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**SEMINARIO INTERNACIONAL - ECOTURISMO:
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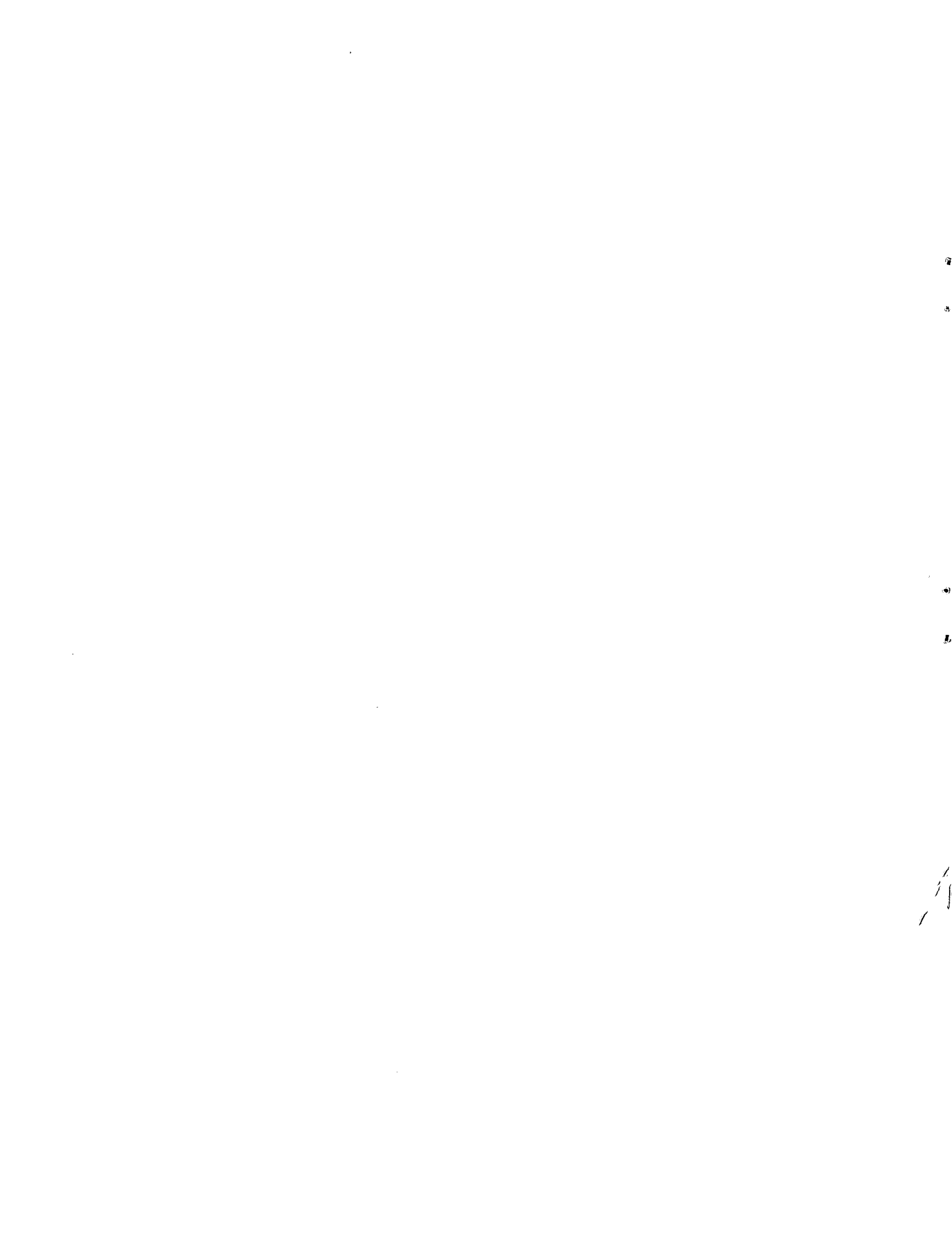
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**NGO-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION FOR ECOTOURISM:
A STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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NGO-Community Collaboration for Ecotourism: A Strategy for Sustainable Regional Development

