

“Pathways in the periphery: tourism to indigenous communities in Panama.”

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Abstract

Indigenous peoples are the poorest of the poor in Latin America, and tourism offers them a chance to make some badly needed money. Yet little is known about the circumstances that allow visitors' dollars to assist indigenous communities most effectively, and those that can make tourists a destructive presence. A comparative analysis of tourism to two indigenous nations in Panama, the Kuna and the Emberá-Wounaan, effectively illuminates these issues, and allows for some conclusions regarding ethnic tourism that can be usefully applied more generally. While there are some unavoidable negative effects associated with tourism, indigenous communities can ameliorate some problems by formulating a clear plan and educating the members of their communities as to its contents. Where indigenous culture is stronger (i.e., less influenced by non-Indian society), tourism tends to cause its decay; where it is weaker, tourism can give incentives for its regeneration.

Pathways in the periphery: tourism to indigenous communities in Panama¹

Tourism offers indigenous peoples a chance to make some badly needed money. Yet little is known about the circumstances that allow visitors' dollars to assist indigenous communities most effectively, and those that can make tourists a destructive presence. A comparative analysis of tourism to two indigenous nations in Panama, the Kuna and the Emberá-Wounaan, effectively illuminates these issues, and allows for some conclusions regarding ethnic tourism that can be usefully applied more generally. While there are some unavoidable negative effects associated with tourism, indigenous communities can ameliorate some problems by formulating a clear plan and educating the members of their communities as to its contents. Benefits are maximized when indigenous peoples are informed and guided by their own leaders. Based on our findings, a general rule might be that where indigenous culture is stronger (i.e., less influenced by non-Indian society), tourism tends to cause its decay; where it is weaker, tourism can give incentives for its regeneration.

In Latin America, as in the rest of the world, "to a very great extent being indigenous is synonymous with poverty" (World Bank 1995:1). In Bolivia, for example, two-thirds of bilingual Indians and almost three-quarters of monolingual Indians are poor. In Guatemala, 87% of all Indians are poor; in Mexico and Peru, the figures are 80% and 79%, respectively. Indians usually have little or no access to electricity, clean water, sanitation, and they are often unable to send their children to school (Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 1994:*xviii*). What is true of Latin America more generally is also true of Panama. Non-Indian Panamanians complete twice as many years of schooling as Indians, for example (Organización Panamericana de la Salud [OPS] 1992:227)., and while illiteracy in the general population was 10.7% in 1990, among Indian women it was 53.2%, and among Indian men, 35.9% (Contraloría General 1990a:85; 215-216).

Panamanian Indians' health is likewise much worse than that of the general population. Eighty percent of the cholera cases reported in 1992, for example, were among the indigenous populations (OPS 1992:41). The prevalence of chronic malnutrition in children is about 20% for

non-Indians, yet 65% for Indians (OPS 1992:10). The Darien and Kuna Yala (two areas of Panama that are 80 and 100% indigenous, respectively) have the highest rates of infant mortality, at about 60 per 1000 live births. The average for the nation is 25 (OPS 1992:24). Forty percent of the children in the Darien are malnourished; Kuna Yala has the highest percentage of malnourished children, at 71.1% (Herrera 1994:45, 116).

To address similarly egregious disparities between Indian and non-Indians across Latin America, the World Bank (1995) calls for more investment in health care and education. The Panamanian government, however, has not proved able or willing to attempt to improve the condition of its indigenous peoples, and given the current popularity of neo-liberal economic policies in the region, it is doubtful that other governments will choose to spend more of a shrinking budget on those who are politically nearly powerless. If elected representatives will not implement a coherent plan for improving the condition of indigenous peoples, what are the remaining options?

There is only one, unattractive but unavoidable, option: the market. This way has repeatedly led to notorious disasters for indigenous peoples in the past, however, with “development” projects premised on cultural assimilation and raw exploitation of natural resources (Burger 1987). In response to the iniquities development experts have perpetrated on Indians, it is tempting to romanticize the bleak economic condition that characterize most indigenous communities. Guionneau-Sinclair (1996:112), for example, argues that the equality in poverty that Panama’s Indians share now is better than any inequality accompanying an increase in material wealth. Bodley (1988:3) asserts “indigenous peoples themselves do not find their way of life materially inadequate when they are still in control of their undepleted resources. Poverty is a product of the state, created by class systems...” Likewise, Brascoupe (1992:6) argues we should not see “traditional cultures as having poor standards of living” (see also De'ath and Michalenko 1988:179).

Yet Indians in Latin America are poor, and do need money to educate their children and fight malnutrition, disease, short life expectancy and high infant mortality. If one grants the

assumption that Indians want medicine and school supplies for their children as much as anyone else, and must pay for them, the question becomes: what sort of market opportunities are best? At the very least, “indigenous peoples must be the partners and not the victims” in the economic development of their communities (Burger 1987:3). In addition, economic opportunities should not simply generate cash (and inequalities), but also promote indigenous cultural and social systems. In his study of the “strategies of ethnic survival,” Adams (1991:191-6) argues that Indians must have control over their language, territory, community, rituals, reproduction and expansion if they are to have a reasonable chance to prosper. It would be most advantageous if making a little cash on the side could also reinforce some of these aims. Finally, economic development, whenever possible, should exist in the context of maintaining the wilderness areas Indians inhabit; in their dealings with the market, they should have economic incentives to protect the ecosystem (Carr, Pedersen, Ramaswamy 1993).

