ABSTRACT

This report covers my experience as an International Intern at Rainforest Partnership from January 2013-May 2013. More will be added to this report upon my return from Peru in August 2013.
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This report describes my involvement as a field intern with the NGO Rainforest Partnership. In January of 2013, I started the internship with the goals of helping to create a management plan for an ecotourism infrastructure they have been working on for the past two years, and to travel to Peru over the summer to introduce the management plan to the local communities of Calabaza and San Antonio who will be running the business. Research in Peru consisted of ethnographic research about the history and cultures of the Calabaza, San Antonio, and Satipo communities, as well as endangered species documentation and an ethnobotanical analysis in Calabaza and San Antonio.

1. Rainforest Partnership

Rainforest Partnership is a non-profit organization located in Austin, Texas. Executive Director Niyanta Spelman and RP treasurer and past board chair Hazel Barbour created RP in 2007 with a vision not only to conserve the tropical rainforests, but also the livelihoods of the people who live in these rainforests. This vision has since stretched into the South American rainforests of Peru and Ecuador. As their mission statement declares, “Our mission is to partner with people who live in and around tropical rainforests to develop environmentally sustainable economies to protect and regenerate their forests” (RP, 2013).

So far RP has aided in the protection of 9,000 acres of rainforest in South America. In three years they have created four projects in two different South American countries. Their projects have created community-owned businesses for 40 families in Peru, and they continue to pursue more projects. They have also been active in helping the women in the communities with whom they partner be more involved in the development of their projects. Women are relatively marginalized in South America, and more so in the more rural parts of the continent. RP has helped approximately 40 women from communities in Peru and Ecuador become more active in
their own communities. One such example of how RP has supported female representation in community development is in their Sani Isla project in Ecuador, which will be expanded on later in this report.

1.2 Community Partnerships and Fundraisers

Rainforest Partnership has many opportunities for people seeking experience with an NGO. Being centered in Austin, TX, RP has had the opportunity to be involved in a number of different events, such as the SXSW Film Festival; Earth Day, an internationally recognized day dedicated to environmental awareness; and Green Drinks, a networking event centered in various pubs and eateries in Austin for young professionals who have interests in environmental policy and conservation.
Volunteers make up the majority of the RP staff. There are only a handful of paid staff. The Austin office is the center of operations, but RP has a regional office in Lima, Peru as well. The Peru core team is made up of four individuals, all native Peruvians. RP has had volunteers from local universities like UT-Austin, Texas State University and St. Edwards University, and have also had volunteers from countries such as China and Brazil. Not all volunteers and interns are from universities either. People from other organizations and businesses come to gain experience with an NGO that seeks to preserve natural habitats. RP utilizes volunteers in the areas of marketing, finance, donation management, graphic design, web development, grant writing, article writing, photography, and event and volunteer organization. RP is also active in environmental policy with some international and stateside United Nations conferences.

RP is dependent on corporate and individual donors when supplying funding for the projects they are involved with. They are active in the Austin and San Marcos communities, participating in numerous events to promote environmental awareness and to gain support for the South American communities they help. Donors have the opportunity to give to specific projects, or they can give to RP for overall funding assistance. Donations are not solely monetary; RP also relies on in-kind donations from other organizations worldwide that include architectural consulting, financial consulting, business management, and networking.
2. Sustainable Development Partnerships

Rainforest Partnership seeks to create sustainable livelihoods for rural communities in South America. These communities typically contact RP through contacts they have made through the various projects RP has been involved with, as well as the networking done on trips that Niyanta and Director of Operations Dr. Nicole Wagner make to various conferences around the world. These contacts have often served as project coordinators, ecologists, and other partners in Latin America who provide resources in Peru and Ecuador. This section will explain why rainforest conservation is of importance, and the reasons behind RP’s mission to partner with rural rainforest communities.

2.1 Threats to Rainforests

Rainforest devastation comes in many forms. It not only depletes a major source of the Earth’s oxygen, but also destroys the natural habitats of humans and a variety of plants and animals, some not yet discovered (Myers et al, 2000; Naidoo and Ricketts, 2006). The global economy has secured a market for cash crops (Münster and Münster, 2012) such as timber and palm oil. Because of this they are perceived as viable and consistent sources of income, based on the economics of supply and demand.

