared visions, collective work” (p. 17). There are no opportunities to develop social capital; the community does not come together to help develop relationships and trust. Relationships and a common perceived goal can unite a community and foster positive change. Organizations can help develop social capital by “bringing together groups of people with different interests with respect to natural resources,” giving the people the opportunity to establish human bonds and stronger relationships (Brechin et al. 2003, p. 182).

The existence of La Tortuga Feliz could be a very positive asset to the community by uniting the community in a shared vision, allowing them to collaborate and unite. There is no other motivating factor on the island to develop social capital. If LTF developed social capital, they would be able to have more success as the community could work together with greater cohesion.

The only visible attempt to create social capital was the formation of the Association; unfortunately, it only divides the community even further. There is some debate as to what counts as an Association meeting and exactly how often they happen, but consensus is that the Association does not meet nearly as often as it should and does not have the resources or ability to make any significant improvements in the community. Although some people blame the administration, shouldn't the Association be in charge of coordinating meetings? Partial responsibility for the failure of the Association lies in the hands of the

administrative staff who should actively guide the process. Partial responsibility also falls in the hands of the locals, lacking motivation.

Robert talks about how the land is “forgotten,” the local municipality does not provide them services like security, electricity, or garbage collection. Getting the municipality involved is a long-term goal, could possibly make it more attractive for families to come. “It’s not attractive to come here, there’s a clinic but the doctor comes once every two weeks and the school is very primitive” (Robert). These conditions have also inhibited the community’s development of social capital.

The community experiences frustration at this lack of social capital. Ronald complains that he is the only one who maintains the Casa Comunal, putting locks on the door, putting up aluminum plates to scare away the bats that nest inside and dirty the building. Even though the community might be hesitant to help him, it is fair to assume that he does not ask for help. Ronald disrespects the other community members, talking badly about them. He is also very cold towards others; it is part of his personality. It seems as though Ronald is just as guilty of not viewing himself as a part of the community, uninterested in working with his neighbors. Ronald says, “The people on this island think the moon is made of cheese. If the Casa Comunal was maintained by the people here, it wouldn’t exist! It’s me who does the work! No one else comes! They all just say, ‘We need to clean this!’ but no one says, ‘I’m going to clean this.’ They think the person who has the obligation to clean it is me. It’s not like that. This is a community that is, in reality, not a community.”

When asked if he thought that LTF would ever hand over control of the project to the locals, Gabriel said, “It would be worse if they handed it over. If they did, it would go to Patricia and Ronald. Those people are so wretched. They are only in it for themselves, it would be worse on the island.” This attitude is very common; many locals have serious problems with their neighbors. LTF is right that handing over control of the project could not be feasible with the current state of the community. There is a lack of trust and positive relationships, which indicate insufficient social capital. LTF should be actively developing social capital in the interest of realizing their goals.

Lack of funds, volunteers, decreasing amount of turtles

Everyone has noted that this year brought fewer volunteers than before. Robert has had to cut down on the number of patrols going out, which in turn has limited the amount of resources distributed to the community. There is less work, which means less income for the locals.

Robert claims that the reason for the lack of volunteers is because they have had technical difficulties with the website. Other members of the administrative staff think the decrease in volunteers is due to the sluggish economy in some Western countries. Many of the community members think the decrease in volunteers is directly related to negative reviews that are being posted about the project. They claim that Robert treats the volunteers poorly. Other volunteers backed up this claim, telling of the bad reviews they saw on the web.

Whatever the reason for a lack of volunteers this year, a lack of funds has always inhibited LTF’s ability to empower the community. With more money, it

is definitely plausible that they might try and do more for the community.

Because of the decreasing amount of turtles due to external factors, volunteer turnout may continue to go down. Some of the community members believe that LTF will not hand over control of the project until this happens, until the project dies.

Problem of cultural tendencies

Another problem that inhibits the success of La Tortuga Feliz is the presence of cultural differences. The administrative staff complained of the local's cultural tendencies that have impeded LTF's ability to perform effectively. Examples of cultural "laziness," and reluctance to take on responsibility are cited.