Tourism to indigenous communities may fulfill some of these conditions. Without question, any piece of that huge market would be beneficial in strictly economic terms. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, the total value of goods and services attributable to tourism in 1996 was \$3.6 trillion, or 10.6% of gross global product. Put another way, tourism sustains more than one in ten jobs around the world (*Economist* 1998:2); if tourism were a nation-state, it would have the earth’s second-largest economy (*Nation* 1997:3). To share in this bounty, Indians do not need much infrastructure or other capital investment; their customs, dress, language, and (exotic) appearance, as well as a clean and fairly secluded village, will suffice. These prerequisites can provide incentives for Indians to maintain their traditions and their environment. There is at least a chance, in short, that tourism to indigenous communities in Latin America will have overall positive results, “based on the converging interests of developing economies, indigenous populations, cultural and environmental sustainability, and the tourists themselves” (Brohman 1996:65).

Yet we know very little about such ethnic tourism, which is rapidly growing without adequate supervision or study. Tour operators are conducting more and more visits every year to

indigenous communities all over the world.² Without question, “investigations evaluating tourism’s possible benefits, shortcomings, and consequences are of utmost concern . . . [as] so very often programs arise with no prior analysis.” (Greathouse Amador 1997:937). A case in point is tourism to Kuna villages in Kuna Yala (also known as San Blas) Panama, which is extremely popular among international tourists, yet whose workings and effects are little known. Despite the lack of information regarding the effects on the Kuna, the Panamanian Tourist Institute’s “Tourism Development Master Plan” (1993:15) has ambitious aims:

San Blas is the most important resource Panama has to exploit... What are missing are support facilities at the landing strips, and regular flights by airlines serving this route. The Kuna natives pose another obstacle, as they wish to do everything by themselves or with outside assistance only on their own terms.

Successful “exploitation” along these lines, if the Kuna are pushed aside, might have some very nasty consequences, however. The former director of the Ecumenical Coalition on Third World Tourism (quoted in Nicholson-Lord 1997:13), for example, declared that tourism “does not benefit the majority of people. Instead it exploits them, pollutes the environment, destroys the ecosystem, bastardizes the culture, [and] robs people of their traditional values and ways of life....” There are other criticisms. De’ath (1988) argues wage labor among indigenous peoples “could undermine the traditional value of economic equality and create classes of rich and poor.” Steinberg’s (1994) research indicates that villages that tourists visit may be envied by other indigenous communities, leading to harmful divisions and resentments. Excessive dependence on tourism could also mean that traditional hunting, agricultural and other practices are discarded, with further negative cultural effects (Greathouse-Amador 1997), and Brohman (1996) notes that tourism has caused the breakdown of traditional social controls. Another debate concerns the lack of social and cultural “authenticity” that results, for example, when Indians no longer only dance their dances to celebrate a special occasion related to tradition, but whenever tourists arrive with money and want to see them (Van den Berghe 1992, Cohen 1988).

Money is the reason Indians run these risks, and existing studies indicate that some indigenous peoples are making quite significant sums from tourism (Zeppel 1988). In addition to generating income, however, the industry may have other benefits. Several authors note that tourism stimulates cultural re-vitalization (Boynton 1997; Browne and Nolan 1989; Stephen 1991; Van den Berghe 1992; Zeppel 1998). Other positive effects could include tourist by-products such as craft production (Stephen 1991), ancillary shops and stands, and improved transportation routes (Greathouse-Amador 1997).

As of yet, unfortunately, we have little understanding of which conditions tend to lead to serious problems, and when the benefits of tourism for indigenous peoples are maximized. It is certainly premature to assert that “a discussion of the impacts of ethnic tourism on host cultures and societies is virtually impossible except on a case-by-case basis” (Harron and Weiler 1992:87). The following analysis illustrates the circumstances that affect the levels of tourism’s benefits and harms, and offers several lessons that can be applied to other cases. To summarize, there are problems resulting from tourism that are likely universal and difficult to reduce, such as inauthentic cultural displays, assimilation of *ladino* attitudes about money, and decreased respect for traditional political leaders. Where indigenous leaders have studied the issue and formulated a plan to control the flow of tourists, however, they have been able to ameliorate the problems of economic exploitation, the move from traditional occupations to tourism, competition and rivalries among Indian communities, and environmental damage. Finally, the benefit most touted—cultural regeneration—is more a function of the geographic location and cultural status of the Indians than a consistent benefit brought by tourism. Our analysis of tourism’s effects begins with the Kuna people of Kuna Yala, Panama.³

2.0 *Lessons from the Kuna*

Panama’s other indigenous groups will one day be in the same boat as the Kuna are now, with lots of people wanting to see their lands. But they will then be in a better position because they will have learned from the Kuna all the dangers of tourism. They will learn the positive aspects

and the negative aspects from the Kuna, and thus they will be able to separate the good from the bad.

Leopoldo Richard, hotel owner. Rio Sidra, Kuna Yala

Of the more than 47,000 Kuna in Panama at the time of the 1990 census, almost 32,000 live in the *Comarca*⁴ of Kuna Yala, on Panama's northeastern Caribbean coast, which consists of about 50 inhabited and several hundred more uninhabited islands, as well as the coastal mainland (Contraloría General 1990a:201; Contraloría General 1990b:171). The Kuna have been welcoming tourists for 40 years, but large-scale tourism began in Kuna Yala only in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Falla 1979:35). Currently, the Kuna General Congress' (CGK) Tourism Commission estimates that 100-200 tourists arrive every month at the 12 official hotels in the *Comarca*; this is clearly a vast understatement, however, given that Kuna hotel owners under-report tourists to evade taxes due the CGK, and judging by the full flights that leave for Kuna Yala every morning from Panama City. The CGK estimates that from December 1995 to May 1996 (the first period for which records were kept), the CGK made more than \$10,000 from taxes alone on the tourist trade (Congreso General Kuna 1996).