The question is, can a market be created for sustainable use? The answer is yes – and some already exist. Over the course of the past two decades, a global market has been made for carbon, headed by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in 1992 (Katoomba Group, 2010). The amount of carbon a specified hectare of forest emits can in fact have a price attached to it, which was the main initiative of the UNFCCC (Katoomba Group, 2010). In some countries, like Peru for example, the government designates portions of rainforest
as protected, which restricts urban and agricultural development in those areas, hence reinforcing the conservation of these areas of rainforest.

2.2 Threats to Rainforest Communities

Sometimes, it is forgotten that there are people who live in these rainforests as well. The conservation focus has primarily been on plants and animals. The livelihoods of the communities located in rainforest areas are sometimes dependent on resources produced by the forests for income, as is seen with the communities RP works with. Instead of taking away the right to market these resources, RP seeks to find a sustainable method where the forest products can still supply these communities with income, but at the same time conserves a greater amount of forest than oil drilling and destructive forms of agriculture.

NGO’s who partner with rainforest communities have gotten some negative responses. Burns (2004) identifies possible reasons for such negativity – a main one being neoliberal imposition. Economics and politics are the bases of Western neoliberal thought (West and Carrier 2004). Local communities who wish to introduce a Western market to their economies are subjected to Western political and economic policy (West and Carrier 2004), often times resulting in a change to their local political, cultural, and economic make-up. Such a phenomenon can, and sometimes does, have a negative effect on these local communities – the cultures of the host communities are repressed, and as a result will disappear.

It is easy to develop blinders when seeking to protect a local culture, but the majority of community-based sustainable development business starters do not subject a local community to an ultimatum of losing their culture or losing their livelihood (West and Carrier 2004). West and Carrier brought attention to a concept called “virtualism,” which is essentially a tendency of imposing Western ideals of conservation on local communities with the purpose of reshaping them to match the market needs (West and Carrier 2004; Burns 2004).
Likewise, Greenwood (1998) suggested that local culture was “packaged” (p 72; Burns 2010, 10), and, that such packaging served to exploit the local communities. Another word for this concept is marketing, and effective marketing at that. For ecotourism specifically, playing on the nostalgia for an environment people from developed consumer areas are so far removed from, with the purpose of protecting that environment and supporting sustainable livelihoods for the local community, is a smart business strategy. As stated by Abram (2010), “If we do not understand how modern states and businesses work, how can we expect to be effective in promoting…insights?” (p 237).

The issues with such a system, referring to the play on nostalgia, arise when the local communities do not want to change. Such an issue should be addressed in the planning stages of the enterprise. The host community has to be well informed of the changes that can occur, accept that possibility, and then a management system has to be created that protects their local culture, instead of erasing it like many ecotourism researchers have proposed will happen. Including a local culture in the ecotourism enterprise can actually help to preserve that culture. It can spread the values embedded in the culture of the host community to the rest of the world. If a host community wishes to incorporate a sustainable use method into their livelihood, who has the right to say they are wrong for doing so? It is their livelihood.

Sustainable development is the basis for achieving the level of conservation RP aspires to. It encompasses three main parts: “biological, social, and financial sustainability” (Newton 2008, pg. 339; Milner-Gulland and Rowcliffe 2007, pg 4). The best definition of sustainable use comes from the Convention of Biological Diversity, Article 2, “Sustainable use means the use of components of biological diversity in a way and at a rate that does not lead to the long term
The community-based approach is the crux of RP’s mission. The ‘partnership’ of Rainforest Partnership refers to the community being an equal stakeholder in the development and implementation of the conservation activity. But creating a way for the local community to produce income is not the only goal, nor does it imply a greater importance to the ecological aspect of conservation. The next section will explain the current projects RP is involved with, as well as identify the good that enhanced community participation in sustainable use enterprises can bring about in terms of social cohesion and conservation of rainforested areas.

2.3 Ecuador Project

The Sani Isla Artisan project is currently RP’s only project in Ecuador. This project is centered on the women of Sani Isla, helping them create a business to sell the baskets and hats they make out of plant fibers from the rainforest. The project was started in 2009, and has since helped the women organize themselves to start a business through building an artisan craft hut, and evaluating the forest resources they will be using to make the crafts. “The older women led the others by teaching them how to collect seeds and plant fibers and to assemble them into bracelets, necklaces, handbags, and the beaded tops and palm skirts worn by their ancestors” (RP 2013). This specific project has gotten some international attention because of the leadership role the women of Sani Isla have taken when standing up to deforestation threats in the area.

