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Promoting Ethno-tourism in the Costa Rican Indigenous Territories to Achieve Economic Prosperity

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Abstract:
This research examines the impact of ethno-tourism on indigenous communities in Costa Rica and its potential for economic prosperity. Costa Rica, a prominent Central American tourist destination, derives a significant portion of its GDP from tourism. Ethno-tourism, which emphasizes the cultural and traditional practices of local people, has emerged as a growing sector within this industry. Despite Costa Rica's overall developmental success, its indigenous populations remain economically and socially marginalized, with poorer health and limited access to essential services compared to the general population. This study examines successful ethno-tourism initiatives among the Shuar in Ecuador and the Mapuche in Chile, drawing parallels with Costa Rican indigenous groups. Fieldwork in Costa Rican indigenous territories shows that communities involved in ethno-tourism have better living conditions. However, these communities are often exploited by large tourist agencies due to limited financial and technological knowledge. The study recommends enhancing legal protections for indigenous lands, and offering financial literacy and technology courses. Additionally, it suggests creating a non-profit organization to help indigenous communities promote their tourism initiatives digitally, ensuring sustainable growth.

Keywords: Ethno-tourism, Indigenous Community, Indigenous Idiosyncrasy, Economic Prosperity

1. Introduction

Costa Rica is a small country in Central America. It has an area of 51.100 km2 and a population of around 4.5 million people. It has become a well-known and increasingly visited tourist destination. The United Nations World Tourism Organization statistics identify Costa Rica as leading the Central America region with a 35% market share. The 2009 Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report ranks Costa Rica as 42nd in the world and first in the Central American region in terms of tourism competitiveness (Matarrita-Cascante, 2009).

According to the Tourism Satellite Account of the Central Bank of Costa Rica, the tourism industry directly accounts for 6.3% of the national economy and 1.9% indirectly, which adds up to 8.2% of the Gross Domestic Product (ICT, n/d). Costa Rican families, especially those in rural areas, rely heavily on tourism, as most of the industry is located in these regions.

Ethno-tourism is defined as any excursion which focuses on the works of humans rather than nature, and attempts to give the tourist an understanding of the lifestyles of local people. This has also been referred to as “indigenous tourism” (Bolnick, 2003). Ethno-tourism is a developing industry within the Costa Rican economy. It is important to recognize that growth trends in ethno-tourism are linked to trends in the tourism industry (Bolnick, 2003). Yet, the term “ethno-tourism” is unknown for many Costa Ricans.

Indigenous groups all over the world have been economically, politically, and socially marginalized and have worse health and nutrition outcomes and more food insecurity than mainstream populations. Costa Rica has been held as an exemplary country for good development. Per capita gross national income and literacy in Costa Rica are the highest out of all Latin American countries; infant and under-five mortality rates, low birth weight, moderate and severe under-five malnutrition, and maternal mortality rates are the lowest (Herforth, 2006). Costa Rica has eight indigenous groups: the Malekus, the Bribris, the Cabécares, the Borucas or Bruncas, the Térrabas, the Chorotegas, the Huetares, and the Ngäbes or Guaymíes (Llobet, 2024). Indigenous people represent 1.7 percent of the national population and have not shared in the benefits

of Costa Rica's development. They have higher infant, child, and general mortality rates and higher rates of malnutrition and infectious disease than the general population. Indigenous territories constitute much of the 3 percent of the country that lacks potable water, and about 40 percent of the indigenous population has access to sewage disposal, compared with 92 percent of the general population. Contributing to these problems are the geographic isolation and poor land of many indigenous reservations, lack of infrastructure, spread-out villages, and pollution from banana plantations that are close to some reserves [2 & 6]. Indigenous communities in the nation also struggle because their lands are often stolen by neighboring landowners.

In Costa Rica, indigenous communities have opened their doors to the world through ethno-tourism. According to diverse indigenous leaders, tourism is the way for them to improve their economic conditions.

2. Main Objective

The main objective of this research is to discover whether that claim is accurate and, if so, how ethno-tourism in the Costa Rican indigenous territories can grow without harming the indigenous idiosyncrasy.

3. Methods

This study will initially review cases of indigenous communities in Latin America that have embraced tourism, focusing on the industry's impacts on them. It will evaluate the effects of tourism on the Shuar community in Ecuador and the Mapuche indigenous group in South-Central Chile [7 & 8].

Following this, a six-week fieldwork period will be conducted across various indigenous reserves in Costa Rica. This will allow for direct observation of the effects of tourism on these populations. Interviews will be conducted with indigenous Costa Ricans to assess their perspectives on tourism and its effects on their daily lives.

Finally, the information gathered will be analyzed and a conclusion will be drawn.

4. Results and Discussion

In Ecuador, the Shuar Community has been hosting tourists for several years. They take visitors to traditional ceremonies and teach them about the medicinal plants they use, such as ayahuasca and tobacco (Salibová, 2020). Tourists visit this community hoping to reconnect with nature and learn about the indigenous cosmovision.

