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Invited

ECOTOURISM IN MEXICO:
NATIONAL AND REGIONAL POLICY CONTEXTS

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ECOTOURISM IN MEXICO: NATIONAL AND REGIONAL POLICY CONTEXTS

Robert G. Healy

Tourism has long been a major source of national, regional and local economic activity in Mexico. Today, tourism accounts for 3.5 percent of Mexico's gross domestic product and is claimed to directly or indirectly support one out of 10 jobs (Anpudia, 1997). The Secretary of Tourism has asserted that in the first five years of the 1990s, "one out of every five U.S. dollars invested in Mexico was directed to the tourism sector." (Hernandez 1995). Although these figures may be somewhat overstated, it is clear that tourism is an important and growing activity in Mexico, and one that contributes additional diversification to both the domestic and the export economy.

Mexico's tourism policy, reflected in public infrastructure, advertising, and various subsidies to private investment, has passed through two distinct stages over the years between the Mexican Revolution (1910-29) and the present. During the period 1929-1974, Mexico emphasized its historical and cultural attributes, which are scattered across the country, though with some concentration in the central zone.¹ Coastal tourism was overwhelming concentrated in Acapulco, which boomed following construction of a road to Mexico City in 1955 and Puerto Vallarta, which gained world-wide attention after the 1962 filming of Night of the Iguana. In the second stage, between 1974 and 1992, Mexico's tourism policy was heavily influenced by the government's promotion of a handful of "megaprojects." These were entirely new destination beach resorts located on the Caribbean and Pacific coasts (see Clancy, 1995). FONATUR, a government tourism planning and financing agency, invested enormous sums of money in Ixtapa, Loreto, Cabo San Lucas, Bahias de Huatulco and, above all, the Caribbean resort of Cancun. These projects alone now account for 40 percent of Mexico's foreign tourism revenue (FONATUR 1994).

Very recently, the country has again been turning to a more geographically diverse tourism policy and one that promotes attractions beyond the country's beaches. Mexico is also reacting to a new source of demand on the part of tourists--the desire to visit areas with natural features, including wildlife, exotic

¹ Jimenez (1993) identifies three subperiods: construction of basic road and airline infrastructure (1929-45), emphasis on tourism as a source of economic growth and national integration (1945-58) and a period of integration into international markets, when tourism was also seen as a projection of national pride and national identity (1959-69), particularly reflected in the 1968 Olympic Games, in Mexico City.

scenery, water attractions, and various forms of outdoor recreation. In addition to this new tourist motivation, Mexico is also finding that tourism is looked to, particularly by a diverse group of non-governmental organizations, as a means of promoting nature preservation and local economic development. This combination of motives--nature as destination, and protection and local development as results--has been termed "ecotourism" (See below and Lindberg and Enriquez 1995).

This paper traces the development of ecotourism in Mexico, considering its changing role in national policy and the relations being forged between tourism and natural area policy, and to local and regional development. The paper will (1) document recent developments in Mexican tourism industry and tourism policy; (2) explore impact that search for "ecotourism" has had on the tourism industry and government policy and the extent that it has developed in Mexico to date; (3) delineate some fundamental issues that are raised by an emphasis on ecotourism, with illustrations drawn from specific locales.

II. Status of the Tourism Industry and Tourism Policy

In contrast to widespread recession in Mexico's economy since the December 1994 peso crisis, the country's tourism sector has been booming. In 1995, Mexico recorded 19.9 million international "arrivals" (persons staying for more than 24 hours), an increase of 16.1 percent over 1994 (World Tourism Organization 1997). There were an additional 66 million short stay visitors, mostly visitors to border towns. Revenue from international tourists was \$6.1 billion, down nearly four percent because of the sharp peso devaluation, but still enough to make tourism Mexico's third largest export sector. Moreover, because the weak peso encouraged foreign tourists, but made it more expensive for Mexicans to travel abroad, the net revenue from inbound and outbound tourism combined was an impressive \$3 billion.

