Costa Rican ecotourism and the (re)construction of social-natures on the Osa Peninsula

Brett Sylvester Matulis
Western Washington University

Follow this and additional works at: https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwuet

Part of the Geography Commons

Recommended Citation
https://cedar.wwu.edu/wwuet/7

This Masters Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the WWU Graduate and Undergraduate Scholarship at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in WWU Graduate School Collection by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.
COSTA RICAN ECOTOURISM AND THE (RE)CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL-NATURES ON THE OSA PENINSULA

By
Brett Sylvester Matulis

Accepted in Partial Completion
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science

Moheb A. Ghali, Dean of the Graduate School

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Chair, Dr. David Rossiter

Dr. Troy Abel

Dr. Joyce Hammond
MASTER'S THESIS

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for master’s degree at Western Washington University, I grant to Western Washington University the non-exclusive royalty-free right to archive, reproduce, distribute, and display the thesis in any and all forms, including electronic format, via any digital library mechanisms maintained by WWU.

Library users are granted permission for individual, non-commercial reproduction of this work for educational research purposes only.

I represent and warrant this is my original work, and does not infringe or violate any rights of others. I warrant that I have obtained written permissions from the owner of any third party copyrighted material included in these files.

I acknowledge that I retain ownership rights to the copyright of this work, including but not limited to the right to use all or part of this work in future works, such as articles or books.

Any copying or publication of this thesis for commercial purposes, or for financial gain, is not allowed without my written permission.

Signature: [Signature]

Date: 15 May 2008
COSTA RICAN ECOTOURISM AND THE (RE)CONSTRUCTION
OF SOCIAL-NATURES ON THE OSA PENINSULA

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science

by
Brett Sylvester Matulis
May 2008
Abstract:

This thesis is concerned with the social construction of nature and society through ecotourism on the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica. It demonstrates that ecotourism is based on an idealized conception of nature external to and separate from society, allowing uneven power relationships to go unexamined and causing themes of social justice and equity to go unaddressed in the development and implementation of it. In my research I show how society and nature are linked in a mutually re-constructive relationship in order to redirect attention onto the way in which powerful agents control the idea of nature in Costa Rica and privilege those who accept the idealized external form, ultimately resulting in uneven development. This is achieved, first, by showing how society constructs nature through discursive representation and, second, by exploring how those new natures reconfigure social relationships and re-order social structures. Methodologically, I take an interpretive approach to participant observation and employ a discourse and image analysis of travel media. Specifically, I analyze Costa Rican travel brochures, advertisements, guidebooks, and electronic sources and contrast two Osa tourism ventures, utilizing information collected from informal interviews and student course journals. I argue that nature on the Osa Peninsula is increasingly being re-made as an object external to society, that society is being reconfigured as a result, that the entire process is controlled by an elite minority, and that the outcome is inequity based on a willingness and ability to accept the dominant new ideas about nature in Costa Rica.
Acknowledgements:

First and foremost I would like express my sincerest gratitude to Dr. David Rossiter for the critical role he played in every aspect of this research. Without his guidance, assistance, and devotion to my success this thesis could not have been possible. Dr. Rossiter’s encouragement and enthusiasm for the subject matter were indispensable throughout the process. I also thank him for the many hours he spent reading and commenting on the drafts leading to this final product.

I would also like to thank Dr. Troy Abel for the opportunity to serve as his teaching assistant on the inaugural Western Washington University Costa Rica study abroad program. Without this, the research I conducted would not have been possible.

I would like to thank Dr. Joyce Hammond for her helpful comments, anthropological perspective, and her superb course on the Anthropology of Tourism.

I would like to thank my friends Alberto Herrera Calvo, Carlos Araya Quintero, and Hayder Santamaria for their assistance in conducting this research and coordinating the visit of nearly 30 students and faculty from Western Washington University to the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica. I would like to recognize Quirá Expediciones as well as the staffs of Carara and Corcovado National Parks for their support of our group in Costa Rica. And finally, I extend my appreciation to my friend Merlyn Oviedo Sanchez for allowing his Danta Corcovado Lodge to be used as a case study in this thesis and to my new friend German Quirós Vivas for allowing his Finca Tilapias also to be used as a case study.
# Table of Contents

Abstract

Acknowledgements

List of Figures

Chapter I: Introduction

The Clay-Colored Robin

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Scholarly Approaches to Tourism

Policy and Implementation

The Preoccupation with Authenticity

Towards Constructivism

Social Nature

Marx

Post-Structuralism

Mitigating the Drawbacks

Caricaturing Constructivism?

Constructed Nature(s)

Methodological Approach

Returning to Costa Rica

Chapter II: Socio-Environmental History of Costa Rica

Section I: Before Ecological Stardom

Pre-contact and Colonization

Coffee Production

Banana Production

Economic Diversification

A Closer Look at Osa

Section II: Building a Positive Reputation

Democracy and Political (In)Stability

Science and Conservation

Ecotourism

Conclusion

Chapter III: Ecotourism and the Construction of Social-Nature

Section I: Constructing Costa Rican Natures

Production of Nature in Costa Rica: The Role of Ecotourism

Construction of Nature in Costa Rica: The Role of Discourse

Construction through Ecotourism: Analysis of Travel Media

Consumption of Discourse and Production of Expectations

Materialization of Idea(l)s
Section II: “Remaking Reality” on the Osa Peninsula 97
   Danta Corcovado Lodge 98
   Finca Tilapias 100
   Contrasting Convictions 102
   Social Capital 105
   Making an Investment 108
   Social Reconfiguration 112

Chapter IV: Conclusion 115
   Theoretical Framework 116
   Historical Review 119
   Social-Nature on the Osa Peninsula 120
   Implications and Conclusions 125

Works Cited 131
   Primary Documents 131
   Secondary Documents 132
List of Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Turdus grayi – Clay-Colored Robin</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Map of Costa Rica</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>International Campaign 2004 – South Pacific</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Path to Pura Vida</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Costa Rica: Volcanoes and Rainforests Close at Hand</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Central America: Costa Rica Traverse</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter I: Introduction

The Clay-Colored Robin

Costa Rica is known by many tourists as the place to go for spectacular displays of tropical nature. Millions travel to the country each year to experience what they believe is nature in its most exotic form (ICT 2006, 10). Bird-watchers, for example, seek out Costa Rica’s most spectacular and brightly colored species, such as the Resplendent Quetzal, Scarlett Macaw, Keel-Billed Toucan, Blue-Crowned Motmot, Fiery-Billed Aracari, and Elegant Trogon. With nearly 900 species of birds native to the country (Henderson 2002, 8), tourists have no shortage of impressive species to see. These birds communicate everything the tourists understand tropical nature to be – magnificent, exotic, majestic, rare. That is why tourists, such as the group that will be discussed in this thesis, are often surprised to learn which bird was chosen to stand as a national symbol of Costa Rica.

The Clay-Colored Robin (figure 1; Turdus 2005), Costa Rica’s national bird, is common, dully colored, and ordinary in appearance.1 The significance of the Clay-Colored Robin for many Costa Ricans may lie not in its appearance, but in the cultural identity it represents. In an interview I conducted, a Costa Rican nature guide explained with pride that the Clay-Colored Robin had been chosen because it was commonly seen and heard on the coffee plantations and was widely known by the rural farm-workers, or campesinos, who spent their days there.2 The Clay-Colored Robin, small and non-descript, represents, for many Costa Ricans, familiar landscapes of work and agricultural production – landscapes that many North American ecotourists would consider degraded and destroyed.

---

1 The source image of figure 1 was obtained via wikipedia.org and is being used within the terms of the “GNU Free Documentation License.”

2 Campesino is the Spanish word for a small-scale rural farmer. It’s closest English equivalent might be “peasant,” however “campesino” does not carry the same negative connotation.
This raises many questions about nature in Costa Rica. Most basically, how can Costa Ricans and tourists have such dramatically different perceptions of the same place? Even though neither sees nature in such a singular fashion (that is, strictly on the basis of aesthetics or strictly in utilitarian terms), their perceptions do differ in some very fundamental ways. What is the

---

3 The meaning of the Clay-Colored Robin is, of course, not universal. In addition to being a symbol of Costa Rica’s agricultural history, it is widely appreciated in Costa Rica for its beautiful song (Museos de Costa Rica 2008, par1), and can even be appreciated simultaneously for both reasons by the same individual. Significantly, the Robin was selected in 1977, before Costa Rica’s environmental movement. Which not only suggests that productive uses of nature were still dominant at that time, but raises the question of whether or not the Robin would be selected again if a new national bird were chosen today (not because it is no longer appreciated by local residents but because powerful agents wish to promote a different image of the country).
historical context that created these cultural differences, and what has it meant, specifically, for the ways in which Costa Rican nature is understood? How are these understandings changing today, through which mechanisms, and who controls that process? If, as Honey (199, 132) suggests, ecotourism and environmentalism have “become part of Costa Rica’s national consciousness,” is the Clay-Colored Robin no longer an appropriate symbol of the country? Or is the Robin a reminder that the Costa Rican identity, despite evidence of an emerging environmentalism, cannot be so simply defined or replaced? If there is widespread Costa Rican pride in the Robin and the type of nature it represents, why is it widely unknown outside of Costa Rica? For what reasons would this be concealed, and who benefits from that being the case? Ultimately, as the image of Costa Rican nature is increasingly stabilized as pristine and separate from society through the expansion of ecotourism, what are the implications for those who see it differently but must live with it?

These are crucial questions for understanding Costa Rican environments and the activities that are based on particular ways of viewing and using them. These questions are rooted in issues of social justice, equity, and uneven power relationships, and their answers concern every aspect of cultural, political, and ecological life in Costa Rica. Fundamentally, what is at stake is the definition of nature in Costa Rica: wilderness or home. Thus, in the following thesis I will explore the proposition that there are multiple, distinct and culturally specific ideologies of nature, although we commonly only see the expression of a certain privileged few within Costa Rican ecotourism discourse. This is despite the fact that many of the core principles of ecotourism proclaim the importance of intercultural sensitivity (TIES 1990, par1-2). I will demonstrate, however, that, in the practice of ecotourism, cultural issues are usually placed secondary to and separate from environmental ones. Ultimately, I will suggest that, in order to truly achieve the principal goals of ecotourism regarding intercultural sensitivity, proponents
must confront the continued neglect of the disempowered rural Costa Ricans and the insistent separation of culture and nature. In this thesis, then, I will address several of the issues raised by the story of the Clay-Colored Robin. Of particular interest will be the operation of power in relationships among tourism hosts, their guests, residents, the government, travel agencies, and the media as they negotiate the fate of rural community life in Costa Rica.

I will explore the following specific questions. How is nature, in both thought and practice, being re-constructed in Costa Rica? Who is in control of this process? And what does this mean for the residents of the region?

I will argue that, during this late-20th and early-21st century period of Costa Rican tourism expansion, nature is increasingly being re-made as an object external to society, that this is occurring largely through ecotourism development (though it began prior to tourism with scientific research, in the 1950s; national park development, in the 1970s; and international conservation campaigns, in the 1980s), and that the entire process is controlled by an elite minority (including scholars, activists, and government officials) that has access to social and economic capital. I will also argue that the re-construction of nature is re-ordering social relationships – exacerbating existing conflict and creating it where it did not exist before. My intention, more generally, is to contribute to the growing body of knowledge that shows that society and nature are intertwined: society re-constructs nature at the same time that nature re-constructs society.

My first step in moving forward will be to provide a theoretical framework appropriate for addressing the questions presented above. In the remainder of this chapter, I will review, in roughly chronological order, the major theories developed in the study of tourism and critically
appraise each. I will identify the shortcomings of these theories and present insights from recent work in the field of geography that will be useful in addressing them. This will require a detailed review of the critical geographic concept of social-nature and an explanation of how it pertains to the analysis of ecotourism in Costa Rica. Following that, I will explain my methodological approach: a hermeneutic synthesis of participant observations and a discourse and image analysis of travel media. Then I will briefly introduce my study site before concluding with a roadmap of the chapters that follow.

**Theoretical and Methodological Framework**

**Scholarly Approaches to Tourism:**

The popularity of recreational travel has risen dramatically in recent decades, and the academic study of it has followed suit. A number of scholars have contributed to the development of a theoretical framework for tourism study; however, most have devoted their attention to policy issues and few have approached it from a critical perspective (notable exceptions include Vivanco 2006, Braun 2002, and Urry 2002). Ecotourism in particular has remained largely the realm of “policy-oriented proponents” inclined to prescribe ecotourism as a mode of unproblematically extending nature preservation throughout the world (Vivanco 2006, 157). Here I briefly discuss the “policy-approach” to ecotourism before reviewing the critical theories that I mobilize against it. My discussion will include a roughly chronological review of the major theories developed in the study of tourism and a critical appraisal of each.

---

4 A “discourse,” in its use here, refers to all the various forms of representation; the ways in which ideas and meanings are communicated. This includes written, visual, verbal, symbolic, and other modes of communication. A discourse analysis is useful in identifying how ideas are promoted, debated, and reshaped within society. Often, only the dominant discourse (the ideas and conceptions of the most powerful agents interested) sees widespread expression.
Policy and Implementation

The study of tourism is a recent phenomenon, receiving “sustained academic attention” only since the 1970s (Gmelch 2004, 7). The study of ecotourism is even more recent. Though various forms of nature travel had begun to be described in the years leading up to it, the term “ecotourism” did not appear until 1983 (Ceballos-Lascuráin 1996, 21). In the first two decades of ecotourism scholarship, the vast majority of contributors took for granted the assumption that ecotourism was a universally beneficial development option that preserved natural environments while enhancing local economic prosperity. These individuals, therefore, focused primarily on issues of policy and implementation by prescribing definitions (Fennell 1999 and 2001; Blamey 1997; Sirakaya 1999; Björk 2000) and developing certification standards (Honey 2002; Font and Buckley 2001) in attempts to pin down what exactly constitutes ecotourism. Though the abundance of definitions is nearly as diverse as the scholars and practitioners that debate them, there is general agreement that ecotourism is more than simply travel to “natural areas,” but rather also concerns issues of cultural sensitivity and the well-being of local communities (Fennell 2001). Largely uncritical approaches to these sociocultural aspects of ecotourism, however, have caused them to be “lost in the global policy-oriented debates” (Vivanco 2006, 157).

The failure of this “policy-approach” to adequately address the social and cultural aspects of ecotourism development is rooted in the conception of nature on which the activity is based. Ecotourism is based on a fundamental separation between society and nature – the idea that “natural areas” are places to which one can travel implies that the places where daily social activities take place (i.e. “human environments”) are “unnatural.” This is the concept of “external nature,” wherein nature is understood to encompass all non-human biological entities and society is understood to destroy what is natural (Castree 2001, 6). Approaches to ecotourism based on this dichotomy are unable to adequately address sociocultural issues because, the connection
between nature’s form and the social conditions that arise from it are not apparent. When unfair or uneven social conditions arise from ecotourism’s preservation of environments the external conception of nature conceals the link, and the activity continues unabated and unquestioned. In this way, it is possible for policy-oriented proponents of ecotourism to have genuine concern for issues social equity and justice, but be unaware of the uneven conditions that the activity they promote is creating.

The external conception of nature is tied closely to “Western” society and ideals – more specifically, to North American and European metropolitan elite educated in the Enlightenment tradition (Worster 1994; Castree 2001, 6). The idea is widespread in North America and Europe and finds its strongest expression in the concept of American wilderness (R. Nash 2001). Several scholars of ecotourism have keyed in on the promotion of this concept through tourism in the “global South” from the “global North” and have drawn an imperialism metaphor (Gray 2003, 117; Mowforth and Munt 1998; D. Nash 1997). This strategy is beneficial because it necessarily frames questions in the context of dominance, oppression, and justice, but the parallel trades on a dualism between global and local and creates some undesirable effects. Ecotourism is a different type of “imperialism.” It is an imperialism of ideas, as opposed to physical settlement and government, and it is more diffuse and covert. Environmental protection is often framed in terms of being in the best interest of the local communities (with regard health issues or resource conservation) and therefore usually goes unquestioned. The duality on which the metaphor is based, however, simplifies the complex character of ecotourism development and the expansion of the external nature ideal. Vivanco explains that it is important to characterize “the ‘jagged articulations’ between places, people, and moving objects” as not “purely or simply” global or local (Vivanco 2006, 8). He suggests “moving beyond a framework … in which globalization and its mechanisms … represent transhistorical processes that rest on a dichotomy of dynamic
‘global forces’ and stable … ‘local places’” because “it often downplays the collaborations, misunderstanding, oppositions, and dialogues that take place” (Vivanco 2006, 9). The global/local dualism also ignores any overlap between the two; many “locals” of Costa Rica are in league with these “global forces” that promote ecotourism development and the concept of external nature. Ecotourism is, therefore, better approached from a theoretical framework that challenges conventional conceptions of nature while continuing to redirect critical focus onto issues of social equity and justice – such as the framework of “social-nature,” which will be described below.

The Preoccupation with Authenticity

Though the field has been dominated by policy-oriented scholarship, several contributors have offered the basis for a theoretical framework. Unfortunately, most are concerned with the issue of authenticity and not more pressing questions regarding inequity and justice. One notable critique of these tourism theories is offered by Urry (2002), who provides a review of the key early contributions to tourism scholarship. Urry (2002, 7) notes that one of earliest formulations of tourism theory was made by Boorstin (1964) who proposed the idea of the “pseudo-event.” He argued that mass tourists, who travel in guided groups, are insulated from “reality,” viewing “inauthentic” performances of culture and “gullibly enjoying ‘pseudo-events.’” Since there is profit to be made from these “extravagant displays” of culture, Boorstin argues, local people are inclined to provide these experiences, further removing the tourist from the “true” host culture. The result of this, according to Boorstin, is “a closed self-perpetuating system of illusions” (Urry 2002, 7), as opposed to social adjustment to modern realities. In other words, Boorstin believes that the “real” was insulated from the re-constructive processes of social interaction, and that anything “non-traditional” or modern was artificial and inauthentic. According to him, tourism
occurs in an “environmental bubble” of scenes and interactions familiar to the tourist (Urry 2002).

