

Third World countries finding ecotourism has double advantage

By Angela Bianchi
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Imagine waking up every morning at the crack of dawn, in a remote village in Latin America — where the air is clean, the people sincere and the food fresh from the garden — to milk the cows, feed the chickens and study termites in the glorious morning sun.

Would you call this a holiday? Yes, especially if you're one of the growing numbers of people turning to ecotourism, (a fashionable term used to describe tourism that promotes ecological understanding—) as an alternative holiday adventure.

For the more than 400 guests and 21 speakers who attended the Second International Symposium on Ecology, Tourism and Local Governments in Costa Rica, ecotourism is the definite answer for developing countries that want to attract tourism dollars but don't want over-developed tourist centres, risk ecological damage and the social degradation (prostitution, gambling, drugs) that comes with mass tourism.

Ecotourism they say, offers a fresh approach to travelling and provides a perfect balance for people who want to travel yet avoid traditional tourist destinations and commercial attractions.

The Costa Rican symposium attempted to highlight some of the dangers facing the world's precious rain forests and present some ways where man and nature could live together to the benefit and profit of both.

Perhaps Roberto Boullon, an Argentinian architect and tourism expert put it best when he said, to defend the environment in Latin America we must pay more attention to the development of tourism, stamp out land speculation and not over produce tourist centres, or Latin American countries run the risk of creating another Acapulco.

"Tourism is an industry without a chimney, whose main purpose is to provide a service, but unlike other industries there is little government and public control. Land speculators have also been successful in bribing local government officials to approve monster tourist developments without an environment assessment plan," says Boullon.

"The Third World, not only tourists, is to blame for its ecological and urbanization problems. In the name of progress, local citizens, too ignorant to

know better, are easily convinced by local tourist promoters that flashing neon lights should replace the more simple wooden street signs in order to attract tourists," Boullon adds.

Not only do ecologically sensitive countries need to educate tourists not to pollute and destroy the environment (ie. coral reefs), but educating local people about conservation is also a prerequisite, said several of the speakers.

They recognized Costa Rica as a prime example of a country that can benefit from ecotourism. Last year the country drew a record 500,000 tourists, by promoting its ecological attractions along with the sand and sun.

By 1994, Costa Rica hopes to turn tourism into a \$500 million industry, marketing itself as a family destination primarily to environmentally aware Canadians and Americans.

"Use it or lose it" is how American ecologist Dr. Dan Jansen describes the survival of the Costa Rican rain forest. "Offer the tourist something different — quality — and let them pay for it."

"If a tourist wants to come to Costa Rica, pay \$200 a day to see termites and get some sun, let them in along with the bird watchers. People are willing to pay big bucks for ecotourism and it costs the country very little. These are the tourists that should be encouraged to come," says Jansen.

But before selling ecotourism, Latin America should pay more attention to upgrading its public health system, says Oscar Medrano, an American public administrator.

"If you want to attract the tourist, you have to fix up the airport toilets first. First impressions do count. Countries have to be honest in disclosing health problems, like cholera, but many officials manipulate statistics in order not to scare off tourism," says Medrano.

On two key issues the speakers did agree; to keep Costa Rica green, and promote their creed to tourists: "Take only photographs and leave only footprints."

They realize education in conservation is key to the survival of the world's great parks and reserves, and education starts at home. Through the school system children are being taught to respect their wildlife, care for their waters and protect their forests.