Mexican tourism authorities estimate that revenues in 1996 were up 19 percent over 1995 and expect a further 10-15 percent increase in 1997 (El Economista 10-30-96). The Caribbean coast of Quintana Roo continues to be the country's stellar international attraction. In the peak months of January and February 1996, Cancun recorded a 92 percent hotel occupancy rate. This was despite the opening of new hotel capacity (Esquiroz Arellano 1996) Moreover new tourist accommodations continue to open elsewhere along the Caribbean coast, as well as at Huatulco and various locations in Baja California.

Since about 1990, Mexico has made some tentative moves toward diversifying its portfolio of tourism offerings. Tourism Secretary

Silvia Hernandez told a major tourism industry gathering in Acapulco that "...today I want to invite you to see our product not only as sun and sand, but also to include the people, food, music and the environment." The rationale for this was a combination of Mexico's diverse resources and a perceived market opportunity: "In the course of this year, we have been thinking a lot about the fact that we have not been able to achieve [tourism sales] in the colonial cities and our enormous and beautiful ecological reserves, when all the market studies demonstrate that passive tourism has been substituted for by another kind, eager to know, experiment with and learn and which seeks exactly what Mexico possesses." (Hernandez 1995) Hernandez noted that Mexico's tourism competitors in the region [presumably she referred to the Caribbean countries] could offer little more than sun, beaches, and good hotels.

A few days later, President Zedillo told the National Council of Tourism Enterprises that "In accord with the purpose of having sustainable development [the National Development Plan] points out the importance of reassessing the value of our natural, ecological and cultural resources as fundamental inputs to greater development of tourism." (Zedillo 1995) The National Development Plan also offers a very explicit and fundamentally economic rationale for seeking more tourism. It is seen as the fastest, surest and cheapest way to promote regional development and to create employment, including jobs for young people of both genders.

Signs that Mexico is redirecting and diversifying its tourism policy can be seen in several places. Since 1990, government-sponsored advertising has begun to shift focus from beach attractions to broader cultural and historical themes. Korzeniewicz and Pitts (1995) refer to four television spots aired in 1994-95. Two ("Rainforest" and "Underwater") highlighted environmental themes; the others emphasized culture, including one that featured the Day of the Dead. New promotional material has appeared on the historical and cultural attractions of dozens of "colonial cities". One pamphlet asserts that "where once conquest created a city, the city now gently conquers its visitors" (SECTUR 1996). SECTUR's elaborate Internet website contains a large amount of information on cultural and archeological attractions, and has a section devoted to ecotourism. Mexico has participated with several Central American countries in the Mundo Maya project, an attempt to link archeological sites through joint promotion and improved transportation. There has been a proliferation of planning and promotional activity by state and even local tourism agencies, many of them in inland regions of the country.

FONATUR, financial and entrepreneurial engine of the coastal megaprojects, has also made claims that it is diversifying its emphasis. A brochure promoting investment opportunities (FONATUR

c1993) mentions not only the five existing megaprojects, but also several "integrated projects" (at least 12 of these are in various planning stages) that include developments in colonial cities and a project in Colima where 80 percent of the property will be "a reserve for a biosphere". A description of another project, on the Jalisco coast, notes that "FONATUR never stops encouraging new ways to discover the unknown beauties of Mexico...with this project [it] wishes to attract international tourism to the hidden spots that only this country can offer and give [tourists] the opportunity to fully enjoy the natural environment." (Charro 1994)

However, the agency is still busily adding hotel rooms at Huatulco and a Phase III offering of development parcels at Cancun has been made. Moreover, FONATUR's director-general was reported by a golf media outlet to have said that the agency "would rather finance a seaside golf course project in Baja California than a mega-project like Cancun" (www.worldgolf.com/travel/mexico). It may be that golf, rather than Mexico's "unknown beauties", will become the new creative focus of FONATUR's future projects. Two golf projects are being built at Los Cabos on the Baja coast, and other coastal sites for golf courses are being considered at Guaymas, Huatulco and on an 81 mile stretch of coastline in Quintana Roo, south of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve (www.worldgolf.com/travel/mexico) Indeed, golf is mentioned by FONATUR as a feature at most of the "integrated projects".