Turner and Ash (1975) refined Boorstin’s argument by explaining how “the tourist is placed at the centre of a strictly circumscribed world” (Urry 2002, 7). Travel agents, hotel managers, and others who serve the tourists while on vacation act, they argue, as “surrogate parents,” relieving tourists of responsibility and protecting them from “harsh reality” (Urry 2002, 7). The structure of the tourism industry was seen as working to restrict tourists to certain approved “sites/sights,” again insulating them from the “real” or “authentic” host culture. The outcome of such an industry is manufactured experiences that are “bland and lacking contradiction” (Urry 2002, 8). Though travel may be motivated by a desire to experience the exotic, Turner and Ash (1975, 292) believe that the tourism industry structures a uniform “world that everywhere shows us our own image” (Urry 2002).

Cohen (1988), however, is critical of the idea that all tourists are blindly led around by tourism infrastructure and naively fooled by “pseudo-events.” He “maintains that there is no single tourist as such but a variety of tourist types or modes of tourist experience,” and that many tourists today do not rely on packaged vacations (Urry 2002, 8). Cohen sees this rejection of organized travel as a response to the artificiality of mass tourism and the basis for the emergence of contemporary (and largely “middle-class”) forms of “alternative” tourism (Urry 2002).

The theme of “authenticity” in tourism, which was raised with Boorstin’s (1964) articulation of the pseudo-event, has remained at the forefront of tourism research. MacCannell (1999; 2004) has continued this tradition, but has challenged Boorstin’s distinction between those tourists who can discern the “authentic” from those who are fooled by artificial productions. For MacCannell,
all tourists “embody a quest for authenticity” (Urry 2002, 9). As a result, they are often fascinated with the “inner workings” of the daily lives of people in the host community. Tourists, then, intrude on the privacy of the host community in their efforts to observe “behind the scenes” or to witness “authentic” activities. In response, the host community constructs “spaces” of “staged authenticity” for tourist consumption in order to reclaim their private lives (Urry 2002, 9). While both MacCannell and Boorstin believe that tourist experiences are typically characterized by the “inauthentic” and “artificial,” MacCannell’s attention to the role that social relations play in the formulation of these “inauthentic” tourist experiences marks a key difference between his analysis and Boorstin’s (Urry 2002, 7-9). It should be noted, however, that, like Boorstin, MacCannell does not consider newly re-constructed “realities,” such as a modern economic system that depends on cultural performance for tourism, to be “authentic.”

In contrast to MacCannell, Crick (1988) argues that all cultures are, in a sense, “inauthentic.” For Crick (1988), all cultures “are invented, remade and the elements reorganised,” so “it is not clear why the apparently inauthentic staging for the tourist is so very different from the processes of cultural remaking” that are constantly taking place outside of tourism (Urry 2002, 9). This argument, however, approaches the idea of cultural re-construction from the standpoint that what is new is necessarily inauthentic, as if there exists static archetypal identities against which cultures can be evaluated (Urry 2002).

While debate regarding “authenticity” in tourism almost always assumes that the “inauthentic” and “artificial” are negative, Feifer (1985) describes “post-tourists” that, she suggests, “almost delight in the inauthenticity of the normal tourist experience” (Urry 2002, 12). The idea of the “post-tourist” may be a suitable theory for understanding travelers to a place such a Las Vegas, where the collection of “artificial” sights has come to constitute a sort of authentic artificiality,
but it is doubtful that this concept could be easily applied to ecotourism. Nature, after all, is (supposedly) the most “natural,” “un-artificial” attraction that exists – tourists (generally) don’t view nature as socially constructed, they view it as “natural.” In support of the concept, however, Urry (2002, 91) argues that “[w]hen the miniature replica of the Eiffel Tower is purchased, it can be simultaneously enjoyed as a piece of kitsch, an exercise in geometric formalism, and as a socially revealing artefact.” Ecotourism, however, cannot be approached in this way, for the nature that ecotourists desire is seen as external and effaced of social intervention – they wish it to be “pure” and “pristine,” not manmade and artificial.

The preoccupation with authenticity in tourism scholarship distracts from issues of more pressing concern, such as the effect new social and physical realities, authentic or not, have on the communities and ecosystems where tourism takes place. Braun’s (2002) articulation of a “discourse of modernity-as-loss” takes a step forward, setting the stage for tourism sites/sights to be understood as reconstituted and, therefore, unfamiliar “realities,” rather than inauthentic replacements of the way things “should” be. In other words, everything is “authentic” and it is simply that tourists (and tourism scholars) mourn the loss of a nostalgic past (Braun 2002) or an imagined ideal.

The imagination plays a significant role in tourism consumption. Campbell (1987) “argues that covert day-dreaming and anticipation are processes central to modern consumerism,” and that people do not achieve satisfaction as much from consuming goods as they do from anticipation of consumption and the “imaginative pleasure-seeking” leading up to it (Urry 2002, 13). Therefore, a “basic motivation for consumption” is “to experience ‘in reality’ the pleasurable dramas [consumers] have already experienced in their imagination” (Urry 2002, 13). Urry argues that tourism is a prime example of this “imaginative hedonism” because it “necessarily involves
daydreaming and anticipation of new or different experiences,” but he is critical of Campbell’s formulation for describing it as “relatively autonomous” from both society and “institutional arrangements, such as advertising” (2002, 13-14).

Towards Constructivism

Urry (2002) presents one of the most refined frameworks for the study of tourism. Building on the work of French philosophers, Foucault in particular, he proposes the concept of the “tourist gaze.” Urry argues that “at least part of [the tourist] experience is to gaze upon or view a set of different scenes, of landscapes or townscapes which are out of the ordinary.” He explains that there is no single gaze or “universal experience that is true for all tourists at all times” because the gaze is constructed by particular social experiences, cultural backgrounds, and the historical period (2002, 1). The gaze is not defined by a set of intrinsic characteristics, but rather is “constructed in relationship to its opposite, to non-tourist forms of social experience and consciousness” (2002, 1-2). Urry describes several ways in which this “division between the ordinary and the extraordinary is established and sustained” (2002, 12). The act of gazing as a tourist can be distinguished from gazing in ordinary life, first, by the sight of unique, and usually famous, objects such as the Eiffel Tower, Grand Canyon, or Buckingham Palace. Secondly, the difference is apparent in the sight of objects that symbolize an ideal, such as a “typical” English village or a “typical” French château. It is also apparent in the sight of unfamiliar aspects of the familiar and sight of familiar things in unusual contexts. Also, “carrying out … familiar tasks or activities within an unusual visual environment,” such as swimming at the base of a remote jungle waterfall, can serve to delineate routine from exceptional. Finally, the distinction can be made in seeing signs that indicate an object is extraordinary, such as viewing a rock that is accompanied by a sign declaring that it came from the moon or walking through a rainforest that is marked as the last remaining “intact” forest of its kind. Urry describes these various forms of gazing to
show that there are many ways that tourists can experience the extra-ordinary sights/sites they seek, and he shows that they can only be defined as extraordinary when held in opposition to ordinary daily life (Urry 2002, 12-13).

Urry further distinguishes two general forms of the gaze: the romantic and the collective (2002, 43). The romantic gaze is a form of tourist experience that places emphasis on “solitude, privacy and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze” (Urry 2002, 43). Though he never explicitly mentions ecotourism, Urry notes that the romantic gaze is usually the preferred form for experiencing nature. Urry further explains that the romantic gaze is largely a middle-class desire and, as such, is afforded greater social standing than “mass” forms of tourism, which is unfortunate because it “exalts an activity that is available only to the privileged” (Walter 1982, 303 in Urry 2002, 45). The collective gaze, on the other hand, necessitates the presence of others. The other people provide an atmosphere and “indicate that this is the place to be” (Urry 2002, 43). Urry provides the example of the British seaside resort, the fortunes of which precipitously declined when it no longer attracted enough visitors to convey the necessary message (Urry 2002).

As well developed as Urry’s (2002) theory of tourism is, his work focuses almost entirely on travel within Europe and centers on the structured social relationships of capitalist economics. He does not directly address the more recent phenomenon of ecotourism in the developing world, nor does he devote substantial attention to the many non-economic social relations of tourism. Urry (2002) places most of his attention on the social relationships of economics (such as consumption of “positional goods,” “income elasticity,” and service economies), and does not address social relationships of community development, cultural exchange, and environmentalism
that have been of greater concern for scholars of ecotourism (Vivanco 2006; Braun 2002). Fortunately, there has been work done to supplement Urry’s contribution.

Vivanco (2006; 2003; 2001) has been concerned with bringing a much-needed critical perspective to the study of ecotourism and environmentalism, specifically in his study of Monte Verde, a very well-known site of ecotourism and nature conservation in Costa Rica. Vivanco approaches the topic from an anthropological perspective and is, therefore, more greatly concerned with exploring the roles that environmental activism, biodiversity conservation, and ecotourism play in the “ongoing changes in people’s lives,” as opposed to a geographical perspective that might be more directly concerned with understanding the roles that those things play in the (re)construction of social-natures (Vivanco 2006, 4-5). Regardless, Vivanco makes a significant contribution to ecotourism literature by bringing a theoretically-based critical perspective to a subject that has been studied almost entirely in terms of policy and implementation (for instance, Honey 2004 and 1999; Boo 1990; McLaren 2003) and by calling into question the moral authority of tourism development decisions that are based on appeals to environmental conservation (Vivanco 2006).

Vivanco (2006) approaches the topics of ecotourism and environmentalism using the concept of “cultural encounters.” As he explains, the “notion of encounters suggests spaces of cultural interaction, conflict, and production in which different views of the world come into consciousness, visibility, and dialogue” (2006, 8). This stands in opposition to an approach that takes environmentalism to be a “static or essential body of political and ecological issues” (Vivanco 2006, 7). Viewing environmentalism as an “arena of encounters” places the focus on “the encounters themselves as specific communicative interactions” rather than on essential and generalized characteristics of a group of people (Vivanco 2006, 8).
Vivanco notes that these encounters do not “necessarily (if ever)” take place “on equal footing” (2006,8). Throughout his work, Vivanco highlights the role that uneven power relations play in the formation of social (in)justice. For example, he suggests that “environmentalism is an apparatus of power in which there are clearly winners and losers, provoking social conflict and exacerbating existing inequalities” (Vivanco 2006, 9), and that “ecotourism canonizes certain versions of natural and social history, to the advantage of some, the expense or silence of others, and the considerable reduction of complexity and heterogeneity” (ibid., 157). While Vivanco argues that the people of Monte Verde are up against powerful campaigns and activists, he characterizes the local as non-passive and explains how they mount a variety of resistances to push back against foreign dominance. Vivanco’s project for challenging the inequity that exists in environmental preservation campaigns and ecotourism development could, however, be strengthened by engaging with recent geographical scholarship that interrogates nature’s privileged position as an external source of moral guidance (Castree 2001).

Braun (2002) works within that geographical tradition in his study of adventure travel – what he calls the “ideological twin” of ecotourism (2002, 111). He understands adventure travel as a nostalgic search for nature and culture untouched by modernity. Drawing on Rosaldo (1989), Braun has described travelers as mourning the loss of primitive nature and culture. He notes, however, that in the process of seeking out these “primitives,” tourists are actually contributing to their further destruction. Braun does not view “the past” as an object that has been destroyed as much as he views the whole process as a continual reassertion of being modern on the part of the adventure seekers. Accordingly, Braun suggests that “adventure travel and ecotourism are best viewed as practices through which subjects both perform and reaffirm the present – and their own identity – as modern” (2002, 112).
In making his argument for viewing tourism as a “discourse of modernity-as-loss” (2002, 134), Braun draws on the concept of a socially constructed nature, which he uses to dislodge traditional ways of thinking of ecotourism and other forms of “low-impact” travel. Whereas “proponents of adventure travel and ecotourism promote these industries” on the grounds that “they leave sites ‘untouched,’” Braun rejects the “untouched/contaminated duality” altogether (2002, 142). In his account, nature is never something that exists separately from human society. Rather, any physical form that nature takes is a result of the effect social processes have had on it – even nature that is seen to be “pristine” is a social construction, as it is identified as such because of particular socio-political conditions and cultural preferences (Castree and Braun 2001; Braun and Castree 1998). Braun’s motivation for viewing nature in this way and for incorporating this understanding into discussions of ecotourism is not to dismiss or discredit ecotourism and the potential it has for nature conservation, but rather to uncover the role it plays in extending the reach of powerful interests and struggles for control (2002). Braun (2002) and Vivanco (2006), then, share the goal of elucidating the uneven distribution of power and operation of it in social relationships of tourism encounters.

Vivanco (2006; 2003; 2001) has developed a much needed theoretical basis for the study of ecotourism, and Braun (2002) has enriched the study of “adventure travel” by applying the well-developed geographical theories of social-nature. The two, however, do not appear to have, as of yet, overlapped. Therefore, my research aims to bridge this divide.

**Social Nature:**

Braun, in his discussion of adventure travel and ecotourism, calls into question the assumption that the various types of “low-impact” tourism are “innocent forms of travel that leave the sites visited intact” (2002, 142). Braun explains that “[t]his view attains its force through the
assumption that ['low-impact'] forms of travel are primarily visual, and that vision is passive” (2002, 142). Against this, Braun argues that the tourist gaze has the effect of altering the objects and cultures gazed upon, actively re-producing the things that come into view. This is similar to the claims made by Urry (2002), however Braun extends the argument by reducing the emphasis Urry places on the role of economics in this process. Instead, Braun argues that the re-production of tourism sights/sites occurs through a variety of social relations and is mediated by discourse. In the cases of adventure travel and ecotourism, which Braun specifically discusses, pristine nature and primitive culture are often sought out by tourists and industry agents and are remade through processes governed by prominent discourses, one of which, Braun argues, is a discourse of “modernity-as-loss” (Braun 2002).

A major goal of Braun’s approach to tourism is to displace the traditional view that nature is something external to and independent of society, in order to expose and confront social inequity and forms of domination that are manifested in particular ways of seeing and relating to “natural” spaces. Utilizing a constructivist approach to tourism, as Braun has done, challenges the notion that visual activities are passive (and therefore apolitical) by making evident the ways in which nature and other objects of the gaze are socially produced (Braun 2002).

In this section I will review some of the literature that is the foundation of social-nature theory on which Braun (2002) bases his analysis of tourism. To do this, I will lay out the historical foundations of social nature theory and review some of the literature on the subject. I begin by discussing Marxist and neo-Marxist contributions to the literature and describing how Marx inspired new ways of approaching the study of nature. I then discuss post-structuralism and the directions that this study has taken since neo-Marxism by introducing the concept of social construction. After that, I discuss several ways in which scholars have sought to mitigate the
shortcomings of a post-structuralist approach to constructivism. Then I defend constructivism against some of the caricatures that have been made of it. And finally, I discuss how nature is physically constructed in practice. In concluding this section, I will return to the subject of tourism by describing several of the ways in which social-nature theory can be usefully applied to the study of ecotourism.

Marx

The roots of social nature theory are found in Marxism. While Karl Marx himself never formulated a focused argument on nature, his work touched on conceptions of nature under capitalism and paved the way for scholars in the Marxist tradition to develop the idea – most notable are Alfred Schmidt and Neil Smith (Castree and Braun 1998). Schmidt (1971) articulates a theory of nature from Marx’s “scattered reflections” on the topic, whereas Smith (1984) identifies some of the “cognitive and political implications” of these ideas in practice (Castree and Braun 1998, 7).

Schmidt (1971) shows that Marx approached nature under capitalism in two ways: first, with a “critique of representations of ‘nature’ within bourgeois societies,” and second, with a “fragmented theory of nature’s creative destruction under capitalism” (Castree and Braun 1998, 7). According to Schmidt’s critique, the bourgeois subject saw nature both as external and universal; paradoxically, nature was seen as that which was non-human, but at the same time, being biological creatures, humans too were seen as natural. Schmidt showed that Marx opposed the bourgeois view and insisted that society and nature were related but not singular. Characteristically, Marx centers this relationship “on the labour process, the point at which society systematically engages with nature” (Castree and Braun 1998, 7-8). Schmidt’s account of Marx’s views on nature has been criticized, particularly by Smith (1984), for ironically conveying
some of the bourgeois conceptions of external and universal nature that Marx opposed and, as a result, diminishing Marx’s most significant observation on nature: that social relations play a critical role in producing both nature and society (Castree and Braun 1998).

Smith (1984) explores some of the implications of the “dual representation of nature” identified by Marx (that is, as both external and universal), showing that these conceptions of nature render it a barrier to society, denies society’s role in shaping it, and “implies that social relations are as immutable as natural processes” (Castree and Braun 1998, 7). Smith rejects these “traditional” views of nature and, in response, formulated a groundbreaking thesis on the “production of nature” in Uneven Development. In that work, Smith explains how capitalism brings natural environments and labor together “in an abstract framework of market exchange which, literally, produces nature(s) anew” (Castree and Braun 1998, 9). Smith’s approach moves “beyond the external and universal conceptions of nature,” emphasizes the “relations between society and nature,” explains how “capitalism constructs and reconstructs whole landscapes as exchange values under the profit imperative,” and “powerfully historicizes human relations with nature” (Castree and Braun 1998, 8). In doing this, Smith defined “a powerful overarching critical research programme” that frames the processes of re-making nature in terms of control and justice (Castree and Braun 1998, 9), thus initiating the critical geographical enquiry of “social nature” (Castree and Braun 1998).

Post-Structuralism

Marxism, despite all the insight it provided the development of social nature theory, is not a panacea. Marxist theory relies heavily on “realist epistemologies” so objects, such as nature, are “assumed to be … unproblematically ‘ready-at-hand’” (Castree and Braun 1998, 15). This overlooks the constitutive role of discourse and the historical character of nature’s materiality.
Fortunately, scholars such as Escobar (1996) have attended to these deficiencies by encouraging the exploration of questions regarding “how discursive relations – and not just market relations – organize social and ecological change” (Castree and Braun 1998, 16). This “post-structuralist” approach has gained traction in the discipline and become an important avenue for exploring questions of nature and environmentalism (Castree and Braun 1998).