When studying the Kuna's experience with visitors to their lands, perhaps the most important lesson is that many benefits flow from establishing oversight over tourism through political institutions—a point Panama's National Indigenous Policy Office stresses quite strongly. The taxation policies of the CGK allow for some redistribution of the proceeds of tourism, and a limitation on the number of hotels in Kuna Yala reduces some of the problems that would result from an uncontrolled influx of visitors.

In April 1996, the CGK approved a Statute governing tourism in Kuna Yala (Congreso General Kuna 1996a), which has since been distributed to all 49 Kuna communities. This document was intended to address, among other issues, the movement of workers from traditional occupations to the tourist industry, and the equitable distribution of tourism's benefits. The Kuna are unable to control tourism completely or even to their satisfaction, but applying their own standards when possible is an important step, and publicizing their own guidelines

forms an important educational role among their communities. In interviews, the Kuna Congress leadership has admitted that it cannot stop the growth of tourism, and explained that they have set their sights lower and instead want to achieve compliance with the norms that the Congress has set down. This is still quite difficult. The first Article of the Statute declares

The only tourist activities and infrastructures possible in Kuna Yala will be, strictly and solely, those that respect, conserve, value and defend the natural resources, environment and bio-diversity of the Comarca, as well as the socio-cultural, political, and religious Kuna norms and customs.

The tourist industry has not complied with this stricture, and one can plausibly argue that it cannot do so. Any large-scale flow of tourists to the *Comarca* is bound to have some negative effects on the environment and Kuna norms and customs. Instead of attempting to closely enforce this Article, therefore, the CGK has been forced to achieve some of its objectives by simply limiting the number of hotels allowed in Kuna Yala. Articles 2, 6, 51 and 52 of the Statute establish that all Kuna must apply to the CGK for written permission before undertaking any tourist venture; those who do not comply will have their property confiscated.

The limitation on the number of hotels was intended to address what is perhaps the greatest concern of the CGK leadership: the economic and cultural effects of a labor shift from agricultural cultivation and fishing for the easier money of the tourist industry. A CGK administrator declared that what has taken place in this regard has implied a certain loss of culture, as many rituals and traditions are based on fishing and agriculture. Excessive dependence on tourism has also been a problem. A member of the CGK Tourism Commission said “when the tourists did not come, and we did not have the sorts of agricultural products that we needed, it became obvious that there was too much of a shift from agriculture to tourism.” He noted also that the Kuna are very aware that they must spend dollars to import food and other goods, and want to produce as much as possible domestically; it is clear that many Kuna communities have lost a degree of self-sufficiency in food production. Members of the CGK’s executive body, the *Junta Directiva*, were most worried about this danger. Worried about

decreasing agricultural production, one member declared “it is fine that women should go and sell *molas* [the colorful cloths sewn onto Kuna womens’ blouses] but why do the men have to go with them and abandon the countryside?” The abandonment of agriculture by Kuna men also makes the land vulnerable to ladino squatters (Falla 1979:65), which in turn has led to violence (*Miami Herald* 5 April 1992).

Another reason for the CGK’s attempt to limit tourism is to restrain competition over tourists between hotels and between communities. Consider the following Articles.

Article 13. Each community location of tourist activities will have its regulations on sale and/or resale of works of art and handicrafts, permitting a just distribution of goods between inhabitants of the community and neighboring villages.

Article 17. The local community or those affected directly or indirectly as tourist areas may demand participation in the benefits that tourism creates. The Tourism Commission will arbitrate each case in coordination with those directly responsible.

How earnings get distributed from the hotel owners and handicraft makers to the rest of the community is a delicate subject, one about which most Kuna are not very informative. Falla’s (1979:55) research indicates that the money is not distributed widely within the *Comarca* – those islands with airports and hotels keep most of the money. Some islands form their own committees to address how to spend the earnings from tourism that is shared among the community; others take a more *laissez-faire* approach. The Kuna are quite reluctant to say how much money they make on the tourist trade. Reporters from *La Prensa*, however, have written that cruise ships that carry roughly 900 people can be expected to leave behind at least \$1,500 and sometimes as much as \$10,000 to the community in taxes and purchases (6 January 1994; 18 February 1996). The hotels charge as much as \$200 per night, with the majority charging about \$100 and the cheapest \$27 (*La Prensa* 17 March 1996). Some hotel owners give a percentage of these proceeds to tour operators in Panama City who steer business their way, but others are completely independent.

Because of the large sums of money involved, there has been a great concern about invidious comparisons and competition arising from tourism, which is reflected in Articles 13 and 17, above. One member of the CGK Tourism Commission feared that competition such as this could cause high levels of resentment and social division; a Kuna hotel owner called this “the real danger.” Outsiders agree. A tour operator with much experience in the industry calls this its main negative effect, and Falla (1979:56) reports that competition has led to community splits and infighting in the past. The Kuna *Junta Directiva* denies that this has been a problem so far, however, claiming (rather implausibly) that they had satisfied themselves that hotel owners were making no more money than others in the community. Falla (1979:57) has found evidence to the contrary, and an article in the CGK periodical *Yala* (1996) also seems to indicate otherwise. The un-named author complained that although some areas “generate great quantities of quantifiable income, these profits are not distributed equally, rather generally benefit a few rich people.” While the distribution of the profits from tourism is quite imperfect, the Statute provides at least a formalized commitment to equity, and a mediation procedure for those who argue they receive fewer benefits than those to which they are entitled.