III. The Search for "Ecotourism"

Ecotourism is a term with multiple definitions, some of which emphasize the visitor's motivation (to experience or study nature) and some of which emphasize the impacts (inevitably positive) that such tourism has on nature and on society. A simple and convenient definition is that of the Ecotourism Society--Ecotourism is "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and sustains the well-being of local people."

"Ecoturismo" is a word heard frequently in Mexico today, in discussions of tourism policy, in advertising material, and above all, in proposals by non-governmental organizations that specialize in nature protection, or community development, or both. For some tourism entrepreneurs it is a potent marketing tool, a way of appealing to a new foreign market. For tourism planners, it is a way of further developing and differentiating Mexico's tourism product. The success of Costa Rica in developing ecotourism is often cited, along with the observation that Mexico has much more diverse natural attractions, as well as cultural, recreational and infrastructural assets far superior to those of Central America's ecotourism hotspot. For environmentalists, ecotourism is looked to

as a way of generating income for parks and protected areas, which in Mexico are on small or nonexistent operating budgets. It might also compensate local people for the loss they experience when protected area regulations shut them off from access to extractive uses of natural resources. For rural development organizations, ecotourism is seen as one of the only new sources of income generation and local jobs, a goal made particularly urgent by reduction of subsidies to small agricultural producers and the consequent fear that millions of ejidatarios will find it increasingly difficult to compete (See Barkin 1995).

Specific examples of ecotourism in Mexico can be described most concisely in terms of activities and the places where tourists most often engage in them:

--whale watching. This is most commonly found at several locations in Baja California, both along the Pacific Coast (Bahia Magdalena, Laguna San Ignacio) and in the Sea of Cortez (Isla Danzante). Whale watching trips also depart from Guaymas and San Blas, farther down the Pacific coast.

--bird watching. This activity is particularly popular in the Celestun Biosphere Reserve (flamingoes), Rio Lagartos, and Isla Contoy on the Yucatan peninsula, at El Triunfo Biosphere Reserve in Chiapas, and at locations along the border where U.S. birders can see neotropical birds at the northern edge of their ranges. Bird expeditions are also available in the Sierra Gorda of Queretaro and in Guanajuato.

--turtle beaches. A number of areas set aside for the protection of sea turtle nests in Jalisco, Nayarit, Oaxaca (e.g. Mazunte) and Quintana Roo (e.g. Xcacel) may be visited by tourists.

--river trips. Among the most popular locations for scenic nature trips and (seasonally, in some places) whitewater adventure trips are the Usumacinta, which separates Mexico and Guatemala, the Jamapa River and its tributaries in Veracruz, and the river and lagoon systems inland of San Blas, Nayarit.

--hiking and climbing. The best known destination for hikers is Izta-Popo National Park, just east of Mexico City. However hiking is also popular in Baja California and at the Barrancas del Cobre, and many of Mexico's high volcanic peaks are popular with climbers.

IV. Issues in Creating Sustainable Ecotourism

Changing policy emphasis from mass tourism to ecotourism, and from megaprojects to projects oriented to nature protection and the

generation of community benefits is not easy. It requires political will, expertise, and a willingness on the part of tourism policymakers to go well outside the range of their traditional concerns. As Mexico explores ecotourism, a number of difficult issues will arise.

Ecotourism as Mass Tourism and Marketing Ploy

Because nature tourism, ecotourism and ecodevelopment have a definite appeal to today's tourists, the terms are frequently used as marketing strategies, irrespective of the actual content of the tourism. Perhaps most egregious example of how inappropriate mass tourism can be insinuated into a natural area was a proposal for privatization and redevelopment of the Grutas de Cacahuamilpa (State of Guerrero), where the Mexican government seriously entertained a private-sector proposal to convert the cavern, now a national park, into the "Grutas del Tiempo," featuring mechanical dinosaurs. The project was abandoned when the project sponsor, a Canadian, was found to have been convicted of fraud in his own country (Instituto Nacional de Ecologia, 1995)