The claim that discourses “organize our attitudes towards, and actions on, nature” is generally less controversial than claims of discourse’s effect on the physical world (Castree and Braun 1998, 17). Castree and Braun (1998, 17-18) explain that constructivist claims of language’s role in (re)producing the material world are often misunderstood. It is not that constructivists believe there is no objective materiality in the world, that physical objects do not exist outside of or until language describes them, but rather that those objects cannot be described or understood without language that is infused with culturally specific and historically significant meaning. Objects, such as nature, do preexist the language that describes them, but they cannot be experienced, known, or comprehended by humans separately from the culture, discourse, and history that gave them meaning; “there is no ‘outside’ a general textuality, no ‘getting beyond’ the epistemological clearings in which we stand from which to obtain certain knowledge” (Castree and Braun 1998, 18). The process of making the physical world intelligible enframes that world within a particular cultural context (Castree and Braun 1998).

Castree and Braun (1998) succinctly explain the origin of the “enframing” function of language. It is rooted in the “distinction between language as ‘instrumental’ and as ‘expressive constitutive.’” The “instrumental” line derives from Descartes who understood “language as arising subsequent to, and as a means of organizing, our experience of an external reality” (1998, 17). By this view, language can be made to objectively correspond to a pre-given outside world
and articulate innocent and unbiased “truths.” The “expressive constitutive” line derives from Herder, Nietzsche, and Heidegger who understood “language as disclosing a world of objects and involvements” (1998, 17). By this view, language is used by people to describe their impressions and understandings of the world, and thus that language always embodies the subjectivity and intentionality of the speaker. The “instrumental” view understands the function of language as objectively describing reality, whereas the “expressive constitutive” view understands reality as an expression of the observer’s subjective positionality (Castree and Braun 1998).

It is from the “expressive constitutive” line that constructivists form their arguments about nature and the world in general. There are several consequences of this. First of all, constructivists often seek to uncover the forgotten enframing function of language and show that the way humans represent nature creates an ordering of it that might otherwise be mistaken for a prediscursive reality. Secondly, an emphasis is placed on historical context and particularity, as knowledge is believed to always be “situated” in specific contexts (Castree and Braun 1998). And third, what is taken to be “normal” or “natural” is challenged, drawing attention to the processes that conceal alternative perspectives, exposing the operation of power, and widening “what is taken to be the domain of politics” (Castree and Braun 1998, 19). A post-structuralist approach lends itself nicely to accomplishing these goals, but it is not without some undesirable side-effects (Castree and Braun 1998).

The theoretical framework of post-structuralism “refuses to privilege a prediscursive realm,” and thus, is unable to promote “counter-hegemonic materializations” (Castree and Braun 1998, 24). Just as the constructivist rejects widely accepted discourse-independent materializations of the world (such as an ahistorical and culturally-sterile “pristine wilderness”), he or she is unable to promote an alternative materialization in its place. It is only possible to suggest alternative forms
(constructed by discourse), not alternative materializations (existing independent of discourse). Thus, the political desire to resist hegemony within the established framework can no longer be realized. Under strict post-structuralism, the physical world always remains just “out of reach,” as inaccessible “shadows” beyond our comprehension (Castree and Braun 1998).

**Mitigating the Drawbacks**

Castree and Braun suggest that a potential way forward from post-structuralism’s tendency to privilege “active form over passive matter” can be found in the field of “science studies” (1998, 26). “Most practitioners of science studies share with post-structuralism the notion of nature’s ‘constructedness,’ but they cast their net far wider than post-structuralism’s narrow focus on discourse” (Castree and Braun 1998, 26). Instead, they believe the world is constructed in a nexus of “material and discursive practices,” resulting in a multi-dimensional field of relations that includes “mythic, textual, technical, political, organic, and economic” factors (Castree and Braun 1998, 26). Science studies is concerned with social construction of knowledge, but it does not move entirely away from its connection with the physical, and thus does not compromise “the sense that the materiality of nature is itself central to our knowledge of it” (Castree and Braun 1998, 26).

Proctor (1998) also provides an approach to the constructed nature thesis that does not suffer from an inability to speak of a world outside of discourse. In response to accusations of relativism (the idea that “truth” is always relative to and does not exist outside of particular circumstances) leveled on constructivism by its opponents, Proctor suggests an approach that blends critical realism with pragmatism; both are “in broad agreement with social constructivism,” yet do not disavow the materiality of an outside physical world (1998, 352). Under the regime of critical realism, “ideas are social concepts that have an ontological basis but
are understood via a particular socially predisposed framework” (Proctor 1998, 361). In other words, a critical realist believes that a pre-discursive reality exists, but he or she accepts that human perception of it always takes place through cultural lenses and in a specific historical context. Therefore “reality,” while it might exist, cannot be known “as it really is.” One cultural group might understand nature as a sight/site to be protected while another understands it as a resource to be exploited, but the “truth” might be that it is only partially either of those (Proctor 1998).

The other component of Proctor’s (1998) approach, pragmatism, involves a more agnostic outlook on the existence or formation of material reality and “truth.” To the pragmatist it does not matter so much what the reality is, or who holds the most accurate understanding of it. What is important to the pragmatist is how events transpire in the real world as a result of those understandings. In short, it doesn’t matter whether it is language that corresponds to a pre-discursive materiality or materiality that is constituted by discursive practices; it only matters what relationships arise in the world we have. The emphasis is on “process over product” (Proctor 1998, 368) – it is more important to discuss critical questions concerning “who constructs what kinds of nature(s) to what ends and with what social and ecological effects” (Castree and Braun 2001, xi), than it is to discuss the implications of material (non-)existence (Proctor 1998).

Critical realism and pragmatism taken together, according to Proctor (1998), provide more than either alone. He suggests, however, that they should not (or cannot) be readily merged into a new “ism.” Instead, Proctor believes that their strength comes from their difference and dynamic blending, and the ability to step from truth claims of nature’s materiality at one level to truth claims of nature’s constructedness at another and back again (1998, 369-370), thus, giving the
social constructivist the ability to address a variety of questions about nature without ever being pegged into any single philosophical tradition. Ultimately, pragmatism and critical realism are tools that ensure “geographers and others whose business and concern it is to represent nature can indeed have something to say” (Proctor 1998, 352).

A third response to the question of materiality within the social-nature project can be made through recourse to a theory articulated by Demeritt (1998). “Artifactual constructivism,” as Demeritt calls it, is not unlike Proctor’s critical realism in that it “does not deny the ontological existence of the world, only that its apparent reality is never pre-given” (Demeritt 1998, 178). It differs, however, in that “questions of abstract truth are undecidable, if not altogether meaningless” (Demeritt 1998, 178). For artifactual constructivists, the “true” material configuration of nature doesn’t matter as much as the meaning it has been given and how the powerful have stabilized that particular meaning to their benefit. More important to the artifactual constructivist is “empirical adequacy and pragmatic achievement” of theory instead of “ultimate truth or falsity” (Demeritt 1998, 178). This agnosticism towards “truth” is similar to Proctor’s pragmatism. Both Proctor (1998) and Demeritt (1998), around the same time, were addressing the challenges levied on social constructivism in similar ways.

Caricaturing Constructivism?

Proctor (1998) and Demeritt (1998) were responding to critiques (or caricatures) of constructivism levied by deep ecologists and others (Soulé and Lease 1995; Gross and Levitt 1994) whose influence and power is derived from particular ways of viewing and understanding nature. The critics based their claims and rebuttals on realist epistemologies and the authority of

---

5 “Deep ecology” is a form of ecological philosophy that takes a bio-centric approach to social issues, wherein humans are seen to be part of a wider ecological community and appeals to nature can guide moral questions.
hard science, portraying constructivism as ludicrously off-center and irrational. All the while, they advocated conventional ways of understanding nature as commonsense and self-evident. It is doubtful, however, that proponents of social constructivism hold views as extreme as they are accused of holding (Demeritt 1998).

Most constructivists grant that society’s constructive potential is constrained by a physical world over which social processes have no control. Demeritt, for instance, cautions against falling “into a much stronger use of the construction metaphor that is anti-realist” (1998, 178). Such radical forms of constructivism, including what Demeritt calls “neo-Kantian constructivism,” are not as widely supported as critics may suggest. Closer examination show that no scholars actually adhere to such an extreme caricature, though Demeritt indicates that Woolgar (1988) does indeed come close.

In the Neo-Kantian form, social construction is understood “in the very strongest and most literal sense;” causality is reversed and, instead, representation (literally) gives rise to the objects represented (Demeritt 1998, 178). While complete denial of pre-discursive materiality may be an extreme characterization of even neo-Kantian constructivism, adherents of this form tend to downplay the role of objects in the construction of our beliefs about them. They deny that knowledge about material objects is constrained by the objects themselves and “[seem] to suggest that nature is whatever science makes it out to be” (Demeritt 1998, 180). This, according to Castree, “exaggerates the power of societies” to construct nature, for “it implies that nature is a tabula rasa [clean slate] on which societies can write at will” (2001, 17).

It has been a preoccupation of many constructivists (Demeritt 1998 and 2001; Proctor 1998; Castree 2001; Whatmore 2002) to differentiate and distance their work from the more extreme
forms of constructivism, which suggests that while few people may actually ascribe to the extreme beliefs, many are accused of it. As was explained above, the theory of “social nature” uses a moderate form of constructivism that is concerned more with the meaning that nature is assigned through social processes than with questions of ontology. This is not to say, however, that those who study social nature are unconcerned with topics of material nature. Indeed, practical application of social nature theory is always at the forefront of discussion (Castree 2001, 18).

**Constructed Nature(s)**

Socially constructed nature is sometimes a difficult concept for individuals to accept because the causal link from representation to physical form is not always clear. Here the distinction between discursive construction of material objects (e.g. neo-Kantian constructivism) and discursive construction of meaning that results in behavior that, in turn, results in the construction of material objects (i.e. social nature) is important. The construction of material nature is hardly a radical idea if it is understood that human “knowledges [of nature] have material effects, insofar as people may believe and act according to them” (Castree 2001, 13).

Human interactions with nature are organized around individual knowledges of it, and those knowledges are constituted by discursive representation. Since representation is culturally and historically specific, so is the form that nature takes. Forests are represented and known in many ways within society; they can be understood, for example, in terms of aesthetic appeal and habitat for wildlife or, among other possibilities, in terms of board-feet and extraction overhead. Individuals develop perceptions based on these representations and in the context of cultural

---

6 The direct discursive construction of objects should not be dismissed outright, as convincing arguments can be made for the direct representation-to-object, neo-Kantian forms of construction in certain situations, such as the study of “the unobservable entities of particle physics” (Demeritt 1998, 180).
values and historical background, and through iterative negotiation, these perceptions influence and constitute behavior. Exposure to and acceptance of preservationist discourse often results in behavior to protect forests, whereas exposure to and acceptance of industrial forestry discourse often results in behavior to exploit forests. Actions are taken, and material nature is physically re-made.

The possible modes of construction are as diverse as the perceptions held. Marxist and neo-Marxist scholarship has provided an extensive analysis of the structured production and re-production of nature in capitalist economies (Castree and Braun 1998, 6-10). Insights from post-structuralist theory, however, show that there are infinitely more ways in which social relationships influence the type of nature constructed. Discourse and imagery of nature originate from many sources, including activist groups, the media, industry, government, religious institutions, academia, the scientific community, and practically every other institution one could think of, and all play a role in the construction of nature’s meaning and re-construction of nature’s form (Castree 2001).

The diversity of groups that have an interest in representing nature means that politics is always a factor in its construction. Heterogeneous populations hold a variety of perceptions and motives, and imbalanced power relations and an uneven playing field give rise to inequity. Struggles over ideology are inseparable from struggles over the physical form.

Taken alone, these theoretical concepts are abstract and lack practical grounding. Without application they are little more than mental exercises. As Castree warns, theory “can become irrelevant if it lacks direct connections to real world events” (2001, 18). That is why, in the remainder of this thesis, I seek to “make sense of the society-nature nexus in practice” (Castree
2001, 18); first, by illustrating society’s role in constructing Costa Rican nature, and second, by revealing how that nature is re-ordering social and power relationships.

Methodological Approach:
In my research, I utilize an interpretive approach to two methods: discourse analysis and participant observation. A discourse analysis entails the review of various forms of communication in order to draw out the expression of ideas and perceptions of objects or concepts. In this case, the analysis will be of travel media and student course-journals. Travel media includes advertisements, images, guidebooks, and websites, and the analysis of it will help to provide an understanding of how nature is represented in the context of Costa Rican ecotourism. These materials carry messages about the perceptions of Costa Rican nature and, as a whole, combine to create an arena of discursive relations where the meaning of nature is not only communicated, but also debated and reshaped. Since, as we know from the literature reviewed above, representation has both ideological and material effects, analysis of travel media can help to reveal both the meaning that is being assigned to tropical nature and the ways in which its physical form is being re-constructed.

Analysis of the course-journals will help to demonstrate the uptake of discourses communicated in the travel media by a group of student-tourists. These journals were produced by 23 students from Western Washington University during a study abroad experience for which I served as a teaching assistant. The group spent one month, July 2007, in Costa Rica studying globalization, environmental policy, and scientific research methods. As a daily exercise, the students were required to respond to questions and prompts, which I helped formulate, about their experiences and coursework. I utilize these written reflections to understand how this group of students perceived and related to the environments they were experiencing. This analysis helps to bridge
from the tourism discourses identified in the travel media to my ethnographic study and the
practice of ecotourism on the ground.

In my analysis of both the travel media and the course-journals, I pay particular attention to the
language and images used to convey messages about nature in order to understand what the
dominant conceptions and materializations of it are in Costa Rica. Specifically, I identify themes
that include vivid descriptions of “spectacular” nature, local concern for the environment, tourism
as a “low-impact” activity, adventure, and reverence accorded to nature through religious
analogies.

For the ethnographic portion of my work, I follow the lead of Vivanco (2006, 2003, 2002, 2001),
an anthropologist who has conducted extensive research on environmentalism in the Monte Verde
region of Costa Rica. Like him, I approach ethnography from the framework of “cultural
encounters,” treating events as “specific communicative interactions” instead of focusing on
essential characteristics of “a people” (Vivanco 2006, 8). My role in the encounters discussed in
this thesis is that of a “participant observer.” Unlike older approaches to the participant
observation method, I do not believe that direct experience of “the situation on the ground”
affords a privileged perspective (Clifford 2003). Experiential authority is based on an “I know
because I was there” mentality that problematically sidesteps perceptual uncertainty (Clifford
2003, 130). Moving away from such myths of impartiality, I overtly emphasize the interpretive
classature of my field research, acknowledging my own situatedness and reflecting on personal
perception. I make no secret of my intentions in writing this thesis; I seek to break down the
dichotomous separation of society and nature on which ecotourism is based in order to expose
and address issues of injustice, inequity, and uneven development that are concealed within.
Most of my interactions with Costa Ricans took place in informal, unstructured settings. Those with tourists, on the other hand, took place in the context of a study abroad experience for which I served as a teaching assistant. Observations of these student-tourists were always mediated by this relationship. I also had access to the students’ course journals in which they responded to daily prompts about their experiences. I utilize these written reflections to supplement the analysis of my interactions with them. In most interactions with the subjects, residents and tourists alike, I encouraged individuals to raise topics that were important to them and their lives, probing for information when needed, instead of guiding them through predetermined questions that were prepared in advance. My primary Costa Rican cases are two business owners on the Osa Peninsula, Merlyn Oviedo Sánchez and German Quirós Vivas, but I also conducted informal interviews with various members of the wider Osa community, which I draw on for supplementary evidence.7

Merlyn is the founder and operator of Danta Corcovado Lodge, a family-owned business in the rural community of Guadalupe (which is a few kilometers west of La Palma on the Osa Peninsula and almost never shows up on the map). Danta Corcovado is an excellent example of Costa Rica’s famed ecotourism industry and its potential for re-constituting local relationships with nature: on the land his father settled and cleared for agriculture, Merlyn’s guests now admire rapidly re-growing forest and the animals that make their homes there. Not far from Merlyn’s lodge is German’s organic farm and restaurant operation called Finca Tilapias. German’s guests enjoy typical Costa Rican cuisine made with organic items grown on his farm including Tilapia fish which the tourists can net themselves. While waiting for their dishes to be prepared, the guests have the option of touring German’s farm and seeing the “traditional” lifestyle of rural Costa Ricans. In my analysis of these operations, I will move beyond questions such as “is

7 Consent has been given for use of Merlyn's name, the name of his lodge, German’s name, and the name of his farm/restaurant. Pseudonyms are used for the student-tourists and other Costa Rican interviewees.
Merlyn’s or German’s operation ‘true ecotourism’” or “how has it re-framed the way ‘local people’ interact with nature,” and instead explore the power relationships and processes of negotiation that have shaped life for Merlyn, German, their families, and their communities.

These are the most appropriate methods for answering the research questions laid out above because they emphasize the non-static character of nature and society. A central goal of this thesis is to show how society and nature are dynamic and linked in a mutually reconstructive relationship. Therefore, research methods that treat society and nature as variable are necessary. Discourse analysis is focused on how dominant ideas are communicated, but it grants that these ideas have been debated, reshaped, and stabilized within the discourse and that they will one day be challenged and debated again. Similarly, the “encounters” approach to participant observation is focused on the circumstances of the specific encounters instead of supposed inherent or unchanging characteristics of people. All of my research is situated in the historical context of Costa Rican social-nature, which further emphasizes the dynamic character of society and nature. The second chapter of this thesis is devoted to revealing the social-natures throughout Costa Rica’s history that are typically denied or overlooked in other historical accounts. This is achieved by synthesizing secondary historical literature (in particular, Evans 1999; Booth 1998; and Wilson 1998) through a critical reading informed by social theory. This, in itself, is an important methodological approach as it shows that Costa Rican nature and society are the products of a complex history, culture, and political situation.

**Returning to Costa Rica**

In the opening pages of this thesis I introduced the Clay-Colored Robin and explained how that bird is a symbol of nature understood and appreciated in a particular way – a way specific to Costa Rica’s history and cultural background. I also explained that the Robin represents a type of
nature that is unfamiliar and troubling to many ecotourists. It raised many questions about nature in Costa Rica and ecotourism and inspired the research herein. From here I will briefly introduce my study site and my primary case-studies before concluding with a roadmap of the chapters that follow.

There are three main reasons why I chose Costa Rica for this study. First, it is a country with which I am familiar – I have traveled there on numerous occasions since 2002 and have established relationships that enhanced my ability to conduct research. Second, I chose it because of my critical interest in ecotourism and its role in nature conservation – Costa Rica is a world-renowned leader in ecotourism development and its economy is dominated by the activity (Honey 1999, 134). And third, because Costa Rica is well-known for its extreme biodiversity and exotic nature, it is a good case to explore the convergence of ecotourism and social-nature theory.

