

CASE STORY ANA01: POSADA AMAZONAS ECOLOGE | Western Amazon | Peru | Austral & Neotropical Americas

Posadas Amazonas Lodge (PAL) is an innovative ecotourism venture engaging native people who live adjacent to a national reserve and a private company, now seen worldwide as a model for conservation while providing jobs and careers for locals. Since its beginning, PAL has been an example of entrepreneur success for local and foreign tourism companies. It has won many international awards, including the United Nation's Equator Initiative Award, and has been the focus of the international media (Stronza, 2010 p. 59).



Posada Amazonas Lodge -View of one of the room hallways -

The ecotourism business has increasingly raised concerns and controversy due to the complexity of its own core principles: nature-based attractions, sustainability and enhanced learning opportunities (Brightsmith et al. 2008). That was also the case with Posada Amazonas Lodge. In the late 1990's, in the first years of operations, not all the members of the community were engaged with the "lodge idea" and the profits were not high enough to benefit the ones that were not completely convinced. However, by 2001, even though the first profits shared between partners were not high, the message was clear: "*respecting the Communal Reserve was worthwhile; respecting certain wildlife was worthwhile...*" (Gordillo et al., 2008).



Ecotourism activities - Enjoying wildlife during a visit to Tres Chimbadas Lake -

During the past 10 years, both the tourist company and the members of the native community have learned how to overcome the difficulties that such a complex partnership implies, not only to maintain the lodge operating but also to make the business strong enough to compete in an area in which currently, there are at least 30 other companies offering similar products. As the ecotourism business grows and becomes more popular, the responsibility of managing the lodge becomes a major challenge. As part of the initial agreement, the whole APA ecotourism operation is going to be 100% managed by the local native people by the end of 2016.

Additionally, traditional social relations and institutions within the community are experiencing challenges as well (Stronza, 2010 p. 66). For example, economic profits from ecotourism have become direct incentives for locals but also for immigrants with the needed skills, meaning not all individuals are likely to benefit equally.

Stakeholder Perspectives

Family Heritage

The village of Infierno is located in southeastern Peru, in the lowland Amazon rainforest of Madre de Dios, along the Tambopata River. Infierno is a mixed ethnic community of around 600 people formed by the native Ese'ejá, Ribereños

(migrants of other parts of the Amazon and the Andes) and Mestizos (mixed families). The Ese'ejas people belong to the Ese'uja ethnic group and to the Tacana linguistic family; indeed they have their own language, also call ese'uja. For the last two centuries, they used to live in a nomadic way in the head waters of the Tambopata and Heath rivers in Peru and in the Madidi River in Bolivia. Their initial population size is unknown but their local history says that their populations declined enormously during the rubber boom in the mid 1990's; time in which they were kidnapped and used as slaves. Their cultural traditions were also damaged by conflict during the rubber boom (V. Sambrano personal communication).



The Native Community of Infierno (CNI) is one of the three Ese'uja settlements inside Peruvian territory and is one of the 930 certified native communities from Peru. It was founded in 1976 when 80 families received legal ownership of approximately 10,000 hectares in the buffer zone of the Tambopata National Reserve (Gordillo et al., 2008 p. 30-31). Although the land is community-owned, each *comunero* has rights over a 30 ha for household, farming, and extractive activities in small scale. In 1987 a communal reserve of approximately 3,000 ha was established, prohibiting farming, hunting, logging, fishing, and resource extraction (Gordillo et al., 2008).

Within the communal reserve, the community created the Ñape Ethno-botanical Center for medicinal and educational purposes (p. 31). The "Centro Ñape" has become the epicenter of medicinal plant knowledge sharing in the area. It is well known by people from different native communities and it is even well respected by local non-native people.

With ecotourism revenues the community has improved its subsistence economy and members have increased their awareness of environmental issues. As many other native and non-native communities, they obtain little economic support from the regional or national government. Their main subsistence activities include agriculture, forest-product gathering, fishing, and hunting. People have limited access to credit or extension services, as well as infrastructure for education, health, and transportation (Stronza, 2010 p. 59). Since 1998, ecotourism, fish farming and handcrafting have become additional sources of income. Road access, a secondary school, a computer facility and a water tank are some of the community's development projects completed with income from tourism (Gordillo et al., 2008 p. 34). Lately, the national government had included communities like Infierno in their operating plans. As a result of that, potable water systems have been built (a single source point per house) and electricity has arrived for the first time to the center of the community.