In Quintana Roo, about an hour's drive south of Cancun, is an elaborate new development called Xcaret. Admission is \$30 U.S. and the area has many of the elements of a recreational theme park. In addition to snorkeling and nature hikes, activities include a "swim with the dolphins" attraction, a horse show, and musical performances. Although Xcaret features beautifully landscaped natural areas, some of its attractions--such as a snorkeling trail through "Maya caves"--were created with a great deal of earthmoving and even dynamiting. Elsewhere along the increasingly built-up coast between Cancun and Tulum, the 880 acre Playcar Resort at Playa del Carmen advertises itself as "a unique and paradisiacal eco-development." Its attractions include 10 five-star hotels and a golf course described as "the only one in the world adorned with Maya ruins." The principal ecological attraction appears to be the Xaman-Ha aviary, with 65 species of tropical birds--located on "3.7 acres of preserved forest."

Despite the danger that mass tourism can create a false and even destructive "ecotourism" a strong argument can be made for locating activities that more closely meet ecotourism criteria within the market area of mass tourism destinations. The rationale here is that visitors drawn to Mexico primarily by sun and sand attractions can receive environmental education through a day trip to a genuine natural area--and that revenue from this tourism can support the area's protection. More remote reserves may be "protected" from tourism, but have less opportunity to gain funds either for maintaining the reserve itself or providing income for local people. As Tourism Secretary Hernandez put it "Cancun is not

only the Caribbean at its most beautiful, but also the doorway to the majestic Mundo Maya..." (Hernandez 1995).

According to Barbara MacKinnon de Montes, president of Amigos de Sian Ka'an, "The entry port of Cancun works beautifully to facilitate massive tourism. This is a tremendous infrastructure advantage for small ecotourism projects. The only problem is harmonizing the tourist image of Cancun with the idea of nature-based tourism." (Mader, 1995) Mass tourism destinations such as Cancun, Huatulco, Puerto Vallarta, and Cuernavaca could be ideal jumping off points for day or overnight trips to nearby protected areas. This type of activity has been termed "add-on ecotourism". It could educate the mass tourist, allow careful control of tourist behavior (by allowing only guided trips), and above all generate funds for the protected area and its adjoining population. Add-on ecotourism could also help ensure the economic survival of small nature tourism firms, which often have difficulty putting together enough visitors for week-long trips.

Security Concerns

A potential threat to the development of Mexico's ecotourism industry is the recent increase in violent crime. It is most apparent in urban areas--the U.S. embassy has issued warnings to visitors to the Historic Center of Mexico City--but there have been many incidents in rural places as well. Tourists visiting enclave resorts, such as FONATUR's megaprojects, can be easily protected; even urban areas can be made safer, particularly by police reforms. But it may prove very difficult to provide security to hikers and campers scattered through the countryside. Moreover, several ecotourism destinations, such as Barrancas del Cobre, are rife with illegal drug plantations. Guidebooks advise tourists to visit only with an experienced local guide.

Ironically, the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas has been associated with a significant increase in tourism to the region. Government officials attribute it to the publicity that journalistic accounts have given to Chiapas and the Maya zone in general. The French Guide Gallimard contains a photo of a Mexican guerrilla (and a Guatemalan fighter) as part of the regional folklore! (Reforma 12-18-96)

Relation of Tourism to Protected Areas

The sorry condition of most of Mexico's national parks and other protected areas has been well documented (Vargas 1984, Nature Conservancy 1996, among others). Few areas have adequate funding for guards or maintenance. And there is widespread timber extraction and hunting, as well as physical encroachment for

agricultural and residential activities. Many of the problems are due to the fact that in many parks little or no land is actually owned by government. Most is in the hands of ejidos, or of private owners, who rely on extraction or occupation of the land for their livelihood. Many of the people involved in this activity are very poor. It is widely believed that ecotourism can improve this situation, by providing revenue for reserve management and by creating economic benefits for those who live nearby. In Mexico, this is so far more a hope than an actual experience.