Whether in response to past problems, or to forestall future problems, by their taxation policies the CGK attempts to make sure that the entire Kuna Yala *Comarca* benefits from tourism. Articles 16, 18 and 24 stipulate that all Kuna who engage in tourist activity must contribute to the CGK; businesses and individuals must keep books on their receipts for inspection by the Congress, and donate what that body establishes; finally, all tourists must pay a \$1.00 fee to the Congress. The CGK has just begun keeping records of these receipts. The administrator who handles the accounts reported that each hotel, based on its size, gives between \$10 and \$15 per month to the Congress; each cruise ship pays \$300 (\$150 to the Congress and \$150 to the local community for the necessary cleanup); and privately owned boats are all charged \$5 each, regardless of size. Tax evasion by Kuna hotels is common, however (*La Prensa* 10 April 1995; 17 September 1995). In addition, the cruise ships are taxed when possible, but

the CGK has little idea how many ships penetrate the *Comarca* waters, or the effects of their visits.

Limitations on the number of hotels cannot effectively control the negative effects of tourism on Kuna society because the number of tourists who stay in the hotels is insignificant compared to the numbers who arrive on cruise ships. Unfortunately, the CGK is almost completely unaware of the full extent of cruise ship traffic—and so is the Panamanian Tourism Institute, which does not keep figures on the cruises that stop in Kuna Yala (Instituto Panameño del Turismo 1992). One can make rough estimates of this traffic from other sources, however. Kidd (1998) lists nine companies that offer yearly cruises to Kuna Yala with a total capacity of nearly 8,000. At least one firm, however, offers up to 30 cruises per year (Premier Cruises 1998). When one adds the capacity of these ships, and multiplies by the 90% occupancy rate the Panamanian Tourism Bureau (1992) cites for cruise traffic through the Canal, 30,000 is a conservative estimate for the numbers of tourists arriving by boat per year in Kuna Yala—and the number is probably considerably higher. Many of these tourists do not come ashore, instead they await squadrons of dugout canoes that the Kuna pilot to the huge ships to sell handicrafts. The authors have also seen hundreds of tourists take launches to a small Kuna village, which completely remakes itself for the occasion. The CGK nominally regulates the 12 official Kuna hotels, which may host 2,500 tourists per year; they have neither the information necessary, however, nor the means to control the tens of thousands of foreigners who arrive on cruises and anchor offshore.

While foreigners own the cruise ships, only Kuna are allowed to own hotels. The CGK has attempted to keep the income from tourism in the *Comarca* by restricting all hotels and other tourist infrastructure to Kuna ownership. The Tourism Statute quotes Chapter 7 of the Basic Law of the Kuna Yala *Comarca* (Article 50), which states “The operation in Kuna Yala of all tourist activities, in every manner, is reserved for Kunas.” As one member of the CGK said, “we have seen that when a *ladino* investor takes advantage of Kuna Yala, they take their money out, and only pay wages to the Kuna instead of keeping their money there.” On one occasion, the

CGK confiscated a hotel owned by *ladino* Panamanians because it did not comply with this and other regulations. The CGK willingness to completely close down a hotel that would have brought the community thousands of dollars speaks to how intent that organization is to keep the tourist business in Kuna hands.⁵ When compared with the experience of the Emberá/Wounaan, it is apparent that this restriction protects the Kuna from economic exploitation and general sharp dealing by *ladino* tour operators. On the other hand, when the Kuna themselves are exclusively in charge of the tourist facilities, they therefore are more closely involved with tourists and other outsiders, more easily compromising and degrading Kuna culture (Falla 1979:55). One result of this is quite obvious. The Kuna have become shrewd enough to bargain and require payment for most all tourist-related services, which has led to a widespread perception in Panama that the Kuna are “money hungry.” One Kuna expressed his disgust at the hypocrisy of such attitudes. Referring to Kuna who ask for money before being photographed, he angrily asked: “Who taught them to ask for money? From whose culture does it come?” He makes an excellent point, but the fact remains that in some areas the Kuna way of life has become monetarized to an important degree due to their close involvement in the tourist trade. More generally, due to the very large numbers of visitors, and because Kuna Yala is geographically isolated from *ladino* Panamanians and therefore enjoys a strong native culture, erosion of Kuna norms and customs due to tourism is more serious than in Emberá/Wounaan villages.

Changes in the Kuna culture are evident in those areas frequented by tourists. There has been a change in artistic expression in handicrafts, as one hotel owner explained. Traditional works have shifted from their original subjects to objects such as elephants, which the Kuna have never seen but the tourists want to buy. “With the *molos*, whereas before they were symbolic, showing stars and rainbows, the sun, the rain, the thunder, now they get their ideas from magazines: you can get Clinton and Castro now” (see also Salvador, ed. 1997:192-211). This is readily apparent to any tourist to Kuna Yala, where the women sell “Hard Rock Café: San Blas” *mola* tee shirts.