David Barkin and Carlos Paillés*

In 1984, a mega-resort, designed to attract beach tourism to international hotels, was initiated on the south Pacific coast of Mexico in the state of Oaxaca. Known as the Bahias de Huatulco, the spectacular setting, in a previously isolated region, is home to about 50,000 people from four different indigenous groups living in some 150 subsistence communities widely dispersed over 700,000 hectares in the surrounding highlands and a number of small fishing villages. The new mega-resort and the accompanying infrastructure integrated the region into the international market, sparking a self-reinforcing cycle of speculation and investment that accelerated the process of social and spatial polarisation, impoverishing the native populations and raising tensions throughout the region; the destruction wrought by Hurricane Paulina in October 1997 suddenly intensified the problems of poverty and environmental destruction. Even before the disaster, a local non-governmental organisation (NGO), the Centre for Ecological Support (CSE, for its Spanish initials), created in 1993 to promote regional development, had begun to implement a resource management program for sustainable development, by channelling domestic and international resources to attack these problems with a series of productive programs designed to stem environmental degradation and strengthen the economy.

The isolated existence of the indigenous people who lived in the Huatulco region was violently transformed when the narrow coastal strip (about 30 km) was expropriated by the Mexican Tourist Development Fund (FONATUR) in the early 1980s for a transnational beach tourism project. After pushing them from their small fishing villages, little thought was given to the local population; construction attracted workers of all sorts along with other people seeking their fortunes from other parts of Mexico. For more than ten years, social tensions rose as five large hotels and many smaller installations were built; menial jobs were offered to the natives who had taken refuge in the larger settlements dispersed in the surrounding mountain communities or in the shanty towns that sprouted to attend to the demands of the new industry. The prevailing pattern of polarising development characteristic of the rest of Mexico became firmly entrenched in this area, with a small, prosperous beach front community coexisting alongside makeshift facilities for the service workers; the local communities increasingly found themselves in dire straits, as national policy discriminated against rural production in general and poor, small-scale farmers, in particular

In this article we will examine the creative role of a local NGO in promoting an alternative approach to development that might contribute to reconciling the conflicting interests in the region. By explicitly recognising the special role that NGOs can play in facilitating community participation, the CSE has facilitated the interaction of groups

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from different cultural backgrounds and social classes in what promises to be an innovative program of diversified development in which environmental tourism will play a fundamental part.

The River Basins around Bahias de Huatulco

In 1958, the landscape of the coast of Oaxaca, seen from the peaks of the Sierra Sur, was that of multiple greenish tones, contrasting with the multiple bluish tones of the Pacific Ocean. In the river basin feeding the coastal aquifer, minor breaks of less than 5% in the tropical dry forest included traditional fields of corn, beans and fruit trees. The coffee areas were covered by the canopies of shade trees. Forty years later, the forest coverage had been reduced by 50%; only 20% resembled its former condition, while the rest suffered from a partial extraction of its timber resources. During the past 15 years the rate of deforestation doubled that of the previous 25 years.

These tropical dry forests are one of the most fragile ecosystems in the world and are rapidly disappearing. Historically, the inherited culture of forest management within the coastal communities has been eroded by an antiquated and venal commercial structure. In spite of sustained demand for tropical hardwoods and attractive prices for such species as Rosewood and *Lignum Vitae*, a complex and costly system of intermediation discouraged communal planting and conservation and forced more intensive exploitation by drastically reducing local prices. Tourist development induced a heavy flow of migrants from the central highlands and other regions to the coast, overwhelming communal management practices that defined and restricted access to the forests.