Two ecotourism projects that have been in place for more than a decade are Sian Ka'an in coastal Quintana Roo and the Monarch Butterfly Reserve, straddling the border of Michoacan and Estado de Mexico. Both have had significant aid from domestic and foreign environmental groups--Amigos de Sian Ka'an and World Wildlife Fund in the former, WWW and Monarca, A.C. and Guardianes de la Monarca in the latter.

In Sian Ka'an (protected 1986, area 528,000 ha.), designation as a protected area and the promotion of tourism have been successful to the extent that the area has remained largely pristine. However tourism is still quite small--generally one boat trip daily to a small area on the upper part of the 1.3 million acre reserve. The population of the entire reserve is less than 5,000 persons and most make a good living from lobster fishing. Tourism has generated economic benefits for a few boat owners, but the area has not had to face much conflict between consumptive and touristic use of its resources. Moreover, the limited area visited by the tourists and the fact that access is by water have minimized impacts on the ecosystem.

At the Monarch Reserve (protected 1986, area 16,100 ha), the situation is quite different. The area, which is only 4 hours from Mexico City, has become a popular tourist destination, receiving over 50,000 domestic and foreign visitors yearly. However, as Chapela and Barkin (1995) point out, the economic benefits are enjoyed almost entirely by residents of El Rosario, only one of the 54 communities in the reserve as a whole. Many communities depend on timber cutting for their livelihood. In 1995, 14 of the ejidos in the central zone created the Alianza de Comunidades y Ejidos de la Mariposa Monarca, which sought to reduce the reserve's area from 16 to 12 thousand hectares, and to allow large-scale cutting even in the central zone of "dead and diseased trees". (Aridjis, 1996)

Tourism also occurs in a few private protected areas. Among them is El Eden, a private nature reserve in Quintana Roo. This kind of activity is relatively common in South America. Its existence in Mexico has not been well documented. Particularly worthy of study would be the private hunting preserves, mainly in Northern Mexico.

Negative Impacts of Natural and Cultural Tourism

Although nature tourists tend to be sensitive to their impact on nature, their enthusiasm to see (and particularly to get close enough to photograph) various natural phenomena can cause considerable damage. For example boats carrying tourists to see the flamingoes in the Celestun reserve disturb flocks by coming too close (Ceballos-Lascurain 1996). The same is true of boats carrying whale-watchers in the waters around Baja California--an activity that may be particularly damaging in breeding grounds. Scammons Lagoon, a protected area that is the most important calving ground for the California Grey Whale, is officially off-limits to visitors, but a recent travel guide notes that "the authorities in Guerrero Negro say that boats are not allowed on to the lagoon to watch whales, but reports indicate that pangas are still available for hire (Box 1994). In the Monarch Butterfly Reserve, tourists can literally tread on the insects as they walk through the forests. Along the Caribbean coast, the popularity of skin diving and snorkeling has caused extensive mortality to corals, and to the marine life that depends on it.²

Tourism based on cultural attractions can also be damaging, unless carefully managed. Religious ceremonies of such indigenous groups as the Tarahumara and the Huicholes could be tremendously attractive to visitors, yet their presence would be very disruptive. Even with more widespread cultural activities such as Day of the Dead, there are some places and ceremonies where tourists do little harm, others where they overwhelm and distort the activity they have come to see.³ Cultural tourism can also fail to benefit those whose culture is being displayed, as benefits flow primarily to non-indigenous persons with more capital and entrepreneurial experience (Van der Berghe 1994).

² However more conventional forms of tourism can be at least as destructive to the same resources. A new pier to accommodate cruise ships has been approved at Paradise Reef on Cozumel, Q.R. A diving group notes that "construction of the pier would double the number of cruise ships stopping at the island and could cause serious harm to Paradise Reef from sedimentation, bilge, chemical waste and other pollution." Coral Reef Alliance, Berkeley, California (www.CORAL.org).

³ This is true for domestic as well as foreign tourists. For example, in 1996, the most popular cemetery in Mexico City was closed for the second night of Day of the Dead because of huge and unruly crowds, almost entirely local.

