

Community-based Ecotourism: Unity, Conservation, and Empowerment
El Topo, Ecuador
Davis Projects for Peace
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PROJECT CONTEXT:

Community-based ecotourism has the ability to simultaneously conserve and protect the natural environment while bringing social and economic benefits to the local people. Relatively speaking, community-based ecotourism needs little investment, making it an ideal way to increase income and employment in areas that are financially impoverished and underdeveloped yet rich in biodiversity.

Ecominga, an Ecuadorian foundation based in Baños, Ecuador, is committed to conserving the unique cloud forest ecosystem within the Llanganates-Sangay Ecological Corridor, a region with exceptionally high biodiversity and endemism. They work to protect these forests from deforestation and destruction. One of their seven ecological reserves, Río Zuñiag, is adjacent to the small community of El Topo. This project intends to collaborate with Ecominga, seeking economic alternatives to deforestation and the exploitation of natural resources in the region. El Topo has approximately 250 residents and is located 30 minutes from the tourism-based city of Baños. The high influx of tourists currently causes environmental degradation in many parts of the cantón.

Additionally, dams built for hydroelectric power are a significant environmental issue in the area. Recently, the community of El Topo lost their fight against the construction of a nearby hydroelectric project. Many in the town worked tirelessly to prevent the project and the resulting environmental damage.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

This project aims to bring self-induced economic benefits to El Topo through community-based ecotourism while simultaneously maintaining the forest through effective conservation practices. Once the initial investments and the organizational structure is established, El Topo will have the opportunity to improve their standard of living and preserve the region's biodiversity.

Goals and Objectives:

1. Protect the health and prosperity of the unparalleled, surrounding cloud forest. Foster within the community pride and a deep appreciation for their environment. Ensure that knowledge and respect of the forests persists, especially among the younger generations.
2. Empower El Topo through economic security and stable employment opportunities.
3. Unite the community around a shared conservation ethic. Create social cohesion by achieving a shared vision of prosperity, peace, and sustainability.
4. Raise awareness of Ecuador's valuable biodiversity. Tourists, both national and foreign, will become aware of the fragility and significance of the local ecosystem and gain an appreciation of the importance of protecting such environments.

Implementation:

- *Train community members.* The Ecuadorian government offers free, three-month workshops that train and certify nature guides. I will work to organize the implementation of this workshop, so that by the time I arrive, certifications will be in place for all who wish to guide. Additionally, the current park rangers working for Ecominga have offered to give additional training on flora and fauna specific to the region. Many El Topo residents already have a basic, English vocabulary. Ideally, the community members who will interact with tourists should eventually learn elementary English. Therefore, I will teach English classes four nights a week to help strengthen their language foundation. In addition, I will lead a total of four (one every other week) community workshops on environmental topics and tourism to help instill a conservation ethic and prepare the community to host tourists in their homes. All

of this training and education will ensure that tourists are provided a positive experience and that El Topo residents feel comfortable and confident in the process.

- *Strengthen the organization and cohesiveness of the community.* Upon arrival in El Topo, I will immediately encourage the formation of an ecotourism council composed of democratically elected community members. This will provide a structure for decision-making and promote collaboration. Council members will manage logistics and work together to insure that as many community members as possible benefit economically by filling positions as guides, homestay hosts, cooks, etc. Women in the town have expressed interest in selling their handicrafts so a leader to organize that sub-project will be determined. Overall, the new jobs this project will create are extremely necessary for the health of El Topo. Based on the twenty-two in-depth interviews I conducted with community members, only three had steady employment within two hours of the town. The rest are without consistent employment, or travel several hours or internationally to obtain work.
- *Improve trails and infrastructure and develop accommodations to increase tourism.* First, we will reinforce, using local materials, parts of the trail in need of improvements. *Mingas*, which are community work projects, will accomplish this and outside labor will be hired for assistance as needed. Bridge reinforcements and touch ups to communal infrastructure will also be completed through *mingas*. Many El Topo residents have expressed interest in hosting tourists in their homes. Some residences will require small structural and comfort improvements, which will benefit not only the ecotourism project but also the standard of living for those residents. Finally, a small, currently vacant, communally owned home could possibly be turned into a tourist accommodation.
- *Generate publicity and solidify relationships with tour and school groups.* Many free forms of publicity exist regionally and I have made contact with several tourist agencies in Baños that are interested in forming a business partnership with the community. A local school group, a Quito-based university group, and a travel agent in Quito have also expressed interest. Prior to departure, I will communicate with all of these leads to solidify clients.

SUSTAINABILITY/FUTURE IMPACT:

Helping El Topo form a self-reliant, democratic management system will ensure that distribution of profits and jobs within the community are maintained. Weekly meetings will establish consistency and a structure to address concerns and new ideas. A survey form will be created for tourists to complete at the end of their visits. This feedback will be used to maintain and further improve the services provided. By promoting ecotourism as a sustainable economic alternative to environmentally harmful practices, the community will have a monetary incentive to continue conserving the pristine, surrounding forests. Instilling a conservation ethic and pride for their natural surroundings will contribute to the sustainability of their unique ecosystem. Finally, by giving tourists not only an enjoyable experience but also a view into the importance and fragility of the biodiverse cloud forests, a conservation ethic and awareness of local issues will spread far beyond the region.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND and QUALIFICATIONS:

I am an Environmental Analysis and Spanish double major at Claremont McKenna College. I have extensive teaching experience, specifically in ESL as well as project management knowledge and leadership experience. I am advanced in Spanish, both oral and written. I spent Fall 2013 studying conservation and ecology in Ecuador where I spent a month living in El Topo, conducting interviews, gathering information, and analyzing the possibility of community ecotourism and the steps that should be taken toward implementation. This not only gave me a solid, research-backed plan of action but also the development of a strong relationship with the community as well as an understanding of the nuances of the local culture and relations.