

Communitarian Ecotourism in the Colombian Darién and Urabá Region: An Opportunity for Peace-Building

Introduction

The Urabá Gulf is located on the western border of northern Colombia, next to Panamá. The continental part of the Gulf is the Darién and Urabá Region. This area of Colombia is still unknown; its violence and uprooting history have stigmatised a beautiful place, diverse in people and nature. In this area, tourist initiatives have emerged from rural communities, the same ones that have suffered a history of violence and repression.

The aim of this article is to show how tourism is an opportunity for peace-building in the Darién and Urabá Region; and through this example to show how endogenous development models are essential for local communities. It is an interesting example of how tourism services provided by local people through four ecotourism centres, managed by communitarian organisations, and with more than 100 families directly involved, are an opportunity for the promotion of a local endogenous development; these services – integrating personal, communitarian, commercial and territorial aspects – are leading to a social change in the area.

Colombia is located in a strategic position, in the northern corner of South America: it is the main corridor to Central and North America. On the northern border with Panamá, no roads are available for vehicle transit and the only transportation is by boat, or by foot on a dangerous and hidden road. This region is called 'Tapón del Darién', or 'Darién Gap'. Its dense vegetation makes it a region with one of the largest amounts of plant and animal biodiversity in the world, although most species – despite their potential value for scientific, biomedical or industrial purposes – have not yet been identified. It's considered a strategic ecosystem capable of guaranteeing essential environmental goods and services for sustainable human development, the maintenance of cultural and biological diversity, the protection of endemism and the balance of basic ecological processes. The environmental richness and the cultural diversity in this territory is amazing: indigenous people, Afro-Colombians, farmers and people from different regions in Colombia, who came looking for new opportunities in the region, all live together here. Urabá borders the Darién region, where agriculture and banana farming are the main commercial activities; the land is productive and has access to the sea through the port of Turbo at the Urabá Gulf.



Map 1: Northern Colombia and Panama with Darién and Urabá Regions marked in dotted line
 Map 2: Location of Ecotourism Centres in Darién and Urabá Region

In the Urabá Gulf, the four ecotourism centres are in Capurganá, Playona, San Francisco (Acandí municipality), and El Carlos (Necoclí municipality).

Access to these regions is complicated. Possible routes are:

- Fly from Bogotá to Montería, and then go about 3 hours by road to Necoclí
- Fly from Bogotá to Medellín and then Apartadó; from there, either go about 2½ hours by road to Necoclí, or else go about 1 hour by road to the port in Turbo, and then by boat to Acandí
- Fly from Bogotá to Medellín and then Capurganá; from there, go by boat to Playona / San Francisco / the port in Turbo, and then by road to Necoclí

If you are heading north beyond Capurganá, there is a boat from Capurganá to Puerto Obaldía in Panamá (there is also a path, which is usable only for walking or on horseback, and it's definitely not recommended); from Puerto Obaldía, there are flights to Panama City.

War and Conflict in the Darién and Urabá Region

The Darién and Urabá region has suffered a history of violence due to its strategic location. According to an investigation published by EAFIT University and the Antioquia Government in Medellín, this territory acts as a corridor to North America for drugs, weapons and other illegal items. The economic potential, and the environmental richness, make the control of the territory an important military objective for different forces. Since colonisation, social and economic interests, linked to vast banana farms and palm crops, have always

caused conflicts about land rights and access. A lack of Government presence, and of legal documents for property, has provided the perfect opportunity for illegal forces to take control of the territory.

In the 1970s, guerrilla forces – FARC (Colombian Revolutionary Army Forces) and EPL (Liberation Popular Army) – occupied this territory, aiming to win the support of the people. They started to take sides with the banana farm employees against their employers, fighting for labour benefits. All over Colombia at that time, the Government failed to implement means that could provide an equitable access to land and political participation to left-wing parties and ideologies.

Soon, conflict between the guerrillas arose – each one with its own strategy to gain control of the territory. The guerrillas' main actions were focused on supporting people to occupy land, in both urban and rural sites. They started killing each other, and this conflict between guerrilla groups about labour and land intensified in the 1980s. There were Government efforts to negotiate and in 1991 the EPL initiated a process to participate in politics; in this context, FARC started killing all people involved in the process and consolidated their presence in the region. Then, in the 1990s, paramilitary forces from the northeast emerged.