Only three people show legitimate interest in learning English: Carlos, Chayo and Patricia. After some time on the island, I decided I wanted to try and empower them myself and teach them English. I tried to encourage the locals to come, and some enthusiasm was expressed at first. Unfortunately, Carlos was the only one who actually showed up to the lessons. Chayo could not attend, and Robert forbade me from having the lessons at the school. Patricia's busy schedule would not allow her to come to the class, but I decided to tutor her individually while she was cooking lunch for the volunteers. All of the other locals expressed interest in the beginning, but never showed up. They kept making excuses. Robert and other staff members attributed this to cultural "laziness" and inability to take responsibility.

Robert claims that he did try and teach the locals English once, when he first started volunteering. It started out being popular, but people slowly lost

interest. Robert explains this behavior as being a Costa Rican cultural trait; they had wanted him to “give” them the “skill,” and “as soon as they realized there was work was involved, they stopped coming.”

On the other hand, although they might not come to the English class, Erin points out: “Jorge wanted to go to English class, but didn’t end up going. On the other hand, when we are on patrols, he always asks how to say things in English. Chayo also does that. I think they are putting an effort, but not in a class type setting that we’re more familiar with.”

Ronald also reinforces this cultural tendency of “laziness”: “The people here *wait* for LTF to do everything. Or Quelonios. It’s not like that, LTF and Quelonios don’t have an obligation to us. Why would they come all the way to Costa Rica and just give us everything we need? A real community would work together for progress. It’s not like that here.”

The grand majority of the locals say that in order to see positive change, the administration needs to change. This is another indication that the locals want to avoid confrontation and thus may hesitate to voice their opinions. This behavior may indicate that it is a part of their culture to just complain. On the other hand, as mentioned before when discussing the disempowerment of the locals, the behavior of the administrative staff might encourage this feeling of inferiority and inability for the locals to properly voice their opinions.

It is possible that the locals’ fear of confrontation, “laziness” and inability to take on responsibility may contribute to barriers in LTF’s potential success. At

the same time, LTF does not exhibit the ability to handle these cultural differences appropriately.

Lack of Human Capital

As mentioned before, the level of schooling on the island is low; human capital is lacking. Only three people on the island can read and write in Spanish. If the locals do not have the skills to contribute more positively to the project, LTF will not grant them the opportunity to do so.

The administrative staff also complains that they are very ungrateful. Alessia says that all they do is complain, it's hard for them to see what LTF *has* done for them. It's very discouraging for the administrative staff, as long-term volunteers. She says this also goes along with the lack of education. "Instead of thinking how they can deal with problems, they complain. It's childish, it's like going to a teacher and saying, '*This* person did *this* to me.'" Ironically enough, I ask Alessia later what her secret is because everyone in the community *loves* her. She explains that she works very hard and they see that and respect her for it. Although the community may be "ungrateful" due to a "lack of education," they see what Alessia does and understand and appreciate what she does. This shows that they actually are capable of being grateful. Alessia has something the other administrative staff doesn't, and they can recognize that.

The lack of human capital has translated to leaving the large majority of the community out of the Association. As mentioned before, only literate community members are permitted to participate in the Association. Leaving these people out has created hostility and tension. An effort should be made to

develop human capital. The more educated and thoughtful the community members are, the greater the contributions they can make to the project.

Administration

Robert admits, “I think the biggest weakness of the project is that the skill set of the people managing isn’t what it could be. Me personally, I don’t know how to put things into motion to develop the community. I don’t know how to identify that. Unfortunately, because of our location, it’s hard to attract professional people.” People involved in community development should have a better understanding of what community development is. This knowledge would greatly aid any efforts. Administrative attitude and skill level limit the potential success of La Tortuga Feliz.

It is necessary to single out Robert as a problem inhibiting the success of LTF because of the pronounced dissatisfaction with him by the majority of the locals. Many of the locals complain that Robert is the reason why some volunteers don’t come back. The locals give specific examples, names, and events and recount that those volunteers told the locals they were going to complain about Robert on the Internet. The locals claim that this is one of the reasons we have a shortage of volunteers. Chayo talks about how Robert made a volunteer leave who had cerebral palsy. She could not go on patrols. Even though she wanted to stay, they told her that she couldn’t because of her sickness.

