

The Effects of Eco-Tourism on Dominica

Jenn Chandler, Kelly Crook, Sarah Israel, Eric McAfee

We should make our island so environmentally sound that ecologically-minded people will be aware of it and they will come. You don't even have to market it as a tourist destination.

-Henry Shillingford

Introduction:

Eco-tourism is tourism based on the appreciation and preservation of the natural habitat of a location. Eco-tourism often focuses on conservation of the environment and the education of visitors. Dominica is a tropical island in the Lesser Antilles of the Caribbean Sea. It is said that if Columbus were alive today, Dominica would be the only island he would recognize. Dominica has a rugged topography, few sandy beaches and pristine rainforests- offering the conservation-minded adventurer a unique experience. Tourism on Dominica is a relatively new industry, currently contributing four percent to the gross domestic product. Dominicans realize the special nature of their island and wish to market its natural beauty to those who are willing to appreciate it. It is the goal of our project to determine the effects of eco-tourism on Dominica by interviewing a variety of knowledgeable Dominicans.

Materials and Methods:

In order to obtain a well-rounded perspective on eco-tourism and its effects on Dominica, we interviewed four people: a tour guide, the President of the Dominican Conservation Association, a travel agent, and a representative of the Division of Tourism for the National Development Corporation. While interviewing we video-recorded, audio-recorded and took notes. This is a general question list that was used at each interview:

1. What is your goal for bringing tourism to Dominica? And what are your limitations?
2. How much of the economy does tourism constitute?
3. How many people visit the national parks? Where are they from? Tourists, or locals?
4. What was the motivation to create national parks?
5. Do you foresee Dominica becoming like other Caribbean tourist destinations?
6. What sorts of conservation efforts does the government institute?
7. What is the main environmental threat to Dominica?
8. Why do people come to Dominica?
9. Does tourism affect the Dominican culture?
10. Has tourism caused inflation?
11. Has tourism had an overall positive or negative effect on Dominica?

Disclaimer: these questions represent a general outline for each interview. This format was not strictly followed, and in some instances, hardly so.

Results:

Henry Shillingford: President of the Dominican Conservation Association

The DCA is a non-governmental organization dedicated to the preservation of Dominica and is actively involved with related policy, education and research. Henry Shillingford represented their perspective and had an overall "if you build it they will come" approach. He is in favor of making Roseau more enticing to cruise ship tourists (who tend to be less eco-minded) in order to prevent these sorts of people from inadvertently destroying the natural habitats of Dominica. He suggests doing this by building a landscaped corridor from Old Roseau to the botanical gardens. He also wants to build a cafe and visitor center at the botanical gardens, and create an aviary for the parrots instead of having them in cages. In this way, the natural beauties of Dominica are left unscarred for the people who appreciate them.

Shillingford realizes that cruise ships are inevitable. In order to benefit more from them, he wants to charge them more to dock and to even charge them to anchor off-shore in view of Dominica because they are gaining by enjoying the island from afar.

Henry Shillingford feels that the biggest threat to the environment is the government and their need for money. Past projects such as the hydro-plant at Trafalgar Falls manifest the government's lack of environmental foresight. Instead of building multiple local plants that would be more efficient and less environmentally damaging, they built one huge plant, that consequently altered Trafalgar Falls. He feels that planning and proper management of resources are key to the prevention of these sorts of tragedies. He also believes that Dominica needs to attract the right sorts of people to the island and plan a tourism carrying capacity accordingly. Ten insensitive tourists are more damaging than 100 eco-tourists, and because the eco-tourists appreciate the treasures of Dominica, these are the ones they should allow on the island.

Shillingford has noticed that tourism has caused a shift in Dominican culture. Many young people have chosen to work in the tourism industry as guides or as market-sellers, instead of continuing the traditional agricultural practices of their parents.

He also wants to cease promoting Dominica as the "Nature Island", but instead as the "Ecological Nation". This, in his opinion, will draw the true eco-tourist, and represent what the island stands for in a more accurate way.