The artistic content of the craft is not the only aspect of Kuna culture to have changed. As a result of the popularity of *molos* among tourists, there has also been a shift in gender relations. This greatly concerns members of the CGK *Junta Directiva*, who stressed that traditional roles (i.e., the men in the fields and the women in the home) should be better respected. An administrator for the CGK noted that women who create *molos* are making more money than most, and therefore want more of a voice within the family and the community. Even those Kuna men who take coconuts to Columbia to sell find themselves out-earned by the women who sell *molos*. This leads to an upset of traditional roles in the family that leads some men to migrate to the cities in search of paying jobs, in order to re-establish their familial power and status (Falla 1979:61-62). “The men still rule, but if things keep on like this women will get more power,” the CGK administrator said gloomily. One Kuna woman argued that women have themselves changed drastically in the tourist regions. In Playón Chico, where arrive roughly 30 tourists per day, she claimed “women have stopped doing traditional work, they don’t cut their hair, or even baptize their babies in the traditional way.” It seems that the island’s *cacique* has given his permission for this, so there is nothing that anyone can do, she concluded sadly. She disapproved of the goings-on at Narganá, an island popular with tourists. “They don’t celebrate anything--they are not traditional at all. There are women in dresses, a Catholic church, videos—why would [tourists] want to see that?” She told the story of a group of visitors that offered a good deal of money for women of her island to dance in an immoral manner for them, but they refused. “Some communities do not refuse,” she concluded ominously. As early as 1975 the Kuna leadership was complaining of the cultural damage that flowed from bikinis and signs proclaiming “Drink Coca-Cola” (CGK conference quoted in Falla 1979:123). Members of the CGK *Junta Directiva* sadly confirmed the loss of Kuna culture in areas of greatest tourist visitation. Some outside observers go so far as to claim that some islands in Kuna Yala have become tourist shows with little cultural authenticity.

Other cultural shifts seem less important, but no less noticeable to the Kuna. One villager gave the following example. There is a rule on one island prohibiting the lighting of lamps when

the local leaders are having a meeting. “But you cannot tell the tourists that they have to eat in the dark,” she said. This has caused problems because the islanders ask why the hotel can keep its lights on when they have to shut down while the leaders are meeting. The response to this has been that the hotels contribute tax dollars to the economy, “and if you would like to pay more taxes, then you can have your lights on, too.” This anecdote makes clear both the reduced status of the Kuna leaders compared to the flow of cash that tourists bring, and the growing importance of money in Kuna Yala. It is now common for Kuna to request payment to be the subject of a photograph, for example, and this has proved shocking to those of their people who consider human photography offensive for religious reasons. Further, the power of money takes away from that of the political leaders. As one member of the *Junta Directiva* complained, “it used to be that when visitors came to the community, they would come to the *cacique* and explain what they were doing and generally pay their respects. Now, they don’t do that, and the local *cacique* feels less like a *cacique*, because people just come on in and do what they please.”

Environmental degradation has also been a problem, a fact which has led to three specific requirements in the Statute. The first, quoted above, declares that all tourist activities must “defend the natural resources, environment and bio-diversity of the *Comarca*.” Further, the Statute calls for the use of biodegradable resources (Art. 22k), and a “high level of sanitation and hygiene” in all tourist infrastructure (Art. 26). Art. 26 likely refers to the lack of septic tanks in the tourist hotels. Our research indicated that only four of the 12 hotels in Kuna Yala have sanitary systems of some kind; the others have simple outhouses at the end of a dock—a widespread Kuna practice. Members of the *Junta Directiva* said the Kuna have traditionally thrown their (scanty) refuse into the sea. With the tourist boom, however, they must now think of alternatives. The cruise ships that come and anchor in Kuna Yala have a severe impact, they noted. (The Statute decrees that each cruise ship must pay \$150 to the CGK specifically for the substantial clean-up of effluent that is necessary after their departure.) Another environmental worry is the tourists who wander from the beaches to the jungles, which are of cultural and religious importance to the Kuna. When tourists are on the beach, they can be watched and

controlled more easily, said one hotel owner in Rio Sidra. When they decide to hike up into the mountains, however, they create trails, kill plants and damage the forests, where the Kuna get much of their medicine. Most worrisome of all is that tourists will stumble across or look for Kuna cemeteries, which have been the target of plunder due to the habit of burying gold with the dead. Tour operators and individual Kuna families, however, continue to offer tours to the jungle, as good money can be had this way.

While some analysts have identified advantages other than cash from participating in the global tourism industry, we found little evidence of this in Kuna Yala. Certainly there was little reason to believe that tourists provided incentives for the Kuna to maintain their customs; on the contrary, wide-scale visitation seemed to degrade the strong Kuna culture wherever it found a beachhead. Further, Kuna Yala has witnessed environmental degradation and decreased respect for traditional political leaders. On the other hand, the Statute likely has been quite effective in ameliorating some other negatives consequences flowing from the tourism industry. Without the limitations on the number of hotels, Kuna Yala certainly would have seen more migration from agriculture to the beaches, and more competition and rivalries among Indian communities. In short, there is no free lunch available to the other indigenous peoples of Panama. As hotel-owner Leopold Richard declares, “if they get some improvement in their material condition as a result of tourism, then they will pay for it in other ways.”

3.0 Newcomers to the market: Tourism and the Emberá-Wounaan.

We recognize that tourism brings money, but we want real benefits, not just some money. To improve the quality of life: water quality, medicines, school supplies for the children. There is a difference between tourism bringing money and bringing real benefits to the Emberá.

Clelia Mezua, *Presidenta*, Emberá/Wounaan Congress

The Emberá and Wounaan peoples, who are culturally and linguistically distinct yet share the same political organization, are originally from areas in and around Ecuador and Colombia, respectively (De La Guardia and Kam 1993:71). According to the 1990 census, there were 14,659 Emberá and 2,605 Wounaan in Panama (Contraloría General 1990a:204). Only 37% of Emberá and 25% of Wounaan live in the Emberá *Comarca* area, however (Guionneau-Sinclair 1996:103-4). The rest are scattered throughout Darien, and some have moved to the wilderness areas around Panama City, such as the Chagres National Park, where roughly 1,500 Indians live (Contraloría General 1990a: 77, 146-150). The relative geographic dispersal of the Emberá/Wounaan and their proximity to *ladino* settlement has resulted in more cultural assimilation than has occurred among the Kuna.

