

Ecotourism and Land Use in Trinidad and Tobago

Governments today, seeking revenues from tourism, actively market their countries' ecological attractions—but how well does it serve the environment or the local population?

Ecotourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the international tourist industry, especially in Third-World countries. The idea is, everybody benefits as visitors enjoy natural wonders, the environment is better conserved, and the local economy is richly bolstered. A curious Santa Clara University professor and her three student assistants went to Trinidad and Tobago to see if that's really what is happening.



Trinidad and Tobago, which together form a nation, lie not far off the coast of Venezuela. In recent years, the two islands have become very popular with tourists, Trinidad for its phenomenal bird population and Tobago for its sun, sea, and sand. The government promotes these attractions as ecotourism, a new style of vacationing by the politically- and environmentally-minded.

Trinidad and Tobago have also been a destination for SCU's summer study abroad program. Recently, Leslie Gray, Santa Clara University assistant professor of political science and environmental studies, supervised three students there, surveying the impact of ecotourism on two villages: Brasso Seco in the mountains of Trinidad, where the most intensive survey work was done, and Charlotteville on the northern shore of Tobago.

Key Questions

"One of the issues we looked at was what the concept of ecotourism meant to different people—to government officials, tourist operators, and local communities," says Gray. "Did it signify anything different from nature tourism or adventure tourism?"

Not necessarily, the students found. "Ecotourism" as a term is popular, even "hot," but as far as many people are concerned it just implies marketing to people who want to see wildlife. In Tobago, for example, a large-scale, foreign-owned vacation

complex touts itself as an ecotourist destination, even though significant environmental damage occurred during its construction.

Other ecotourist enterprises are more serious about their conservation and education mission. In Brasso Seco, they are trying to implement small-scale sustainable tourism projects in which local villagers benefit directly from visitors.

Besides learning how people in Trinidad and Tobago defined ecotourism, Gray and her research assistants sought answers to three other questions. First, they wondered whether ecotourism actually helped to foster conservation. Model projects around the world have shown that it can, but what was happening on these two islands?

Second, did local communities participate in and benefit from ecotourism? Some critics have said that when locals do get to participate, it's usually as service people rather than decision makers. So, survey questions probed for ways in which the community benefited from ecotourism, and whether local people were involved in the decision-making process.

"In Brasso Seco there has not been that much tourism," Gray says, "but some small local enterprises are starting to rent out houses. On the other hand, in the village on Tobago, they are starting to see lots of tourism, with yachts coming in and that sort of thing. It is affecting the environment in quite negative ways."



Elianna Strode
Leslie Gray

Land Tenure

The third area in the surveys touched on one of the thorniest problems of tourism in Third-World countries. Was ecotourism having an impact on land values and land tenure?

As a result of successful tourist ventures, the prices of land and property are often driven past what local communities can afford. That is the case in Trinidad and Tobago, where most villagers don't own the land on which they farm and live.

By and large, they are squatters on the plantation land where they formerly worked. Over time, they can form rights to the land. What Gray is interested in is whether, with these insecure rights, the people invest in things that maintain the environment, such as tree crops.

The survey work in Brasso Seco focused extensively on such land tenure issues, examining whether local ecotourism efforts had inflated land values, and if rises in land values had affected squatters' rights.

Students Doing Research

One of Gray's student assistants, Kelly Warren, was an SCU alumna who was living in Brasso Seco at the time. She and Paulina Flint—a sociology major who already had some experience with survey methods—interviewed all 65 households in the small mountain village.

"I mostly designed and tested the survey," says Gray, "but the implementation was all hard work on their part."

They collected data about basic social structure, including how much land the villagers owned, what they did on it, and what their outside sources of income were.

They did not need to do the surveying in another language, because the people of Trinidad and Tobago speak English. Although language was not a hurdle in this study, Gray says "field research tests young people in all sorts of ways."

"More than any other school I know, Santa Clara involves undergraduates

in research—and there are lots of opportunities for students to interact with faculty."

Leslie Gray
assistant professor of political science and environmental studies