During this time, drug trafficking became an important economic income for all illegal bands. After Pablo Escobar's death in 1993, Carlos Castaño became the main leader and, with the support of EPL's former combatants, fighting began against FARC. The violence perpetrated by paramilitary forces was escalating; Darién and Urabá was a place known for torture and captivity, and was the region in Colombia that suffered the most from this kind of paramilitary violence. (Gobernación de Antioquia 2011: 20–45).

The complexity of the conflict is enormous. Between 1988 and 2002 there were 103 massacres and 697 people were killed. 2001 was the year with the most displaced people in Colombia and specifically in the Darién and Urabá region. The consolidation of the paramilitary forces has a complex analysis; in common with military Government forces they were fighting against FARC, and this common goal facilitated their position in the region. Some violent actions, connected with the responsibility of the military forces, are still being brought to justice. At that time, Elmer Cardenas Block and its leader Freddy Rendón Herrera, alias 'El Alemán', was the main force. According to a report of the Intereclesial Justice and Peace Commission, paramilitary forces killed 600 people annually from 2001 to 2005. Between 2002 and 2005, paramilitary forces started to negotiate and also started productive projects in the area. (ibid.).

The region is a place where different forces collided, from guerrilla to paramilitary; in the middle of this struggle were farmers, indigenous people and local people fighting for their right to land access and basic needs. Nowadays, it seems that the worst part of the conflict has ended even though drug trafficking still persists. The challenges now are the restitution of land and rights to all victims of conflict, and the bringing of productive alternatives to drug trafficking and illegal activities to the local communities.

The Benefits of a Tourism Local Development Model

The Global Code of Ethics for Tourism points out the important role of tourism “towards alleviation of poverty and the improvement of the quality of life ... its potential to make a contribution to economic and social development, especially of the developing countries ... the need for the promotion of a responsible and sustainable tourism that could be beneficial to all sectors of society” (WTO, Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, 2).

The value chain of tourism implies economic, cultural and social relations with different participants: farmers, fishermen, health services, security forces, guides, transportation, commerce, handicraft workers, the educational system, and commerce in general. Tourism is an activity that generates multiple benefits to the various economic sectors of society.

Besides that process, tourism helps to identify and promote the value of local culture, the territory, the natural resources and landscapes; helping communities to care, watch and protect their land, their culture, their roots and identity.

The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) indicates that tourism has been growing in emerging countries. In Colombia, foreign visitors are an increasing trend in recent years: 7.3% more from 2010 to 2011, and 7.16% from 2011 to 2012 according to migratory data; in total 1,692,821 visitors were registered in 2012. (Migración Colombia 2013). This represents an enormous potential to develop and improve the quality of life in Colombia. Tourism also presents huge possibilities to stimulate local development – from cities to rural areas – due to Colombia’s great natural and cultural diversity and potential. Tourism is a tool for economic and social development that has increased in importance in the world. It’s one of the sectors which has a greater impact on the social structure due to its wide reach into society.

The positive effects of tourism are stronger if the community gets involved. That’s why communitarian tourism is a good alternative – because local people can manage their resources, thereby allowing the preservation of environmental and cultural assets, and enabling the benefits of the tourism activity to fit more closely with the communitarian needs. If the local people have a main role, then it’s possible to promote endogenous development models, which strengthen their roots and identity. Community-based tourism, constructed for and by the local people – who thus have control of decisions and have an active role – makes it possible to establish relationships based on dialogue and interaction between them and the visitors.

World Wide Fund International defines communitarian-based tourism as the activity where local societies have effective control over their territory, their development and management (World Wide Fund 2001). Through local active participation, tourism projects bring most of the benefits to the local communities.

In this kind of tourism, other economic activities of the local community are necessarily involved, such as agriculture, fishery, artisan crafts, commerce, transportation, guided tours and others. Tourism, then, generates local in-

come, jobs and a dynamic economy. The innovation and initiatives for local employment and opportunities could be more suitable to their needs, their vocation and their economic possibilities and abilities. The process then becomes a continuous endogenous development, looking for what the local people want with a significant contribution for them and their locality. If tourism is responsible and planned, it articulates an equitable economic development and preserves culture and environment (Da Silva 2012, 181–99).

Nowadays, Colombia is trying to strengthen the normative frame for communitarian tourism and nature tourism. According to the UNWTO, nature tourism is one of the fastest-growing types of tourism worldwide; and ecotourism is defined as nature-based, containing educational and interpretation features, organised usually for small groups, minimising negative impacts upon the natural and socio-cultural environment, generating local income to communities and increasing awareness towards conservation.