Tourism to Emberá/Wounaan communities began in earnest only in 1993, and the Emberá/Wounaan Congress (CGEW) has not yet formulated a plan to regulate the industry. Indeed, the subject has not drawn much attention from the leadership, judging by the absence of a discussion of tourism in the CGEW Charter (Pueblo Emberá/Wounaan 1996), and in its official organ, the *Boletín Makoa*. The number of tours to these communities is much smaller than those to the Kuna: perhaps 100-200 visitors in a good month during the tourist season, and as few as a quarter that many during the rainy months. But such tours are increasing in number, and without a clearly defined set of regulations, the Emberá/Wounaan are currently at the economic mercy of tour operators, and have difficulties distributing the proceeds from the industry and limiting invidious competition between villages. Because the native culture has been so weakened, however, tourism does not act as a degrading force, as in Kuna Yala, but rather offers an incentive to bring back old traditions.

The typical economic arrangement between tour companies and the Emberá/Wounaan tends to put the Indians at a considerable disadvantage. As opposed to the Kuna-owned business in Kuna Yala, the Emberá/Wounaan people are simply individual and unorganized employees of the tour operators in Panama City, and as such must try to strike the best individual deals they can. Yet they are often naive in the ways of the market and the facts of commerce, and are not

difficult to take advantage of. In a typical arrangement, the tour company pays the village a negotiated fee per visitor, and encourages tourists to buy handicrafts. The precise economic impact of tourism to the villages is difficult to determine, partially because no other studies exist against which to compare our figures. Also, tour operators consistently over-stated the amount of money they brought to indigenous communities, and the villagers themselves often have poor or nonexistent record-keeping. Our best estimate is that a village receiving tourists steadily throughout the year could expect to make between five and ten thousand dollars. (Claims by tour operators to have brought \$45,000 to a single village in the course of a year could not be substantiated, and appear grossly inflated.) Village 260, for example, made up of 68 Emberá in the Chagres National Park, earned roughly \$7000 in gross revenues in 1995, according to the village's *Junta Directiva*. The rough median for the amount spent by tourists on each visit to a village is \$300, and tours can visit as often as 10-15 times per year. These sums, however, are for the exclusive use of the villages visited, and no mechanism as yet exists by which they could be distributed to the larger Emberá/Wounaan population.

In addition to the amount spent on handicrafts, tour companies commonly pay the village between \$5 and \$10 per tourist, depending on the bargaining ability of the village *cacique*, among other factors. Villagers in Pararapuru, for example, have concluded verbal agreements with tour operators only to have the tour operator lower unilaterally the price *per capita*. On the other hand, Village 260 was only being paid \$3 per tourist before leaders protested and secured a raise to \$5. In two other villages, tour operators had come through promising to bring tourists if the Indians would build an authentic lodge in the traditional style. After the construction of such structures, on both occasions the tour company reneged on the agreement and did not compensate the Indians for their time or materials. The mayor of the Sambú *Comarca* in Darien stresses when each village negotiates separately, they are at a disadvantage *vis a vis* the tour operators. When Indians are simple employees of *ladino* businessmen, they have much less negotiating power than do the Kuna who control all the tourist facilities in Kuna Yala; accordingly, tour operators take advantage of the Emberá/Wounaan to a much greater extent.

Panamanians often accuse the Kuna of being too concerned with money, yet they simply defend themselves with a knowledge of the tourist market and the money to be made there. If the tours to Emberá/Wounaan communities continue to grow, these peoples will likely also lose their naivetè and prove more difficult to exploit economically. This would, of course, imply a significant cultural change.

In response to reports of tour operators' exploitation and unfair dealing, the *Presidenta* of the CGEW argues that the Panamanian Tourist Bureau should serve as the guarantor of the agreements the Indians set up with the tourism firms. More useful would be a statute such as the Kuna have implemented, establishing, for example, a minimum-pay scale with which each Emberá/Wounaan village and tour business would be familiar, making it more difficult for tour operators to dictate terms. Such a statute would be difficult to enforce, as it is in Kuna Yala, but it would at the least inform the often isolated villages what they should expect to receive from the sharp-dealing businessmen from Panama City. One village, for example, did not even know that they could simply make an hour-long trip to sell their handicrafts in Panama City, instead of waiting for tourists to be sent to them. (The tour operator involved with this community became quite angry when he heard the villagers had been told of this option.)

Neither does the Emberá/Wounaan leadership have enough information about the mechanics of tourism. In interviews with the authors, the *Presidenta* and her advisers made clear that they were not aware of the extent of tourism in their lands. Unreported tourism is untaxed tourism, and it is not uncommon to hear of village *caciques* concluding their own deals with tour operators and not informing the CGEW. This prevents the proceeds from being distributed in the form of taxes to the communities uninvolved in tourism, and also serves to undermine the political leadership. Several tour operators noted that it could become a serious problem if their colleagues continued to bypass the CGEW: when *ladino* businessmen do not respect the Indian leaders, this attitude tends to infect the indigenous rank and file, they warned.

Given the often-close proximity of *ladino* Panamanians, Emberá/Wounaan are often more like their Spanish-speaking neighbors than are the isolated Kuna. (This is true to a lesser

extent even in the isolated Darien.) Emberá-Wounaan villagers often look, act and speak similarly to *ladinos*. Tourism to these communities plays a much more positive role in terms of protecting and re-creating the indigenous culture than it does in Kuna Yala. Where the Indians had worn jeans and tee shirts and were unaware of their traditions, for example, tour operators have offered them money to put on a cultural show for tourists, which means that the traditions must be re-learned from the elders.

