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Selling timber or nature? Reconciling forestry and tourism in Mexico

This research is based on a comparative case study of two communities in southern Mexico: Santa Catarina Ixtepeji and Santa Maria Yavesia in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca. The purpose of this article is to reconcile forest practices with tourism management on an inclusive, sustainable basis. Although both communities studied have won kudos for their sustainable management efforts, they differ in their respective approaches taken. While forestry and tourism can co-exist, this combined option may not always work. It is recommended that community preferences and progressive land tenure arrangements be carefully considered when planning for forestry, tourism, or both.

Keywords: community, resource conflict, forestry, environment, sustainable, tourism

This article is based on the author's Ph.D. dissertation "Ecological Democracy and Forest-dependent Communities in Oaxaca, Mexico" (expected 2004, University of Alberta, Canada). For their financial support, sincere appreciation is extended to the International Development Research Centre and the Organization of American States. Please direct all inquiries to Ross E. Mitchell, Ph.D. Candidate, Department of Rural Economy, Room 515 General Services Building, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, CANADA T6G 2H1; ph. (780) 492-4225, fax (780) 492-0268, e-mail: ross.mitchell@ualberta.ca.

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Forestry and tourism management often compete for the same land resource. Lines become blurred when we speak of sustainability with both sectors claiming to be capable of sound, sustainable practices. While it seems plausible that innovative multiple use strategies can include both timber and recreation values, potential for real conflict exists.

Many environmentally focused tourists and tourism operators would prefer not to see evidence of any logging, especially where clearcutting is the principal harvesting method. Foresters, on the other hand, generally have few concerns in providing access for tourism; that is, as long as it does not drastically reduce productive land areas or timber volume. Often political support or resources for proper forest care may be inadequate. Resource development options may range from full protection for biodiversity protection to solely wood fiber production. Against these challenges, is it possible to reconcile forestry and tourism? This question forms the main purpose of this article.

Study sites in Oaxaca

Santa Catarina Ixtepeji (1880 meters and a population of 2,532, Census 2000), about 1.5 hours north of Oaxaca City, was one of two municipalities selected. The other was Santa Maria Yavesia (2000 meters and a population of 460, Census 2000), about four hours by bus north of Oaxaca City. Both belong to the Sierra Juárez mountain chain (also called Sierra Norte).

Prior to the 1980s, much of Ixtepeji's forests were selectively logged by a parastatal company under the mistaken notion that remaining pine trees (smaller and often stunted) would adequately regenerate once the high quality large trees were removed. When Ixtepeji regained control of its forest resources in 1983, they began testing silviculture methods favoring natural regeneration of pine and planting native pine species. But forest goods incorporate both timber and non-timber products. The latter group includes collecting wild mushrooms, bottling mineral spring water, and tapping for pine resin. These activities are under the authorization and supervision of the federal Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT). Ixtepeji's forests were certified in 2001 by SmartWood/Rainforest Alliance on behalf of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), an international non-governmental organization that recognizes sound forest management from a balanced social, environmental, and economic perspective.

However, it is community ecotourism that has attracted much attention – even internationally. Ixtepeji's ecotourism preserve, although relatively small at 885 hectares, attracts an average of 200 tourists monthly. Net revenues are shared by the community, and the local guides and managers are elected every three years. Several biodiversity studies carried out in recent years point to a healthy forest.

Unlike Ixtepeji where timber benefits are shared with tourism revenues, Yavesia has persistently refused to log its forests. Most residents convey their understanding of how their water, soils, and forests are inextricably linked, and must be preserved forever. As one local resident explains, "There is an ecological tranquility here that you can't find in many parts of the country. Mexico is destroying its forest resources, but here in Yavesia we have always conserved our forests ever since our ancestors left us this natural heritage."

Yavesia shares the same 29,430-hectare land base as part of Pueblos Mancomunados, a cluster that includes two other municipalities, Amatlán and Lachatao, and five smaller towns. But Yavesia has never been comfortable with this shared land arrangement. Most residents justify their continued struggle to achieve autonomy and about one-third of the land base as necessary to protect their forests. They say they have no intention to engage in commercial logging but wish to focus instead on ecotourism and watershed protection. Sustainable forms of tourism in Yavesia include hiking, mountain biking, bird watching, and cultural home stays. Still, firewood collection, charcoal production, and small-scale logging by local carpenters all impact local forests, even in relatively isolated Yavesia.

Forest governance in Ixtepeji and Yavesia seems to be pointed in the right direction. Both communities are working toward more inclusive and sustainable ecological management. Both share traditions of strong cooperative relationships, collective land ownership and management, and cultural patterns that reinforce long-held decision-making mechanisms. Communities such as Ixtepeji and Yavesia also have a strong forest conservation ethic; many are acutely aware that the forest is for all to use, including visitors and future generations. Besides the ecological benefits, low-intensity logging (for Ixtepeji only) and non-timber forest products provide opportunities for many community residents to get involved and earn extra income. Both communities have earned regional, national, and international awards in the past two years. In November 2002, both communities were publicly awarded the prestigious World Wildlife Fund's (WWF) "Gift to the Earth" for good care of their forests. However, deeply held concerns for the forests are being played out differently. Whereas Ixtepeji has both tourism and forestry, Yavesia is pinning its legal and political hopes on eventual land title. For them, ecotourism is not compatible with logging, since they have been witness to past exploitative practices.

Implications

In the final analysis, resource specialists, planners, and politicians would do well to listen more to local people. Progressive land tenure arrangements can also be studied and adapted, if possible, to the benefit of local people, tourists, and forests. Mountain communities are generally well placed to determine what is ultimately best for them and their environment. This includes possibilities for both tourism and forestry, although there may be cases of incompatibility. In such cases, local wishes should be respected as long as this does not place negative pressures on forest ecosystems. As messy as these situations can be, feasibility studies should address local concerns for land tenure, traditional beliefs, and current preferences. Whether tourism, forestry, or both, are to be carried out, practitioners need to listen carefully to nearby communities that will be most affected by these projects.