Community Managed Tourism

There have been some attempts in Mexico, as in Belize, Senegal and Costa Rica, to create community managed ecotourism. There is long-standing experience with small resorts built on ejido land (e.g. the lake and cabin complex owned by an ejido outside Comala, Colima). But recent interest in ecotourism has given new impetus to such activity. In Oaxaca, the state Secretariat of Tourism Development (SEDETUR) has built simple tourist cabins in 9 villages, calling them "Tourist Yu'u" or "House of the Tourist". They rent for a modest 20-30 pesos per person. On Oaxaca's Pacific coast, the community of Mazunte has declared itself a "Reserva Ecologica Campesina" with 25 families organizing themselves to provide lodging in their houses for tourists. The project is an attempt to offset the economic effects on Mazunte of a 1990 government ban on turtle fishing, which for thirty years prior had been the economic basis of the community. In Ocosingo, Chiapas, the Ejido Emiliano Zapata provides hiking trails through the Lacandon rain forest, local guides, and accommodation in camps and a communal house. Late in 1996, the Ejido Salto de San Anton, just outside Cuernavaca, Morelos, was awarded a grant from the NAFTA-originated Commission for Environmental Cooperation to create facilities for visitors to deep canyons that cut through the ejido's land. They contain interesting perennial vegetation in an otherwise seasonally dry landscape, and many of the plants are of medicinal or other use. A secondary goal of the project is to provide a natural barrier to continued urban sprawl on the western edge of fast-growing Cuernavaca.

Ecotourism and the Domestic Market

Most discussions of ecotourism, both in the international literature and within Mexico, emphasize visitation by foreigners. Yet Mexican domestic tourism is between two and four times as large as international tourism. There are definite indications that many Mexicans, like foreigners, are increasingly interested in making nature part of their vacation experience. For example, a survey of 400 visitors to Barrancas del Cobre (Breunig 1997) found that half were Mexican nationals. Moreover, in response to a hypothetical question, Mexican visitors showed substantially higher "willingness to pay" for visiting the area than did U.S. tourists.

The Mexican Bird Museum in Saltillo had 108,000 visitors in its first year of operation (1994) of whom 97 percent were Mexican (Herreman 1996). Moreover, large numbers of Mexicans are among those hiking the Izta-Popo volcanoes and visiting the Monarch butterfly reserve. Visitors to Parque Nacional Eduardo Ruiz (Barrancas del Cupatizio) in Uruapan, Michoacan are overwhelmingly Mexican. Finally, some of the best information about Mexico's

natural attractions may be found in the Spanish-language magazine Mexico Desconocido. Particularly notable is a special edition on national parks, published in 1995, which offers the best information yet available (but still far from adequate) on roads, availability of facilities and other data essential for visitors. The Instituto Nacional de Ecologia has also produced beautifully printed pamphlets on several biosphere reserves, which include maps and descriptions, though little specific information on how to visit them. These too are printed in Spanish.

The potential for domestic tourism to natural areas has hardly been discussed in Mexico, much less exploited. Particularly intriguing is the fact that Mexico has long charged fairly high admission fees (usually 10-16 pesos) for admission to its archeological sites and historical museums.⁴ Yet these are heavily visited by Mexican nationals. This may indicate a willingness to pay that could be extended to protected natural areas as well, and could contribute greatly to their protection and upkeep (for a pioneering study of willingness to pay at Mexican archeological sites, see Beltran and Rojas, 1995).

Institutional Challenges

One of the largest obstacles to creating ecotourism in Mexico is the number of interests and decisionmakers involved, particularly when specific sites are involved. Snook (1993) points out that sustainable management of the Monarch butterfly wintering area must involve coordinated participation of three national agencies (SARH, SEDUE [now SEMARNAP] and SRA), the state governments of Michoacan and Estado de Mexico, nine municipios, more than 36 ejidos, and private property owners. Adding tourism to the mix would involve another national agency (SECTUR), state and municipal tourism authorities and a new set of private sector interests.