Robert has a lot of trouble understanding and respecting cultural differences. Judy says that Costa Ricans don’t like conflict and Robert doesn’t respect them for that. She says that sometimes they’ll just tell you what you want

to hear. Instead of understanding the cultural difference, he believes they are just dishonest. “He knows it but at the same time it still just doesn’t sink in. I’m pretty sure that’s where a lot of the conflict arises between the two groups, because he doesn’t try to see it their way.”

In addition, Robert treats the locals like children. The best example was when he told the local employees that they were wrong to tell me the truth about LTF. He reprimanded them for being honest and talking with me, and *it worked*. They listen to him and respond to his demands.

Robert also doesn’t respect his fellow co-workers at times. Judy explained a time when Daniela and herself wanted to go to some schools and talk about turtle conservation, a very important part of conservation. Robert told them it wasn’t a priority. He has also yelled at Daniela for doing things without “asking him,” she was following the biologist’s orders to do things a certain way in the hatchery and he said she could not do that. She respectfully responded that we had to do it that way otherwise the biologist won’t let the project keep going and he said I don’t care. “I think he just likes to be in control.”

Luis’ perception of Robert is that he stays in his office all day, “signing things and returning emails instead of trying to live with the community and understand what they need.” He finds it very hard to communicate with Robert. He feels like his opinion is not respected, so he avoids having discussions with Robert. The volunteers have also recognized Robert’s lack of social skills: “My biggest complaint is Robert. He doesn’t talk to you; he doesn’t make us feel welcome. If he’s treating the locals in the same way he’s treating us, the locals

probably don't feel respected, he's probably unable to establish a rapport with the community.”

Robert as well as the rest of the administrative staff have inadequately addressed the challenges they have faced, as evidenced by the dissatisfaction of the community and the indications of disempowerment. If the administrative staff had been trained in community development, they would know the appropriate methods to implement in an attempt to mitigate the negative effects of LTF.

In conclusion, empowering a community is a difficult and complex process. This task proves to be difficult for La Tortuga Feliz because of the lack of social capital and community on the island, lack of funds, inability to mediate cultural differences and develop human capital, and administrative attitude and skill.

Recommendations

In order to truly empower the community, we can take each challenge faced by LTF and offer a different way of looking at this challenge. La Tortuga Feliz could build social capital and unite the community by facilitating activities that would develop relationships. Other sources of income could be pursued to accumulate more funds. The administrative staff could attempt to understand cultural differences and work with the community in ways that accommodated this knowledge. LTF could hold workshops to develop human capital, or provide incentives for locals to want to increase their skill levels. Apart from developing administrative skill, the administration could be more critical of their attitude and

ask the locals how they could change their attitude to better respond to the needs of the community.

Paul Lepoutre built social capital by playing dominoes with the community members. LTF should encourage interaction between the administration staff, the volunteers and the locals by organizing social gatherings. Meetings and opportunities for *all* community members to collaborate would be incredibly positive. Locals should be encouraged to voice their opinions; the administrative staff should show more respect for the community members in every interaction.

Building social capital should also include increased transparency of LTF to the local community. The local community will be able to trust and understand LTF, fostering more effective collaboration between LTF and the community as well as more positive interactions. LTF should try harder to communicate more effectively with the community, in order to avoid the negative consequences that come from miscommunication.

Additional income generated could mean increased investment in community development initiatives. LTF could advertise to attract more volunteers, provide services or goods for the volunteers to consume, or invest in other moneymaking activities.

Locals may have cultural tendencies of “laziness” or inability to take on responsibility. I put “laziness” in quotes because any cultural attribute should not be viewed in a negative light, and “laziness” usually has a negative connotation. Cultural differences are not negative; they are just divergent from what we might

be used to. LTF is a Western organization based on Western values. These foreigners invade the locals' island and pretend that they have all of the answers. Westerners need to respond appropriately to cultural differences instead of dismissing them or feeling frustrated. Incentives could be put in place to encourage locals to take on responsibility. It may be frustrating that the guides do not want to learn English. This may not indicate that they are "lazy," just that they do not understand the value in learning English or they have been out of school for so long and have little motivation.