Two-thirds of this destruction is due to the "walking milpa" (the system of slash and burn cultivation that encroaches on the forest for the short term planting of corn and associated crops) and agrochemicals. The other third is mostly due to the illegal cutting of trees encouraged by developers of the tourist corridor from Huatulco to Puerto Escondido. Devastation of the forests has been followed by the erosion of the soil and the final result is critical: the water supply to the Bahias de Huatulco tourist development area will be exhausted by the year 2020, unless some regeneration program is implemented.¹

Most people in the region are still not even aware of the depths of the impending crisis. International integration assures regular supplies of lumber and food at prices that do not reflect their real costs: producers are poorly paid, water wasted and the environment despoiled. Consumers have become accustomed to these subsidies from the poor, from a clientelist political structure, and from nature; in the process, peasants have been forced to eke out an existence, dismembering their communities and devastating their environment. So absurd is the process, that the new hotels elected to import rolls of carpet grass from the centre of the country rather than seed new lawns in Huatulco, as if the region's abundant

¹ Data collected from the battery of wells that supply water to the coastal areas showed a 26% decline in the levels of the aquifers between 1986 and 1992. Extrapolation of this trend leaves insufficient water for cost-effective pumping in less than a quarter century

natural and human resources were not relevant. Even water appears as a gift from heaven: in Huatulco, urban consumers receive it free and, although they complain, the hotels are only charged a fraction of what they would pay in other international resorts. Underpriced resources for the privileged urban population are yet another signal discouraging peasant society from continuing its arduous task of environmental management, truncating its time honoured commitment to assure water for their children and their grandchildren. In the end this combination of factors contributes to a self-devaluation within peasant society, a seemingly irreversible loss of self-esteem.²

To add insult to injury, in 1997, hurricane Paulina destroyed 6 or 7 million trees, increasing desertification in the river courses by 80%, and damaging 2/3 of the peasant homes. But it also instilled a renewed sense of responsibility towards nature in most of those communities that had been able to maintain communal organisations. This is the basis for the growing enthusiasm of the communities to participate in the regeneration activities.

Communal organisation and the CSE: A complex history of accommodation for development

Unlike many other groups in Mexico and Latin America, the communities in this part of Oaxaca have strong communal organisations. In spite of having origins in four different ethnic groups, each with its own language and cultural patterns, all of the native peoples in this region share a tradition of strong collective roots based on the collective ownership and management of their land, their abiding support for local forms of communal organisation and well-engrained cultural patterns that reinforce the traditional mechanisms of decision making, known as "uses and customs". These communities have struggled through the centuries to defend their homelands against outside invaders, be they other Mesoamerican groups, the Spanish conquerors, or the new powers from a modernising nation. Even as they developed relationships with these outsiders, they managed to defend substantial areas of community life and decision making from attempts to dictate the terms of their submission or more full integration into alien societies.

When the government decided to create the resort development, the Oaxacan natives were rudely shunted aside. Expelled from their coastal communities, even the meagre compensations promised for expropriations were rarely paid. Uncomprehending and without alternatives, many of those who resisted were slaughtered in the unrelenting drive to push forward with the program. Developers moved in with impunity, backed by military might and a political commitment to forge a beach-front paradise. It is no wonder, then, that as the hotels were inaugurated and menial employment offered, many in the region chose to remain in their communities while a few migrated further afield in

² The uprising by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in January 1994 is dramatic testimony to the depths of this process and the latent reserve of pride in this endangered heritage.

search of better opportunities. Traditional authorities and elders counselled against integration, moving to reinforce local options.

The CSE was created sometime after the first large hotels were inaugurated in the new resort. Cognisant of the underlying conflicts that permeated the region, the NGO carved out a niche for itself: working with the native communities to regenerate some of the smaller river basins in the region as part of a broader effort to promote community welfare, through the rehabilitation of the tropical dry forests, replanting denuded areas with native species of trees with cultural and commercial value. It started to work with the communities to implement a diversified development program in which the forests would play a central role, but where complementary activities would offer an essential economic underpinning to assure its economic viability and guarantee sufficient opportunities to persuade people to remain and strengthen confidence in community governance and management capabilities.