Within Costa Rica, I am primarily focused on the Osa Peninsula, which is located at the southwestern-most tip of the country (see figure 2; “Costa Rica” 2007). The Peninsula is mostly rural and situated on the periphery of Costa Rican political and economic life – it’s not uncommon to hear complaints that politicians forget that Osa exists in between campaigns and when it comes to infrastructure development. The road that connects Osa to mainland Costa Rica is in notably poor condition (though significant improvements have been made recently, in 2007) – the public bus slows to a crawl after exiting the Inter-American Highway from San Jose because it must dodge countless potholes and the occasional landslide. There are two main

---

8 According to Honey, tourism is “Costa Rica’s number one foreign exchange earner” (1999, 134). Since 1986, agriculture and industry have been declining and services increasing in importance in the Costa Rican economy (World Bank 2007, 1). According to the U.S. Department of State, the Costa Rican economy is composed as follows: agriculture is 8.7% of GDP; industry is 28.9% of GDP; and commerce, tourism, and services combine for 62.4% of the GDP (Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs 2008, par.4).

9 The source image of figure 2 was obtained via wikipedia.org and modified by the author. It is being used within the terms of the “GNU Free Documentation License.”
centers of activity on the Peninsula, Puerto Jimenez and Drake Bay, and several other small communities, including Rincón, La Palma, and Guadalupe.

Historically, Osa was home to the indigenous Guaymí tribe (who still have a small community and government reserve) and did not see widespread settlement by Euro-Costa Ricans until the mid-twentieth century when the United Fruit Company moved operations to the Osa area (Evans 1999, 36-37) and gold was discovered on the Peninsula (Evans 1999, 97). Settlement of the remote area was encouraged by government policies that granted land to anybody who made
“improvements” to it – which was usually understood to mean bringing the land into agricultural production (Evans 1999, 42). Population increased gradually with the growth of the gold mining and timber industries (Evans 1999, 97). More recently, however, Osa has seen a surge in tourism development. Since I first visited the region in 2002, the visibility of tourism has increased dramatically with the most striking changes occurring since 2005. Much of the draw to Osa can be attributed to Corcovado National Park, which has been called the “jewel in the crown” of Costa Rica’s world-famous national park system (Brandon and O’Herron 2004, 160).

My first step in moving forward will be to provide historical context for my study area and the claims I will make about it. Chapter two will recount some of the important points in Costa Rican history, placing particular attention on the way Costa Rican society has constructed social-natures throughout. What I will provide is, by no means, an exhaustive historical account, but rather a basic inventory of critical moments that have shaped the country and its citizenry today. Importantly, I will focus on the historical processes that defined these things rather than simply the outcomes of those processes. In the third chapter, I will continue to explore my research questions through a study of Costa Rican ecotourism; first, by considering how the structured and unstructured social relationships of ecotourism are constructing nature in Costa Rica (devoting particular attention to the way powerful groups and individuals dominate the process), and second, by closely examining the specific situations of two Osa residents (contrasting their differences to elucidate the causes of their differing levels of success). Finally, I will conclude this thesis by returning to the Clay-Colored Robin and discussing the implications my critical interrogation of Costa Rican ecotourism has in the practical implementation of it. I will also back the discussion out to a broader scale by identifying how my findings can be applied to ecotourism in general by suggesting that social-nature theory is an effective way to achieve some of

---

10 The history of Costa Rica will be discussed in greater detail in chapter two.
ecotourism’s central goals concerning intercultural sensitivity and the well-being of local communities.
Chapter II: 
Socio-Environmental History of Costa Rica

Historical accounts of Costa Rica almost always highlight the country’s ecological and political exceptionalism. Emphasis is typically placed on Costa Rica’s extremely high level of biodiversity, expansive system of protected lands, political stability, and peaceful history (Evans 1999; Honey 1999; Boo 1990). Too often, however, these summaries are presented in the form of a list (McLaren 2003, 119; Fennell and Eagles 1990). Removed from context and lacking important detail, they serve to set the stage for discussion of the popular topics concerning Costa Rica, such as ecotourism and environmental conservation. Following Vivanco (2006), however, I argue that this attention to the outcomes of history, rather than the historical processes themselves, has several undesirable effects; outcomes do not explain how or why events occurred, nor do they make apparent the uneven power relationships that shaped them. For those reasons, I will provide a process-based account of Costa Rican history below, and in later chapters I will refer back to this section, detailing the political and social implications of the events addressed in this thesis.

As the title of this chapter suggests, I will not approach Costa Rica’s social and environmental histories as if they are discrete, albeit related, topics. Instead, I will discuss the two as intertwined and inextricably linked. Whereas the majority of research on Costa Rica reflects mainstream conceptions of primary nature (nature which is inherently separate from society) and secondary nature (nature which has been altered by society), I will work with the concept of “social-nature.” Within this framework, every manifestation of nature is seen as a product of society. This even includes places traditionally thought of as “primary” nature, as the decision not to develop such areas is always rooted in cultural preferences and socio-political processes. In this chapter I will recount the history of Costa Rica which is well-documented elsewhere (Evans 1999; Wilson
1998; Booth 1998; Barry 1991), but I will add to it by making explicit the ways in which society and nature are intertwined. One of my goals is to promote the idea that, since human history began in Costa Rica, there has been no such thing as a non-social nature in that country (Castree and Braun 2001; Braun and Castree 1998; Cronon 1996).

There are many forms that social-nature can take, and during one period in Costa Rica’s history it was rapidly taking the form of a forestless landscape under extensive agricultural production (Evans 1999, 33-52), organized under the control of powerful banana barons and coffee oligarchy (Wilson 1998, 26; Booth 1998, 36). Some saw Costa Rica’s environmental future to be so bleak that they described the country, Evans notes, as “a runaway train on a steep and curvy downhill grade” (1999, 49). So how has Costa Rica, in light of a history with such thoroughly utilized nature, managed to build a world-famous reputation for conservation, and in light of a history with such uneven distribution of wealth and power, managed to become known for its large middle class and high standard of living? With this thoroughly social nature, how has Costa Rica managed to become an icon for ecotourism to “pristine” areas? The answer lies partly with the country’s encounter with foreign scientists and conservationists, and the influence they had on local land-use policies.

Mario Boza, a prominent figure in Costa Rican environmentalism, has explained that “the diversity and wealth of Costa Rica’s flora and fauna, as well as the majesty of its countryside, have attracted the attention of scientists and naturalists from all over the world since the mid-1800s” (Evans 1999, 15). This is without a doubt true, but that alone cannot explain the immense attention Costa Rica has received from tropical researchers. It is not as though “there is something essential about Costa Rican nature” that brought people to study it, nor was there anything “inevitable about its conservation” (Vivanco 2006, 12). After all, nature like Costa
Rica’s was, at one time, abundant in Central America. Rather, it is Costa Rica’s unique social history that sets it apart from its Central American neighbors and that brought it down the path towards conservation fame.

This chapter is organized into two main sections, each with several subsections. The first is titled “Before Ecological Stardom” and concerns the period in Costa Rica’s history prior to the infusion of environmentalism into state policy and the daily lives of many Costa Ricans. It is further divided into subsections that reflect the predominant social and economic activities of particular periods, which I have categorized as pre-contact and colonization, coffee production, banana production, and economic diversification. I will conclude Section One with a focused look at the Osa Peninsula, my specific area of interest. The second section, titled “Building a Positive Reputation,” concerns Costa Rica’s encounter with environmentalism and its rise to international fame. Topics of this section include democracy and political stability, science and conservation, and ecotourism. Though roughly chronological, the periods of history covered by the two sections overlap, exist in tension with one another, and suggest a heterogeneous political and cultural situation in Costa Rica. Also, in delineating these two sections, I do not intend to suggest that the transition from the former to the latter is a progression towards an enlightened or morally-superior social and political order, nor do I intend to suggest that this transition has been universal within the country. Rather, this demarcation is intended to mark a rapid and dramatic shift in direction, the cause of which is a major focus of this thesis. I will conclude with some thoughts on ecotourism, Costa Rica’s trademark product of recent decades, and how this industry relates to the history outlined herein.
Section I: Before Ecological Stardom

Pre-contact and Colonization

When Christopher Columbus claimed discovery of Costa Rica in 1502, humans had been living in the area for at least 10,000 years (Evans 1999, 4). At the time of the arrival of the Spanish, there were two prominent indigenous cultures: the Gran Nicoyas and the Chibcha tribes (Booth 1998, 32-33). These people inhabited a region, which archaeologists have termed the Intermediate or Isthmo-Colombian Area, that is situated between Mesoamerica and the Central Andes, or the area that ranges from present-day Nicaragua to Colombia, Venezuela, and Ecuador (Hoopes and Fonseca 2003). While the actual boundaries of cultural influence are contested (Carmack and González 2006), it is clear that, relative to other parts of the New World, the Intermediate Area was only sparsely populated by indigenous tribes (Evans 1999, 4). Because of this, and because it was distant from the centers of the Mesoamerican and Andean empires, Costa Rica never developed large pre-colonial cities and never saw the construction of impressive pre-colonial architectural monuments (Evans 1999, 4).

The lack of large pre-colonial cities does not mean, however, that the people who lived in Costa Rica prior to its “discovery” did not leave a lasting mark on the landscape. As in many places, the indigenous peoples of Costa Rica burned parcels of land to make way for agriculture (Clement 2001; Evans 1999, 34), and in one area, are thought to have eradicated a certain plant species from overuse (Northrop and Horn 1996, 289). But indigenous intervention is rarely considered to have been detrimental to the “naturalness” of nature in Costa Rica. Evans (1999, 33-34), for example, characterizes the indigenous people as having done “little to deteriorate the natural environment” and as being in balance with what the environment could provide. It is not uncommon for “pre-modern” peoples to be viewed in this way, as what has been termed
“ecologically noble savages” (Redford 1991). In this case, the indigenous people are seen as primitive and as having not yet separated from nature, so their activities are considered part of nature’s processes. Thus, any traces they left on the land do not result in the re-classification of that land from primary to secondary nature (Colchester 1997, 99-100).

While romantic views of indigenous cultures tend to portray these people as having lived in harmony with nature (Vivanco 2003, 60), the Spanish colonists are typically portrayed as destroyers of nature (Evans 1999, 35-52). Certainly, the Spanish had an enhanced capacity for transforming the natural world (having an economic system that encouraged the expansion of production and the technology to make it happen), but both indigenous and European societies interacted with their surroundings to produce and re-produce different social-natures.

The Spanish Conquistadores were in search of wealth and power, neither of which made Costa Rica of great interest to them. Though they had named the land Costa Rica, or “Rich Coast,” for its presumed abundance of gold, deposits were scarce compared to other parts of Central America. For this reason, the Spanish focused attention elsewhere. Also, because the indigenous American power-centers were located elsewhere, a large presence in Costa Rica was unnecessary to maintain control (Evans 1999, 5). The small indigenous population and subsequent small colonist population have lead some to characterize Costa Rica as having been wild and inhospitable (Evans 1999, 5). This has contributed to the perception, today, that Costa Rica stands apart from its neighbors as having truly been a place of untamed tropical nature.

Almost sixty years passed after the “discovery” of Costa Rica before the first Spanish settlement was established in the Central Valley (near the present-day capital of San Jose) around 1560. Sixteen other settlements were attempted, but only two were successful. Those two were small
and did not see rapid growth; a census in 1611 counted only 330 Spaniards, and the number grew to a mere 2,146 by 1700. The colonists attempted to produce cacao and tobacco for export, but the effort was unsuccessful. This, combined with a lack of valuable minerals and a labor shortage, meant that the colony of Costa Rica was extremely poor (Booth 1998, 33). Evans comments that because Costa Rica had very little early agricultural development, “European settlement made less impact on the natural environment” (1999, 5). Implied in this comment is the idea that Costa Rican nature remained more “natural” because society did not intervene. This does not mean, however, that the result was a non-social nature. Indeed, the decision not to settle in a certain area or the inability to do so are both social factors that played a role determining nature’s form in Costa Rica; the social-nature produced was one with few signs of colonial agriculture.

Colonial relations between the Spanish and indigenous peoples were mixed, entailing instances of coexistence, cooperation and violence. The Gran Nicoyas were conquered shortly after European settlement, but “others resisted encroachment for decades” (Booth 1998, 33). Some fled from the Central Valley where the Spanish colonies were, some integrated with the Spanish to form a mestizo population, but most died from European diseases (Booth 1998, 33-34). Whereas “control of the native Indian population formed the backbone of the colonial economy” in much of the rest of Central America, few indigenous Costa Ricans were forced into slavery. Booth (1998) and Wilson (1998) agree that the indigenous population was so small that forced labor was not viable (thus, contributing to colonial poverty), but Booth later contradicts himself by pointing out that the Costa Rican indigenous population was approximately four times greater than that of the Spanish in 1700 (p. 34). The reason indigenous peoples were not widely enslaved in Costa Rica is unclear, but the answer is likely not that the Costa Rican colonists were somehow more
egalitarian. Booth (1998, 34) notes that a “sharp social differentiation” and hierarchy existed in Costa Rica, including a population of black slaves that grew rapidly during the 18th century.

It is possible that the indigenous peoples of Costa Rica were simply just more difficult to subdue. Unlike the Aztecs and Incas, who were organized under a central authority, the indigenous peoples of Costa Rica were separated into autonomous tribes (Wilson 1998, 12). As a result, the indigenous Costa Ricans could not be defeated in “one fell swoop” (Wilson 1998, 12). The conquer of a single small tribe also would not produce the same dramatic psychological effect experienced by the Aztecs and Incas when they saw their entire empires collapse at the hands of a few hundred Europeans. It is possible that the indigenous Costa Ricans, who Wilson (1998, 11) characterizes as “very hostile to the settlers,” did not simply accept their fate as a conquered and enslave-able people because they never saw decisive defeat on the scale of imperial collapse.

Until relatively recently, historians argued that the “lack of easily subduable Indian labor” combined with pervasive poverty to force “nobles and commoners alike … to till their own land” (Wilson 1998, 11), which precluded the emergence of an elite ruling class in Costa Rica. This concept, termed the “rural democracy thesis,” has been discredited and replaced by a new model that suggests a highly stratified social system. Wilson points to several scholars whose work suggests that “economic and social life in [colonial] Costa Rica was characterized by significant income and wealth disparities” (1998, 13-14), and contends that Costa Rica’s democracy cannot, therefore, be explained solely by the rural democracy thesis. As I will show below, economic expansion in post-colonial Costa Rica only exacerbated social stratification, leading to a tumultuous period in civil society and an unstable political environment.
Coffee Production

Life in Costa Rica did not change quickly when it obtained independence from Spain in 1821 – it took almost a month just for the news of independence to travel from the colonial capital to the provincial capital (Wilson 1998, 16). Though it already had a relatively high degree of autonomy from the colonial government, one significant change was that Costa Rica was no longer restricted to trade exclusively with Spain (Evans 1999, 6). Coincidentally, it was around the same time that certain hill-slopes in the Central Valley were found to be ideal for the cultivation of coffee. An English merchant by the name of William LeLecheur, in 1843, was the first to introduce Costa Rican coffee to Europe, and demand for the product exploded (particularly in England at the start of the industrial revolution) when it was found to stimulate workers in industrial settings (Evans 1999, 5-6). Coffee exportation quickly became the basis of Costa Rica’s economy.

An economy dependent on coffee production meant the rapid re-production of forested landscapes into places of extensive agriculture, and led some, Evans notes, to deem the period Costa Rica’s “first wave of deforestation” (1999, 6). At the time, however, the population was still small, about 60,000 in the 1820s, and concentrated, occupying only two percent of the landmass (Wilson 1998, 25). For this reason, landscape conversion was also concentrated in a small area; Evans points out that that most of Costa Rica would remain “under forest cover until the 1950s” (1999, 6). However concentrated it may have been, the effect of the coffee industry on Costa Rica’s landscapes was not insignificant. For the first time in Costa Rican history the systematic conversion of “pristine” nature into a human-modified and materialistic nature was linked to economic growth and driven by external demand for goods (Evans 1999, 35).
Evans points to the relatively small and concentrated effect the coffee industry had on the land and suggests that “an incipient conservation awareness was already starting to emerge” in Costa Rica as early as the mid-19th century (1999, 35). He claims that Costa Ricans had “enough ecological sense” to utilize lands that were sufficiently fertile and capable of sustaining agriculture (unlike the foreign banana interests that would come later), to discourage techniques that led to soil sterility, and to even levy a series of decrees that protected forests (1999, 35-36). He implies that early post-independence Costa Ricans were unique in the way that they understood and related to nature, that they cared for nature more than other Central Americans. It is doubtful, however, that sound agricultural practices and decrees to protect watersheds were motivated by “conservation” in the form that we know today. During the mid-19th century, the Costa Rican understanding of nature was largely utilitarian (Evans 1999, 16), and political focus was on emerging from colonial poverty through agricultural development (Wilson 1998, 23; Evans 1999, 42).

There is some disagreement over the social conditions that were produced by the coffee trade. Evans does not explicitly mention the “rural democracy thesis,” but he makes note that, unlike industries in other Central American countries, Costa Rica’s coffee industry was comprised of “small, family-owned cafeteras,” which resulted in a large middle class and “established the base for a stable democracy” (1999, 6). Wilson (1998) and Booth (1998), on the other hand, argue that the coffee industry was not as equitable as Evans suggests (though Evans does, later (p. 35), acknowledge the existence of an “agro-export oligarchy”). Booth notes that “coffee barons usually dominated [the] national political scene” (1998, 36), and Wilson places emphasis on how the elites were able to use accumulated wealth and connections to European merchants and bankers to establish a system of usury (1998, 24-25). This system of exploitative lending, Booth contends, “gave the larger growers considerable power over the smaller ones” (1998, 25). As the
“coffee oligarchy” became wealthier, “they also became better organized politically, more protective of their economic position, and willing to use undemocratic means if their interests were threatened” (Wilson 1998, 21). For example, in response to tax reform that “challenged the oligarchy’s economic hegemony,” war minister Frederico Tinoco Granados, “at the behest of the coffee oligarchy,” led a coup in 1917 that ousted President González (Wilson 1998, 28). The heavy-handed role of the elite coffee barons in Costa Rican political life, characterized by Wilson (1998) and Booth (1998), is clearly inconsistent with Evans’ (1999) argument that coffee production was one of the factors that made Costa Rica distinct from other Central American countries and led it down a different path. Wilson agrees that life in early post-independence Costa Rica was, in fact, different, but “more in a sense of scale than type” (1998, 35).

