

The Promise and Challenge of Ecotourism as a Source of Funding for Environmental NGOs in Peru

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Abstract

This paper is intended to answer the question of how NGOs can authentically incorporate ecotourism as a source of funding without interrupting progressive work, while also further contributing their core missions geared towards protecting the environment. The model I have used to investigate this business opportunity is comprised of different methods working hands on particularly with current NGOs, ecotourism companies, and personal communication with locals of the Madre de region in Peru. My goal for this research is to support the opportunity for individuals to participate hands on work in an environment that lacks the support from its own government to potentially gain support and inspire others to contribute to particular organizations missions and successes.



Sign along side the interoceanic highway in the Madre de Dios region of Peru. It translates to “let's take care of the environment, let's preserve the forests”. Photo by Megan Nugent

Introduction

The success of and NGO's financial strategy is crucial to the organization's success. Financial independence and security are the determining factors for all future operations, and ultimately for their survival as an organization. A recurring issue faced by all NGOs is securing readily available sources of funding (Hill & Hill,

2011).

Fortunately, environmentally based NGOs have an opportunity that they have the potential to utilize: the inclusion of ecotourism. Ecotourism can be defined as “Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (The International Ecotourism Society, 2016). Its purpose is to unite conservation,

communities, and sustainable travel that will have a positive lasting impact on all who are involved. The basic principal of ecotourism can lead to positive contributions with minimal impact (Hill & Hill, 2011).

This can include building environmental and cultural awareness, providing direct financial benefits for conservation, as well as financial benefits and empowerment for local people, and raising sensitivity to host-countries' political environmental, and social issues (The International Ecotourism Society, 2017). Through this research, I hope to support the positive business opportunity environmental based non-profits have on incorporating ecotourism as part of their financial strategy.

Methods

I wanted to approach the methods investigating the opportunity for NGOs to incorporate ecotourism through a model that would reveal different perspectives and types of ecotourism being conducted by various sources. I visited ecotourism lodges, held interviews with heads of other environmental based NGOs, held in depth discussions with a volunteer placement advisor for a reputable organization, collected crucial information by visiting ecotourism sites and by discussing the experiences that other tourists made at the site.

For interviews with other organizations, the following protocol was used:

About the Organization

First I will start by asking you questions primarily about your organization. This will include mission, strategy, and information regarding your personnel.

1. What is the core mission of your organization?

a. What is your strategy on achieving this? And how do you do

it?

2. As part of your strategy, what type of projects are you developing? Short-term, medium-term, or long-term projects.

3. Do you have staff available to run those projects all the time? If so how many?

4. What have you found challenging with running an NGO in this region?

Financial Strategy

I will now ask you questions based around different financial strategy's you use to fund your organization. This section will include basic information regarding your primary and secondary sources of funding and your annual budget.

5. In the non-profit sector NGOs have diverse sources of funding such as grants, business activities, individual donations, etc. I am curious to learn what your funding strategy is?

a. What challenges have you been faced with in developing this strategy?

b. Are you satisfied with your current strategy, or are you thinking of changing it? If so, why?

6. What are your different sources of funding and what percentage does each contribute to your overall budget?

7. Would you mind telling me what range you annual budget was in 2016? (up to 100,000; 100,000-300,000; more than 300,000)

Ecotourism

This is the last section of the interview. I will now ask you questions about your thoughts and plans of ecotourism, if you have any at all.

8. Have you incorporated ecotourism within your financial strategy?

If yes, continue to question (9-19). If not, continue to question (20-24).

9. When and why did your organization decide to incorporate ecotourism?

10. What ecotourism experiences do you offer?
11. How many people participate in your ecotourism yearly?
12. What has been your strategy on finding participants for your ecotourism projects?
13. How are you competing with (non-NGO) companies offering similar activities?
14. Do you feel ecotourism is positively contributing to your own goals as an organization without shifting your activities to only ecotourism related ones (as in, are you doing it in such a way that you are not letting go of other important projects)?
15. Or do you feel it can potentially be a barrier to accomplish your mission, goals, and current projects you are running?
16. What are your plans for ecotourism in the future?
17. What are some positive examples you have experienced with your ecotourism projects?
18. What are some examples of specific challenges you were faced with in including ecotourism projects?
19. Do you feel ecotourism will have a direct impact on your organizations success for the future?

Results

Alliance for a Sustainable Amazon - ASA: Participation in ASA's Educational Internship Program

Alliance for a Sustainable Amazon (ASA) is a U.S.- based 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that is active in the southeastern Peruvian Amazon (Alliance for a Sustainable Amazon, 2017). Geoff Gallice, a citizen of the U.S., founded ASA in October of 2016. ASA was initially founded domestically so it would hold a legal U.S. presence. This also enabled the NGO to apply for funding and other opportunities that American organizations could provide. Because ASA operates

directly in Peru, the Peruvian government also needed the organization to be legally established. Therefore, in February of 2017 Johana Reyes-Quinteros, a citizen of Peru, founded ASA Peru (J. Quinteros, personal communication, November 3, 2017). Its primary mission aimed “to promote the conservation of natural resources in the Amazon through sustainable agriculture, biological research and monitoring, and community engagement and education (Alliance for a Sustainable Amazon, 2017). Their research, education and conservation projects are based at their field site “Finca Las Piedras”, located near Puerto Maldonado in the Madre de Dios Region of Peru.