The complementary activities envisioned in the CSE program included ecotourism, a renewed emphasis on production of basic foods for local consumption, and commercial production of goods and services for local and specialised foreign markets. The new strategy was anchored in a carefully designed program to use reforestation as the centre of a program to rebuild the deteriorated watershed that would be the foundation of a stronger productive system in the region, a prerequisite for supporting the local communities and their cultures. This approach was designed to create a favourable environment to attract visitors who might be interested in a variety of ecotourism offerings; these would be owned and managed by the indigenous communities participating in the program and sensitive to the natural heritage that they were rescuing and preserving.

The CSE's initial diagnosis of the local ecosystems confirmed its early analysis that the unusual tropical dry forests presented a unique challenge for rehabilitation and conservation. The early decision to organise the work on the basis of water basins proved crucial, as the nurseries and new plantings required regular flows of water or irrigation; pruning and other cultivation practices were implemented through a process of joint administration in which outside experts shared their knowledge with the natives who applied their inherited learning about the region. A new diversified mixture of species began to thrive with unexpectedly high growth rates. From the very beginning, bungalows were constructed as part of the program, creating an opportunity for offering some ecotourism services as part of an effort to demonstrate that the local cultures were also of interest to people from far afield, and that local practices for managing and conserving the environment were valued by others who would be willing to pay for the privilege of visiting the area.

The CSE participates in these programs through a series of trust funds that are administered through a tripartite structure. The indigenous authorities charged with the management of community property and local political representatives join with the NGO to implement decisions about how governmental programs and outside assistance will be

applied within each community. One of the programs that has been in operation longest illustrates how the process works: The Magdalena River Program includes a broad series of activities that include the monitoring of aquifers, protection of the integrity of river beds and banks from erosion, reforestation through new planting, soil stabilisation and protection, water conservation, sustainable agriculture, reuse of agricultural and forest waste products, infrastructure for environmental tourism, and community environmental education. A long period was required to implement this program, developing the mechanisms for communication with the communities and overcoming the historical pattern of paternalism by which outside assistance was transferred to such groups in return for political support without a corresponding opportunity for local participation and without any meaningful consultation about the programs' design or implementation.

A devastating hurricane, Paulina, hit the region in Fall 1997. It proved to be a turning point, demonstrating the effectiveness of many of the CSE programs and identifying design weaknesses of some of the conservation and construction practices. The storm destroyed millions of trees, accelerating the process of desertification while demonstrating the urgency for increasing the scale and intensity of the rehabilitation and diversification programs. The tragedy catalysed the communities, leading to the consolidation of more communal assemblies that began to demand assistance, effectively transferring the initiative from a lethargic bureaucracy to the local groups anxious to initiate their own programs with the resources that might otherwise have been siphoned off by ineffective governmental agencies.

Although the destruction wreaked in the highland communities was serious, it turned out that the crisis on the coast would prove more worrisome in the long term. As a result of the hurricane, and the river basin approach adopted by the CSE, the NGO began to examine the coastal aquifer closely, revealing a serious shortfall that would leave the tourist economy without local supplies of drinking water in less than a quarter of a century, if corrective measures were not implemented. This alarming finding was denied by the official water agency, but most other official organisations joined in supporting the CSE efforts to broaden the scope of its program to prepare to confront the impending crisis.

The forging of a sustainable development strategy³

With the disaster, the CSE perceived an opportunity to undertake a more ambitious program for the region as a whole. Federal agencies quickly took advantage of the Centre's presence and capabilities to charge it with intermediate term responsibilities for reconstruction, once the emergency disaster relief programs were terminated. A history of bureaucratic bungling, placed the NGO in a favourable position to complement the river basin project with a far more ambitious reforestation program that would replant target areas with a view to restoring biodiversity, a concern of people within the communities, while

³ Cf. David Barkin, *Wealth, Poverty, and Sustainable Development*, Mexico: Editorial Jus, 1998, for a lengthy discussion of the principles of sustainability on which this project is based.

assuring that some of the species serve the demands of the marketplace. The forestry program was conceived of as part of a broader program for regional development and environmental protection. Because economic and social viability was a criterion from the beginning, technological innovations associated with existing market opportunities will allow wood products and derivatives rather than raw trees to be marketed, creating more employment and generating greater value for the communities. This is a fundamental feature of the program, since these communities have suffered from unfavourable conditions for their products for decades, if not centuries, as the market works to exacerbate the discrimination imposed by society against indigenous groups and peasants, placing a low value on their labour, their resources, and the products of their work.