It is obvious that if human capital were to increase, the locals would have greater capacity to play a larger role in the project and contribute effectively. Volunteers have expressed interest in tutoring or working with the locals. LTF could very easily encourage volunteer interactions with the locals in an educational or skill cultivating context.

In addition to more capable locals, it would help to have more capable administrative staff members. It would also be incredibly beneficial to address Robert's negative attitude. Perhaps the administrative staff could sit down with Robert and understand what he may need. It could be that Robert's negative attitude comes from loneliness, a condition that could be remedied by positive social interaction.

It may seem impossible to reach a point where LTF could hand over control of the project to the locals. Currently, LTF is not taking any steps in that direction, instead disempowering the locals and getting further and further away from local autonomy. Little steps here and there could be taken, as outlined

above, in order to get closer to the possibility of handing over control of the project to the locals, and affecting true community empowerment.

Conclusion

Empowering a community is a gradual and difficult process. Although La Tortuga Feliz had some positive effects on the community, they have not truly empowered the community. LTF faces many challenges as any community-based ecotourism initiative would, but they are not appropriately responding to these challenges. It is imperative to continue to fight for meaningful community participation and greater community involvement.

Probably one of the most important lessons is that things are not always as they seem, it is always more complicated. The full potential of the project and the island is not being explored for a variety of different reasons. Despite all this, I would not say that the project is unsuccessful, it is just seriously lacking. LTF has good intentions, but that is never enough. Good intentions must be accompanied by good practices rooted in education and understanding about community-based ecotourism. It is incredibly important to always be critical of what is going on, accepting that there will always be a way to change the project for the better, continually reevaluating the methods and searching for ways to improve.

It's not just about that feel-good satisfaction you get. Making the world a better place. It's not just about doing something that you *think* is good, that you might go to lengths to convince yourself is good. You need to constantly educate yourself, constantly learn from your mistakes. Always ask yourself how you can

do something better. It's about teamwork, making a real effort that takes a lot of energy. Taking chances, trusting people you might not normally, treating everyone as a partner instead of inferior. It's about research and training, looking at what other people have done and getting the *facts*, perpetually developing your methods.

Community-based ecotourism is an important way in which we can progress as an eco-friendly society that also advocates democratic ideals of community autonomy. La Tortuga Feliz is an example of an ecotourism project that is doing important environmental work as well as positively contributing to a community. If more work is taken to address the fundamental needs of the community as well as truly empower the community, LTF could experience even more success and embody an exceptional ecotourism model.

It's nice to want to "Change the world" and "Make a difference." The distressing tragedies of the world make hopeful individuals want to rise to the occasion. Unfortunately, we sometimes get further entangled in blind optimism and fantasy; perhaps forgetting what the world *actually* might need, and just seeking to derive that feel-good satisfaction that comes from charity. What the world needs, what community-based ecotourism initiatives need, are individuals that are willing to learn from mistakes, to genuinely do something for others and not for themselves, to not only have good intentions and the appropriate attitude, but the knowledge to back it. It's not about charity; it's not about leading a community out of poverty. It's about solidarity, working with a community in a partnership. The lessons learned from LTF can benefit those attempting

community-based ecotourism as well as those just trying to make that “difference” in the world.

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Appendices

List of Terms

ASVO- Asociación de Voluntarios para el Servicio en las Áreas Protegidas.

(Volunteer Association for Service in Protected Areas)

CBC- Community-Based Conservation

CRC- Costa Rican Colón (currency)

ICDP- Integrated Conservation and Development Projects

IUCN- International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources

LTF- La Tortuga Feliz (The Happy Turtle)

NGO- Non-Governmental Organization.

WIDECAST- Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network

WWF- World Wildlife Fund

List of Characters

All information reflects data collected at the time of June 2011.

Administrative staff (4)

Alessia Jensen- In her late 20s, from Italy, has volunteered with LTF for 6 yrs on and off.

Daniela Möller- In her late 30s, from Germany, has volunteered with LTF for 5 yrs on and off. Previous work in psychiatry and “pedagogy” (not teaching/therapy) with handicapped people.

