

## Tourist Expansion and Development of Rural Communities

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Lara Moragrega Martín

# Tourist Expansion and Development of Rural Communities

## The Case of Monteverde, Costa Rica

202



Central America harbors some of the most important remnants of tropical vegetation at a global level. Its rainforests, among the most representative tropical ecosystems, cover only 5% of the Earth's surface but are home to half of the world's biological diversity. Costa Rica, the second smallest country on the Central American isthmus, has been able to establish a national network of protected areas safeguarding tropical biodiversity on more than 25% of its territory. These areas serve

educational purposes and attract scientists and tourists, with important implications for the development of the surrounding rural communities. The creation in 1972 of the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve brought important socioeconomic and environmental changes to adjacent communities. These changes were both positive (eg introduction of new rural production methods) and problematic (sudden urban development without prior land use planning).

### Growth and tertiarization of a rural area

Located on the Tilarán mountain range in northwestern Costa Rica, at an altitude of 1500 m, the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve is a protected area of about 5000 ha. It is adjacent to the communities of Santa Elena, Cerro Plano and Monteverde, which have approximately 3300 inhabitants. During the past 20 years, under the influence of the Monteverde Preserve, Monteverde experienced an economic shift from agriculture to the service and tourism sectors, which accelerated economic change and shaped development.

The case of Santa Elena community illustrates the consequences of intensive economic transformation without ade-

quate territorial planning (Figure 1). This has conditioned community development and the population's relationship with the environment. The present case reveals the need for growth and planning to go hand in hand.

### Pre-tourism development

After Independence in 1821, agriculture and cattle breeding became Costa Rica's main economic activities. The first settlers in the Monteverde area—farmers from the Central Valley—arrived around 1920 and founded small settlements, taking advantage of the fertile and unexploited land in this mountain area. Thirty years later, Quakers from the USA established a

**FIGURE 1** Uncontrolled urban development in the Monteverde area. (Photo by Lara Moragrega)





small community in Monteverde. They defined a conservation area (the Guacimal river watershed) to protect their water sources, and an area of agricultural and animal husbandry for household use, soon to be complemented by a cheese factory. During the 1950s and 1960s this became the main organization in the area, and the main source of income until the arrival of tourism around 1985. The factory also functioned during this period as a small municipal body, offering community services such as road maintenance, a school, an electrical plant, and a health center, thus complementing economic with social development.

### Population pressure and the advent of conservation and tourism

In time, migrants arrived in considerable numbers from nearby areas (San Ramón, Tilarán, etc), putting pressure on land and production. The Quakers, preferring to remain uninfluenced by certain lifestyles, kept their distance from the newcomers, while the latter concentrated on the territories in the communities of Santa Elena, Cerro Plano and Monteverde.

Meanwhile, several scientific investigations conducted in Monteverde revealed the need for total environmental protection. A natural reserve was created in 1972 at the headwaters of the Guacimal river. Land was soon acquired by the Tropical Science Center (TSC), a private non-profit organization and the first of its kind interested in the preservation of natural resources in Costa Rica. The Monteverde Preserve became the first private preserve in Costa Rica, ahead of the National Network of Protected Areas created in 1985.

The establishment of this network, the advent of ecotourism, and investment by the state in tourism infrastructure during the 1990s constituted added value for the country. Tourism became the most significant economic activity in Monteverde, displacing agriculture and milk production, and generating unplanned and uncontrolled development. International recognition gained by lands under TSC administration, and the purchase of lands for conservation by other organizations, soon led

to a marked increase in visitors to the preserve, with a consequent increase in the demand for labor, as well as in immigration and construction of hotels and other tourist facilities. Associated social problems appeared as well (Figure 2). Continuous growth of the tertiary sector also led to important changes in land use.

### Disorganized administration and inefficient territorial planning

Given the magnitude of the impact caused by tourism on the economic, social, and environmental characteristics of the region, it was necessary for the municipal administration to use certain regulatory instruments. Unfortunately, in the case of Monteverde, such measures were clearly insufficient, especially with regard to territorial planning. Santa Elena, the main population nucleus in the district of Monteverde, is managed by the Municipality of Puntarenas. The distance between the district and the administrative center is a

**FIGURE 2** Hillside slum dwellings have emerged as a by-product of rapid and uncontrolled socioeconomic change. (Photo by Lara Moragrega)





**FIGURE 3** The main street of Santa Elena, clogged by tourist traffic that takes up too much public space. (Photo by Lara Moragrega)

major problem. This is aggravated by the location of the district in an area where 3 different municipalities converge, and by the administrative incompetence of Puntarenas, absorbed as it is by the problems of the central district.