Clem James: Tour Guide for Ken's Hinterland Adventures

Clem James has worked in the Dominican eco-tourism industry for thirteen years. Clem feels that eco-tourism has had an overall positive effect on Dominica thus far. However, he feels that there is a certain point when tourism will harm the environment and the country. Clem feels that Dominica has no cultural identity, as it was lost to television, so tourism does not really have an affect on Dominican culture. Clem said that they government's need for the immediate dollar is the biggest threat for the environment: instead of looking ahead to future impacts, they focus only on instant gratification. Clem believes that although the government is a lost cause, the local people of Dominica can be made to see the long-term impacts of their actions.

Clem has noticed an increase in trash with the increase of cruise ships, as well as increases in crime and drugs, also due to western influence. He has also observed an increase in prices of items such as mangos and other things that can be bought in the market. Tourists are willing to pay higher prices, and sellers now expect locals to pay higher prices as well.

Europeans are the most environmentally friendly tourists in Clem's opinion, while Americans are the most destructive. The rugged nature of the island has kept out large developers in the past and Clem anticipates that large scale hotels and resorts will not succeed on Dominica

because of this. Clem feels that as long as the integrity of the environment is protected, eco-tourism will continue to have positive impacts, but he is afraid that those who should be watching out for the environment may be neglecting it.

Ms. Marvlyn Alexander: Sales and Marketing Officer of the Division of Tourism

Ms. Alexander, an employee of the National Development Corporation, is a proponent of eco-tourism. The NDC is the governmental agency that represents and promotes Dominica by marketing and developing tourism. The government prefers tourism to be locally owned and operated so that the profits benefit Dominicans. In order to facilitate the growth of the tourism industry, the government has integrated tourism into educational programs at schools, made efforts to sensitize and inform citizens and started certification classes for taxi drivers and tour guides.

The government wants to develop the tourism industry in a way that is eco-tourist friendly. They want small cabins as opposed to large hotels. Their reasons for protecting the environment seem to be to draw tourists. Miss Alexander feels that the biggest threat to the environment is insensitive tourists who mark their names on trees and other destructive acts. In order to alleviate the negative impacts of tourism, the NDC attempts to educate both Dominicans as well as tourists. Signs displaying messages such as "take only pictures, leave only footprints" are placed in areas of popular destinations.

The NDC is enthusiastic about the benefits that eco-tourism can bring Dominica. The government has plans to develop a Long Goal Tourism Institute in order to anticipate and plan for future development. Dominica is the last island to develop because of the rugged topography, so they have the benefit of watching other islands in the Caribbean develop beforehand. She expressed the government's goal to increase tourism to 30-40% of the GDP, in order to diversify the economy and prevent Dominica from being dependent on any one source of income.

Ecotourism Representatives of Whitchurch Travel Services

Whitchurch is a private business interested in bringing more tourists to Dominica. The travel agents are very enthusiastic about eco-tourism and its benefits. They are "all for it." They said that most tourists come from other Caribbean islands. They also said that the most environmentally-minded tourists are from France, while the least environmentally-minded tourists are Americans. The travel agents feel that cruise ships are eco-oriented, and help with such efforts as beach clean-ups. They feel that the tourists least likely to appreciate the environment are those that stay for the day. They suggest that these people not be informed of the natural wonders of Dominica's rugged interior, and instead distract them with shopping opportunities that will satisfy their interests. Both representatives felt strongly that eco-tourism has positively influenced their culture. They feel more aware and proud of their heritage and want to show it off and share it with visitors. Holidays such as "Creole Day" and "Straw Hat Day" are becoming more numerous as eco-tourism becomes more prevalent. The travel agents did not believe that Dominica has the capacity to ever become a large scale tourist attraction because of the island's inherent topography.

The travel agents have noticed a few negative changes as a result of tourism: prices in the market have increased and some locals try to take advantage of tourists. However, they believe that the benefits of eco-tourism far outweigh the costs at this time. They commented that eco-tourism is such a young industry that they cannot anticipate the long-term effects that it will have on Dominica, but as for the present, they think it is beneficial.