According to Executive Director Niyanta Spelman, when RP first visited the village the women never said a word in any of the development meetings. After repeated encouragement,
the women have become very active in voicing opinions about conservation, creating plans of action, and collaborating not only with each other, but also with the RP representatives and with news reporters from the United Kingdom journal, the Guardian. The Guardian has published an article about the contract of former president Pablo Liucy and oil company Petroamazona, which would have allowed seismic research to be done “in return for $40 (£26.60) a hectare and a verbal promise to build a new school, communal kitchen, better toilets, a new football pitch and houses” (Watts, 2013). The women of Sani Isla were the instigators of a solid stand against this decision, saying they are able to create their own livelihoods while still protecting their forest.

![Figure 5 RP Executive Director Niyanta Spelman (far left) with Sani Isla women in front of their artesian craft hut](image)

The next phases in this project include finishing the environmental, lingual, and business education needed for the women to effectively market their crafts. Some aspects of the business the women in Sani Isla do not feel comfortable handling themselves just yet, such as greeting tourists, handling transactions, and making use of various pricing systems, so RP will be seeking to hire a project coordinator who will live in the community and also serve as a liaison to Sani Isla and Quito, Ecuador.
2.4 Peru Projects

There are currently three projects in Peru that RP has helped start. They are located in Chiapota and the Pampa Hermosa Protected Area near Satipo. In Mushuk Llacta de Chiapota, Peru, there are two projects RP has been involved with. The first is sustainable harvesting of the mastodon palm (*Aphandra natalia*), also known to some as the piassava palm (*Leopoldinia piassaba*), which is a 30 ft. palm endemic to the Amazonian rainforest. This species of palm has disappeared from the locality of Chiapota due to the unsustainable harvesting of the plant in the area. Now, the community of Chiapota is reintroducing this species to the Amazon rainforest.

With help from RP and their in-country forestry specialist, women in this community are also harvesting this plant in a biologically sustainable method, and using the fiber to make brooms. They then sell these brooms to produce income. Taking this one step further, the women of Chiapota decided to create a handicraft business using the piassava palm to make baskets and hats. Wayne Mayer, a PhD candidate from the Nicholas School for the Environment and Earth Sciences at Duke University, conducted his dissertation research on the sustainable harvesting of the piassava palm and the economic and environmental feasibility of this practice for impoverished communities (Meyer, 2006).

The last project is centered on ecotourism development in the Pampa Hermosa Protected area in Calabaza and San Antonio, Peru. This project, described below, formed the basis for my internship report, and also served as the fieldwork for my thesis.
In the cloudforest canopy of the eastern side of the Andes Mountains, Rainforest Partnership is helping the communities of Calabaza and San Antonio free themselves from a history of destructive irrigation and unsustainable coffee harvesting that has been eroding their soils and destroying patches of forest. It is common belief that 3,000 years ago the Ashaninka communities occupied this area (Norma Lecca, interview). They were fishers, foragers, and agriculturalists of cassava (*Manihot esculenta*) and plantain (*Musa paradisiaca*). These communities were well aware of the cycle of nature; they moved constantly when the land was infertile and animals were scarce, and they returned when nature was regenerated.

With the arrival of the Spanish, these Ashaninka communities were forced to move to the lowlands, into the cloud canopy where the settlers did not venture. An influx of migrants came into the area as a result of road construction during the 1960’s. There was then a reverse effect during the 1980’s when Peru was experiencing episodes of violence throughout the country, resulting in depopulation of the province. Most of the inhabitants of this area are migrants from...
the highland Huancayo area, installed in Pampa Hermosa for over 40 years. Because of this, they will not be referred to as an “indigenous community”, but rather the “local populations”, or “communities”; community refers to the villages of Calabaza and San Antonio.

These communities need a source of income. The agricultural techniques that they have been using since their communities moved from the highlands are no longer fit for their needs, or for the longevity of the Peruvian cloud-canopy rainforest. These communities actively took notice of the damage being done by them to their own land, and now they wish to change. The following sections will outline the tasks I was assigned as this ecotourism project developed.

