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Ana L. Báez

Sky Walk–Sky Trek: A Successful Community Project in the Mountains of Monteverde, Costa Rica

The Sky Walk–Sky Trek project is located in Monteverde at approximately 1700 m above sea level in the Tilarán Mountains of northern Costa Rica. It has been cited as an example of a totally rural tourism initiative, and its quality has been praised worldwide. The Sky Walk offers visitors—including the disabled—an opportunity to experience different levels of biodiversity in the cloud forest on a series of suspended bridges connected by trails. The Sky Trek is a more adventurous experience, consisting of a series of cables (for sliding across canyons) and trails. Besides having an educational component, the project has made a positive, well-recognized contribution to forest regeneration on abandoned pastureland. Moreover, it illustrates the problems and challenges of community participation in tourism microenterprises. Size is not necessarily a criterion for success in tourism projects: a small-scale tourism project must be creative and responsible and must show familiarity with its product and its customer base.

An innovative approach to ecotourism

Costa Rica, located in the middle of the American continent, is privileged by its location and its topography—factors that help account for its great variety of ecosystems and biodiversity. The country is internationally known for its efforts to conserve and protect different ecosystems. One hundred and fifty-one government-protected areas exist in many different categories. The private sector also participates through the creation and maintenance of an increasing number of private protected areas. A total of 26% of the country's territory is protected under different management categories.

The Monteverde region is known for scientific research as well as for promotion of responsible management of natural resources, community participation in projects, and the creativity and entrepreneurial abilities of its inhabitants. Located in the middle of the country at an altitude of 1700 m, Monteverde is influenced by the climatic conditions of both the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. Six different ecosystems can be identified within a relatively small area. Monteverde is a very mountainous region, with a protected tropical cloud rainforest characterized by great biodiversity and exuberant vegetation. There are 100 species of mammals, 400 species of birds, 120 species of reptiles and amphibians, 2500 species of plants, and thousands of insects.

Monteverde currently has a population of around 5000 inhabitants. In the late 1950s its economy was based on subsistence agriculture. By the beginning of the 1960s it had become an important center for the dairy and cattle industries, which were promoted by a group of American Quakers. Although there was some interest in conservation at that time, it was not until the mid-1970s that conservation efforts resulted in an increasing number of hectares being protected. Publication of the initial results from scientific research led to recognition of the richness of cloud forest biodiversity in the region.

As a result of the scientific information generated in this region, the first steps were taken toward promotion of tourism. By the end of the 1980s Monteverde had become one of the best-known ecotourism destinations in Costa Rica. And what is even more important, it has been able to retain this position in the years since.

Ecotourism in Monteverde had continued to expand and explore new frontiers and products to add to the activities that originated in the region. All these activities are linked to issues related to conservation, research, and management of natural resources, with an important educational and entertainment component. Among the most popular activities are the Monteverde Cloud Forest Private Reserve, the Community Reserve of Santa Elena, the Butterfly Garden, the Orchid Farm, the Community Art Center, CASEM, the Cheese Factory, the Frog Farm, and Sky Walk–Sky Trek.

All these projects were designed, and are still individually or collectively operated, by members of the community. This article focuses on Sky Walk–Sky Trek, a novel and successful project that has received worldwide recognition.