The reforestation program differs dramatically from similar programs elsewhere. The first round of plantations resulted in germination rates exceeding 90% for the several species and replanting brought the effective rate to virtually 100%. The selection of varieties, the techniques used and the anticipated marketing opportunities are creating an extraction profile that will allow the first harvest of smaller trees only five years after the initial effort. In the meanwhile, the planting of other areas, the construction of bungalows, and other activities will assume increasing importance in the region.

The organisational structure is also innovative. The CSE is a constitutive part of a several local trust funds that integrate governmental agencies, the communities and the private sector into the program. Although some local business groups have made contributions to local public relations efforts, only the Sheraton Hotel has offered substantial direct support for the conservation activities; it is remarkable that the other international chain, ClubMed, has resisted participating even in promotional activities. The operating Trust Fund, charged with the eventual co-ordination of the individual enterprises that are being established by the communities themselves (including a pure water bottling plant and the ecotourism project) has established a formula that attempts to create a solid foundation for future activities: prices for goods and services must be sufficient not only to cover the direct costs of production, but also contribute to a fund for additional activities in the community and environmental programs in the region as a whole; at present, the division is a third going to each part, while remaining competitive. This is the essence of the international "fair trade" movement.

During the initial stages, the communities have displayed a remarkable capacity to integrate these programs into their existing structures. The assemblies where the initiatives are discussed reveal that their forefathers regularly engaged in such activities; we discovered that forest protection and replanting brigades used the same seed collection techniques and planting methods that are now being (re)introduced. This same process of interaction with the regional supervisors reveals the importance of water management and protection activities in the communities in past epochs, tasks that have been neglected as discriminatory governmental policies have forced the peasants to search for income and employment in nearby towns or even in the USA to ensure the viability of their communities and the survival of their families.

The present program envisions an eventual charge to the coastal communities to cover part of the costs of the environmental services being provided through the regeneration of the river basin. At present, this cannot be implemented because the water system is controlled by the government tourism agency which has not been able to fulfil its promises to deliver a high quality product; compounding the problem, the hydraulic infrastructure is not well maintained. In fact, at present the local Chamber of Commerce considers the lack of an adequate water supply to be a major obstacle blocking the construction of at least a dozen new hotel projects in the area. Once the communities have demonstrated their ability and willingness to maintain their systems, as well as their effectiveness in reducing the damage from seasonal rains, it is expected that the local authorities will be able to include a charge for these environmental services for large scale users. In the interim, other mechanisms are being explored as a way of explicitly integrating the coastal beneficiaries into the program: they are expected to provide some support for the ecotourism activities; future programs include reserves for native flora and fauna, with the possibility of areas for larger mammals, once common in the zone. The communities will shortly begin developing a dependable capacity to supply fruits and vegetables to the hotels, and contracts that will compensate the communities correctly for the real costs of production, including fair wages for the workers and a charge for the environmental services that are normally not included by the market. The opening of channels for regional discussions of activities that will increase the overall attractiveness of the area for visitors in a sustainable fashion is a fundamental part of the collaboration among dissimilar groups, and essential for the long-term consolidation of the CSE agenda.

The role of ecotourism

From the very beginning, it was clear that tourism might play an important part of resource management program. The communities would be able to offer a variety of nature tourism and similar activities as part of diversified regional development effort. The CSE initiated preparations by designing bungalows that could be built by the communities. Local promoters were already helping people to integrate this type of activity into community life, encouraging women to think about preparing traditional meals and helping men to improve their skills to ensure that the construction would offer a quality service. When the hurricane struck several of the buildings were destroyed or collapsed, forcing design modifications that produced a more solid and attractive structure.