Discussion:

Environment:

Everyone interviewed is concerned with protecting the environment; however, they have different motives for doing so. Some want to protect it for the intrinsic value that it has, others for utilitarian purposes that can benefit them financially. We feel that the government is less concerned with the natural health of the island, and is more concerned with developing the country and increasing the GDP. The setting aside of National Parks seems to be more of a money making opportunity rather than a gesture of their intentions for preservation. We feel that the government does have good intentions towards conservation, but at the same time they are distracted by tourism dollars. Because eco-tourism is such a young industry, it is expected that the delicate balance between profit and preservation will not be reached for some time.

It is our opinion that the development of Dominica for eco-tourism has often drawn away from the very essence of eco-tourism. Concrete paths to Emerald Pool, the tram to Boiling Lake, and the large turbines in front of Trafalgar Falls are a few examples of how the natural beauty of the environment has been sacrificed in the name of financial gain. This is a blatant contradiction of interests. True eco-tourists do not want to see concrete in pristine rainforests, and they want to take the hike rather than ride leisurely to the top of Boiling Lake. It is evident in our opinions that instances such as these have actually taken away from the experience of Dominica, rather than enhance it, and the only thing that it has promoted is someone's pocketbook.

Economy:

Eco-tourism currently comprises four percent of the Dominican economy. There are approximately 900 hotel rooms on the island, and rarely are they all full. The majority of eco-tourism profits are generated from those who stay over-night on the island. Cruise-ships bring 85% of the tourists to the island, but only 3% of eco-tourism dollars. It is not difficult to see that Dominica either needs to take more advantage of cruise-ship money making opportunities, or focus more on over-night guests. We feel that Dominica should charge cruise ships money to anchor in their adjacent waters and charge tourists a higher fee to spend the day on the island. In this instance, we agree with Henry Shillingford and the travel agents, that cruise ship tourists should be distracted by shopping and other leisurely activities in Roseau that will prevent them from causing unnecessary harm to the environment. We also feel that Dominica should focus more on their longer staying guests. These travelers tend to come to Dominica because they are aware of its rare beauty and appreciate conservation efforts. Besides their more ecologically sensitive disposition, these guests are also the ones that have the potential to contribute more to the economy, as their money stays on the island.

Culture:

The Dominican culture has been altered most by the diversification of the job market. Locals are attracted to jobs in the tourism market, such as tour guides, vendors, and taxi drivers. This increase in employment opportunities brings more freedom of choice in lifestyles for Dominicans.

The increase in eco-tourism has brought cultural awareness and national pride to Dominicans. Dominicans realize what their island has to offer and want to promote and share it with others.

A negative cultural impact of eco-tourism is the increase of quick, disposable income brought by tourist dollars. This unfortunately has played a part in the increase in crime and the

prevalence of drugs on the island. However, from the interviews we conducted, we feel that these activities are more brought upon by television and other media influences than tourism.

One of the main cultural events on the island is Carnival. This event is held annually and is a celebration of cultural music, dance and food. This is often the one time out of the year that all hotel rooms are booked, and is a time when Dominica can share its cultural wealth with many visitors.

Conclusion:

After careful evaluation of the many perspectives we have collected, we have come to our own conclusion of the effects of eco-tourism on Dominica. We feel that eco-tourism has an overall positive influence, but limitations must be set; planning and evaluation must play a vital role in the decision making concerning the expansion of eco-tourism. We suggest that local developers be favored over foreign investors, and should be careful not to be focused only on monetary profit. We feel that the greatest threat to the environment and economy are the cruise ship tourists. These visitors often do not appreciate Dominica's natural wonders and are likely to take them for granted. We also feel that the cruise ship industry presents an economic illusion, as many tourists come, but few dollars stay. It is our hope that the eco-tourism industry of Dominica maintains its integrity and honest vision as we have observed. In order to be successful and have a meaningful and lasting eco-tourism program, Dominica must find the right balance between economic profit and environmental preservation. We realize that this is hardly a simple feat, but we are confident that with the right motivation and foresight, Dominica can prevail as the only true eco-tourism island in the Caribbean.