

## **"Ecotourism in Panama: A Viable Developmental Tool?"**

by Leif Petterson

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A question plagued me during my first days of research in the Comarca de Kuna Yala, home of the Kuna Indians of Northeastern Panama. Why has tourism in Kuna Yala become so prominent in a culture that has fought valiantly and on occasion violently to retain and protect its autonomy and subsistence lifestyle? Why has tourism been embraced so readily when it appears that the Kuna people have achieved their goal in continuing to live in the same tradition that they have for centuries, outside of the direction influence of the Westernized and developing Panama?

After arriving in Ustupo, the largest of the Kuna Islands in the Eastern region of the archipelago and devoid of tourist facilities, we noticed how subsistence based the economy was. Food came from the sea and small farms on the nearby mainland. Coconuts, gathered by every capable man, woman and child from the hundreds of uninhabited coconut palm infested islands that dot the coast, were traded for basic goods, such as toilet paper, water, sugar, and flour with the Colombian merchant vessels that island hop there way up the Coast to the Zona Libre at the mouth of the Panama Canal in Colon. This is the extent of Kuna Yala economy, more tied to Colombia than to the Panamanian mainland. The only source of actual monetary revenue comes from tourism.

Modest and simple as this economy is, it has proven itself fully capable of providing nourishment and simple goods to a population of roughly 200,000 Kuna since

the 1930's. They live close to their historical roots: packed islands with bamboo and thatch huts, no running water or electricity, no plumbing but teeming with life and living culture. This was what the Kuna have fought to preserve, a way of life, a living culture that is distinct and free from an overbearing Western influence, perfectly capable of providing for itself. But now it seems like there is a shift taking place, more and more people are leaving the Comarca to find jobs in the city, more Kuna are getting higher educations, and more Kuna are taking advantage of the growing tourism industry. Why the new participation in the Panamanian economy and eagerness to grow the tourism industry in the Comarca?

One night at dinner with Amador, the owner of the lodge on Isla Tupile where we stayed, I asked him. Why are so many Kuna trying to earn money and own ecolodges when they claim that all they want is to maintain and protect their lifestyle? Why earn money in a subsistence culture? A long pause followed. This is an excerpt from my journal entry that night:

*Amador told me that it was more or less in order to sustain this lifestyle. Without education for the younger generation Kuna Yala will fail. They need doctors, lawyers, politicians, and professionals. In order to pay for this education people have to earn a living and tourism is the best way to do that in Kuna Yala, without having to leave for the city.*

This was a turning point in my research. I had previously viewed Kuna Yala as entirely autonomous and removed from the economic and social structures of Panama

and on a larger scale the world, an isolated archipelago with no roads leading to it. But Amador was right; Kuna Yala would fail if it truly was disconnected. They are already facing serious problems with environmental sustainability and agricultural production...They need politicians and intellectuals to preserve the autonomy of the Comarca with good relations with the Panamanian government, and they need doctors and teachers to come back to the Comarca to serve and teach. Without these people, Kuna Yala could not continue to exist. It became apparent to me that Kuna Yala was not outside of the system but very much a part of it. What has allowed the Kuna to preserve so much culture and tradition is their incorporation into and their understanding of the economic, social and political realities that now dictate life around the world. Ecotourism is viewed as a means to provide necessary revenue to protect and preserve the status quo in Kuna Yala.

This revelation helped to frame the rest of my research. I began to look for solutions to problems with the management of ecotourism and the environment within the context of these social, economic and political conditions. Realizing that there is no escaping them, I began to think like Amador, asking myself how the system can be bent or manipulated to provide for sound environmental policy and effective ecotourism management. There clearly is a solution to these problems, whether they lie inside or outside the traditional set of regulatory functions. Perhaps solutions are to be found in some strangely ironic symbiotic relationship similar to that of the Kuna's with tourism.