There is a general agreement among the Emberá/Wounaan interviewed that tourism is helping revivify old customs. Even the CGEW *Presidenta*, who is quite suspicious of tourism, was forced to admit that it seemed to have this effect. One villager of Pararapuru noted that they now dance the traditional dances more often, “not just on the special occasions, and the old ones then tell us what sort of people we are and what culture we have and what our food is like and so on.” One *cacique* said that his people now know 7 dances because someone came from Darien and taught them; before tourism, his people had forgotten the dances, or never learned them. An advisor to the CGEW said that one of the greatest benefits of tourism was that it gave young people an incentive to stay in the villages and preserve the old ways instead of going to Panama City to look for work. One might argue that this cultural regeneration is not genuine, however. Yet for villages that had lost their traditions, re-learning them appears to be one of the few unambiguous positive effects of tourism to their communities.

Some of the requirements tour operators place on villages to ensure an “authentic” experience for the tourist, however, verge on the authoritarian. One business owner was quite forthright about the stipulations he enforces to ensure a tradition-rich environment for the tourist. His company requires Indians to wear their traditional clothing, use as little plastic as possible, refrain from littering, and to use natural materials in the construction of their huts. If he finds that they have broken these rules, then he stops sending tourists. “The *caciques* then come to my office, ask why they are not being paid, then they understand.” Another businessman told much the same story. He forbids Indians to hang their clothes out on the line, or even to use tin roofs. This last requirement has been the cause of much resentment on the part of Indian villagers.

When one community finally managed to scrape together enough money to build a school, the tour operator was enraged that the roof was made of tin, which was “inauthentic.” Not surprisingly, the village had put up a tin roof because it was cheaper in time and labor. Yet the position of the tour operators is clear: “tourists don’t want to see barracks,” one said repeatedly.

The conditions tour operators impose are a source of dissension in some communities. In one, the *cacique* refuses to wear the traditional dress, preventing his village from participating in tourism when most of them want to do so. Others choose not to participate, resenting the conditions tour operators impose. The *cacique* of Alto Chorro, for example, said that the tour operators wanted his community to present themselves “how the Emberá *used* to be. We are civilized now.” Tour operators usually insist that Indians men wear only a brief cover for their genitals, and the women only a fiber skirt—the traditional garb of the Emberá/Wounaan. The women of Alto Chorro, their leader said, would have been quite uncomfortable taking off their blouses for foreign tourists. (Some Indian women compromise by wearing brassieres instead of going completely topless.) In any case, because the village has access to good fishing at Gatún Lake, they were not forced to accept the offer. Other villages are not so fortunate, and we were unable to find any cases of villages without access to such economic resources turning down offers of tourism. Indians, tour operators and many outside observers agree on an interesting point in this context. For those communities without other economic options, tourism provides an economic alternative to cutting down trees to sell to logging firms, an alternative that has proved tempting in the past.

Another, less important, advantage to tourism is its positive effect on Emberá/Wounaan crafts. Traditional Emberá and Wounaan baskets and carvings are more functional than decorative, and before the tourist wave began around 1993, such products were for practical uses. Now the artisans are paying more attention to the artistic possibilities, and two noted that the attractiveness of their handicrafts had improved as a result of the tourist market; an international distributor of Indian baskets told us that the artisans have become more and more able to meet his strict quality demands. This in turn has opened the market for these goods in

Panama City, where they can often be seen in department stores, in turn providing a further source of income for the indigenous villages. This parallels the experience of the Kuna, but with an important difference. While the Kuna favored art form, the *mola*, has been coarsened by the market's demands, the Emberá/Wounaan, starting from a relatively lower cultural level, have seen their crafts increase in quality and beauty.

The mayor of Sambú in Darien admitted that while the commercial uses of the Emberá/Wounaan art did have these productive consequences, the trade “benefits some and not others.” While the Kuna have made clear their policy—not always followed—of sharing the gains from tourism, the Emberá/Wounaan have taken no such steps as yet. Similarly, divisive competition between villages for the tourist dollar has also become a problem. A *cacique* in Darien described how those whose villages that did not attract tourists complained to the leadership about their neighbors' good fortune. The leaders are not always sympathetic, however. A tour operator claimed that in his dealings with *caciques* in the Darien, they had taken the bulk of the money for their own use on several occasions, instead of distributing it throughout the village as per the agreement. The Kuna have also made clear in their Statute that environmental damage is not an acceptable tradeoff for tourist dollars. The Emberá/Wounaan have not as yet seen widespread environmental degradation, but they are unequipped to handle such consequences of an increase in the number of tourists. So far, the environmental effects have been confined to a shortage of the materials necessary to make the baskets and other crafts sold to tourists and department stores. One artisan said that now it takes almost an entire day to find the materials—all the trees (*cocobollo* and *nagwalla*) have been cut down by other artisans. A regional *cacique* in the Darien made similar comments, and explained how in his tours through the villages he always tells the artisans to re-plant the trees. “For that reason the Indians need to run our own tourist business, so that we can ensure that those plants are re-sown.” To these negative environmental effects, however, must be added the positive consequences of the often-harsh stipulations tour operators place on indigenous villages. There is little question that

villages that host tourists are cleaner, and their inhabitants, when employed entertaining tourists, are less likely to be tempted to engage in logging and other unsustainable practices.