Rainforest Partnership has been working with the communities of Calabaza and San Antonio for two years. My main task since I started at RP in January 2013 has been to help create a management plan that these communities can easily comprehend and implement into their livelihoods. A management plan is essentially a plan of action that outlines all factors of the business at hand. It is a way of organizing the process of creating a business. It is essentially a set of conceptual principles, policies, agreements by stakeholders, the host community, and the local governments, as well as previous and current marketing strategies for the enterprise. The plan had to be easy enough for people who have no experience in business management to be able to organize themselves into a working unit. It does this by outlining the positions that must be filled, which helps them assign tasks to different people in order to get the business running.

At first, creating this plan was daunting. I had no experience in any sort of managerial position before. But after much reading I found that such a plan required more common sense about what a business needs to run than anything else. Before I came to RP there were two people who worked on creating a management plan for this ecotourism business, but without much success. After two years it was never finished. The document did not need to be elaborate;
it needed to be simple and well organized. There are two project coordinators in Peru with whom I collaborated with on a weekly basis to act as a team on how to create this management plan.

I found that creating a management plan from scratch was going to be tenuous. I did not want to exclude vital information as a result of my own ignorance. Fortunately, I found a mock management plan for a fictional industry that was created by a firm in India. As I expected, they included aspects of the plan I surely would have overlooked.

For example, this plan included copies (fake) of the signed agreements from the host community, the stakeholders, NGO, and relevant governmental agencies. This mock plan had sections for proposed activities, referring to what tourists would have the opportunity to do, as well as impact on the environment, campsite design, resources, and town infrastructure; cultural considerations, including contact history and heritage and positive impacts on the culture of the host community. It also included economic and social issues, including community support, impact on employment and training, and possible negative impacts and management strategies; health, safety & security issues, including laws and regulations, staff responsibilities, visitor information; a section on the tourism sector, which entails networks, local and regional tourism businesses, and quality assurance certification; and on trialing and evaluating the venture, which explains how trial runs were conducted, if at all, and the responses of the participants’ experience.

After I read through this document, I began to edit it to pertain specifically to the Colibri project. Most of my editing included deletion of their text (since it was irrelevant to the plan I was making) and replacing it with questions to answer about Calabaza and San Antonio’s history, culture, government, and local economy. The reason for replacing their information with RP’s, and the importance of using a fake management plan, is that management plans are
themselves intellectual property. Sometimes they are stolen from other businesses and used as their own. It is a competitive industry, where different businesses can start out as partners, but later become competitors. I did not want this to happen, which is why I chose a plan from a fictional business.

The other information in the management plan, such as a schedule for tourists, how waste was taken care of, the different structures that are being built, and attractions tourists would have access to, could be filled in by the two project coordinators in Peru. I sent the management plan to them so they could fill in the blanks. For whatever was left, Norma and Lucia (the Peru coordinators) decided it would be best if, while I was in Peru, the communities vote on what they want and do not want, as well as on who will be doing what tasks.

There was also an entire section of the management plan dedicated to the culture of the local populations, including the different cultural practices ecotourists could engage in, if any. This cultural section is one aspect that sets a community-based infrastructure apart from other types of tourism infrastructures. The management team decided it would be best to wait until I was in Peru to update this section so that the data collected would be primary. This way, too, the communities themselves would be deciding how much of their culture could be experienced by ecotourists.

Once I received the final additions from the Peru coordinators, I edited the entire document for content. Previously, I had included specific questions to guide the other members of the management team in collecting the correct information. I took those questions out, leaving the questions in the section on the local population’s culture. I also gathered together the various legal documents associated with the business, which included signed agreements by the local community leaders, regional municipality, RP stakeholders, and other partnering institutions,
such as Architects without Borders, who have agreed to assist in the creation of the ecolodge for this business. After the final edits were completed, I sent the plan back the Peru coordinators so they could translate the entire document into Spanish.

4. Community Selection Criteria for RP’s Future Projects

The second undertaking I was part of during my internship was the editing of the Community Selection Criteria document. This document serves as a guide to use when RP is seeking out new community partners. When selecting a new project to develop, there are various factors that must be accounted so that the effort put into a project does not end up as wasted time, energy, and money. This document also needed to be translated into Spanish at its completion, as all international projects RP is involved with are located in South America.