If it can be argued that Costa Rica’s coffee export industry was an exception to the Central American model of exploitative economics, the same cannot be said about banana production. Costa Rica was not spared from the meddlesome political agendas of the infamous banana barons that led some countries to be termed “banana republics.”

*Banana Production*

Wilson calls Costa Rica’s banana industry an “accidental by-product of the government’s attempts to facilitate the exportation of coffee” (1998, 26). Costa Rica’s Central Valley, the country’s primary region of coffee production, is isolated by high mountains and, in the 19th century, dense forests and the lack of transportation infrastructure made shipment of coffee to the port of Limón extremely difficult (see figure 2). The Costa Rican government first attempted to obtain funds for the development of a railroad that would connect the regions from British financial institutions, but when British banks retained 80 percent of the money raised as a commission, the project failed (Wilson 1998, 26). The government next turned to Minor C.
Keith, a U.S. railroad tycoon, in 1883 for assistance. This time the government used an asset they had in abundance in their negotiations. Keith’s company was given an enormous land grant (nearly 7 percent of the national landmass, on a 99 year lease) in exchange for the construction of the railroad. In order to defray the cost, Keith began to grow and export bananas through his Tropical Trading Company (Wilson 1998, 26).

Bananas quickly gave rise to Costa Rica’s second economic boom (Evans 1999, 6), but the industry was marked by several key differences (Wilson 1998, 26). Whereas coffee production and the corresponding landscape conversion had been concentrated around the capital city of San Jose in the Central Valley (apart from the required transport lines and the ports of Limón and Puntarenas), banana production required warmer, more humid growing conditions and, thus, spread out into the lowlands, particularly in the Caribbean zone around Puerto Limón (Evans 1999, 36). Economic development was now driving more widespread and rapid landscape conversion, especially since “a banana field’s productive life is limited to seven years” and diseases, which plagued Costa Rican banana production, rendered the soil infertile (Evans 1999, 36). This resulted in the continual need to clear forest for new plantation land, and thus has caused scholars such as Evans (1999) to characterize banana production as far more destructive than coffee production.

Banana production is also differentiated from coffee production in that it required a greater labor force and transportation infrastructure, and thus, greater capital investment. This, according to Evans (1999, 36), made banana production an unfeasible venture for the small-scale farm operations that prospered in the coffee industry and “opened the door to foreign multinational corporations.” In 1899, Keith’s Tropical Trading Company merged with the rival Boston Fruit Company to form the United Fruited Company, “which aggressively consolidated its dominant
position as Costa Rica’s main banana producer” (Wilson 1998, 26). The United Fruit Company, based in New Orleans, Louisiana, came to monopolize the production and exportation of fruit from Costa Rica (Evans 1999, 36). United Fruit did not integrate into the Costa Rican economy, but rather exploited it by “developing few links to the rest of the economy and society,” relying on U.S. banks for financing, and importing supplies from the U.S. and labor from the West Indies (Wilson 1998, 26-27).

Prior to the establishment of the banana industry, few people lived in the region around Limón. Banana production, however, required a large labor force and necessitated the importation of workers. Many came from Jamaica, and were thus culturally distinct from the rest of the Costa Rican populace – to this day the Caribbean zone of Costa Rica is largely black and English speaking. By the mid-1930s, United Fruit employment in the Caribbean zone numbered over 10,000 (Wilson 1998, 26-27).

United Fruit proved that its interests did not lie in the well-being of its workers when, plagued by a soil fungus, the company began to abandon operations near Limón, leaving behind the workers who had migrated there (Evans 1999, 36). By 1940, the company had completely deserted the region. Clearly United Fruit was more greatly concerned with “a good return on their investment than in ecologically sensible agriculture” (Evans 1999, 36) or fair treatment of labor. When they resumed operations on the Pacific side of the Talamanca mountains near Golfito and the Osa Peninsula (see figure 2), a second labor migration took place, this time consisting primarily of “white” Costa Ricans of European or “mestizo” descent from the Central Valley. Eventually, by the 1980s, United Fruit would repeat their poor treatment of labor by pulling out a second time, again leaving the workers behind (Evans 1999, 37).
While Evans emphasizes the ecological recklessness of the United Fruit Company, he notes that “[c]learing land for banana fields … is only part of the banana deforestation picture,” suggesting a greater problem secondary to banana production: “when the plantations were abandoned, … banana workers flocked to the countryside to settle, farm, and eke out a living in the forest” (Evans 1999, 37). His account portrays banana production as having been a serious but temporary threat to the environment and campesino colonization as an equally serious but persistent threat. Vivanco (2003, 65) has pointed out that “campesinos have been widely projected as the main culprits in Costa Rica’s rapid deforestation.” This image, of campesinos as “destroyers of nature,” dismisses rural people as “actors to be acted upon and not collaborated with” (Vivanco 2003, 61), causing conservationists to approach them “not as equals with whom to negotiate but as obstacles … to be removed from the landscape” (2003, 67). Vivanco also provides evidence that campesinos may not always be as destructive as they are made out to be (2003, 66), and Evans contradicts himself when he equates lack of contact with the land with careless use of it (1999, 36) – nobody has greater contact with the land than the campesinos.

While campesinos certainly have played a significant role in the conversion of landscapes in the production of both bananas and coffee, the idea that they were (or still are) at the root of the environmental conversion is problematic. In fact, campesinos were encouraged by national policy that granted free land to anybody that would make “improvements” to it. This usually meant clearing forest and putting it into agricultural or cattle production. The 1961 Law of Lands and Colonization, for example, went as far as to impose sanctions on landowners with uncultivated land (Evans 1999, 42).

11 The word “campesino” refers to the rural, and often poor people who inhabit Costa Rica. They typically are involved in subsistence agriculture. The closest English translation might be “peasant,” but “campesino” does not carry the negative connotation that “peasant” typically does.
Economic Diversification

The 1950s began a rapid transformation of the economic basis of Costa Rica. External factors such as increased competition from other tropical regions and decline in market prices affected Costa Rica’s agricultural industry. Costa Rica’s so-called “dessert crops,” “coffee, bananas, and to a lesser extent sugar, cacao, and tobacco,” saw decline, and Costa Ricans responded by diversifying the economy (Evans 1999, 37). During this time, many banana plantations were re-constructed as African palm plantations for the production of palm oil, and the government’s “internal development” plan promoted beef cattle production. Ranches, starting in the 1960s, replaced many agricultural fields and forested lands. And when, in the 1970s, the United States saw exponential growth of fast-food restaurants, demand for cheap Costa Rican beef was driven through the roof. The response in Costa Rica was to rapidly convert all variety of land into pastures – about one-third of the country’s landmass by 1980 (Evans 1999, 37-40).

Timber cultivation, which is often thought of as a major factor driving deforestation, played a relatively small role in Costa Rica’s landscape conversion when compared with agricultural and beef production (the Osa Peninsula is an exception). In brief mention of the topic, Evans (1999) shifts attention to how timber extraction facilitated further migration of campesinos into the remote reaches of previously inaccessible regions. “Along the roads made to haul timber out of the backcountry came squatters … looking for land to farm” (Evans 1999, 41). Again, campesino destructiveness is the focal point even in light of “big-business” logging that extracted timber from protected areas and government policy that encouraged settlement and deforestation (Evans 1999, 41).
Settlement in this fashion was particularly significant on the Osa Peninsula, my specific area of interest. Settlers came not only for free land cleared by timber cultivation and banana production, but also on the prospect of striking rich in the gold mining industry.

A Closer Look at Osa

As mentioned above, Costa Rica was prematurely given its name for its presumed abundance of gold. Famously, the country’s relative scarcity of gold made the “Rich Coast” a misnomer until a shift in perception deemed Costa Rica’s rich biodiversity an asset. Despite all of this, the Osa Peninsula actually contained significant deposits of gold. It wasn’t until the late 1930s, however, that these deposits began to be mined and not until the 1960s that operations were taking place on a larger scale (Evans 1999, 97).

During this period, the primary (and, at first, the only) economic activity was banana production. The United Fruit Company moved its operations to the Osa region in the early 1930s, causing the first large-scale migration of Euro-Costa Ricans to the area (Brandon and O’Herron 2004, 158). United Fruit cleared large expanses of forest for their plantations and abandoned empty lands when soil nutrients were depleted. Poor soil quality would continue to be a problem for all subsequent tenants of those lands (Evans 1999, 36).

Between 1947 and 1960 migration to Osa was further encouraged by the construction of the Pan (or Inter-) American Highway (Brandon and O’Herron 2004, 158), both because it provided work and because it provided improved access. Beginning in 1989 the United States Army Corps of Engineers built and improved other minor roads on and around the Osa Peninsula because of “the Regan administration’s paranoia about communist infiltration in Central America” (Evans 1999,
This alarmed conservationists because of the easier access it provided miners and settlers to yet “unspoiled” lands (Evans 1999, 161).

The early settlement period of Osa (1930s-1960s) was difficult. The entire region was highly isolated and is often compared to the “frontier” of the American West (Evans 1999, 97). Contributing to the lawlessness was Osa Productos Forestales (OPF), a U.S. forestry company that arrived to Osa in the 1950s. OPF, which was granted 40,000 hectares by the Costa Rican government (Minca and Linda 2000, 119), settled land ownership disputes with precaristas (or squatters) by burning homes and shooting at them. They quickly became “a symbol of corruption, scams, and land-hording Americans” (Brandon and O’Herron 2004, 158-159).

Gold mining on the Peninsula expanded in conjunction with the fruit and timber industries and the road building projects. As the companies cleared land, precaristas moved in behind them, setting up farms and panning for gold. This process, as mentioned above, was only encouraged by national policy that gave free land to settlers who made “improvements” to it (Evans 1999, 97).

The Costa Rican government was quite tolerant of the precaristas, even if industry and conservationists were not. While the government passed laws, such as the aforementioned Law of Lands and Colonization, protecting squatters’ rights and guaranteeing reimbursement in the event of seizure, conservationists consistently saw them as a threat to preservation efforts (Evans 1999, 97-99). The situation on Osa was no exception. Settlement of Osa was taking place so rapidly during the period leading up to the mid-1970s that conservationists, fearful of settlement impact, urged the establishment of a national park on the Peninsula (Evans 1999, 97-98). Some in the National Park Service, or SPN, expressed concern over taking such action “due to the
population of *precaristas* living in the region,” but eventually Corcovado National Park was established through executive decree by President Oduber (Evans 1999, 97-99). It was only after this decree that they learned some 1,500 precaristas and hundreds of livestock would need to be removed (Evan 1999, 99).

In the 1980s, just years after the establishment of Corcovado, Costa Rica entered a national economic crisis. This situation was exacerbated on Osa due to the withdrawal of the United Fruit Company, and unemployment increased at unprecedented rates. Widespread joblessness spawned a renewed surge in gold prospecting and settlement on Osa. The ecological effect of the increased mining activity troubled many conservationists, and presented a difficult situation for the SPN in the newly formed Corcovado National Park. As many as 1,500 miners were presumed to be working illegally inside of the park boundaries, in addition to “3,500 ‘legal’ mining concessions” in the buffer areas surrounding it (Evans 1999, 144-145). The environmentalist response to “threats” such as mining were inspired by the coexistence philosophies of Dan Janzen. Nationwide, there was a departure from the former policy of “fortress conservation” to focus on the provision of economic alternatives (Evans 1999, 154). This had far-reaching effects that transformed the way of life in Costa Rica.

Augelli (1989) refers to the 1950s as the “era of transformation” for Costa Rica because of a dramatic shift that occurred in the way that beef was produced. The name, however, is also a fitting title for the period between 1980 and the 2000 because of rapid transformation of economic activity from agriculture to tourism and because of the transformations in social life and landscape composition that came with it. Though this period began with one of the highest rates of deforestation in the world (Evans 1999, 39-40), it would end in a dramatically different
situation, solidifying Costa Rica’s international reputation for conservation and landscape
protection (Evans 1999, 53-71).

Section II: Building a Positive Reputation

Historical accounts of Costa Rica, such as the one I have drawn above, often elucidate a past of
extensive environmental degradation, violence, and social inequity (Evans 1999, 33-52; Wilson
1998, 9-39; Booth 1998, 32-55), a past that seemingly sits in stark contrast to the country’s
present-day reputation. Today Costa Rica is famous for progressive environmental conservation
policy, democratic governance, and environmentally sound industry. The construction of Costa
Rica’s contemporary reputation was gradual. It began with political developments that cemented
democratic rule and stability, which in turn created a climate that encouraged an intellectual and
conservation movement, eventually giving rise to ecotourism. This section will provide a
detailed description of how this took place, and will be organized into three main topics: the
construction of democracy and political stability, the growth of scientific research and a
conservationist class, and the emergence of ecotourism.

Democracy and Political (In)Stability

Wilson (1998) and Booth (1998) have shown the “rural democracy thesis” in Costa Rica to be
largely a myth. The thesis claims that Costa Rica’s remoteness, lack of subduable indigenous
labor, and poverty forced the country’s elite to work their land alongside the common people,
resulting in a classless egalitarian colonial society. These ideas are well enough rooted in history
to make the thesis convincing (Wilson 1998, 11), but they thrive only in ignorance of the contrary
evidence (Booth 1998, 29). Costa Rica’s development of democracy “was not a linear
progression from colonial rule to Liberal democracy” (Wilson 1998, 19). Rather, as was
discussed above, Costa Rica’s early independence was characterized by a highly stratified social
system dominated by an agro-export oligarchy which was willing to use violence and fraud to achieve political ends (Wilson 1998).

Costa Rica’s turbulent history continued through most of the 1940s. Though the decade began with progressive social reforms, class struggle and economic crisis were characteristic of the period. The social reforms of President Rafael Calderón (1940-1944), which included “social security (offering unemployment, health, accident, and old-age benefits), and eight-hour workday, a minimum wage, and workers’ right to organize,” are seen as the first “genuine” measures of their kind (Wilson 1998, 31). These reforms, however, were implemented at a time of economic crisis brought on by World War II and resulted in a “government budget deficit and increasing public debt” (Wilson 1998, 32). While Calderón enjoyed the support of a broad coalition (including the Catholic Church and the Communist Party), opposition was well organized and equally broad (including middle-class opposition groups El Centro and Acción Democrática). The “coffee and business elite viewed Calderón as a traitor to his class and were vehemently opposed to his reformist economic and social policies” (Wilson 1998 32). In addition, the economic crisis caused the deterioration of support among the campesinos (Wilson 1998).

José Figueres, who was exiled in 1942 for “vociferously attacking the Calderón government on national radio,” began drawing support to not only oust Calderón’s National Republican Party, but to install a “Second Republic” (Wilson 1998, 33-34). Figueres’ actions began in the form of “terrorist attacks” against the Picado Administration (1944-1948), Calderón’s chosen successor. Eventually, after controversial measures taken to annul the 1948 presidential election, Figueres and his mercenaries attacked and defeated the national military. After six weeks of fighting that
left “between 1000 and 2000 people” dead, the civil war ended in a negotiation that installed the Figueres junta (Wilson 1998).

Scholars usually mark the end of the 1948 civil war as the turning point in Costa Rican political history (Wilson 1998, 41; Evans 1999, 55; Booth 1998, 52-53). The constitution written in the aftermath of the war included a broad array of provisions that limited executive power, divided the branches of government, guaranteed many of the social reforms of the early 1940s, ensured personal liberties, and most famously, abolished Costa Rica’s army (Booth 1998, 56-66; Wilson 1998, 41).

Lack of context often leads to the abolition of the military being portrayed as a noble move by a highly enlightened Figueres regime (Honey 2004, 409; Evans 1999, 55), however, Wilson argues that it “might have been the only political option open to the junta” (1998, 43). By disbanding Calderón’s army and incorporating his own into the new Rural and Civil Guards, Figueres removed a direct threat and secured his hold on power (Wilson 1998, 43). Whatever Figueres’ motivation, the inclusion of the mandate in the 1949 constitution had a lasting effect that precluded any future military coups. According to Evans, without a “central command structure,” the security forces that Costa Rica did maintain were not likely to be used by the government to “assert undue influence over civilian society, as is frequently the case elsewhere in Latin America” (1999, 2). To further safeguard against the establishment of control by military warlords, Costa Rica created a system that requires the reappointment of the heads of the security units every four years without the possibility of a second term (Evans 1999, 2). This was a significant development for a country that had seen a high degree of military involvement in civilian politics, especially during the period from 1824 to 1889 (Wilson 1998, 20).
From 1948 onward, Costa Rica would only strengthen its reputation as a peaceful place – coming to be recognized by many as “the Switzerland of Central America” (Vivanco 2006, 10; Booth 1998, 29; Evans 1999, 2). This was “largely a function of the elite-level compromise concerning the manner in which competition for political power should take place” (Wilson 1998, 45). Electoral reform, which included the establishment of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, “facilitated the smooth transfer of political power” and “effectively prevented the use of violence for political ends” (Wilson 1998, 45). As a result, voter registration and turnout rose and remained high (until a slight decline in 1998), reflecting perceived legitimacy of the electoral process (Booth 1998, 46-48).

The new constitutional provisions did not completely safeguard Costa Rica from becoming entangled in hostile politics. Honey suggests that financial and political ties with the United States came with “the requirement that Costa Rica quietly support the U.S. war against Nicaragua” in the 1980s (1999, 133), but Costa Rica escaped direct involvement in military operations when President Oscar Arias crafted the Central American Peace Plan – an act that eventually earned Arias a Nobel Peace Prize (Honey 1999, 131). This diffused the tensions in Nicaragua and launched Costa Rica into the global spotlight. Costa Rica’s “visibility as an island of peace and democracy in a war-torn region” (Vivanco 2006, 11), had a lasting effect on the future of Costa Rican life.

