

Is ecotourism the way forward for countries such as Ecuador?



Environment - international agreements:

Party to: Antarctic-Environmental Protocol, Antarctic Treaty, Biodiversity, Climate Change, Climate Change-Kyoto Protocol, Desertification, Endangered Species, Hazardous Wastes, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Tropical Timber 83, Tropical Timber 94, Wetlands.

Introduction

Ecuador is situated in western South America. Its neighbouring countries consist of Peru and Columbia and it borders the Pacific Ocean at the Equator. Quito is its capital.

Ecuador is an LEDC because of many factors of economical detriment; It remains a lower middle income nation with a gross domestic product of \$30.7 billion, or \$4,300 per capita. In South America, only Bolivia has a lower per capita GDP. Agriculture (primarily bananas, coffee, and cacao) and fishing are important sectors of the economy, together providing 50% of export earnings. Petroleum, the other major export commodity, produces 40% of export earnings. Being solely made up of primary goods, income is irregular and small. Its import commodities consist of vehicles, medical products, telecommunications equipment and electricity, all of it manufactured goods (excluding electricity) which have substantially more value than its exports. This could lead to the danger of having a trade deficit, increasing its foreign debt.

Ecuador's chronically large foreign debt stifles its economic growth. Its public debt is 40.1% of GDP and its current account balance is \$-566million. 70% of the population lives below the poverty line, more than double the rate of 5 years ago. Its birth rate is 22.29 births per 1000 population as opposed to Britain's 10.71 births per 1000. With birth rates this high, it'll mean more mouths to feed, effectively leading to more money being spent on food where it could have been more beneficial if used for another purpose. Its infant mortality rate 22.87 deaths per 1000 births as opposed to Britain's 5.08 also backs up the claim that Ecuador is a LEDC.

When it comes to looking at how Ecuador will cope with an increase in tourists, the fact that only 98 of its 359 airports have paved runways will question the consistency and the efficiency of transportation in and out of Ecuador. Britain, with roughly the same land area, has 334 of its 471 airports with paved runways. Also, as a consequence of its petroleum industry, new environmental issues have sprouted up, which include water pollution and other pollution from oil production wastes in ecologically sensitive areas of the Amazon Basin and Galapagos Islands.

Ecuador does feel that attracting tourists will help the country to move forward in terms of development. Tourism certainly has several attributes which would bring direct benefits to the country, unlike other sources of income, such as their banana industry and primary sources in general; Foreign currency brought to the region by tourists can be invested, improving local education, health and other services. Jobs for local people are created from tourism giving them the chance to learn new skills in tourism services, and the construction of new houses and business premises also creates jobs and develops further skills. Local infrastructure is improved as water and sanitation facilities, roads, buses, taxis and airports are provided for tourists. Tourists can see beautiful landscapes, interesting wildlife and plants and be educated to the dangers to fragile ecosystems in the modern world.

Commercial (“normal”) tourism

Commercial tourism is tourism that businesses use to earn as much money as possible

from, by attracting as many people into the country as can be achieved. Financially, it is certainly beneficial for Ecuador in the short term, to say the least. Income from tourism is usually greater than the income from the export of a few raw materials. Profits can then be used to improve local housing, schools, hospitals, electricity and water supplies, local people can then use those tourist facilities created as well as having an increase in their domestic employment options such as in hotels, entertainment and as guides.

However, what makes the evolving Ecuador tourism industry a particular concern is that there is no regulation of commercial tourism at present by the local tourist operators and its legal usage of the land. Apart from an obligation to conduct an Environmental Impact Assessment by the Antarctic Treaty, there is essentially no constraint on where you can go, what you can do, and how many of you can do it.

The consequence of this is that tourism is already exerting pressures on Ecuador's environment, and the increasing commercial interest is changing the nature of Ecuador's political regime. Increasingly, commercial benefit, rather than concern for the environment, science, or international cooperation, is what is driving Ecuador's government towards commercial tourism. Whatever the good intentions of present industry members, the nature of commercial tourism is such, that its unrepresentative nature, self-interest and structural instability make it an inappropriate sole guardian for Ecuador's environment. Hotels, airports and roads could spoil the visual appearance and create noise, air pollution and litter; as a consequence the farming economy, which plays a big part in sustaining Ecuador's imports of bananas, could be damaged as the land is sold to developers. This then makes much of the food eaten by tourists come from imports either because local production is now insufficient or unable to meet the demands for European-type foods, it is then sold at the developing country's prices. This will increase the amount of money spent on imports, which may lead to money needing to be borrowed increasing national debt. It doesn't help that usually only 10-20% of the income received from tourists actually stays in the country. Most hotels are foreign-owned and profits go overseas, and tourists spend most of their money in hotels. More consequences from the mass building of hotels is that it will mean local people may lose their homes, land and livelihood. For example, fishermen could be affected as hotels are built next to beaches, people will become dependent on serving wealthy tourists.