The Province of Puntarenas is regulated by the Urban Planning Law, a national development instrument that reveals a painful deficiency encountered nationwide: the absence of a national plan for territorial planning. Moreover, the municipality has failed to develop complementary legislation that would answer each locality and/or region's need for territorial organization. As a result, the Santa Elena community mushroomed, presumably with no other limitation than requests for land permits submitted to the municipal body.

### **Current situation: causes and consequences**

The present annual growth rate of the Santa Elena population (7.9%), the high percentage of land under construction, and the increase in tourist services indicate a short-term and uncontrolled transformation of this mountain community from rural to urbanized. Hotels, commercial establishments, and residences have emerged as a result of feudal-style ownership of the land. Landowners have invested

in construction without taking into account the need for a balance among the different requirements of a complex social and environmental space. In Santa Elena, there are practically no public spaces or green areas where people can meet. Sidewalks are not wide enough for minimal walking comfort. The main street is blocked when buses arrive (Figure 3). The main commercial establishments are all in the same area, which discourages distant residents from using them. New tourism infrastructure progressively invades the periphery of the town, encroaching on the ecological corridors that are of vital importance to many species in the preserve.

The increased flow of vehicles, the emergence of slum dwellings, the contamination of nearby streams, unruly disposal of solid waste, and inadequate integration of buildings into the landscape are additional consequences of uncontrolled development. Both population growth and infrastructure development are characterized by lack of management, encouraging action lacking in solidarity and the pursuit of individual values and needs. Although an increasing number of associations are emerging, representing different interests, they are proving to be less effective than needed for the population to act in common accord and solve growth and development problems in Santa Elena. Social segregation has emerged in the community, most likely caused by ethnic diversity and socioeconomic disparities. This impedes the emergence of a community identity and reinforces individualism and uncoordinated action.

### **Conclusions**

The lack of administrative order that has characterized Santa Elena's development in the last 2 decades calls for political change to improve organization and planning and guide the area's strong developmental dynamics. On the one hand, Monteverde requires administrative reorganization. This idea was initiated with the recent creation of the District Municipal Council, to which the Municipality of Puntarenas has delegated the right to make decisions at the local level, in an effort to obtain more direct control of ini-



tiatives in Monteverde. On the other hand, there is a need for social cohesion so that the community can develop instruments to establish a dialogue and conduct negotiations regarding common and sectoral interests, on which new administrative policies must be based.

One of the more urgent problems currently faced by the Monteverde community is the need to centralize a large number of resources at the local level, both in terms of information and the economic benefits of tourism. Effective information management at multiple levels is a key element, required both for analysis of the present situation and for modifying administrative policies to promote social relations, with the aim of integrating the community into decision-making processes. The problem at present is that information is dispersed and not available to everybody; there is also little interaction among public organizations. Highly efficient communication channels need to be established so that the population has access to information, scientific knowledge, and political power, and can participate in proper land use and environmental planning processes. This can be achieved through public discussions, participatory workshops, and publications. It is also important to take advantage of already available technical and human resources, especially at the TSC and the Monteverde Institute.

The concentration of resources in the hands of a few individuals in the area constitutes an obstacle to proper development of the community. The incipient appear-



ance of tenements in Santa Elena and Cerro Plano, for example, is the consequence of a lack of affordable land, concentration of property in the hands of a few, and the low wages prevalent in some sectors. It would be advisable to formulate economic policies and projects oriented towards better distribution of income, as well as policies to regulate land speculation.

Appropriate territorial planning guidelines and environmental management initiatives need to correctly and efficiently regulate all land and environmental management in the medium and long term, taking into account not only economic aspects, but social and ecological ones as well (Figure 4).

**FIGURE 4** New tourism infrastructure encroaches on ecological corridors and is poorly integrated in the landscape. (Photo by Lara Moragrega)

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