Tourism has had a highly meaningful impact on the Shuar Community, both economically and socially. Ethno-tourism has led to significant infrastructure improvements within the Shuar Community. Shuars have used money obtained from tourism to build pathways, cultivate the river shore, and upgrade their homes. Tourism has allowed this community to obtain Wi-Fi and other modern amenities while maintaining their customs and ideology. Culturally, tourism has allowed for a cultural exchange between Shuars and visitors that has sparked an exchange of ideas (Salibová, 2020).

In South-Central Chile, the Mapuche indigenous group faces problems regarding land ownership and economic marginalization. As indigenous Costa Ricans, the Mapuche have historically been dispossessed of their ancestral lands due to state policies and the expansion of large estates owned by powerful landowners. This dispossession has led to significant loss of territory, affecting their traditional way of life and cultural practices (Rivera, 2012). Indigenous Costa Ricans face similar problems, as some powerful landowners invade their lands.

The Mapuche have been open to tourism for numerous years. It has created alternative economic opportunities for them. By developing ethno-tourism initiatives, the Mapuche can generate income from visitors interested in their culture, traditions, and natural environment (Rivera, 2012).

Tourism has served as a tool for the Mapuche to spread awareness about their land situation, as it has given them a platform to educate foreigners on their struggles. Some visitors who learn about the Mapuche's difficulties and their aspirations may even become advocates for their rights. This increased visibility can put pressure on authorities and landowners to address the Mapuche's situation.

Tourism has also allowed Mapuche to share their traditional knowledge of environmental conservation with visitors. This helps conserve their natural resources and can mitigate some of the environmental degradation caused by the neighboring landowners' activities.

After analyzing how tourism has impacted other indigenous groups in Latin America, fieldwork was conducted in indigenous territories in Costa Rica. The Maleku, Bribri, Cabécar, Boruca, Térraba, Ngäbe, Huetar, and Chorotega communities were visited. This experience allowed for the direct observation of the effects of ethno-tourism on the Costa Rican indigenous populations.

The fieldwork revealed that ethno-tourism is more developed in some communities than in others. For example, the Maleku, the Bribri, the Térraba, and the Boruca are exploiting ethno-tourism. There are Airbnbs, restaurants, and even museums in these areas. On the other hand, the Ngäbe have not exploited tourism as much, but are currently organizing themselves to do so.

There is a clear correlation between tourism and living conditions. In territories where tourism is well-developed, residents have better access to resources such as potable running water and electricity than those in areas with limited tourism.

During the fieldwork, Dagoberto, a Maleku leader, was interviewed. The interview was held in Spanish and was then translated into English. Dagoberto was asked about his thoughts on ethno-tourism. He stated:

> "Some white people believe that Maleku hate tourism because we're lazy, but that is not true, we love it. We are good people, and we want to work.
>
> They have marginalized and excluded us for centuries, but tourism gives us a platform to get the recognition we deserve. It allows visitors to learn from us and see for themselves that we are not salvages and that we have a lot to offer the world." (Dagoberto, personal communication, March 24th, 2024).

Conversations with members of various indigenous groups revealed a consensus that tourism has positively impacted their communities economically. However, some admitted that large tourist agencies have exploited them. These agencies offer to coordinate tours but then underpay the indigenous guides, keeping a significant portion of the revenue.

The individuals explained that their limited financial and technological knowledge makes them vulnerable to exploitation. Since they do not know how much to charge visitors for their tours or have a platform to advertise their tourist activities, they accept the unfair terms the large agencies offer them.

5. Conclusions

Upon analyzing the impact of ethno-tourism on indigenous populations in Ecuador and Chile, it was concluded that tourism benefits these communities economically and socially. Therefore, it is advised for the Chilean and Ecuadorian governments to invest in promoting tourism in their countries' indigenous territories and approve laws to improve the legal protection of indigenous lands against invasive non-indigenous landowners.

It is recommended that indigenous communities in Latin America consider embracing ethno-tourism, as it is expected to bring them significant economic benefits.

Following the examination of the fieldwork results, it was confirmed that the indigenous leaders' claim that tourism can improve their economic condition is true. A correlation was found between the development of ethno-tourism and the economic conditions in indigenous territories: the more developed the tourism sector, the better the economic situation of the community.

A significant issue encountered is that large tourist agencies are taking advantage of indigenous Costa Ricans and exploiting them due to their lack of financial and technological knowledge. A proposed solution

is for the Costa Rican National Learning Institute (INA) to offer financial literacy and technology courses in indigenous territories. This small investment is projected to have significant returns by mitigating poverty and improving educational levels in these communities.

Empowering indigenous people to take control of planning their tourism activities will allow the industry to grow without harming the indigenous idiosyncrasy.

Finally, this research suggests the creation of a non-profit organization that works directly with indigenous communities to help them promote their tourism digitally, enabling them to compete against large tourist agencies.

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This research led me to create the Roots Costa Rica Non-profit Organization, whose goal is to use digital advertising tools to promote ethno-tourism in the Costa Rican indigenous territories, while fighting social injustices and racism against indigenous Costa Ricans. Roots Costa Rica has helped numerous tourists, both national and international, plan their visit to an indigenous reserve. I invite you to visit the organization's website: https://www.rootscostarica.online/.

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