ASA directs diverse projects that support their core mission of conserving the Amazon rainforest's biodiversity. This primarily includes their Sustainable Tropical Agriculture and Biological Research and Monitoring projects. The sustainable tropical agriculture sector promotes, supports and researches the agricultural practices and crops that lead to the highest yields, the highest incomes for local farmers, and the fewest negative environmental impacts (Alliance for a Sustainable Amazon, 2017). Because they are aware that their efforts and research will have no impact if they do not motivate a change in people's actions, they emphasize providing direct technical assistance to Amazonian farmers. As for the Biological Research and Monitoring conducted by ASA, they hope to collect the basic biological data needed to monitor changes in plant and animal populations over time due to human activities, including hunting, habitat loss, fragmentation, degradation, and global warming. They then use the data to develop management strategies for plant and animal species or groups of species of key ecological or conservation importance in the region. These strategies will be

carried out in collaboration with regional partners in government, the non-profit sector, and ecotourism (Alliance for a Sustainable Amazon, 2017).

The internship programs ASA offers is typically designed for students who have an interest in pursuing a career in science, or whoever may generally have an interest in gaining an understanding in tropical biology and conservation techniques. Their main focal areas in achieving conservation is biological research and monitoring, and sustainable tropical agriculture (Alliance for a Sustainable Amazon, 2017). Interns will conduct their own personal independent research project during their stay, examples of past projects vary widely and the organization is incredibly flexible to accommodate each intern with their own desired proposal. Figure 1 outlines the organizational structure for Alliance for a Sustainable Amazon during the time the study was conducted, and also shows my own reporting structure.

Semi Structured interview with ACCA - Association for the Conservation of the Amazon Basin, with Daniela Pogliani

Acca is an NGO that has a substantial presence in the Peruvian Amazonia. When I held this interview with

Daniela Pogliana, Head of operations, I found that they have already incorporated ecotourism as part of their financial strategy. She described their core mission is towards protecting the biodiversity of the amazon basin. Their strategy at achieving this consists of operations with the national and international governments, and local stakeholders. The three main components of the projects they worked on include Landscape conservation, science and education, and sustainable livelihoods. We discussed different challenges she is faced with in running an NGO. A big frustration Daniela expressed to me was the lack of respect felt from both potential donors and government based on the belief that non-profit organizations lack the professionalism and efficiency to actually get things done. She explained how their team at ACCA works to break this misconception through their strategy and mission.

Participation as an Eco-tourist at Paradise Lodge

Paradise Lodge is an ecotourism company based in Puerto Maldonado that offers various excursions, as well as an opportunity to stay along side the Madre de Dios River in a traditional style cabin. I

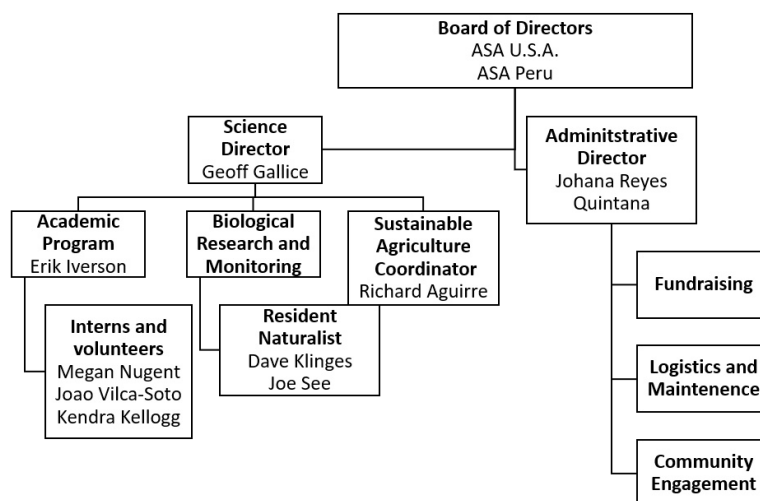


Figure 1: Alliance for a Sustainable Amazon’s Organizational Chart showing the organizational structure in 2017

participated in both their offered excursions, and an overnight stay. Below is an over view of the experience:

We took a boat ride to the lodge where we were provided lunch and a briefing of activities for the duration of the trip. The following activities were included (Figure 2):

- Kayaking to “monkey island” (an island sanctuary for rescued monkeys, not owned by the company)
- Cayman search by boat on the Madre de Dios river
- Zipline and canopy walk that was located on their property
- Trip to Tambopata National Reserve (Lake Sandoval), officially a protected area since the early 1990’s (“Tambopata National Reserve - Sandoval Lake,” 2015)

Discussion

Through the research I have conducted with the organizations and companies operating in the Peru, I have come to conclude the most valuable contribution ecotourism has is the potential to create a true personal connection with the participant and the natural environment. NGOs carrying out educational based programs should target not just scientist, conversationalist, etc. I believe it is crucial for the protection of the environment to be obtaining participants from all different backgrounds. The more “outsiders” they can get to create a

relationship with the fragile ecosystem and depleting environment, the more likely it will be for those people to spread the word in new territories, thus creating an impact perfectly aligned the core values of these organizations. The more people we can get to connect with the environment, the more people we will have on our side in protecting it.

With the information I have gathered first hand, I see an immense amount of growth opportunity for non-profits in Peru to gain through ecotourism. It is both rewarding and impactful to the organization itself and the tourist.

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Figure 2: Impressions of the excursion to Paradise Lodge, (a) boat ride on the Tambopata river, (b) canopy walk at Paradise Lodge and (c) kayaking on Lake Sandoval

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