If for close to a decade after the adoption of commercial tourism, and no companies have sought to seriously examine Ecuador's tourism industry or suggest any need to effectively regulating it, the industry may develop only short term profits. The amount of tourists that enter the country will most likely end up causing permanent damage to the environment, leaving the country unattractive and with significantly less income from the industry. The number of tourists and their wealth have the potential to strongly influence the local environment.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism means ecological tourism, where ecological has both environmental and social connotations. It is defined both as a concept-tourism movement and as a tourism (specifically sustainable tourism) section.

Ecotourism has clear benefits. Poor countries that are rich in biodiversity benefit from the money tourists bring in, supposedly without damaging the environment. "Ecotourism is an alternative activity to overuse of natural resources," says Geoffrey Howard of the East Africa office of IUCN (the World Conservation Union) in Nairobi, Kenya. "Many of our projects encourage ecotourism so that rural people can make a living out of something apart from using too much of the forests or fisheries or wetlands." It is small-scale most of the time and usually it is the local people which control it, making it directly benefiting to them and the wildlife, using local resources sustainably without straining or polluting the environment. Putting all this together mean that it is educating as well as entertaining tourist visitors. Ideally, ecotourism operated by communities should both satisfy tourists' desire for adventure and comfort and contribute toward satisfying the basic economic needs of the community by employing natural and cultural resources in local development. The standard of living should improve, and the value attributed to natural and cultural resources should likewise increase. Specifically, ecotourism should motivate local people to value and conserve resources - including not only natural resources but also local culture and language. It should also encourage participation in community groups, create opportunities for training and technical assistance, develop communities' ability to manage financial resources or establish community development funds, and lead the establishment of well-managed reserves, educational facilities ,and other attractions.

Ecuador has an abundance of wildlife, scenic areas that are attracting an increasing number of tourists. The income from these tourists can provide the financial justification for protecting the biological communities.

But while The World Conservation Union (IUCN), other organisations, and governments of nations such as New Zealand and Australia, try to ensure that their projects are ecologically viable, many ecotourist projects are unaudited, unaccredited and merely hint they are based on environmentally friendly policies and operations. The guidelines that do exist mostly address the obvious issues such as changes in land use, cutting down trees, making tracks, or scaring wildlife. Other disadvantages to ecotourism are the limitations that would be needed, such as scale, which restrict how much profit can be gained from the industry in contrast to commercial tourism, especially when it is attracting smaller, more specialized groups of people such as bird watchers and environmentalists. Also, it will not create a wide spread increase in the job opportunities for many who are under or unemployed simply because of the industries layout. It is mainly the local people who control the tourism in their local area.

Conclusion

In denouement, I do believe ecotourism, done properly, is the best way forward for countries like Ecuador because it creates economic opportunities in the area while at the same time protects its natural resources and local way of life, along with benefits to a wider range of people varying from the local people of the rainforest right up to the government. It is more appropriate to developing countries than the mass tourism associated with places such as Florida,

the Spanish costas and the Greek islands in the developed world.

However if they were to go for ecotourism they face two challenges. The activities of the tourists and the facilities that they use must not accelerate the damage to the environment, and the tourist industry must provide benefits to rural communities so that they can become advocates for conservation. The best outcome of this approach is that communities preserve both their environment and their own culture in the process. Finding the right balance between development that is profitable and long-term conservation represents a challenge for the ecotourism industry.

My case is not that there should be a prohibition of Ecuador's commercial tourism. Tourism must be subject to some constraints, and it must not compromise Ecuador's established designation as a natural reserve, devoted to peace and science. If it is not to become a destructive facet of human activity in Ecuador, it cannot increase endlessly and it has to accept some limits on the types and locations of activities.

In my opinion the United Nation should support tourism in LEDCs by working on adopting a people-centred policy framework which will create a sustainable economy with little social difficulties. They should help create a good governance at national and international levels, this will enable authorities to act sooner and with more effectiveness on certain situations that need to be settled with care. Also, work to build human and institutional capacities and increase their productivity to make globalisation work for the least developed countries. Enhancing the role of trade in development will most certainly help countries with trade deficits. At the same time taking action to protect and reduce the vulnerability of the environment, which can benefit the countries cultural aspect as well as their economy, like the income from tourism. Lastly, mobilizing the countries' financial resources, to bring the most effective and efficient source of export which, in turn will create more money for the countries to use to push themselves further into development, eventually producing indirect benefits to the countries tourist industry.

All of these reflect one way or another what is needed for tourism to work as effectively as possible and will either directly or indirectly benefit the industry as well as the countries themselves

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