

Community-based Ecotourism: Unity, Conservation and Empowerment
Ecuador

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The goal of this project was to work with the community of El Topo to initiate a community-based ecotourism business to bring much needed employment opportunities while uniting the community around a shared vision of prosperity, peace and conservation. In the long term, we strive to conserve and protect the natural environment while bringing social and economic benefits to the local people.

Unanticipated difficulties and obstacles were a daily occurrence but with steadfastness, constant adaptation, and a sense of humor nothing proved too large a hindrance. Trainings and workshops for community members were important for the sustainability of the business. I organized a two-month course for the 10 interested community members, many of whom are youths without much work opportunity. They met twice weekly and I taught classes along with other speakers on basic guide-related topics. In September, a local naturalist began a second two-month course focusing solely on the flora and fauna of the area to give a better understanding of and appreciation for the local environment. With this additional knowledge they have been able to share the importance of the ecosystem with visitors. Additionally, all involved in the tourism operations were required to participate in three workshops: 1) the importance of conservation and how the success of the business goes hand-in-hand with preservation; 2) the basics of ecotourism and how to receive tourists; and 3) fundamental business, group organization and finance principles. I co-led these workshops with acquaintances in the province with deep knowledge of the subjects. To continue the dialogue of environmental conservation, I organized a five-day children's camp focusing on environmental education. We used art, games, music, and excursions to teach the value and significance of their local ecosystem. By fostering pride for the environment, we hoped to create a conservation ethic within the youth and ensure knowledge and respect for the forests.

To strengthen the organization and cohesiveness of the community, we elected an ecotourism board to lead the project and handle the organization, finances, and administrative work. The elected president and I led weekly meetings for all those participating in ecotourism to figure out logistics and regulations of the tourism operations. Through a democratic process we developed the rules of procedure, covering topics such as division of profits, standards of behavior and service, process of accepting new members, sanctions, financial management, etc. These discussion-filled meetings were productive and ensured that everyone was in agreement with expectations. One of the best, originally unplanned happenings was a weekend trip I organized to a village five hours north that has been successful in community tourism for 15 years. Ten of the most invested project leaders participated. Until this trip there was excitement and interest in the project, but also a lack of faith. The visit showed them what community tourism looks like. They realized you don't need a luxury hotel or fancy restaurants but rather a lovely community located in a beautiful locale. They understood that creating an ecotourism operation is a process that takes time to develop, and their excitement about their own business possibilities grew. The weekend gave them a vision, made them confident in the tourism process, and heightened their interest in the business potential. They shared their new enthusiasm with the rest of the group back in El Topo.

The project's greatest challenge was trying to legalize the organization and create a bank account for the business. I spent many days traveling to government offices throughout the state trying to procure information on how to meet the legal requirements. I experienced a lack of uniformity and organization within the government; it was nearly impossible to find clear, consistent information. However, I was able to sort out and begin the process. A highly recommended and respected local attorney has agreed to help the community free of charge as they continue the legalization process.

Infrastructure improvements were also needed. We fixed a bridge on the hiking path, constructed two rest areas along the trail, and converted a community building into a tourist center. We transformed a

plot of community-owned land into a camping area, and with the help of a local expert constructed ecological bathrooms on the site. Additionally, we made minor improvements to the general aesthetics of the community, such as painting *mingas*, community work projects. Not only did this cut down on costs, but it also brought community members together for a common purpose. To encourage personal investment and prevent financial exploitation and conflict, I decided to only use the grant for infrastructure that would benefit the ecotourism members equally.

Early on I was able to connect with a local hotel owner with a strong interest in community tourism. She began sending patrons to El Topo within the first month. This was extremely fortunate as it allowed the community to immediately gain experience in ecotourism and see the possibilities. El Topo continues to work with the hotel, and the owner will send even more of her tourists as the community refines its operations. Publicity in the form of posters, flyers, and pamphlets were passed out in hotels, restaurants, and tourist agencies in the nearby tourism city of Baños and El Topo has had several visitors as a result. As the ecotourism project continues and improves, several local tourist agencies have expressed interest in forming business partnerships selling 'El Topo packets' to their customers.

Within the first two months of operation, El Topo hosted 20 tourists from across the globe. As the operation improves and awareness spreads, I have no doubt the operation in El Topo will continue to develop. There are currently 30 participating in the ecotourism operations and I expect this number to grow. Those directly involved range from community youths working as guides to elderly folk who give tours of their farms. According to their agreed upon financial model, a small portion of every tourist 'packet' sold goes into a community fund for health, education, and conservation. In this way those that may not be able to or choose not to participate are still benefiting indirectly from the ecotourism operations. El Topo is tight-knit, but I witnessed a growing sense of community as people rallied around ecotourism. As tourists visit and community members host and guide, a beautiful interaction occurs. The community shares their village, forests, rivers, and culture with pride and the tourists respond with admiration. This reaction heightens community members' appreciation of their natural environment while the visitors gain not only an awareness of the valuable biodiversity and significance of the local ecosystem but also an understanding of the importance of protecting such environments.

To me, peace and well-being are inextricably intertwined. Peace not only means lack of conflict and violence, but also includes peace of mind, access to basic human needs and security. Peace is also living in harmony with one's surrounding environment. As humans depend on *la naturaleza* for fundamental needs, peace between the two entities is essential. Decisions and actions are greatly influenced by external conditions. When we are placed in positive settings we respond in a positive way. In the case of El Topo, there had been past conflicts over the construction of a hydroelectric dam. To observe a woman in the community working and laughing alongside a fellow community member, whom she had previously described to me as an *enemigo*, was a true testament to the coming together of El Topo. The ecotourism project is a tangible way for them to overcome their past differences and work toward a shared goal.

My experience was a reminder that those living in poverty are often de-humanized; poorness is viewed as their defining characteristic. The reality is that regardless of socioeconomic status, individuals, families, and communities have the same basic desires, aspirations, and needs. What matters most is that the external environment allows them to meet their needs and reach their full potential. Living in El Topo demonstrated to me that apparent differences, whether cultural, economic, ethnic, etc., can be overcome by our shared humanity. Positive change is not just an unattainable dream but an achievable reality. I am now encouraged to view global difficulties through a more hopeful lens.

"I feel incredibly blessed to have been given the opportunity to make a positive impact in the community of El Topo; ecotourism has brought much needed employment opportunities while uniting the community around a shared vision of prosperity, peace and conservation. This experience has shown me the power and potential of turning passions and caring into action." -Erin Ristig