Nature and communitarian tourism tend to preserve natural and cultural resources and improve local income in a sustainable way. These types of tourism characterise the function of the ecotourism centres in the Darién and Urabá region.

Tourism in the Darién and Urabá Region

Even though tourism is not the most important economic activity in the Darién and Urabá region, Capurganá, Sapzurro, San Francisco and Necoclí have been identified as local destinations. The main economic activities in the area are commerce, banana farming, fishing and agriculture. Due to the extensive banana farming and the commerce, the region is a place where many people from Apartadó and Medellín come to vacation with their families; Capurganá has also received some international tourists, but there is no data available about the number of tourists in the area.

In this region, there is a basic level of infrastructure, with some hostels, hotels, campsites and restaurants; local inhabitants and residents generally have been employed by these, but they are usually not the main participants in tourism. Nowadays, the community has the possibility of getting involved in the service as main participants in their territory. The United Nations Office On Drugs and Crime (UNODC) supports an initiative, which promotes alternative development through communitarian projects on artisan fishing, handicrafts and ecotourism managed by social organisations, working towards establishing a value chain.

There are four ecotourism centres managed by social organisations in the area, as follows:

- ‘El Carlos’ Ecotourism and Archaeological Centre – El Carlos, Necoclí, Antioquia
- ‘Iracas de Belén’ Ecotourism Cabins – Capurganá, Acandí, Chocó
- ‘Posadas del Río’ – San Francisco, Acandí, Chocó
- ‘Playa Caná’ Ecotourism Centre – Playona, Acandí, Chocó

The centres have cabins, restaurant service, paths and ecotourism activities covered by a local development course of action to build up management and operational abilities for local sustainability. The construction has low impact on the environment, and the residents control and measure water, energy and waste, trying to work in a sustainable way. Currently, this operation is the first and only one in Colombia with an international certification: 'Smart Voyager' for Sustainable Tourism is the certification chosen for the ecotourism centres. This is a certification programme for the whole of South America, which has its origins in Ecuador and is given by Smart Voyager Certified. Smart Voyager is recognised by UNESCO, and one of its first programmes was in the Galapagos Islands; it is part of the Sustainable Tourism Certification Network of the Americas promoted by Rainforest Alliance. This certification has been considered to be a big step for the community, and reflects the great work that they have been doing to promote tourism in a sustainable way, working together as a group.

The four ecotourism centres in more detail are:

1 El Carlos Ecotourism and Archaeological Centre, Necoclí

This centre is managed by a cooperative and 22 families are directly involved in the project. These are mainly farmers, some of whom used to work with drug trafficking and paramilitary forces. El Carlos is a rural village; Adventism is the main religion there and, for this reason, there is no loud music around, unlike in the Caribbean and on the Colombian coast. People are friendly, simple and kind; they are learning about tourism. They keep trying to bring groups to visit and experience their quiet life. People from schools, enterprises and families from Medellín and Apartadó come to visit. The main attractions here are the landscapes, the food, the rural way of life, the archaeological museum and the ecological paths leading towards a waterfall. The artefacts in the museum were found in the village and originally one of the leaders took care of them. Later they were legalised and the community is now the administrator of all the legacy of ancestral inhabitants of the area. Some local people work in handicrafts and their products are sold at the Centre. The tourists buy agricultural products from the locals and fish from the local fishery association in town.

2 Iracas de Belén in Capurganá, Acandí

This centre is managed by an association; 32 families are directly involved in the project. These people are mainly Afrodescendants, farmers and some fishermen. The territory is a communitarian afrodescendent area, and the Centre is located between the sea and the forest. The main attractions are the beaches and the sea, the forest, the culture, and the diverse fauna and flora; there are also some activities like diving, snorkelling, bird watching and nature walks. The tourists buy agricultural products from the area, fish from the local association and handicrafts from the local people.

3 Posadas del Rio in San Francisco, Acandí

This centre is managed by an association. 35 families are involved directly in

the project; these people are mostly women. This ecotourism centre is located in a beautiful area in the middle of the forest, close to the San Francisco River. It's a corridor for fauna and flora, and is visited from time to time by howling monkeys and titis (small monkeys). It's a quiet place surrounded by nature, ideal for resting, nature walks, snorkelling and bird watching.