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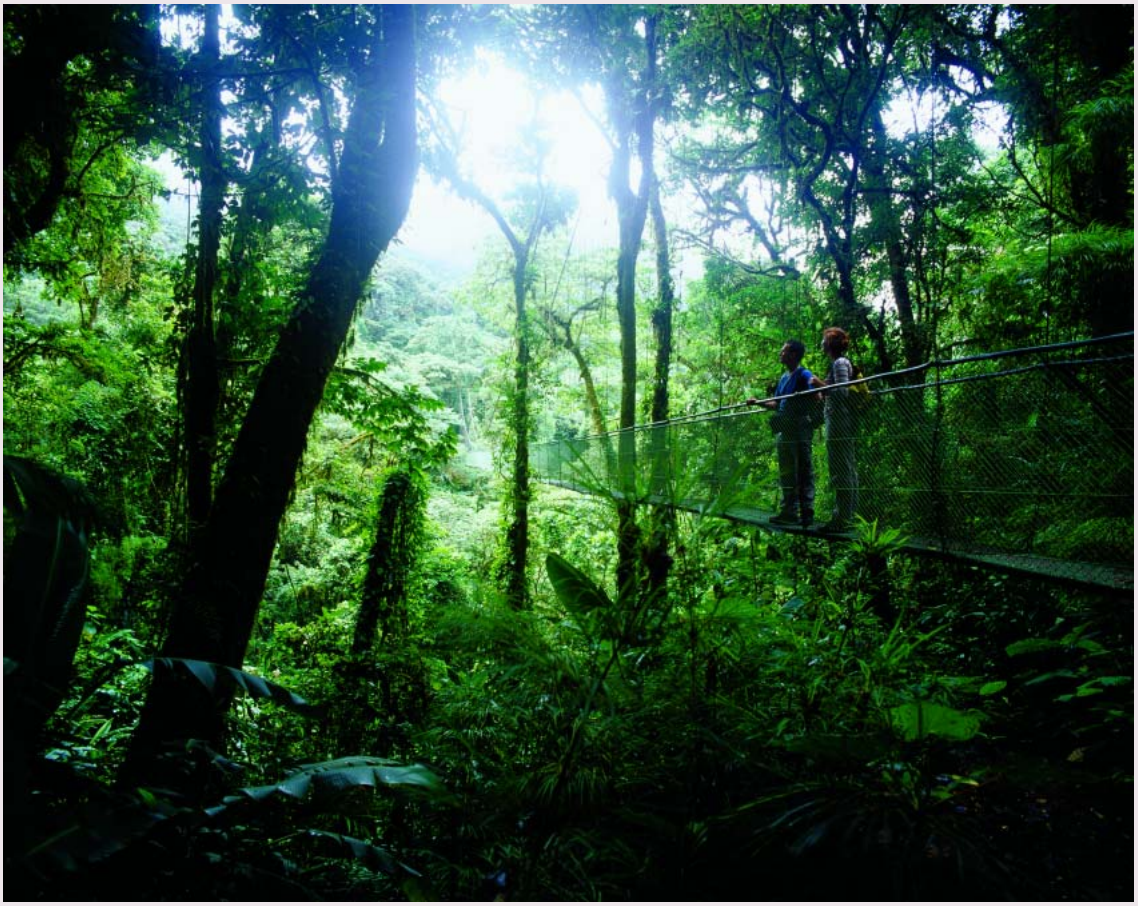


FIGURE 1 The suspended bridges of the Sky Walk offer visitors an opportunity to see and learn about cloud forest biodiversity at close range with minimum environmental impact. (Photo courtesy of Valle de Monteverde)

The Sky Walk and the Sky Trek

The Sky Walk consists of 7 suspended bridges (from 80 to 300 m in length, with a maximum height of 46 m) in different parts of the forest, interconnected by a system of walking trails. The Sky Walk is 2.5 km long and offers a mountain hike that lasts about 1.5 hours (Figure 1).

The Sky Trek, designed primarily for the adventure-loving tourist, consists of 11 cables that enable visitors to traverse canyons within the forest at a maximum height of approximately 700 m. This system of cables is connected by hiking trails. The adventurous visitor can thus alternate between cable rides and hiking, for a total of 4.5 km (approximately 2.5 hours hiking time, see Figure 2).

By comparison with other canopy observation systems, Sky Walk–Sky Trek offers greater numbers of people an opportunity to enjoy and learn about the beauties of the forest while avoiding detrimental impacts on the ecosystem. Even more important, it allows children, adults, and physically disabled people to reach remote areas of the forest with great ease and safety. Trained local guides accompany groups of up to 10 visitors, thus supporting the educational goal of the project.

Community roots

The design, construction, and operation of Sky Walk–Sky Trek are the result of a joint effort by 3 members of a local family from Monteverde: Fernando, Ana Victoria, and Rodrigo Valverde. These 3 siblings are known in the community for their leadership, their great sense of responsibility, their futuristic vision, and their passion for work of high quality. This family has clearly defined the objectives of the project and has been fully involved since its inception, working as team members who recognize and respect one another's skills.

Visits have steadily increased since the initial stages of project operations in 1997 (Figure 3), with reports of great satisfaction from visitors. This has led to improvement and expansion, including construction of new bridges and cable systems. There is a new restaurant and handicraft store, and a similar project in another part of the country is under way. A total of 45 jobs have been generated, 75% of which

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FIGURE 2 There is a system of 11 cables along which hikers can slide to cross canyons. These cables are connected by hiking trails, which make for an adventurous 2.5-hour experience. (Photo courtesy of Valle de Monteverde)

are filled by local residents. The enterprise provides training, which enables employees to enhance their abilities and their skills in specific areas of activity.

Tourists remain an additional night in the local area because of this project. This not only benefits the local lodging, food, and transportation industries, but visitors also seek out local guides and opportunities to engage in other activities. In addition, the project supports local schools, churches, community associations, and rural roads, among other things. The greatest impact has probably been at the community level, where the project serves as a source of optimism and inspiration for other new initiatives by people in rural areas.