Justin Jensen- In his late 20s, from USA, has volunteered with LTF for 3 yrs on and off.

Robert Adeva- director of the project, in his mid 40s, from Wales, has volunteered with LTF for 5 yrs on and off. Became “operational manager” in 2006 and assumed the role of director after Paul Lepoutre died.

Local employees (9)

Camaron- full name: Rolando Gonzalez. 47 yrs old, employee of LTF for 1 yr. Father of Jeison.

Carlos- full name: Carlos Blanco. 43 yrs old, employee of LTF for about 5 yrs. Also sells souvenirs to volunteers.

Chayo- full name: Alberto Alvarez Quesada. 48 yrs old, employee of LTF for 7 yrs.

Culebra- full name: Miguel Cordoba Hernandez. 54 yrs old, employee of LTF for 4 yrs. Father of Miguel and André.

Jeison- full name: Jeison Gonzalez Nuñez. 23 yrs old, employee of LTF for 6 months. Son of Camaron, brother of Davey, brother-in-law of Patricia.

Jorge- full name: Jorge Gualeta. 51.5 yrs old, employee of LTF for 7 yrs. Married to Judy, father of Monica.

Hernan- full name: Hernan Francisco Barrientos. 22 yrs old, employee of LTF for 6 yrs. Son of Ronald, sister of Patricia.

Patricia- full name: Flor Barrientos Basques. 26 yrs old, employee of LTF for 5 yrs. Married to Davey, mother of Soley, daughter-in-law of Camaron, sister-in-law of Jeison.

Ronald- full name: Ronald Barrientos Quesada. 67 yrs old, employee of LTF for 7 yrs. Father of Patricia and Hernan, grandfather of Soley, father-in-law to Davey.

Local non-employees (18)

André- about 15 yrs old. Son of Culebra, brother of Miguel.

Davey- full name: Davey Gonzalez Nuñez. 28 yrs old, former employee of LTF.

Worked for 2 yrs and then left because the money was not good. Current employment: maintaining the vacation house and land of an American named Mark. Married to Patricia, father of Soley, son of Camaron, brother of Jeison, son-in-law of Ronald, brother-in-law of Hernan.

Enrique, Juan and “Bookie”- poachers who live on the island.

Gabriel- full name: Gabriel Solano. 34 yrs old, employed as a butcher. No relation to Luis Solano.

Gorilla & Morita- a married couple that cares for the vacation house of a Costa Rican. In their mid to late 30s. Rumor has it Gorilla was a former cook for Quelonios, but was fired because of his drug use. Place of residence unknown. Possible poachers.

Los Mapacho- A family that lives an hour’s walk from the project. Income generated from farm, however it is quite possibly they also poach turtles. The family consists of: Elvis, Hugo, Penguino, Anthony and Carmenina.

Miguel- full name: Miguel Cordoba Jimenez. 19 yrs of age, son of Culebra. Former employee of LTF, worked from 2008-2011. Currently working as volunteer coordinator for ASVO.

Miguelito- full name: Miguel Areas Artavia. 69 yrs old, former employee of LTF. Worked for LTF for 6 yrs until they let him go in 2010 because of health problems. Current employment: selling coconuts and avocado in Siquirres.

Minor- full name: Minor Eduardo Hernandez. In his early 60s, former employee of LTF. Currently poaching turtles.

Monica- about 14 yrs old. Daughter of Jorge.

Soley- about 8 yrs old. Daughter of Patricia and Davey, granddaughter of Ronald.

Miscellaneous

Didiar- full name: Didiar Chacon. In his early 50s, from San José, country coordinator for WIDECAST and biologist of LTF.

Judy- full name: Judy Robbs. 54 yrs old, from Canada, volunteer at LTF for 4 yrs on and off. Married to Jorge.

Luis- full name: Luis Solano. In his late 30s, director of Quelonios as of approx. 2 yrs. No relation to Gabriel Solano. Temporarily staying on the island.

Mauricio- a poacher in his early 20s, temporarily staying on the island.

Roy- full name: Roy Alexander Quesada Calderon. In his late 20s, recently hired as the chef at Quelonios. He has a lot of history volunteering and working in conservation. Temporarily staying on the island.