If this activity is to be successful, however, many more cottages will have to be built throughout the larger river basin. Careful thought is being given to the carrying capacity of each area within the region, and the ability of the people in the communities to provide the range of services that will be offered to the visitors, without threatening the structure of local life and production. Some of the local tourist promoters (including one of the hotels) have agreed to participate by channelling some their own clients into these facilities on attractive terms that will assure the communities a steady flow of income and gainful employment consistent with strengthening local institutions.

The CSE is proceeding cautiously. The tropical dry forest ecosystem is a fragile environment; their preservation and protection require an infrastructure to assure healthy growth; visitors will have to be carefully guided through the region, constructing trails and training local people on how to best share their knowledge with the visitors. Once initiated, the temptation to attract large groups presents a permanent threat to the project, the ecosystem, and the communities themselves: the steady progress in incorporating the communities into the development of a variety of smaller enterprises is part of the long-term process of creating appropriate conditions for the communities to begin to control directly the activities.

Today's efforts to rehabilitate the region and create the foundations of a basic infrastructure are being financed with development assistance funds from the national government and international sources. The move to a commercial stage will require different sources of capital: there is no lack of outside interests interested in financing this project. Here again, the CSE again views its role as more than that of a promoter; it is not simply attempting to create opportunities so that the communities can take advantage of a potential market. The local hotels have expressed their willingness to support the implementation of the overall resource management program through the ecotourism activities. Some of the more visionary hoteliers have begun to realise that this offering can complement rather than detract from their own markets and have accepted the position of the CSE that community ownership and control is an essential building block to assure the viability of the overall reconstruction program. The main challenge will be to control this develop so that is a complementary part of the larger program, rather than one that dominates and subsumes the communities and their ecosystems to the short-term demands of a sometimes fickle market.

A review of many ecotourism projects in Mexico and Central America reveals their destructive impacts on local processes of sustainable advance. In fact, one of the areas that attracts the largest number of nature tourists in Mexico, the reserve of the Monarch Butterfly, is actually in the throes of a process of impoverishment because the local population has not been allowed to participate directly in creating adequate facilities that would offer the more than 200,000 visitors who visit the area during the four-month period when the lepidopters nest there.⁴ Other projects offer crass distortions of the concept, like the site advertised as "Nature's sacred paradise"; it displaced local Mayan communities, dynamited sacred wells, and illegally keeps endangered species in captivity, to attract visitors to its lucrative "ecotourism" theme park in Quintana Roo. The difficulties of combining local participation, with a socially and environmentally balanced program that also produces a profit create a constant tension that provokes conflicts among groups with the best of intentions.⁵ The CSE model on the coast of Oaxaca offers

⁴ Cf. Gonzalo Chapela and David Barkin, *Monarcas y Campesinos: Una estrategia de desarrollo sustentable para oriente de Michoacán*, Mexico: Centro de Ecodesarrollo, 1995.

⁵ Ron Mader's recent tourist guides to Mexico and Honduras, both entitled: *Adventures in Nature*, (John Muir Publications, 1998) are a testimony to the variety of efforts and the difficulty of finding the ideal

a promising alternative, by inserting an ecotourism component into a broader project of community directed regional resource management, that offers essential environmental benefits to every social group in the area.

model. His constructive comments are an excellent contribution to help visitors make the most of their ecotravels.

ABSTRACT

Ecotourism is being developed as part of an ambitious regional resource management program to rehabilitate the watersheds above the mega tourist resort of Huatulco. The beach communities are home to international hotels but face a problem of rapidly declining water tables. We are working with the peasant and indigenous communities to enable them to develop and manage the ecotourism facility in a sustainable way, supported by the transnational beach tourism industry. The key to success is the application of the principles of Autonomy, Self-Sufficiency, and Diversification to permit the communities to support their traditional institutions and economy while implementing programs to facilitate economic growth.