Low environmental impact

Having the lowest possible environmental impact is one of the greatest challenges in the development of any ecotourism project. Sky Walk–Sky Trek has not only taken this challenge into account but has also shown that the goal of having a minimal environmental impact can be achieved on the basis of local willingness and dedication. Investment and labor costs would have been much lower than the actual figures of 20 people and 8 months, but the necessary choices were made to ensure minimal environmental impact. All the raw materials and equipment for the project were transported manually, and no heavy equipment was used, leaving manual labor as the only option in realizing both projects.

It is important to note that these projects do not use any form of electrical energy for their daily operations (except for the reception and restaurant areas), nor do they generate excessive waste. A responsible waste management plan currently under development includes California worms for organic material composting, among other options.

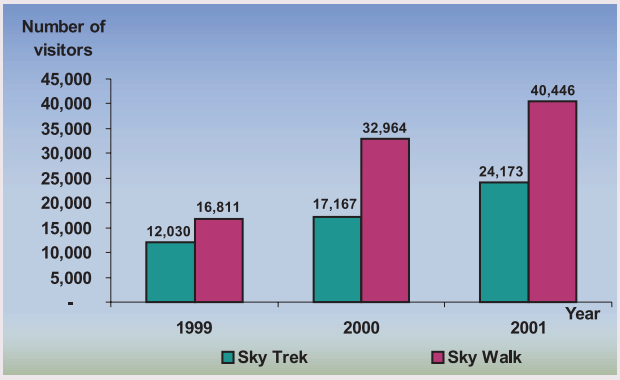
The land where Sky Walk and Sky Trek are located was acquired specifically for this project. It was formerly a mixture of farmland and abrupt canyons with patches of forest. Today, as a result of the change in land use and natural regeneration, it is returning to natural forest (Figure 4). This will ensure the preservation of 120 ha (the Sky Walk and Sky Trek together occupy only 20 ha). This property has now become part of the Monteverde–Arenal biological corridor in the Arenal Conservation Area and plays an important role as a buffer zone, protecting a crucial source that supplies water to members of the community.

Reasons for success

Sky Walk–Sky Trek has numerous features that characterize a successful small-community business project. Some of its most relevant characteristics in this respect are as follows:

- *Creativity.* Sky Walk–Sky Trek is an innovative project that adds value to natural resources and offers an unusual experience combining adventure, entertainment, and educational components to

FIGURE 3 Total number of visitors to Sky Trek and Sky Walk, 1999–2001. (Source: Valle de Monteverde)



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FIGURE 4 The Sky Walk–Sky Trek project has contributed to conservation of the cloud forest in Monteverde and to successful regeneration of the forest in abandoned pastures. (Photo courtesy of Valle de Monteverde)

satisfy a new and growing market. Once the product is developed, it is very important to continue innovating. This not only ensures that work in the tourism industry does not become a mere routine for local people and project personnel alike but also improves the image of the project. A good administrative plan must provide resources for maintenance of existing infrastructure and facilities, as well as for new investments.

- *Responsibility*. Far from being an "opportunistic" idea, the project has been well thought out and structured, showing responsibility for resource management and meeting the challenge of minimizing environmental impacts. It offers a high-quality experience to visitors while remaining competitive through reasonable prices. Safety is taken very seriously, and there is continual monitoring of the facilities, equipment, and staff. In addition, feedback from clients is considered an important tool for improving services. The social component of the project has been addressed responsibly, and the positive impacts in the community are obvious. Sky Walk–Sky Trek has gone well beyond the status of a tourism project. Its location was deliberately chosen with the aim of supporting local efforts to conserve natural resources.
- *Information*. Knowledge about the dynamics, opportunities, and resources of tourism in the region was fundamental to identifying the pros and cons for the success of the projects. Information about financial sources and potential markets played a major role in the initial stages. Continuing information generated by clients is also fundamental to satisfying client expectations and strengthening the product to keep it successful within a changing and very competitive market. Continuous and direct contact with visitors has provided useful information and offers an opportunity for the project to be identified with the personal touch of the owners.

There is no doubt that Sky Walk–Sky Trek is based on the talent and creativity of members of the Monteverde community, who have not only taught us that a dream can come true but also shown ability, vision, and high concern for quality in the product they developed.

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Ana L. Báez is a biologist and the president of Turismo & Conservación Consultores. She has over 15 years of experience as an international consultant on responsible tourism and sustainable development and has coauthored "International Guidelines for Ecolodges," which will be published by The Ecotourism Society, Vermont, USA.

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