Sherri- full name: Sherri Sarratore, in her late 50s, from Minnesota, USA. In a relationship with Gabriel Solano, local non-employee. At time of interview, been on island on and off for 3 years, former volunteer coordinator for ASVO, has volunteered for LTF before.

Volunteers

Anke- full name: Anke Sinnecker. 42 yrs old, from Southern Germany, volunteer at LTF for 2 1/2 wks.

Erin- full name: Erin Cardenas. 27 yrs old, from USA, volunteer at LTF for 3 wks.

Jenny- full name: Jennifer Rasch. 23 yrs old, from Germany, volunteer at LTF for 2 wks.

Joyce- full name: Joyce Storimans. 22 yrs old, from the Netherlands, volunteer at LTF for 3 wks.

Gil- full name: Gil Peeri. 19 yrs old, from Israel, volunteer at LTF for 3 wks.

Inga- full name: Inga Alberti. 29 yrs old, from Germany, volunteer at LTF for 1 1/2 wks.

Saray- full name: Saray Lira. In her early 20s, from USA, volunteer at Quelonios for 2 wks.

Sinead: full name: Sinead O'Conner. In her mid 20s, from USA, volunteer at LTF for 6 months.

Interview Questions

For Administrative Staff:

How long have you worked with LTF? What is your job? What do you understand LTF's goals to be? How does LTF accomplish these goals?

Past: How did LTF start? What were locals doing before? What problems has LTF encountered and how has LTF grown from these experiences? How did LTF work with locals to identify and understand their needs?

Present: How is LTF doing now? How would you personally evaluate the success of LTF? What has LTF done/is doing to empower the local community? How do you evaluate the current relationship between the organization and the locals?

How has this relationship changed? What is LTF's biggest strength as an NGO? What is LTF's biggest weakness/area of improvement? What is the relationship like between the locals and the international volunteers? Is tourism a sustainable means of income for the locals? Would you have any suggestions for NGOs that want to do what LTF has done? Can you explain any difficulties with cross-cultural communication between the Western administrative staff and the locals?

Future: What plans does LTF have to hand over administrative power to the locals? What does this transition mean for training and initiatives taking place/needing to take place? What are short-term/long-term goals for this process? Will the project be sustainable?

For International Volunteers:

How long have you been volunteering with LTF? What is your impression of the organization thus far? What other experiences do you have with international volunteering/work?

What influenced you to do this? Do you believe you are making a difference?

Why?

What are the strengths/weaknesses of the project? Would you suggest any areas of improvement? Overall, how would you evaluate the success of the project?

How would you evaluate the relationship between the administrative staff and the locals? How would you evaluate the relationship between the locals and the international volunteers? How do you personally deal with locals and problems that rise between language barriers and/or cultural differences?

For Locals (employees):

Background information: What do you do with LTF? How long have you been working with LTF?

Past: What were you doing before LTF started? When they started, what were your initial impressions of the project? (How has this impression changed?) How did LTF work with the local community to identify their needs? Has LTF always involved the local community? What did you perceive their goals to be? Did LTF encounter problems? How did they deal with these problems? Did the locals encounter problems? How did they deal with the problems? Was it hard to communicate because of language barriers and/or cultural differences? How did LTF deal with these communication problems? How did the locals deal with these communication problems?

Present: Do you consider the work LTF has done to be successful? What is the current relationship between the locals/administrative staff? What are some strengths of the project? What are some weaknesses of the project? Can you explain the relationship between the locals and the volunteers? Overall, do you think their presence in LTF is a good thing? If you were managing LTF, what

would you do differently? Can you explain the process currently underway which seeks to hand over administrative control of the project to the locals? The training involved? Workshops?

Future: What do you anticipate in the future for LTF?

For Locals (non-employees):

What is your relationship with LTF?

Past: What were you doing before LTF started? What are you doing now? How has LTF affected you personally? How has LTF affected your community? Has LTF worked with community/been mindful of their needs? How has LTF/local community dealt with problems pertaining to the project? What were these problems? Did you have any problems related to language barriers and/or cultural differences?