While the Emberá-Wounaan have not seen many negative effects of tourism so far, the leadership fears the worst. To avoid future problems, the *Presidenta* wants “to control the number of tourists, the type of people, how long they stay, what they do.” An advisor to the CGEW makes the same point. If the numbers of tourists are limited, his people can devote themselves to agriculture and traditional pursuits. Noting that the CGEW sees that the Kuna were already too dependent on tourism and had lost self-sufficiency in food, he stated: “To protect our culture, we want tourism to be only a part of the economy, not the whole thing.” Similarly, in Darien local leaders are afraid of too many people devoting themselves to tourism, and not tending the rice and bananas, which would lead to “loss of their way of life,” as one put it. It seems highly probable, however, that without a coherent plan to control the industry, if the number of tourists increases, so will the Emberá/Wounaan dependence on their dollars.

The CGEW leadership recognizes that the ordinary villager, especially in the more secluded areas, sees no downside to tourism and wants as many visitors as possible. Asked what the leaders would do if their people began clamoring for more tourists instead of a limitation on tourism, one advisor to the CGEW made an interesting point. “We have to educate our own people. It is not just education for the tourists from Panama or the exterior, but also of our own people. If we don’t do that, then the tourist wave will become uncontrollable.” In order to educate their people and make an attempt to limit the number of tourists who visit, however, the Emberá/Wounaan leadership will have to develop a political plan as the Kuna have done.

Conclusion

Tourism can help Indians make the money they badly need, but it also imposes serious costs, only some of which are possible to ameliorate. The Kuna Statute to control tourism has so far reduced the harm from environmental degradation, economic stratification and rivalries, the movement of labor from agriculture to tourism, and the economic exploitation of uninformed

Indians. Other problems appear more intractable: a contrived rather than authentic display of traditions, a decreased influence of the political leaders, and the money-shrewdness that accompanies a closer equality in market relations between Indians and tour operators. The issue of cultural regeneration or degradation seems unrelated to any actions that could be taken by the communities in an attempt to protect themselves from tourism. The Kuna have had to wrestle with cultural dilution and coarsening, for example, precisely because their culture was relatively unaffected by the larger Panamanian society until tourism's encroachment.

The Emberá/Wounaan share some of the difficulties the Kuna have encountered, but these are still limited by their reduced exposure to large numbers of tourists: some environmental damage (sure to increase in the future), a contrived display of traditions, and a reduction in the power of and respect given to traditional leaders. The Emberá/Wounaan, however, have benefited from tourism in ways the Kuna have not. While the dancing and wearing of costumes is often only for tourists' benefit, tourism has led to a rejuvenation, rather than a loss, of traditional Emberá/Wounaan customs. This appears to be because their culture was more compromised by *ladino* Panamanian society before the arrival of tourism. The Emberá/Wounaan face the problems of economic exploitation, invidious comparisons and envy, and a reduced ability to distribute the proceeds from tourism largely because they have as yet not formulated a formal plan to regulate tourism in their lands.

Tourism is an industry that, above all, brings great change to indigenous communities, both in Latin America and the wider world. Our research indicates that the level of cultural loss the community has already borne, and the extent to which the community has implemented a clear plan regulating tourism, act together to determine the degree to which the industry's benefits are maximized and costs reduced. It is our hope that these findings can be productively applied to other cases of tourism to indigenous communities in order to carefully plan and control the industry, thereby providing for the material betterment of the lives of indigenous peoples.

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¹ A note on terminology. Generalities are often stylistically useful, if literally inaccurate, and therefore in this paper to refer to the original inhabitants of the Americas we use the terms Indian, indigenous people and the adjective indigenous. Political and semantic objections can be raised to any of these and their alternatives (see Wright 1992, x). Further, instead of using the Kuna and Emberá words for local leaders, we substitute the word *cacique*, which is more likely to be familiar to readers. Lastly, to refer to non-indigenous Panamanians, we use the term *ladino*, which the Indians themselves often use.

² See the “Specialty Travel Index” site <http://www.spectrav.com/>, which advertises tours to indigenous peoples in almost 50 different countries. (Go to “Anthropology” under the “Interest Activity Index.”)

³ The data upon which the following analysis is based consists of 42 interviews with Indians, conducted at 12 different tourist locations in Panama, ranging from the Darien to Kuna Yala to the Chagres National Park; 16 interviews with all 10 companies offering tours to indigenous communities in 1996; and interviews and informal discussions with government officials, biologists, members of non-governmental environmental organizations, and academic specialists in indigenous affairs. Other data include published and non-published materials from the Kuna and Emberá-Wounaan Congresses, and publications of various Panamanian government ministries. The majority of the interviews were conducted from June to December

1996, with additional research undertaken in the fall of 1998. Translations from the Spanish are the authors'.

⁴ A *comarca* is inalienable land that allows for Indian self-government. The Kuna possess the *Comarca* of Kuna Yala (a related group of Kuna, who are not yet significantly involved in tourism, possess the *Comarca* Madungandí), and the Emberá/Wounaan the *Comarca* Drúa in Darien. The Kuna, unlike most indigenous peoples, are granted a high level of political autonomy by the Federal Government. The main locus of this power is the CGK, which is granted authority by various Panamanian constitutions and legislation that recognize the Kuna political Charter. The CGK may take whatever steps necessary to protect the welfare of the *Comarca* as long as its actions do not contradict the Constitution or Federal law. See Howe 1998; Herlihy 1989.

⁵ To prevent hidden ownership of hotels in Kuna Yala, the Statute on Tourism declares, for example, that all hotel-owners who wish to improve their properties must apply to the CGK, demonstrating their sources of financing (Art. 4). Further, it is forbidden to use any Kuna Yala real estate as collateral for any type of loan: "infractions will be punished with annulment of the project and confiscation" (Art. 7).

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