

"Ecotourism in Panama: A Viable Developmental Tool?"

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My time spent in Panama was a disheveled, inspiring, humbling and powerful experience. In one moment all my answers, interviews and insights were falling into my lap, but within that same moment, a feeling of complete helplessness and frustration lingered. In a country that binds together several preserved and ancient cultures, guerrilla warfare in an immense tropical forest on the border of Colombia, a canal that directs maritime passage for the entire western hemisphere, and a history of struggle for independence from the Spanish, French and the United States, there is a dynamic dichotomy of incredible infrastructure and classic third world economic disparity. Instead of continuing to generalize the feelings and experiences I had in Panama, I present a compilation of journal clippings leading up to what I consider the critical moment of my experience, the moment when I questioned everything that I had initially set out to do in Panama.

July 31 – Isla Ustupo

All I can feel is bitterness and curiosity as I arrive on the islands of the San Blas on the eastern side of Panama. Hector Guzman, a scientist from the Smithsonian Institute of Tropical Research has previously informed me of the haunting stories of environmental degradation that takes place on these islands. It's nearly impossible for me not to be moved when I hear about their coral depletion problems; slashing off pieces of living coral reef for additional land

mass to counter their overpopulation problems. Even more disturbing is their lobster and fishing habits that have depleted populations so drastically that it has started to raise fists all throughout Panama. Perhaps these practices are excusable for a subsistence, island culture, but the Kuna methods of squirting bleach under the reef have made me question their morality.

I have only been on Ustupo Island for nearly 3 minutes and already there are intense stares from the hundreds of skinny Kuna children playing soccer in the plaza and the women waiting in line for the payphones. The young Kuna business owners promptly approach me because they know that I have money, and I get tossed around from hotel to restaurant in a state of confusion and culture-shock, and its still only 7:30 in the morning. The rarity of white people on an island of 8000 inhabitants pushes the curiosity of people far enough that they begin to briefly look me in the eyes, or, if they are bold enough, ask me a question. People start warming up to me and realize that I am not the wealthy and snotty northerner they thought I was and slowly the Indians start gathering around the local restaurant to hear what I have to say. Eventually, as the conversation begins to relax and the plastic chairs slowly move closer to each other, a 30 year old man comes stumbling out of the restaurant and sways straight for my direction until he stops a few inches from my face; so close that I am inhaling the fumes of alcohol emanating from his mouth with every breath he takes. In broken Spanish he mumbles questions at me loud enough for the entire plaza to hear, while keeping his balance by holding onto my shoulder and adamantly remaining uncomfortably close to my face. The people sitting around at the restaurant

anxiously explain to me the “chicha festival” which celebrates their independence from the raping and pillaging that occurred during the Spanish conquest. This festival consists of the entire community drinking for 3 consecutive days from 50 barrels of fermented sugar cane and I had happened to arrive on the third day. All of a sudden I start noticing that everyone around me is drunk; the 90 year old man barely standing on his own two feet as he staggers down the narrow pathways of the huts, the men at the restaurant all talking at once in voices louder than necessary, and even the women holding onto each other and giggling in each other’s ears. The entire town seems to be swaying about the dusty streets. As I walk into “the party hut” a whirlwind of stumbling men of all ages immediately approach me as if I were their neighbor. The zoo of Indians are in all stages of debauchery, some dancing, some in the middle of the floor passed out, while others sit around a drum singing Kuna chants. Far worse than the men, is a herd of young Kuna women in their traditional molas and bracelets dancing around one of the many barrels of chicha fuerte, while on the fringes the 70 year old women are stumbling around with their eyes closed playing their harmonicas in no synchronous order. The women act as regulators of the chicha-fest to make sure that someone is drinking the chicha at every minute, 24 hours a day. Within 72 hours, these women have managed to make the two Kuna communities consume every last drop of alcohol on the island while maintaining the dancing, smoking and traditional chants. In that moment the world is spinning and every person and every part of the room is consumed in their festivities, not even noticing that my whiteness stands out like a sore thumb. In that moment I can feel through the

joyousness of celebration, a strong and flagrant culture that has maintained their pride and roots throughout all their historical struggles for independence. In that moment, I forget completely about the bottle of bleach that is hiding under the fisherman's bed, or the pile of coral that was sacrificed so more mangrove huts could be built on the island. And in that moment, I start to forget all the moral dilemmas and frustrations that I came to the island with.