Present: Has LTF been a success? Overall, can you evaluate the relationship between the locals and administrative staff as being good/bad? Overall, is the relationship with the locals and the international volunteers good/bad? Can you identify strengths of the project? Weaknesses of the project? What do you think of LTF handing over administrative control to the local community?

Survey Questions

Please answer each question for the conditions before the existence of LTF and after.

1. How is your access to good food?
2. How is your access to services to maintain good health? For example, potable water.

3. Do you have good relationships with the people in the community?
4. Are there community events in which the whole community can participate and have fun together?
5. Do you have a boat?
6. What level of school have you completed?
7. Are you in the Association?
8. Is the Association effective? That is to say, does it respond well to the needs of the community?
9. Are there various opportunities to have fun on the island?
10. Do you think you belong to the community?
11. Would you like to stay on the island?
12. Is the use of drugs out of control here? That is to say, does it affect the community in a negative way?
13. How many incidents of crime occur on the island? What types of crime?

Pictures

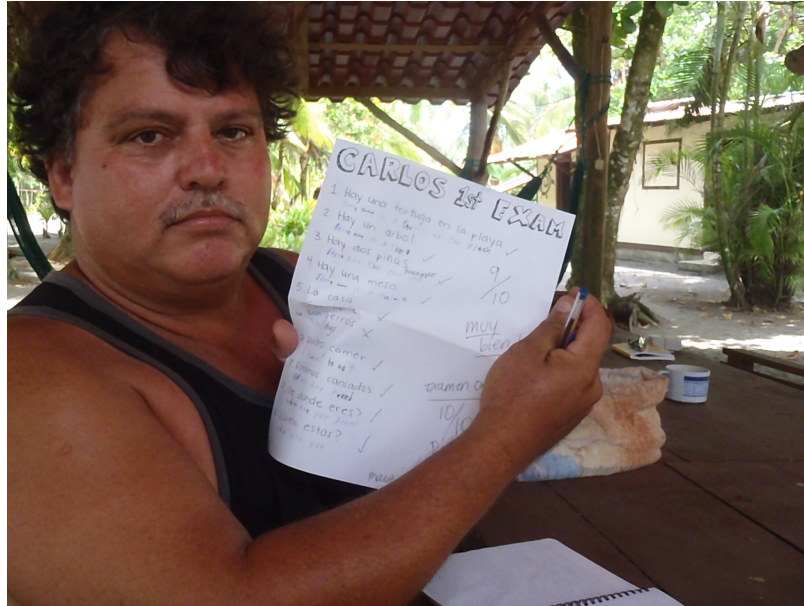
All pictures taken by Rachel LeQuire.



Local employees and administrative staff attending a training session.



The hatchery where the turtle eggs are buried. You can also see how close the jungle is to the beach.



Carlos takes an exam at the LTF home base, English class with Rachel.



Rachel and Patricia at the LTF home base.



Baby Leatherback turtles. They hatched during the day, which means that we had to keep them in this box until the nighttime, when we could release them.

Summary of Capstone Project

There was a time when efficiency and intelligence meant bending the Earth to our will, exploiting our resources to reap the benefits. With depleting resources, rising inequality and environmental crises, our world is telling us that efficiency and intelligence must be redefined to incorporate the serious consequences that exploitation of resources can incur.

We participate in a consumer society. Consuming resources in the past without regard to the consequences has caused myriad problems including negative effects on local communities, harming ecosystems, the endangerment and extinction of various animals, etc. As “green” initiatives grow throughout the world, we see a development in the understanding that we must now begin to consume with environmental and social consequences in mind. We buy eco-friendly products, support fair trade and initiatives of local empowerment.

Tourism in developing countries is a type of consumption; it has transformed to reflect our awareness of the changing times. This new tourism is called ecotourism. “Ecotourism is believed to be the fastest growing type of tourism. Many have come to view it as a means of reconciling the conflicts between the needs for protected area conservation and the pressing needs of local people” (Brechin et. al 2003, p. 103).

An understanding of what ecotourism entails still develops today. There have been various problems in implementing ecotourism that reflects how much we still need to understand about this process. Studying what ecotourism means in

a theoretical sense can only help us so much, we must also learn from case studies and an appropriate review of these examples of ecotourism.