The community selection criteria will typically contain the project process, which includes a diagram of the project selection process, an overview of specific process components typically including criteria for community and country selection, agreement provisions, project monitoring and reporting, project development process, and an exit strategy when the enterprise is self-sustaining or if the project fails. The intent of this document is to conduct a cost-benefit analysis of any potential project.

The majority of the document was already finished. There were some discrepancies, though, identified by some of the board of directors. They made comments as they read through the documents, and I was charged with the task of implementing the constructive comments and adding any additional edits. This document had a higher level of technical language, as RP stakeholders and board of directors, who are well versed in project development and management, were the only ones who use it. After the first edits were completed, a translator
converted the document into Spanish and it was sent to the Peru coordinators to look over and add any suggestions they had.

5. Conclusion

Ecotourism has often received criticism from academia – where it has been associated with environmental and cultural degradation (Gómez, Aparicio, and Alcocer 2012; Coria and Calfucura 2011). Its structure is often confused with tourism, or mass tourism, which does not have the same environmental or cultural focus as ecotourism. With a business such as ecotourism, there is a large socio-cultural factor, especially so with community-based infrastructures. It was when I read more about what “community-based” meant that I realized the important role an anthropologist can play in ecotourism development. The local community must know exactly what is going to be done, referring to the development of the business; after all it is their livelihoods that are about to make a change. They will be running the business themselves, so the community must agree on everything the plan includes.

When ecotourism businesses, located in remote areas, end up failing, it is usually because of some cultural or social factor that was not addressed at the onset of development. Such factors may be due to lack of community involvement and lack of community acceptance of the business. Another factor that is common is that there is not enough income generated from the ecotourism business to sustain the livelihoods of the local community. Sometimes, economic gain is not even what a host community is eager to attain – where their goal is to protect their forest over anything else. Economic gain is also one of the least reliable aspects of ecotourism to begin with (Bookbinder et all 1998).

It is common to assume that the ultimate factor of success for an ecotourism enterprise is economic, or monetary, gain alone. It is true that there exists a strong economic factor within
ecotourism success, but monetary gain is not all that can be obtained, especially with community-based infrastructures (Stronza and Gordillo 2008). Social capital is an area that beckons anthropological research for ecotourism (Brosius et al. 1998; Russell and Harshbarger 2003; Stronza and Gordillo 2008). Local community participation in the ownership and management of the ecotourism enterprises can support social “cohesion” (Stronza and Gordillo 2008, 451). Beyond that, it can enhance the morale of the community as a unified entrepreneurial system – working together to create a sustainable livelihood and developing new learned skills that translate beyond the ecotourism business. With enhanced communal cooperation comes a greater chance for longevity of the enterprise (Stronza and Gordillo 2008).

There are other ways that local communities can create income in conjunction with an ecotourism business. One example of this comes from the Sani Isla community. They have an ecotourism business, and it was created before the artesian craft business RP was involved with. The business was not generating enough income, and that is one reason the former president signed the agreement with Petroamazona (Watts 2013). But, because of the strong conservation focus that the local community has, they decided to not give in to the agreement by their former leader; they did this by adding to their income using handmade crafts. These crafts can now be advertised and sold at the ecolodge located in Sani Isla, Ecuador. All this to say, if the local population is not directly involved in the development stages of an ecotourism enterprise, there may be more difficulties later on.

These issues can start to be resolved through participant observation, which is a common methodological practice for anthropologists. Anthropologists seek to understand how such global frameworks like ecotourism and environmentalism fit into the lives of people (West and Carrier 2004). There exists a link between the environment and the political, cultural, economic aspects
of society, and anthropology has the capacity to identify these links through its “comparative framework” (Burns 1999, 84). The method that is necessary to attain such a level of intricate underpinnings requires immersion, “for often it is only in the interstices of their lives that we can uncover clues to the ways in which these forces are transmuted when they are injected into the complex contexts of their worlds” (West and Carrier 2004, 486). The role of anthropology in ecotourism is to conduct anthropology for ecotourism.

My experience with Rainforest Partnership has been enriching. I am focusing my Thesis research on ecotourism businesses, and using the one they are creating as a first-hand example of development and to see how the communication dynamics of the host community to an NGO, so my time there is not yet over. Although I may not see myself working with conservation within the NGO market, I do have a great deal of respect for the amount of work NGOs do. Their gain comes from knowing they have helped the causes they feel compelled to, and their success is driven by passion.
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