Inadvertent side-effect of a move to consolidate power or enlightened step towards national peace, the abolition of Costa Rica’s military is, today, a point of widespread national pride. It is advertised in travel media (ICT 2004a), emblazoned on t-shirts, and cited to support the mantra “Costa Rica es diferente” (Booth 1998, 29). In 2003, Costa Ricans protested fervently when their country was listed in the Bush Administration’s Coalition of the Willing for operations in Iraq.
Some protestors proudly invoked self-images of a peaceful un-militarized nation that had no place in foreign wars (“Costa Ricans Defend Neutral Tradition” 2003). Though neither troops, nor financial support was ever sent, Former President Pacheco “came under severe criticism from the public and political leaders for [his] support” (Veillette 2005, 3). Pacheco, however, claimed “he agreed only to join countries that were against terrorism” (Associated Press 2004, par 4).

“Former [and currently re-elected] President Oscar Arias was especially vocal in criticism of U.S. policy in Iraq” (Veillette 2005, 3). Finally, “[i]n September 2004, Costa Rica’s Constitutional Court ruled that the country [could not] be listed as a member of the U.S. ‘coalition of the willing’” (Veillette 2005, 3).

Science and Conservation

Costa Rica’s reputation as a politically stable, democratic country played a significant role in drawing researchers and scientists to the country (Honey 2004, 409). Skutch, a famed American naturalist who began studying Costa Rica’s flora and fauna in the 1930s, is quoted by Evans as saying that advantages of studying in Costa Rica were “its political stability and the friendliness of its people. … Thus the naturalist working in some remote spot was not likely to have his studies suddenly interrupted or his thin lines of communication cut by a violent upheaval, as has happened to many in Latin America” (Evans 1999, 21). Though Evans conspicuously omits Skutch’s aside that Costa Rica was “not without an occasional bloody revolution” (Skutch 1971, 8), his point is essentially correct: even during its turbulent periods, Costa Rica was relatively more stable, and thus a more attractive option for those who wished to study tropical nature, than other parts of Central America (Wilson 1998, 35).

Costa Rican policies and practices continually welcomed foreign researchers throughout history. As far back as the mid-19th century, the Costa Rican government actively recruited scholars from
Europe to meet their need for university professors (Evans 1999, 18). Costa Rican higher education benefited greatly from the connections formed with foreign intellectuals, and many Costa Ricans became prominent academic figures themselves. One such figure was José Zeledón who was sent to study at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. in the early 1900s. While there, Zeledón “established important connections with American scientists,” opening the “floodgates … for U.S. researchers to start pouring in to [sic] Costa Rica – a flow that never waned” (Evans 1999, 20). By 1914, “Costa Rica had become the center of scientific research in tropical America” (Evans 1999, 20).

Only a small segment of Costa Rica’s population took part in this portion of the country’s history. Evans notes that “[b]ecause field research was viewed by many as a pastime for the eccentric or the rich, few Costa Ricans became involved” (1999, 21). Of those Costa Ricans who did get involved, a substantial number played prominent roles (Evans 1999). Rodrigo Gámez, a plant virologist and former professor of molecular biology at the Universidad de Costa Rica, explains that the presence of foreign researchers and scientists influenced and encouraged many Costa Ricans to develop a greater interest in the “nation’s biological wealth” (Evans 1999, 28).

A disparity existed between those Costa Ricans, like Gámez, who were highly educated and those who labored in the fields. This disparity and Mario Boza’s suggestion that there was “total indifference to environmental problems on the part of the general public” (Evans 1999, 79), is evidence that the formation of, or widening of the gap between, classes was taking place; on the one hand, there was a highly educated class of conservation-oriented individuals and, on the other, a class that remained closer to their humble campesino roots. Though they were the minority, by aligning themselves with influential and well-funded environmental groups, this new
“conservationist class” derived the power to steer Costa Rican policies towards conservation (Evans 1999, 72-93).

Two prominent figures, who might be considered part of the emerging conservationist class, were Mario Boza and Alvaro Ugalde. The two played critical roles in the early stages of the establishment of Costa Rica’s national parks. Both were scholars in fields related to the environment, both received training with the United States National Park Service, and both made their debut in conservation politics at the fledgling National Parks Department during the 1970s after the passage of the Ley Forestal (or Forestry Law). Ley Forestal, which passed in late 1969, was the law that established Costa Rica’s National Parks Department. The early years of the Parks Department were met with an insufficient budget, lack of employees, and in Boza’s words, “total indifference” (Evans 1999, 79) – further indicating a disconnect between social classes in Costa Rica. Nonetheless, Boza and Ugalde, with support from their friend First Lady Karen Figueres, took impressive strides establishing one park after another (Evans 1999 78-93).

These individuals, as well as others, were responsible for launching what became one of the most famous systems of parks in the entire world. The work they did in the early years of the Parks Department had a lasting effect on Costa Rica’s international reputation for conservation and on the economic future of their country. The conditions that were created by scientific research and land protection were essential to the emergence of ecotourism (Evans 1999).

Ecotourism

Ecotourism, the unique brand of tourism that was arguably invented in Costa Rica, evolved out of Costa Rica’s encounter with environmentalism, land protection, and scientific inquiry. Academic tourism may have been one of the first forms of ecotourism that emerged. Evans notes that,
“scientists … may not have started coming to Costa Rica … for fun or entertainment, but their dollars added to the foreign tourist trade and helped to launch a thriving academic tourism business” (Evans 1999, 219). A study of one very successful field research program indicated that 60 percent of their participants returned to Costa Rica at a later date, and 69 percent persuaded others to visit (Evans 1999, 219). Travel to Costa Rica snowballed through the 1980s and 90s, and entrepreneurs in Costa Rica took advantage of this opportunity. For example, one individual opened “simple cabinlike” lodging on the Osa Peninsula thinking “he would market his place to scientists wanting to conduct research …, but he soon discovered that U.S. travel agents were interested in marketing [his place] as a destination for nature tourists” (Evans 1999, 222).

Ecotourism, however, did not come “naturally” out of Costa Rica’s scientific past. Rather, many other social conditions were required for its emergence. Both governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations (national and international) widely promoted environmental education in Costa Rica, which had (and is still having) a huge effect on the strength and continued development of ecotourism. Not only has increased knowledge and curiosity about the environment led to increased domestic travel to the parks, it has enabled many to seek careers in nature guiding (Evans 1999, 221). Internal politics also fostered tourism development. Mario Boza, for example, promoted the establishment of national parks as potentially “major sources of [tourist] revenue for the nation” (Evans 1999, 216). And, indeed, Costa Rica’s famous parks are often considered a fundamental reason for its successful ecotourism industry (Honey 1999, 132). The National Parks Act of 1977 was another way that the Costa Rican government helped the fledgling ecotourism industry grow. This act restructured agencies and put greater emphasis on interpretive facilities for visitors. Shortly after that, in the 1980s, the government began
promoting sustainable use of the parks for economic development and (partly) as a way to fund park operations (Evans 1999, 220-221).

The impact of the above history on ecotourism is that it created an infrastructure that would continue to attract a unique type of tourist. Tamara Budowski’s “taxonomy” (Evans 1999, 217) of tourists helps to explain how academic tourism led Costa Rica’s industry down a different path. Whereas a tourist to Cancun might be concerned with material comfort and luxury services, Costa Rica’s early scientific tourists were “scientists and students who travel[ed] for education or research reasons and who therefore generally remain[ed] [in Costa Rica] for longer periods of time, [made] use of regular services (family restaurants and public transportation), and stay[ed] in moderately priced hotels”’ (Budowski 1992, 55). Costa Rica didn’t (initially) develop large resorts because the tourists who first traveled there sought other experiences. They wanted to immerse themselves in “pristine” tropical nature and to learn about what they saw, and Costa Rica delivered.

Costa Ricans provided tourists with experiences of “pristine” nature not by bringing them to areas that were free from the effects of society, indeed those do not exist (Castree 2001, 3), but rather by re-constructing places as such. Places that had thousands of years worth of socially-produced nature were re-made into places that resembled images of “pristine” nature that were held in the imaginations of the tourists. This occurred on several scales and in several ways: as discussed above, large areas were declared national parks by the government, and people were removed from them (Evans 1999); other areas were purchased with funds raised by international environmental campaigns, and the people who sold their land moved elsewhere (Vivanco 2006); and forests were re-planted on individual farms and pastures by the Costa Ricans who owned them (MacKinnon 2004).
Not all tourist attractions that developed in Costa Rica, however, sought to provide the experience of “pristine” nature. As travel to Costa Rica became popular in the 1990s, resort-style attractions arose that critics consider to be “scams,” attracting tourists with green advertising, but only providing superficial encounters with the environment (Honey 2004, 412-413). “Greenwashing,” as it has been termed, received a lot of attention in ecotourism literature, and prompted several institutions to create certification standards for ecotourism (Honey 2004; Honey 1999). The Costa Rican government developed one of the most famous and widely-known certification standards, called the Certification for Sustainable Tourism (Rivera 2002). Conflicts such as this are indicative of the social struggle and attempts to control the concept of ecotourism, a theme that I will discuss in greater detail in the following chapter.

Conclusion:
Costa Rica’s famed ecotourism industry was not a product of universal support at the national level, nor was Costa Rica’s renowned environmental ethic held by every Costa Rican person. In fact, Mario Boza stated that he and several other well-known Costa Rican environmentalists were able push forward park initiatives “in the face of the belief, which most of [Costa Rica] originally shared, that nature conservation is a superfluous activity” (Evans 1999, 194). It is important to remember that the Costa Rican population is not homogeneous, and that characterizations of them in any singular way inevitably ignores the “complexity and dynamism” of their historical relationships with the natural landscapes (Vivanco 2001, 90). Martha Honey, for example, contends that while “environmentalism was confined to a small cadre of scientists and national park offices” in the early 1980s, “a decade later, ecotourism and environmental ethics had become part of Costa Rica’s national consciousness” (1999, 132) – as if ecotourism and environmental education have successfully (and completely) converted a previously
unenlightened Costa Rican public to morally superior ways of understanding and relating to
to nature. Honey then points to Chris Wille, of the Rainforest Alliance, who, speaking about Costa
Ricans, has said that ecotourism and environmentalism are “now their self-identity. … There is a
lexicon of environmentalism here, right up to the president” (1999, 132). Right up to the
president, but what about right down to the common campesino? Wille, like Honey,
characterizes the acceptance of environmental values and ecotourism as thorough and uniform in
Costa Rica by claiming that even the president has been positively influenced. He ignores other
segments of the population, however, that may not have been as willing to accept these outside
ideas, and speaks for broad categories of people. No doubt, many Costa Ricans would affirm and
be proud of his characterization (as progressive environmental stewards), but such claims over the
population as a whole simplify the complex situation of life in Costa Rica and suggest a
homogeneity of their culture.
Chapter III: Ecotourism and the Construction of Social-Nature on the Osa Peninsula, Costa Rica

Costa Rican nature has been known in many ways throughout history – as a home and resource for indigenous peoples, as an obstacle to settlement for colonists, as a resource and place of agriculture for the newly independent nation, and most recently, as pristine and exotic for the ecotourist. At each point in history, nature has been re-constructed anew. The dominant discourses of the period re-defined nature’s meaning and, through actions associated with those understandings, re-made nature’s physical form. From this perspective, society and culture have always been closely tied to nature in Costa Rica – even in the most recent incarnation where that connection is vigorously denied. This chapter is concerned with exploring the ways in which ecotourism in Costa Rica has re-constructed (and is re-constructing) nature on the Osa Peninsula and with addressing issues of social injustice that arise in the process.

In the first chapter of this thesis I discussed the concept of socially constructed nature. I explained how, within that framework, nature is not seen as an object distinct and separate from society, but rather as intertwined with and inextricably linked to it. Instead of being inherently destructive of nature, society is seen to be responsible for its constant re-definition and re-construction according to culturally and historically specific social preferences. For this reason, the meanings and forms of nature are as diverse as the cultural groups that define them. I also explained that the expressions of nature that become visible around the world are the product of complex processes of social negotiation and struggle, and that one of the central motivations for understanding nature as a social construct is to expose the ways in which uneven power relationships, inequity, and injustice are masked by unquestioned assumptions about nature conservation.
In the second chapter I summarized some of the key moments in Costa Rica’s social and environmental history. Throughout, I identified linkages between society and nature in order to emphasize how, at no point in the country’s history, have the two been separate. I also highlighted key events that were critical in defining the Costa Rican identity, culture, and reputation. The purpose of doing so was to suggest how some Costa Ricans might perceive, understand, relate to, and interact with nature in their country and to provide context for the claims about social-nature that I will make below.

With the groundwork laid, I will begin to explore the ways in which nature on the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica has been assigned meaning and given form. I will do so by considering both Costa Rica’s recent economic shift towards tourism related activities and the discursive representation of Costa Rican nature; specifically, representations propagated by tourism providers, government, and activist organizations through advertisements and travel media targeted at North American tourists. More importantly, I will focus on how, in the process of (re)constructing the meaning and form of Costa Rican nature, uneven power relationships and inequity have resulted in the advancement of certain ideological perceptions of nature and the marginalization of others. This will show that though a diverse range of actors has a stake in making claims about Costa Rican nature, the ability to do so is with widespread effect is restricted to a small group of elite individuals, including scholars, activists, and government officials. I will discuss how those individuals have consolidated control of the process through exclusionary practices of defining and certifying ecotourism. Finally, I will ground this discussion in two case studies on the Osa Peninsula. Utilizing reactions and reflections of the student group whose visit to the Peninsula I coordinated, I will show how two Costa Rican ecotourism entrepreneurs have dealt with the reality of living in an area drastically re-constructed from a place of agriculture to a place of
environmental conservation (a process that occurred largely beyond their control). I will also show how the degree to which each has accepted and adopted the dominant ideologies of nature has affected the success of their business and their social status. This will show that not only has international concern for “saving” tropical nature re-constructed the physical and ideological terrain of the Osa Peninsula, it has also re-constructed social relationships, exacerbating existing inequity as well as creating it where it did not previously exist.

Methodologically, I follow the lead of Luis Vivanco who has conducted extensive research on environmentalism in Costa Rica and who has brought a much needed critical perspective to the topic. Like Vivanco (2006; 2001), my approach is interpretive and based primarily on participant observation. The cases I describe in this thesis are of interactions that took place mostly in informal settings through relationships and acquaintances developed since January 2002, though they are primarily from research conducted while serving as a teaching assistant to a study abroad program during the summer of 2007. The scenarios that I describe in this thesis are selectively chosen, but not arbitrarily selected. The purpose is not for them to stand as universal representations of Costa Rica’s experience with tourism; indeed situational particularities preclude the existence of any such model. Rather, they are intended to stand as “emblematic encounters in which people and institutions … negotiate the meanings and practices” of tourism (Vivanco 2006, 17). My goal is to shift attention towards the processes through which Costa Rican society and natural areas are constructed and away from descriptions of essential characteristics.

Vivanco (2006,8) explains that greater emphasis on the processes of construction can be achieved by focusing on “cultural encounters” instead of efforts to describe “a people” in the traditional ethnographic sense. This places the focus on “the encounters themselves as specific
communicative interactions,” thus avoiding characterizations of homogeneity and unchanging essential traits (Vivanco 2006, 8). In this approach, social movements such as environmentalism and ecotourism become “arena[s] of relational encounter” where cultural and, I argue, environmental production take place (Vivanco 2006, 9). It is in these “arenas” that “certain privileged ideas about natural and social realities are channeled, giving shape to new relationships between and among natures, nations, individuals, and institutions” (Vivanco 2006, 9). Similar to trends in political ecology, the encounters approach is highly concerned with the operation power and issues of inequity. They differ, however, in that political ecology tends to focus almost exclusively on how local experiences are the “product of European colonial ideas and institutions,” as opposed to how a wider variety of social relationships and interactions can have the same effect (Vivanco 2006, 9).

This “encounters” approach is a departure from other forms of ethnographic research. During the first half of the twentieth century, it was widely believed that the professional ethnographer’s specialized training enhanced his or her ability to “get to the heart of a culture more quickly, grasping its essential institutions and structures” (Clifford 1983, 124). Trained in academic settings and backed by institutional authority, ethnologists were seen as disinterested and, therefore, able to make claims about cultures and practices with the appearance of objectivity. The academic community tended to accept this “I know because I was there” mentality, so long as the researcher had received the proper training and achieved a certain status. Today, however, there is far greater skepticism towards claims of impartiality and neutrality in academic research (Haraway 1988, 575-580). As a result scholars such as Vivanco (2006; 2001) have tended to take a less authoritative approach, embracing the interpretive nature of research and acknowledging the positionality of the researcher; this is precisely how I will proceed below.
This chapter is organized into two main sections. The first section, titled “Constructing Costa Rican Natures,” is concerned with how nature in Costa Rica and, more specifically, the Osa Peninsula has been assigned meaning and given form through the structured relationships of ecotourism development and the unstructured practices of discursive representation. The purpose, as it is with all social-nature writing, will be to expose the uneven power relationships and inequity within the processes of nature’s construction by uncovering how the power to control nature’s construction in Costa Rica has been consolidated in the hands of a few through exclusionary practices of defining and certifying what “authentic” ecotourism is. In this section I will be exploring the first two of my three research questions: how is nature being re-constructed on the Osa Peninsula, and who is in control of that process? I will argue that nature on the Osa Peninsula is increasingly being re-made as an object external to society, that this is occurring largely through ecotourism development, and that the entire process is controlled by an elite minority that has access to social and economic capital. I will demonstrate this through a discourse and image analysis of travel media and a content analysis of journals kept by student-tourists during a study abroad experience, which will bridge from discursive representation to social practice. In the second section, titled “‘Remaking Reality’ on the Osa Peninsula,” I will consider what effect the re-construction of nature and the exclusionary defining of ecotourism by the elite have had on the ground. I will consider in detail two individuals with similar backgrounds who have had differing degrees of success negotiating their places in the new socio-natural order of the Osa Peninsula. Specifically, I will look at how they have navigated the newly re-constructed social terrain of their communities by evaluating the successes and failures of their respective ecotourism ventures. Of interest will be how acceptance and adoption of the dominant discourses of ecotourism and environmentalism have played a role in determining social status, and how that has not only perpetuated, but also exacerbated social inequity. This section will provide answers to my third research question: what does the newly constructed form of nature
on the Osa Peninsula mean for its residents? I will argue that the re-construction of nature on Osa is re-ordering social relationships – exacerbating existing conflict and creating it where it did not exist before. My intention is to show that society and nature are intertwined in a mutually re-constructive relationship.