My research brought me to La Tortuga Feliz (LTF), an ecotourism initiative and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) operating on Pacuare Beach, Costa Rica. On a beach where the locals' source of income was poaching turtles, killing them and/or harvesting their eggs, LTF set up this environmental conservation tourist organization. Bringing in international volunteers to conserve the turtles, LTF employs locals using the funds generated by these volunteers. Not only does LTF focus on the conservation of endangered species of turtles, LTF is concerned with local community development and empowerment.

This project seemed to stand out from other projects because of its intention to involve the community in a meaningful way. In fact, they claimed that someday they wanted to transfer total control of the project to the local community, an admirable goal that seemed to express true consideration for local empowerment. What better way to empower the people than to give them all of the power? This type of empowerment is incredibly important as it reflects democratic ideals and the importance for higher ethical standards in our modern world. Unfortunately, very minimal research exists that evaluates attempts in ecotourism to involve the community in meaningful ways.

I needed to see what this community-based ecotourism model was like on the ground. I spent one month conducting informal and formal interviews, observing and participating in the project. I wanted to make sure I formulated the right questions and had an adequate understanding of ecotourism before I left,

conducting extensive literary review. I have continued my literary review, seeking to put my experiences in a larger context.

Establishing friendships with the locals and administrative staff to gain trust and access to important information was important. It was incredibly difficult to get to know the locals. I wanted to spend time with them and talk to them, but the implications behind my friendly behavior created tension. As an engaging, young, American lady on an isolated island populated predominantly by single, lonely men, it was hard to avoid uncomfortable situations and misunderstandings.

Every single inhabitant of the island had something negative to say about the project. Once they started feeling comfortable with me, they would not stop complaining. A couple of the locals were a bit more reserved or hesitant to say bad things about the project. The majority, however, expressed their overall discontent with the project.

I noticed immediately a big discrepancy and disconnect in what the locals felt and what the administrative staff felt. I identified excessive issues of miscommunication, lack of understanding and inability to handle cultural differences. It was frustrating for me to see problems where, as an outsider, I could perceive an easy solution. I did not want to interfere in the conflicts, desiring to remain neutral. Even if I had a strong opinion about something or thought I could help, I kept it to myself.

Although LTF was successful in terms of conservation and slightly improving the lives of the locals, they had failed at empowering the community.

There was absolutely no plan or initiative being taken to hand over control of the project to the community. Although the administrative staff (of all Westerners) had good intentions and sometimes exhibited enthusiasm and other beneficial attitudes, they did not understand how to approach their challenges in a correct fashion.

Breaking down my findings at LTF, I quickly uncovered signs that indicated empowerment of the community was not happening. The administrative staff felt superior to the locals, shown by a lack of transparency and their treatment of the locals. In addition, there was a lack of communication between the project and the community as well as lack of acceptance by the community that showed the project's failure to empower the community. When an outside organization *invades* a community they aren't a part of and claims to work for the good of that community, a genuine effort should be made to fulfill their promises.

Critical and disappointed at LTF at first, my extended time on the island led me to the realization of *why* empowerment can be so difficult. A lack of community cohesion and social capital, lack of adequate funds (coming from a decrease in volunteers and turtles) as well as cultural differences stood out as the biggest obstacles LTF was facing. The locals were also considerably dissatisfied with the attitude of Robert Adeva, the director of the project, which highlighted the limitations LTF experienced because of administrative attitude.

It's nice to want to "Change the world" and "Make a difference." The distressing tragedies of the world make hopeful individuals want to rise to the occasion.

Unfortunately, we sometimes get further entangled in blind optimism and fantasy;

perhaps forgetting what the world *actually* might need, and just seeking to derive that feel-good satisfaction that comes from charity. What the world needs, what community-based ecotourism initiatives need, are individuals that are willing to learn from mistakes, to genuinely do something for others and not for themselves, to not only have good intentions and the appropriate attitude, but the knowledge to back it. The lessons learned from LTF can benefit those attempting community-based ecotourism or even just trying to make that “difference” in the world.