4 Playa Caná, Acandí

This centre is also managed by an association. 35 families are directly involved in the project; these are mostly displaced people who are returning to their land. Due to this factor, however, more conflicts have arisen; the roots and the networks are fragile, and this makes the dialogue and problem-solving difficult. The land is right by the beach, where there was once a school and a community; nowadays there is a 10 kilometre, beautiful but isolated beach. Here, the Cana turtles (a big kind of marine turtle) come to leave their eggs that hatch once a year between May and July. People are trying to protect the eggs, learn, and teach others to respect the beach and nature. Today the area has been declared a national natural reserve for the protection of the turtles.

There is an organisation in charge of the commercialisation of all four ecotourism centres. This is very challenging – because guaranteeing visitors, and a stable income to the communities, is not at all easy in a place with difficult access and stigmatisation.

The objectives of the various organisations are to improve the quality of life, and to generate employment and alternative income – as well as social, cultural and environmental preservation. The people involved are organised through a board and committees; amongst other things, they have the ability to make decisions, and they show communicational skills, management capacities, leadership and teamwork. The active community participation in the project's process of identification, diagnosis and creation promotes the empowerment and strength of the communitarian concept.

Each ecotourism centre has its own dynamic and reflects a different reality. The most important objective in the process is to strengthen communitarian capacities for a common goal; this process is a long-term action for social change through tourism. In some cases, it's important to reincorporate people who were involved in conflict directly. In other cases the confidence and return to the territory are the main objectives. Empowerment of women and leadership bring opportunities to the families; in all of them network and identity strength are essential.

All the families involved in the ecotourism centres have high levels of unsatisfied needs, according to the statistics managed by the Government. They are a vulnerable-based population, according to the Colombian Government – meaning that they have no protection or capacity to face a threat to their psychological, physical or mental status due to diverse factors that could be institutional, educational, health-related, cultural, environmental, and educational. The presence of women, children and people affected by the conflict is therefore essential: without the active participation of the community the project wouldn't make sense.

Social Change Through Communitarian Tourism

Tourism could provide collective benefits:

- Sustainable development and the preservation of cultures and the natural habitat
- Economic local growth
- An integral experience for visitors and host communities
- A leisure activity that has effects on the culture and the spirit

UNWTO emphasises in the Code of Ethics, that tourism can be an efficient tool to advance international peace and understanding and that its social, cultural and ethical dimensions are an important potential contribution to promote values such as tolerance, respect of diversity and respect of nature.

The organisational associative structures promote solidarity values through a qualification process that includes personal, familiar, communitarian and entrepreneurial aspects. Furthermore, tourism is a service, and its focus is on human interaction and personal experience. It also implicates human skills, abilities and capacities both as an individual and as a group. When people start a process working together with others, it starts to create an internal process for the development of confidence and self-esteem.

This case experience in the Darién and Urabá region has different components that promote social change through communitarian tourism:

Personal skills

Every single person involved in the ecotourism centres has gained confidence and self-esteem by developing their personal skills; that could be linked to the participation in a wider group, where each opinion is taken into account, and where the decision-making process involves each member of the group. Women don't usually have time to work because of their family duties, but here they have a space to talk, participate, and make important decisions for the community. Their role is essential at the centres: in service, reception, gastronomy and administration, among others; they could also bring their children who could get involved in some duties.

Communitarian work and participation

The positive aspects of the participation in communitarian activities promote feelings of wellbeing, and of being useful. The associations and groups provide the possibility for people to get involved and, in turn, to be given a sense of empowerment in the community. The communitarian participation brings individual welfare through a higher self-esteem and useful feeling. (Sánchez 1999, 254)

Identity

This is the way people define themselves; its how their fundamental characteristics make a person a human being. This identity could be influenced by the existence of recognition from others. This recognition could shape the identi-

ty of individuals and groups. Taylor refers to the understanding between people as being shaped by meaningful dialogue and interaction with others; this helps to consolidate identity and dialogue through recognition. (Sánchez 1999, 252–253)

The strength of the identity linked to the territory through tourism is another important contribution. This territorial identity in rural areas is essential, and even more so, if it's a strategy regarding peace-building. When this process to rediscover landscapes and surroundings means you could walk again without fear along the paths leading to the forest and the sea, along the paths to rice crops and banana farms, along the paths where you could show outsiders and visitors the birds, the plants that heal, and maybe the endemic frog that only you could find in your territory, where you live, then your territorial identity is strengthened and reconfirmed.