Section I: Constructing Costa Rican Natures

Marx, as I explained in a previous chapter, was one of the first scholars to theorize that nature’s form was a product of society and social interaction. Those who came after him, especially Neil Smith (1984), elaborated on Marx’s ideas to argue that the social structure of capitalist economics produces (quite literally produces) nature anew, and that it does so in a systematically uneven fashion. An important question, then, is who controls the processes of nature production and to what ends? As more and more scholars contributed to this topic, it became apparent that structured social relationships (such as capitalist economies) were not the only way that society produced nature. Rather, they argued, nature is also constantly being constructed (in thought and practice) through discursive relationships – that is, the way that nature is represented is actually responsible for defining its meaning and form. The question, however, remained the same: whose representation of nature is expressed in discursive relationships, how does this construct nature in unfair ways, and what uneven power relationships make it so? The construction of nature thesis, then, does not disavow the production of nature, but rather builds upon it (Castree and Braun 1998).

In this section, I will discuss how Costa Rican natures have been (and are being) constructed in both structured and unstructured ways. First I will examine how ecotourism has, in the Marxist sense, restructured the economic situation in Costa Rica so as to favor the production of a certain type of nature. After that, I will consider the role discourse has played in re-defining the meaning
and form of Costa Rican nature to the same ends. Third, I will analyze several forms of travel media to understand how ecotourism is constructing nature within the country. Fourth, I will demonstrate that the messages communicated in ecotourism discourse help to create and frame tourist perceptions and expectations through an analysis of the group of American students whose visit to Costa Rica I helped coordinate. And finally, I will discuss how these idea(l)s communicated travel media are materialized in physical reality. Throughout, I will discuss how uneven power relationships have been a factor in determining who has had the authority to define nature and ecotourism in Costa Rica and in whose interest it has been done.

Production of Nature in Costa Rica: The Role of Ecotourism

The irony of Costa Rica’s famed reputation for conservation is that, at the same time that much of the land was being placed under formal protection, the country was experiencing one of the highest rates of deforestation in Central America – a situation Sterling Evans has called “the grand contradiction” (Evans 1999, xii). One of the reasons for this was that, up until the 1980s and 90s when a transition took place, Costa Rica’s economic system was almost entirely dependent on agricultural production. Tropical soil, being quite poor for most forms of agriculture, was quickly depleted of essential nutrients, rendering the land infertile and requiring further expansion into forested areas to continue production (Evans 1999, 36). That is why many environmental activists saw ecotourism as a panacea for Costa Rica’s ecological woes. Ecotourism promised a way to shift the country’s economic dependence off of practices that required forest conversion and onto practices that encouraged forest preservation.

This economic transition, and resulting shift in land use activities, began in Costa Rica with new opportunities created by the high level of scientific research being conducted in the country. The Marenco lodge on the Osa Peninsula is one example of how this happened. Evans explains that
the Costa Rican man who opened the lodge had intended to “market his place to scientists wanting to conduct research” in the area, but that “he soon discovered that U.S. travel agents were interested in marketing Marenco as a destination for nature tourists” (Evans 1999, 222). It was opportunities such as this that inspired many Costa Ricans to enter the tourism industry. Gradually, economic reliance on agriculture lessened as tourism development replaced it. Accordingly, fewer lands needed to remain in production and more were required to be “intact” as tourist attractions.

There are many examples of individuals (one of which will be described in detail in the second section of this chapter) who, having seen development opportunities in the tourism industry, abandoned the farming lifestyle. In doing so, those individuals often allowed their fields to regenerate forest, and some (such as an individual discussed in section two) even actively replanted vegetation in order to attract animals that tourists enjoy viewing. In this way, one of the products of ecotourism has been landscapes of ecological restoration. This economic reproduction of landscapes is precisely why ecotourism has been promoted so heavily by environmental activists. Ecotourism has also made lands formerly seen as unprofitable, such as national parks and forest preserves, into a massive renewable resources of potential tourist revenue. The rationale of ecotourism advocates has been that so long as “intact” landscapes are of greater value than they would otherwise be in agricultural production, Costa Ricans will always choose conservation – something they have championed as ecotourism’s unique ability to “convert” individuals that would otherwise be a “threat” to conservation (Vivanco 2001, 90). This is logical, but it ignores the “complexity and dynamism” of individual relationships with the forests and “essentializes” Costa Ricans as “motivated by an economism that degenerates into the destruction of forests if not redirected or checked” (Vivanco 2001, 90). It also characterizes Costa Ricans as barriers that should be managed rather than people with whom to be collaborated.
Whether or not the complexity of Costa Rican relationships with nature allows the strategy to be completely effective, the economic opportunity that ecotourism provides is being used as a tool to modify the behavior of local communities (Vivanco 2006, 83; Salafsky 2001, 185). Ecotourism is, at least in part, a strategy to manage the behavior of individuals that are seen as one of the greatest “threats” to successful conservation. The fact that they have been the target of such actions is evidence that it is likely not Costa Ricans, certainly not rural poor Costa Ricans, that are in control of the processes of ecotourism production. While individuals may be empowered, and even encouraged, to operate their own ecotourism ventures (e.g. TIES 2008; TNC 2005), they are restricted to certain operational guidelines that they themselves have little control over defining (ICT 2008). Instead, the privilege to define and certify ecotourism remains primarily in the hands of scholars, elite organizations, and government. Despite the obvious disempowerment of ordinary Costa Ricans, the ability to define ecotourism is not entirely centralized. Costa Ricans, therefore, cannot be completely restricted from being involved. Even rural poor Costa Ricans are not entirely powerless against those that control the definitions and certifications of ecotourism. They can, through certain acts, enter into limited negotiation with those elite groups, or failing that, reject their ideas entirely through drastic measures.

While close examination has proven otherwise (Vivanco 2006), ecotourism in Costa Rica has tended to be presented as an essentially benign innovation in which everybody wins – environmentalists get protected nature and local communities get economic opportunity. Presented in this way it seems only logical to support it, but as we have seen, ecotourism’s apparent benefits mask its tendency to consolidate control in the hands of the elite. Ecotourism’s

12 Described here, behavior modification is an intentional goal of ecotourism development, but it is important to recognize that it is also sometimes an unintended result of involvement in the industry for reasons such as economic gain.
broad and unquestioned acceptance is based on the taken-for-granted concept that nature conservation is *always* in the public interest. This is not to call into question the idea that, in certain very real ways, healthy environments mean healthy people and assure the sustained resources for future generations, but rather to call into question the assumption that this is what motivates international environmental conservation. These ideas, besides being overtly paternalistic, are hardly what motivated the expansion of ecotourism in Costa Rica. As will be made clear in the discussion below, ecotourism development is, above all else, motivated by a desire to preserve ecosystems for purposes of aesthetic consumption. While proponents may genuinely believe that they are acting in the best interest of local populations, they, as Vivanco has shown, systematically neglect to consult or involve them in the decision making process (2006, 185).

*Construction of Nature in Costa Rica: The Role of Discourse*

Above, I make the claim that ecotourism has re-made landscapes of agricultural production into landscapes of aesthetic consumption. The explanation provided was based almost entirely on the structured relationships of economics. This alone, however, cannot explain how ecotourism originally emerged or why it became popular so rapidly. The answer to those questions is significant and can be explained, in large part, by the discursive re-construction of nature’s meaning. Below, I will explore the role of discourse in the creation of an atmosphere conducive to activities such as ecotourism.

In common usage of the word, “ecotourism” is usually assumed to unproblematically refer to a set of predefined and absolute principles. Standards (such as the Costa Rican government’s internationally recognized Certification for Sustainable Tourism or CST) even exist to evaluate a business’s success at implementing ecotourism. Despite these assumptions of universal meaning,
debates about what actually constitutes ecotourism are very much unsettled, and definitions remain contested. It has been the preoccupation of scholars, activist organizations, and government to define and certify ecotourism, and seemingly every representative from those groups has his or her own slight variation (Honey 1999, 170-174; Wall 1994, 7; Andersen 1994, 32; Boo 1991, 4-8; TIES 1990; Rainforest Alliance 2008a; ICT 2008). They are, for the most part, however, only slight variations. The same general themes of nature conservation, community development, and local economic stimulation tend to arise in most definitions (Fennell 2001), and generally, what is or is not ecotourism can be agreed upon. This, I argue, is the result of the concept, its implementation, and the wealth it generates being controlled by an elite group of likeminded individuals. The voices of the Costa Rica’s rural poor, those whose lives are most directly impacted by ecotourism, are conspicuously absent from these debates. This is because, as Vivanco points out, “rural Costa Ricans [have] tended to represent subjects to be acted upon, and only collaborated with insofar as it helps achieve certain institutional, strategic, or ideological goals” (2006, 185). My concern, therefore, is not with the definition of ecotourism, but rather the process through which it is defined.

The definition and meaning of ecotourism is constructed through a process of discursive representation that is closely linked to certain ideological perceptions of nature. The way that nature is represented in published media (re)creates people’s perceptions of the world, their actions in it, and even its material form. Though it has been treated as such by critics, this is not such a radical idea when it is understood that knowledges of nature “have material effects, insofar as people may believe and act according to them” (Castree 2001, 13). If nature is represented as an obstacle to progress, as it had been during the agricultural era of Costa Rica’s history, then people are likely to remove it. On the other hand, if nature is represented as an object of great value, as it commonly is in environmental and ecotourism discourse, and the individuals and
institutions promoting that message have the power to advance it, then people will begin to protect and preserve it. This is precisely what has been taking place on the Osa Peninsula and Costa Rica in general.

Costa Rica’s visibility on the world stage of environmentalism and ecotourism began in the early 1980s. Scientists and researchers, who had been working in the area for decades, began to be alarmed by the state and trend of Costa Rica’s ecological future – the country’s forests were rapidly being converted into fields and pastures for continued agricultural expansion (Evans 1999, 36-43). Slowly, however, those individuals contributed to the reversal of the deforestation trend by exporting a powerful message about Costa Rican nature: that it is extremely rare, still very much unknown, and in great danger of being lost. This was seized on by environmentalists around the world who, because of favorable social conditions of the time, were in influential positions. They used the message from Costa Rica and the scientific authority it carried to generate immense support for environmental protection in Costa Rica (Evans 1999, 26-27). Vigorous campaigns to “save the rainforest” raised unprecedented funding for environmental conservation (Vivanco 2006, 51).

One such campaign that took place in Monte Verde, Costa Rica is discussed by Vivanco (2006, 69-73). In his discussion he cites a statement from one of the coordinators of the campaign. She identifies nature films and their message of an immanent extinction of wildlife as a motivating force that sparked the multi-million dollar campaign to protect the region’s forests (Vivanco 2006, 70). These films depict exotic and largely unknown landscapes and wildlife that are in constant threat of destruction, and in the case of Monte Verde’s Bosque Eterno de los Niños campaign, they served as a powerful call-to-action. This is significant because it demonstrates
how the dramatic re-construction of landscapes can occur through unstructured social relationships, through images and representations of nature.

In these films, science was used to represent Costa Rican nature in a particular way to create a powerful message regarding the imperative to protect it (Vivanco 2006, 71). This representation served to construct an imaginative space in which Costa Rica was constituted by dense forests teeming with exotic biodiversity in constant danger of being destroyed. As time progressed, however, Costa Rica’s reputation increasingly became one of conservation success, and the message shifted from the risk of loss to maintenance of the protected. This is when activists and environmental organizations began efforts to modify the values and behaviors of local individuals so that policing of protected lands would ultimately be unnecessary in the long-term (Vivanco 2006, 94). With this came new ways of thinking about and using the forest ecosystems. Ecotourism, for example, began to be promoted as a tool for removing the “threat” of local exploitation – if the forests were profitable to local populations, there would be an incentive to preserve them. The invention of ecotourism created an entirely new way of understanding nature (for both locals and tourists) and new ways of representing it. These ideas about Costa Rican nature were communicated through advertisements and other travel media produced to promote ecotourism. As ecotourism expanded, Costa Rica was increasingly re-constructed, in both thought and practice, as a place for that activity.

Construction through Ecotourism: Analysis of Travel Media

Increasingly today these messages about Costa Rica are coming directly from individual experience through imagery, textual publications, and electronic sources, unmediated by the protocols of structured social relationships such as economic development. Analysis of travel media produced to promote ecotourism can help to elucidate the type of nature that is being
constructed as well as the uses of, activities in, and relationships with it that are considered acceptable within the framework of ecotourism. The media analyzed below depicts Costa Rican nature in ways that might be expected: it is seen as pristine, spectacular, exotic, wild, and separate from humans. Several themes about nature can be identified in the media as well; the major themes identified below include vivid descriptions of “spectacular” nature, local concern for the environment, tourism as a “low-impact” activity, adventure, and reverence accorded to nature through religious analogies.

These messages and themes can be found in, for example, a poster produced by the Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (the ICT or Costa Rican Institute of Tourism) to promote tourism in the Osa region (figure 3; ICT 2004b). There are several messages that can be drawn from this advertisement – some obvious and intentional, others hidden in subtext. First, attention is drawn to the caption: “We’ll care for you almost as much as we care for Nature.” Significantly, the word “Nature” is capitalized, communicating respect and reverence. The caption implies that Costa Ricans are, above all else, concerned for the well-being of the environment. Whether or not they are, to what degree they are, or whether or not it is even possible to measure such a trait is irrelevant – it matters only that this message conveys the perception that they are, and that those who receive the message will expect them to be.

Featured less prominently in the poster, but an equally strong message, is the logo and slogan of the ICT in the bottom right-hand corner: “Costa Rica – No Artificial Ingredients.” Others, including Gray (2003) and Vivanco (2006), have commented on this phrase, keying in on its appeal to the North American preoccupation with undisturbed or pristine landscapes. With this particular instance of the ICT logo there also appears the image of a Scarlet Macaw. Use of that
bird is a strategic move, as many Costa Ricans are well aware that the Macaw represents certain ideals for tourists, more so than would the image of a Clay-Colored Robin. Finally, the

This image has been removed to comply with copyright. It can be found here:


Figure 3
advertisement depicts a couple enjoying themselves in a structure that appears to be floating above or settled gently on top of the vegetation below. This implies that ecotourism has little or no negative effects on nature, so that tourists can rest assured that they will not be disrupting the harmony of such a sacred place during their visit.

These messages of spectacular and exotic nature are echoed in other advertisements produced by private travel companies. The Disney Travel Services corporation, for example, publishes a brochure that describes their Costa Rica package. It states that on the “Path to Pura Vida” (or “pure life”) you will encounter “rich, green canopies dense with some of the most colorful wildlife anywhere” and “some of the most pristine white-sand beaches and crystal blue waters” (figure 4; Disney 2007, 24-27). Similarly, the brochure for the International Expeditions company features images of exotic wildlife and an imposing volcano landscape, showing only one human-made structure “against a backdrop of lush jungle vegetation.” It also describes Costa Rica as a “paradise for the naturalist” wishing to experience “palm-fringed beaches” and “mist-shrouded mountains cloaked in cloud forest” (figure 5; IE 2007, 49-51). This language evokes images of majestic landscapes and undisturbed natural scenes. Some brochures, such as the “Active Adventures” catalog produced by World Expeditions (figure 6; 2007, 122), even acknowledge Costa Rica’s expansive agricultural lands that clients must pass through on their way to and from the “rugged interior,” which is described as a “spectacular natural wilderness” where clients have the chance to “glimpse rare wildlife and birdlife in [a] pristine tropical rainforest.” The image that accompanies this description is of group of backpackers crossing a suspension bridge into thick vegetation near the “spectacular Poas Volcano” (World Expeditions 2007, 122).
This image has been removed to comply with copyright. It can be found here:


Figure 4
This image has been removed to comply with copyright.
It can be found here:


Figure 6

83
Though organized travel through large companies such as the ones discussed above constitutes ecotourism for many people, others might argue that it is not “authentic” ecotourism. For that reason, I also considered travel media produced for a different type of tourist for a different type of travel. Significantly, many of the same messages ran through much of these materials as well. A popular guidebook, *Lonely Planet: Costa Rica* (Vorhees and Firestone 2006), echoes the idea(l)s of pristine nature, unpeopled landscapes, and a progressive local environmentalism. In the introduction to the chapter on Osa, the Lonely Planet guidebook states that “[r]esidents claim [Osa] is the most picturesque, the most pristine, the most perfect spot in Costa Rica” (Vorhees and Firestone 2006, 401). Not only does this reiterate a society/nature separation, characterizing Osa as pristine, it projects the desire for that separation onto the residents of Osa, suggesting that it is a universal value. An expectation comes with this that Costa Ricans will demonstrate this tendency during the tourist’s visit. The book also claims that Osa’s “miles of shoreline are populated with swaying palms and prodigious birdlife, but hardly a human soul” and suggests that this is because “much of this area was never populated or developed by Ticos” (Vorhees and Firestone 2006, 401). This perpetuates the myth of Osa being “true wilderness” not only by denying the historical record – the peninsula was widely settled, consequently presenting relocation problems upon establishment of Corcovado National Park in 1975 (Evans 1999, 97-99) – but also by denying the present-day social-natures. The beaches of Osa are imagined as empty places of natural beauty, not places where Costa Ricans live their lives and make their homes.

Another guidebook, *Bradt: Costa Rica* (Banting 2006), reiterates the message of local environmental foresight and stewardship in the book’s natural history section. It states that “[m]other nature has blessed Costa Rica with more biodiversity than any other place on earth,”

---

13 “Tico” is a self-given colloquial name for Costa Ricans.
and explains that “[t]hankfully, the people of Costa Rica have recognised the treasure trove they call home and have created an extensive system of” protected areas (Banting 2006, 15). The implication is that Costa Ricans universally share the author’s (and likely the reader’s) concern for environmental protection. Other travel authors focus more on describing with vivid detail the places potential tourists can visit. National Geographic’s guidebook, for example, represents Costa Rica as a place of “glorious emerald, teeming with colorful wildlife: rainbow-hued scarlet macaws, electric-blue morpho butterflies …, and the iridescent green Holy Grail of neotropical birds, the quetzal” and of “sweeping rain forest, rugged mountains, fire-spitting volcanoes, and lonesome beaches stretching along jungle-lined shores” (Baker 2000, 10). The book entices the reader to “discover the full kaleidoscope of wilderness wonders” (Baker 2000, 10), especially on the “sparsely inhabited” Osa Peninsula where the “largest extant stand of primeval rain forest” still exists (ibid., 172). In the same vein, the Adventures in Nature travelogue advances the idea that Costa Rica exemplifies a society/nature separation, by suggesting that it “touches the heart and mind, not through elegant boulevards, towering cathedrals, or an imposing place in history, but through its incredible natural beauty and a gracious people” (Sheck 2001, 1).