Since the lodge opened, community members have filled most wage labor positions (Stronza, 2010 p. 62). People selected to work at the lodge are placed in a 2-year employment rotation, designed to offer the same opportunity to all community members. RFE provides capacity building for waiters, housekeepers, boat drivers, and cook assistants. Technical positions (bilingual guides, bartenders or chefs) undergo more complex training to enhance guest satisfaction. Selected individuals have been trained in finance, human resources, operations and marketing in order to develop the capacities needed to manage the business in the future (Gordillo et al., 2008 p. 35).

Development

In 1989, Peruvians Eduardo Nycander and Kurt Holle initiated The Tambopata Macaw Project to study the charismatic macaws, illegally hunted at that time (Nycander and Holle, 1996 p. 179). They built the Tambopata Research Center (TRC) on the upper Tambopata River in the center of a pristine tropical lowland forest (Gordillo et al., 2008 p. 32). The 6 to 7 hours of travel by bus and canoe from the nearest airport of Puerto Maldonado to the TRC represented a challenge. A closer place for overnight stay closer to the river port was needed (Palm, 2008). Nycander and Holle

founded a private tourism company, in order to accommodate researchers and nature tourists. In 1992 Rainforest Expeditions (RFE) opened the 13-room Tambopata Research Center (TRC) to travelers with the purpose of using tourism revenues to fund their research activities (Gordillo et al., 2008 p. 32).

Initially, community members were hired as research assistants in the TRC (Gordillo et al., 2008 p. 32). The relationship grew as RFE continued to hire staff from the community, contracted local services whenever possible including transportation, lodging and food (Nycander and Holle, 1996. p. 173). In 1995, the leader of the community sent Nycander a letter expressing his concerns regarding employment of some community members who were unable to fulfill their communal responsibilities because they had to leave the community for months. Also, the community felt RFE was giving opportunities to some members but not all (Palm, 2008).

In 1996, RFE initiated negotiations with the community. After several meetings, local officers of Conservation International, RFE and the community signed a 20-year contract to build an ecotourism lodge (Gordillo et al., 2008 p. 33). The contract stipulated the distribution of net profits with a ratio of 60:40 favoring the community. At the end of the contract period, the community could choose to continue the partnership with RFE, work with a different business partner or administer the lodge on their own. They called their joint venture the Ke'eway Association in Participation (Palm, 2008). The agreement included the community's obligations regarding the environmental protection of the resources (hunting and tree-felling was prohibited). The contract also stipulated active community participation in the lodge's development, operation, and management (Stronza, 2005 p6). In April of 1998, the 24-room lodge Posada Amazonas welcomed the first group of tourists. Currently, the lodge receives approximately 7,000 visitors a year (Gordillo et al., 2008 p. 33). Visitors from the U.S. and Europe pay approximately \$95 per person per night. In 2006, the partnership generated net profits of US\$217,000 and US\$225,000 in 2007 (Stronza, 2010 p. 59).

The ecotourism business has had not only economic but also social effects for the community and the management of their resources. Employment at the lodge requires staff to live at the lodge during the contract period. Therefore, workers are likely to shift out of other productive work since they no longer have time to cultivate their fields, hunt, or forage (Stronza, 2010 p. 67). In traditional forest communities members do more or less the same work receiving more or less the same benefits (Gordillo et al., 2008) p. 45). Interestingly, this is no longer the case for the people from the community of Infierno. Due to interaction with NGO's and the co-management of the lodge, people have learned about capitalizing what they have in order to gain more (Stronza, 2010). The ecotourism activity has promoted the development of individual businesses. Some members of the community have invested their tourism profits in fish farms, *bodegas* (warehouses), and other small businesses.



Handcrafting is one of the "new economical activities" for people from Infierno

Environmental Advocates

RFE has worked closely with international institutions to generate information that promotes conservation. Some of the institutions include Frankfurt Zoological Society (FZS), US universities (Stanford, Texas A&M, University of Michigan), and Conservation International. Collaborative activities around the world include long term wildlife monitoring programs, field research programs, and doctoral dissertation research (Gordillo et al., 2008 p. 34). In conjunction with the Frankfurt Zoological Society, codes of conduct for viewing giant otters were established in order to protect reproductive nests and foraging behaviors of the otters. In addition, Conservation International and the community have worked on a wildlife-monitoring program that tracks levels of pressure on wildlife due to hunting and

tourism. Community members collaborate with conservation initiatives by gathering data, serving as wildlife monitors, assisting research projects, etc (Stronza, 2010 p. 69).