Mexico has recently turned over management of a number of its national parks to state governments. This may increase opportunities for participatory management by bringing the level of decisionmaking closer to the local people and local interests. However it simultaneously increases the difficulty of communication and promotion to an internationally dispersed tourist market. Such devices as nationally developed tourism circuits, better coverage of protected areas in commercial guidebooks, and state and local links to SECTUR's Internet homepage will have to be emphasized if the parks are to become attractions known and enjoyed only locally.

⁴ Admission on Sunday, however, is always free.

V. Conclusions

Tourism, which has for many years been a successful and important part of Mexico's economy, is currently under active reexamination by policymakers. The single-minded emphasis on FONATUR's megaprojects, which has been at the heart of national policy for more than two decades, is being replaced by an interest in diversification of market offerings and a desire for greater geographical dispersal of tourism's benefits. Ecotourism is regarded as a market niche where Mexico enjoys multiple competitive advantages. It is also being promoted by environmental groups interested in linking tourism and protected areas, as well as by community development organizations looking for new economic activities for increasingly desperate rural areas.

Although nature-oriented tourism is growing in locations dispersed throughout Mexico, these activities have not yet been linked in a way that makes them mutually self-supporting. Information about the full range of opportunities is still hard to find, and only on the Yucatan peninsula have real ecotourism travel circuits developed. Small enterprises face substantial challenges in marketing their product nationally and internationally, and receive little help from government in doing so. Moreover, although among ecotourism's multiple promises is the generation of financial support for protected areas and for local communities, these have been slow to materialize.

With its abundant natural and cultural resources, excellent infrastructure, and proximity to the enormous North American market, Mexico could be a world leader in ecotourism. Opportunities are particularly great in "add-on" ecotourism, in the development of protected areas as tourism destinations, and in the promotion of nature-oriented activities to domestic tourists. Ecotourism is an area of great promise in Mexico, but it has not yet become a reality.

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I. Introduction

--historical and current importance of tourism in Mexico

--since creation of INFRATUR (1969) and FONATUR (1974) Mexico changed from emphasizing historical and cultural attractions to concentration on mega-resorts

--Despite relative success of these, Mexico has started to realize that fastest growing tourism demand segments oriented to natural and cultural feature, of which Mexico has abundant supply

--Ecotourism (tourism based on nature and culture, with positive impacts on resource protection and on local economy) seen by many outside and inside Mexico as ideal response to some of country's most serious problems. But there are many interpretations of ecotourism, some of which do not involve a single element of the standard (Ecotourism Society) definition

--Intent of paper is (1) document recent developments in Mexican tourism industry and tourism policy; (2) explore impact that search for "ecotourism" has had on the tourism industry and government policy and the obstacles it faces at both national and regional levels; (3) show through series of specific examples, how the search for ecotourism has played out in specific places-- Quintana Roo, Copper Canyon, Reserva Monarca, Cuatrociénegas.

II. Development and Status of Mexican Tourism

--US has always been major market, and logical one for further development. 19th and early 20th century patterns of tourism-- culture as prime motivating force (except for Acapulco, and to lesser extent Puerto Vallarta and Baja California).

--era of megaprojects

--changing context, circa 1990--changing demand mix, intensified competition, new ties with NAFTA, neoliberalism and diminished role of state, Cancun demonstrated powerful regional development potential of tourism, quote statements of tourism ministers (esp. remarks of Silvia Hernandez at Acapulco conference, 1996)

--current tourism statistics

III. Ecotourism As Solution

IV. The Search for Ecotourism in Four Regions

Quintana Roo, Reserva Monarca, Copper Canyon, Cuatrociengas

(I see these as vignettes of about 2 pages each, showing contrasts between areas where ecotourism is already highly developed--QR and Monarca--and places where new development is likely)

V. Conclusions

Why Mexico needs ecotourism--to create rural jobs (much needed as traditional agriculture is marginalized by NAFTA); to create public support for protected areas through domestic tourism and outdoor recreation; to provide economic rationale and actual support for management of protected areas. Interaction of megaprojects and ecotourism--"add on" ecotourism. This has already developed in Quintana Roo, with both positive and negative results; Japanese study underway of possibilities on Jalisco coast.