Territorial identity could be interpreted as a 'sense of belonging, social identification, shared representation of a collective self' (Pollice 2003, 109); the author points out that territorial identity helps to strengthen locally-shared ethical and behavioural values, that improve productivity, and allow commercial relationships and collaboration. It also helps to improve inter-generational transfer of knowledge, and to create and improve the mechanism of change and adaptation – and is therefore a sound basis for innovation.

Tourism could help in an active way to promote territorial identity through two specific activities:

- Gastronomy
- Guiding as an interpretation of culture and nature

It's a great experience for local communities to identify their local products for their restaurant menu, and to rediscover flavours and use their ancestral knowledge in recipes, with local plants and domestic animals. They feel proud to let visitors know that the vegetable was planted by families and neighbours, and was taken care of by their children, perhaps; letting them know their family recipes, and how the husband fishes in the morning, may also be worthwhile. Some other options could be the identification of routes and paths around their homes, to show visitors the best view of their town and landscapes, and to show how the sea provides food and is sometimes calm or not so calm to navigate. They could also show how they plant a tree, or different fruits and vegetables, or how they live from agriculture, or maybe how the forest is their ancestral land.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Darién and Urabá region in Colombia has for years been suffering from the consequences of a complex conflict. People there have been developing survival strategies to get through all these years. Afro-Colombian people in Capurganá are organised in a communitarian entity and have remained there, in the middle of conflict. People in Playona have been returning to their

land and restructuring family and communitarian networks. In San Francisco, where the women have been resisting war and inequity, and where there are neither police nor hospital, the people have been developing ways of living in a mixed community with people from the interior, including Afro-Colombians, indigenous people and farmers. El Carlos in Necoclí has witnessed the emergence of violence in the middle of the paramilitary forces and has been resigned to losing fathers, brothers and sisters. With on-going violence, these communities have been living in perpetual silence to try and survive without becoming a target of war.

In the last six years, the worst of the conflict has seemed to be over; people are recovering from their wounds and Colombia's Government is trying to reach a solution for victims. Tourism as an alternative for communities, linked to other associated initiatives like fishing and handicrafts, has been developing little by little; the area has been identified as an attractive destination for visitors. There is some basic infrastructure and tourism has been a tool for strengthening networks, for the preservation of nature and culture, and as an economic alternative for families. The process is long and, after years of community work in tourism, there are both tangible and intangible changes in the territory, in the society and individually. This changing process through tourism, improving personal and entrepreneurial skills based on local resources in an endogenous development frame, creates identity, feelings of security, a sense of community and belonging, helping to reconstruct society and to build the foundations for peace. The reinterpretation of life to show to visitors their positive aspects of everyday life and surroundings helps to reinforce their sense of life as a community.

In a place where violence has its roots and people try to overcome this devastation, it's very important to restore confidence, strengthen networks of support and give people the means to empower a life project that could be an effective tool for communities to work together for a common goal. In this case, tourism provides the tools for economic growth, social and cultural strength, and environmental preservation. The strong feeling that local communities in the Darién and Urabá region are creating through tourism for their territory, their rich diversity, their cultural values, their local products and all the resources involved in the service they give to visitors, is an invaluable feeling that helps them to be proud of themselves, their origin, their territory, their community and their own decisions in life.

These communitarian initiatives present multiple challenges. The support in commercialisation and entrepreneurial aspects is essential to maintain a stable income for local people. On the other hand, local public institutions and even private ones have to start a process of trust and support of these initiatives. Usually people in rural communities are subjects of subsidiary policies, but they are not seen as main participants in their own development. It's important to start the movement towards this by giving the means to grow and develop self-esteem and self-confidence in their own territory. If local rural development is not based on communitarian values and abilities, and local communities are not the main participants in their own destiny, peace will be

a difficult achievement. They, like everyone else, have to find their own path in life, and be able to integrate their own resources, both territorial and symbolic, to lead productive lives. If they could find the means to live harmoniously in their territory, people would have less interest in self-destructive or illegal actions.

It's essential to support these rural communities; to help strengthen their roots and value their land. Leaving them alone only contributes to the possibility of war and conflict. Tourism implemented the right way is a tool for development, for understanding, for sustainability and for peace.

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