Earthwatch volunteers monitoring a Macaw nest in Tambopata Research Center

By means of grants from the Earthwatch Institute, a mutually beneficial partnership has developed in support of the research and conservation activities of the Tambopata Macaw Project (Brightsmith et al. 2008). Researchers trained over 300 volunteers who provided 13,000 hours of labor and paid for hospitality services during their visits. Benefits were shared among the research project (>\$400,000), Earthwatch (\$387,000) and Rainforest Expeditions (\$300,000).

Volunteers learn about the conservation values and share their experiences when they return to their home communities (Brightsmith et al. 2008). Broader awareness of the Ecolodge spreads by word of mouth when volunteers share their experiences with friends, family and colleagues. Managers and researchers from across the globe have been trained at this location, returning with valuable knowledge for parrot conservation projects in Costa Rica, Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil, Puerto Rico, and Indonesia.

Regulatory Agencies

Due to its native origins and its proximity to an area protected by the national government; the native community of Infierno is regulated by a number of agencies, locally, nationally and internationally. Nationally, the lands surrounding Posada Amazonas (Tambopata National Reserve and Bahuaja-Sonene National Park) are managed by tribal authority and the national park system (Brightsmith et al., 2008).

Locally, the native community of Infierno has two types of authorities that might act in an autonomous way.

(1) The “directive group” (Junta Directiva) has a direct regulatory function. It is elected every 2 years in a closed vote election and the structure is one president, one secretary and one “treasurer”. (2) The “control committee” (Comite de Control) has an administrative and supervisory function. It is formed by 10 people (8 men and 2 women; 5 native and 5 non-native). Members are elected in an open general assembly (Asamblea General) every two years and they can keep the position depending on past performance in the committee. Both authorities require “foreigners” (people from outside the community) to explain their proposed activities before entering tribal lands and report their results upon returning (G. Vigo-Trauco, unpublished data).

People from Infierno have “ancestral rights” over the lands that belonged to their nomadic predecessors, so they can fish, log and even hunt in areas in which these activities are prohibited by law, such as inside the Bahuaha Sonene National Park. However, the National Park System Office (SERNAMP) and its administration office (AIDER) have created a “document of rules” in which the amount of extracted resources and the times of extraction are indicated. The National Park Office has in some part, the authority to supervise native extraction activities.

As native people from the Madre de Dios area, they are part of FENAMAD (Spanish acronym for native federation of the Madre de Dios River and effluents), which is an organization that protects their individual and collective rights as well as promoting their social and economic development.



Group of young “comuneros” from the native community of Infierno

Internationally, the community of Infierno, as a certified Peruvian native community, is under the protection of the "Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples" signed by the United Nations in 2007.

The lodge itself is regulated by the tourist company (RFE) and the native community in a fifty-fifty system of decision making. The manager of the lodge has to ask the company and the control committee of the community for every single important decision before action is taken. Generally, in their communal regular meetings the regulations concerning land use impact and tourist activities impact inside the community's protected land are usually proposed by Rainforest Expeditions (RFE) directive group, after considering government guidelines of land use.

Challenges for the Future



Birdwatching from the Canopy Tower in Posada Amazonas Lodge

The global visibility of Posada Amazonas Ecolodge spreads awareness of the principles guiding ethical ecotourism: nature-based experiences, sustainability and learning opportunities. One of the agreements of the PAL ecotourism business was to let the local people, after 20 years of operations, decide if they would like to run the whole business operation by themselves, without Rainforest Expedition participation. The target year is getting closer and the community is not completely ready to manage a business that requires very demanding activities to succeed, such as international marketing and training of staff in a foreign language. Additionally, an emerging concern is how individual aspirations could conflict with community life and social order within the village of Infierno (Stronza, 2010). How might these economic changes affect communal work and cooperation? How could capital accumulation and economic different ultimately affect conservation of the resources? Could individual entrepreneurship alter shared norms, traditions and social relations in the community?

Sources and Additional Reading

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