Today’s technologies have increased the intensity of unstructured discursive representation. Websites, weblogs, and online reviews, for example, have enabled individuals to publish personal experiences and perceptions unmediated by agencies and institutions such as the ICT or private companies in the case of the above poster and brochures (figures 3-6) or by a publisher in the case of the guidebooks. Prospective ecotourists can find an abundance of information about Costa Rica through the internet. The “Nature Vacations” website (“Costa Rica Eco Travel” 2008), which is returned near the top of a Google search for “Costa Rica ecotourism,” lists several “Ecologically Responsible Tours” and recommended hotels. The website contributes to the

14 The use of google.com is intentional, as it is the primary information gathering tool used by many people today.
construction of Costa Rica’s reputation through the characterizations that it makes about travel to the country. A caption reads: “Imagine seeing a glimpse of the Resplendent Quetzal on a high cloud forest trail, watching in awe as a volcano erupts in front of your eyes … finding jaguar footprints in the forest, the flash of a scarlet macaw as it flies across a deserted beach, imagine eco-travel in Costa Rica!” ("Costa Rica Eco Travel" 2008). It is saying that Costa Rica is exotic and spectacular. Personal accounts of specific lodges and tours can be found on websites that allow user reviews. Significantly, the individuals posting information on those sites reiterate some of the same messages as the institutions and agencies that disseminate knowledges about ecotourism. An individual posting on TripAdvisor.com about Danta Corcovado Lodge, one of the case studies I will discuss in the next section, states that “[t]he lodge rests lightly on the land and allows you to see the rainforest in a nearly undisturbed fashion” (“Tour lightly on the land” 2007). Another individual, posting on the same site about the same lodge, comments on the private trails that “lead you into an area of untouched primary forest … a cathedral of natural beauty” (“Merlyn’s Magic” 2007). Weblogs allow individuals to share accounts of their travels and personal experiences. One such “blog” written about travel to Corcovado National Park characterizes the journey as a perilous adventure with many near misses and constant danger, but is also filled with tranquil moments of quite contemplation “out in the wilderness, surrounded by the rainforest” – “one of the most peaceful experiences” of the author’s life (“Corcovado” 2006).

The same messages and representations of exotic and awe-inspiring natural beauty run throughout almost all of the media published on Costa Rica. Many powerful words are used to describe Costa Rica and the nature it contains; those used in the media reviewed above include majestic, picturesque, lush, dense, pure, primeval, sparsely inhabited, unpeopled, deserted, separate, tranquil, peaceful, perfect, rare, rugged, colorful, rich, untouched, undisturbed, harmonious, and on multiple occasions, pristine, spectacular, wild, and beautiful. Certain themes about Costa
Rican nature also arise in these media including local concern for the environment, tourism as a “low-impact” activity, and adventure. A religious analogy is also apparent, communicating a special respect for Costa Rican nature through words such as cathedral, Holy Grail, sacred, paradise, and “Nature,” with a capital “N.” These ideas settle in the minds of prospective tourists to Costa Rica and create detailed imaginative geographies. Prior to ever setting foot in the country they have played out entire fantasies in their minds about what Costa Rica will be like.

Consumption of Discourse and Production of Expectations

The consumption of Costa Rican tourism discourse (and the production of expectations from it) is apparent in the written reflections and observations I made of the students whose visit to Costa Rica I helped coordinate. The students on this trip were required to keep course journals in which they responded to daily prompts about their experiences. On 8 July 2007, towards the beginning of their stay in the country, after a short visit to La Selva Biological Station and several days into their visit to Carara National Park, they were asked to reflect on their expectations of and experiences in Costa Rican forests. One student wrote:

I was not completely sure what to expect before I came to Costa Rica. I was expecting the forests to be amazing and very different than anything I had seen before. I was correct in these assumptions. I had read a little about the forests before coming so I had some vague conceptions of what they might be like.

Another wrote:

The forests of Costa Rica are pretty similar to what I envisioned. They are dense, hot & humid with an amazing diversity of plants & animals. The flora is as lush & bountiful as I expected.

Some commented that they tried to go without expectations, but the language the students used to describe what they saw and knew of the forests was reflective of that used in the media I analyzed above.15 The forests were described as diverse, pristine, lush, bold, bright, beautiful, amazing,

---

15 Of the 22 student journals reviewed, three indicated that they tried to go without expectations, eleven indicated that the forests were what they expected or similar to it, four indicated that it was not what they
very different, thick, stunning, containing amazing biodiversity and abundant wildlife, staggering, near incredible, dense, bountiful, surreal, green, awesome, fascinating, intriguing, intimidating, complex, vastly layered, peaceful, and exciting. Though this language is not identical to (or quite as colorful as) that used in the advertisements reviewed above, several words overlap and the broader theme is the same: Costa Rican nature is unique and impressive.

Some of the students indicated where their expectations were formed. Many agreed, in a discussion held on 24 July 2007, that nature programs on the Discovery Channel, National Geographic Channel, and Animal Planet were very influential in framing their perceptions. Others identified fictional films set in tropical areas, such as Predator, Rambo, Platoon, and The Jungle Book that have shaped their perceptions of the environments. Though specific sources were not provided, one student wrote that she had “done some research into the area which painted a picture of lots of birds and vegetation.” Discussion made it apparent that these students had been exposed to marketing similar to the advertisements reviewed above, and at least two students carried copies of the Lonely Planet guidebook.

The uptake of idealized landscape images from these sources is apparent in student reflections on their experiences. While satisfaction with the Costa Rican landscapes experienced was unanimous within the group, many indicated discrepancies between the forests described in the sources that framed their perceptions and their actual experiences, even from an individual who stated that the Costa Rican forests had “met and exceeded all of [his] expectations.” In response to their 8 July 2007 journal prompt, three students indicated that they expected the forests to be more colorful – they explained that it was as green as they anticipated, but that they expected more brightly colored animals and flowers. One student wrote “I pictured a lot more flowers in expected, two indicated that it was similar to other experiences in tropical forests, and two provided no indication of expectations.
bloom.” Most of all (in 15 out of the 22 journals reviewed), the students indicated that they had expected to see a lot more wildlife.\textsuperscript{16} One student commented on this by referring to a conversation she had had with a guide at La Selva. The guide had explained to her that tourists are often frustrated when they do not see much or any of the wildlife portrayed in the media they have consumed. Another student reflected on this lack of visible wildlife by writing:

I feel that as [tourists] we expect to see everything in the jungle when we go on nature walks. This is partly because of nature T.V. shows feeding us rare footage of wildlife shots [sic]. We are also fed descriptions from the parks about the animals that we could see. Americans, in our culture, expect to see entertainment with everything we experience. Tourist attractions try to accomplish this, but they can’t control nature.

This student was indicating that the image of Costa Rican nature portrayed in travel media was exaggerated to appeal to the desires of tourists and that hosts tried to deliver, but short of a zoo-like experience, they could not guarantee wildlife sightings. At many sites, however, the forest itself has been produced for the tourist experience.

One such site is the Villa Lapas resort, near Carara National Park, where the students had their Costa Rican zipline and canopy bridge experiences.\textsuperscript{17} The forests where these activities took place had been open pastureland that was burned annually only 10 years earlier, but were re-grown for the purpose of creating the tourist attraction. This fact was revealed to the group by their guide halfway through the canopy tour, and many were very surprised because it had seemed much older to them. One student exclaimed with disbelief: “I thought this was primary forest!” Several students were impressed by the rapid renewal of the forest, and wrote about the ecological benefits of landscape transformation from tourism development. Despite being aware that tourism was the reason the forest existed, almost all of the students (20 out of the 22

\textsuperscript{16} In response to their 8 July 2007 journal prompt, students responded that they expected to see more “birds,” “snakes,” “mammals” (twice), “animals” (three times), “wildlife” (three times), “insects” (five times), and “flowers” (twice).

\textsuperscript{17} The students participated on the “Skywalk” activity on 8 July 2007 and the zipline activity on 13 July 2007.
reviewed) questioned tourism’s status as a “low-impact” activity (one of the discourses identified in the above travel media), identifying human presence in the canopy as disruptive to animal behavior and construction of the bridges as “excessively invasive and unnecessary.” One student wrote:

I feel that [the term “ecotourism”] is thrown around way too much specifically by those advertising ecofriendly excursions which in fact they are no so “eco-frriendly” [sic]. I feel that the majority of what we have experienced such as canopy tours or the guided tours are not what I would have imagined ecotourism to be. Often the emphasis was placed on the tourism [part of the word] but used the “eco” [part] just to seem environmentally friendly.

Even though ecotourism is portrayed as “low-impact” by travel media, the students did not readily accept it.

There was evidence in the students’ reflections, however, that they expected Costa Rican nature to be, as indicated in the travel media, a place of adventure – the more exciting, the better. Many of the students were disappointed by the lack of excitement they derived from their canopy tour and zipline experiences, writing in their journals such things as “I am a little surprised that [the bridges] are such a popular tourist attraction” and stating that the ziplines were “anticlimactic.”

Their expectations for adventure were met later in the trip, on 21 July 2007, when they hiked 22 kilometers through the center Corcovado National Park to the Sirena Ranger Station. The greatest excitement of that day, however, came not from the world-famous forest they were hiking through or the astonishing biodiversity it contains, but rather from a tractor ride to the Park’s entrance. They rode in trailers as the tractors pulled them up a riverbed for almost two hours, over bumps and uneven terrain, under low limbs and overhanging vegetation that they had to dodge and duck, and through the river more than 15 times. Most of them (17 out of the 22 reviewed) wrote excitedly about this experience in their journals, calling it “the highlight of the day,” “a crazy and thrilling adventure,” “adrenaline pumping,” “nail-biting,” “more exciting than the zipline or crocodile boat ride,” “the most fun part of the trip,” and “an experience I will never
forget.” Significantly, not a single person reflected in their journal on the ecological damage this likely caused to the river ecosystem. The excitement, it seems, was enough to distract even a group composed primarily of environmental science students (a group that had been concerned with the impacts of foot trails and canopy bridges) from concerns for environmental preservation.

This momentary diversion from an otherwise strict environmentalism underscores the argument that individuals are not singularly defined by one set of values. Though none acknowledged their own heterogeneity, many of the students recognized it in the Costa Rican population when reflecting on another of the discourses identified in the above media; that of a progressive local concern for the environment. Most (17 out of 22) did not accept the notion that Costa Ricans are universally more environmentally aware than most Americans. One individual expected they would be, writing in his journal that “the people of Costa Rica probably have more of an opportunity to appreciate their natural surroundings,” but most expected that the level of environmentalism would depend on the individual and the activities in which he or she participates. Journal entries included an expectation that Costa Ricans would be more progressive in terms of consumption and wastefulness but less so in terms of “soil erosion and chemical hazards,” a belief that the government might be responsible for progressive environmental policies that “don’t always reflect the views of the general public,” and an argument that “Costa Ricans who work in National Parks [sic] or … ecotourism are probably much more aware of preserving the environment;” suggesting that the students felt environmental awareness in Costa Rica was dependent upon a range of social circumstances. While they readily identified heterogeneity within the population of Costa Rica, there was no indication that the students extended this concept to individual Costa Ricans – in that even a single person might

---

18 In response to a journal prompt on 1 July 2007, the day of arrival for most, four students indicated that they expected Costa Ricans to more environmentally aware than most Americans, four indicated that they expected them to be about the same or less aware, twelve indicated that it would depend on the person or activity, one rejected the idea that such a comparison could be made, and one gave no indication.
move dynamically in and out of spaces of environmentalism, demonstrating progressive awareness at certain times and in certain situations and resulting in conflicting and sometimes contradictory behavior (as had been the case with them on their tractor adventure). Instead, they seemed to believe that individual Costa Rican identities are static, being *either* environmentally aware *or* not, but never both at different times and in different situations. Regardless, they rejected the idea promoted in tourism discourse that Costa Ricans are universally more environmentally progressive. One student came to this realization after becoming disillusioned by the pollution she had witnessed. She wrote in her journal on 2 August 2007:

> One of the major turning points for me was seeing the mass pollution on the Tarcoles River. I had always envisioned Costa Rica with pristine clear water.

Of the five discourses identified in the media above, there was evidence that this group of students had been exposed to four: Costa Rican nature as exotic and impressive, tourism as a “low-impact” activity, Costa Rican environments as a place of adventure, and local concern for environmental conservation (no student used religious analogies to describe their expectations or experiences). While they did not readily accept or agree with all of what they had been exposed to (questioning tourism’s status as a “low-impact” activity and challenging the idea that all Costa Ricans adhered to a progressive environmentalism), the students’ perceptions of Costa Rica had certainly been influenced by travel media; they expected spectacular visual displays of nature in the Costa Rican forests, and they anticipated an adventurous journey. This shows that the students have engaged with tourism discourse, received ideas from it, synthesized them with previously held perceptions and opinions, and produced expectations. Their geographical imaginations – the way they envisioned and conceived Costa Rica – were filled with fantastic images that framed the way they understood and interacted with the place. This demonstrates the link from discourse to perception, but remaining is the question of how these ideas are translated into material reality and what effect this has on society and the social relationships of tourism.
Materialization of Idea(l)s

The fantasies that travel media help create are often times not merely hopeful possibilities for tourists, but rather they become expectations on which Costa Rican hosts must deliver. The reasons Costa Ricans often provide these experiences (or at least attempt to do so) are complex – much more so than wanting to simply capitalize on a development opportunity. These reasons include the desire for business success, to align themselves with the ideals of the powerful and politically connected, to increase social status, and because of adopted ideology. In this way, representation precedes physical construction; advertisements and other travel media, based on perceptions of nature, are produced by institutions and individuals and contribute to the construction of idea(l)s, actions are influenced, and physical form is altered accordingly. In section two, I will address this in greater detail through a case study on the Osa Peninsula. Here, however, I wish to uncover issues of injustice and focus on the unfair expectations that are hidden in the construction process.

The characterization in the ICT poster (figure 3) and the Lonely Planet guidebook – that the primary concern of all Costa Ricans is the preservation of pristine environments – places unfair expectations on local people to demonstrate a progressive environmental ethic. This idealization becomes a baseline from which Costa Ricans are evaluated. The advertisement represents a separation between society and nature (in the way that the man-made structures float above the natural area) that appeals to the North American sentiment that “the only acceptable role for humans in ‘wilderness’ is as observer” (Gray 2003, 119), and Costa Ricans are expected to deliver such an experience. As we know from social-nature theory, however, the disentanglement of the two is an impossibility. Therefore, the expectation to provide it is an unattainable standard to which Costa Ricans are destined to fail.
Certainly, however, many (possibly most) ecotourists do leave Costa Rica as satisfied customers. If impact can be concentrated well enough, and if the myth of a society/nature separation can be maintained, tourists will be satisfied with the experience they receive. Evidence is in the success and fame of ecotourism ventures in Costa Rica that are based on this premise. The injustice is that Costa Ricans have little choice but to provide such experiences; alternatives such as agriculture no longer carry the social distinction they once did, so in order to be successful, Costa Ricans must participate in the tourism industry where, in order to sell something, they must “paint it green” (Evans 1999, 218). Tourists control the wealth, and tourism providers must accommodate them in order to gain access to it. Framed in another way, it might not seem unreasonable that the livelihoods of many Costa Ricans are tied to the endorsement of the “pristine nature” myth: Costa Ricans choose to enter the business of providing these sorts of experiences because they want access to the wealth it generates. But this ignores the fact that the decision to enter the tourism industry has little to do with the conditions that made ecotourism the dominant economic activity and an ever-present part of Costa Rican life. Most Costa Ricans played no role in creating this situation. Rather, ecotourism emerged from the actions of an elite minority with the power to reframe the Costa Rican image and reputation. While domestically Costa Rica may still be largely defined by hardworking campesinos mentioned in the national anthem and “praised in official speeches as the backbone of the country” (Hiltunen Biesanz et al. 1999, 56) or by the landscapes of production represented by the Clay-Colored Robin, internationally Costa Rica has become the success story of tropical nature “saved” from

---

19 The original quote reads “[w]hen Costa Ricans want to sell something, they paint it green” (Evans 1999, 218), which implies that participation in tourism is always a choice. I am arguing, however, that social conditions are forcing Costa Ricans into tourism where they must paint their businesses green to be successful.

20 Campesino is the Spanish word for a small-scale rural farmer. It’s closest English equivalent might be “peasant,” however “campesino” does not carry the same negative connotation.

21 The anthem refers to “labriegos sencillos” (simple farm workers), describing them with “eterno prestigio, estima y honor” (eternal prestige, esteem and honor).
human destruction. Suddenly, many Costa Ricans found that the agriculturalist lifestyle was under attack. The *campesino*, once a respected and patriotic figure, had been “rendered obscene” and refigured as the destroyer of nature by powerful foreign interests (Vivanco 2006, 25). They needed to adjust their lifestyle or suffer the consequences of being a member of a social group that had lost its standing (that is, at least, within certain circles). Involvement in ecotourism and adoption of environmentalist values in Costa Rica is more than an advantageous economic opportunity, it is an act of class re-association (though, as I will show in the next section, it does not always mean dissociation from previous groups).

The ecotourism economy, though it offers increased access to wealth, comes with several undesirable side-effects for Costa Ricans. Maintenance of the myth of a society/nature separation extends beyond immediate tourist interactions. Signs of human activity remain visible on the land and can compromise the viability of the tourism industry. For that reason, Costa Ricans are constantly required to conceal signs that they actually live in areas that tourists view as “pristine” – an especially unfortunate situation for those who never chose to welcome ecotourism in the first place. A schoolteacher from the La Palma community on the Osa Peninsula, for example, explained that local people “preserve nature because it is the law” or because ecotourism gives them incentive to do so. While there are many other factors (such as a desire to align with the ideals of the powerful and politically connected, the opportunity to increase social status, and the adoption of dominant ideology) that make the motivation for preservation more complex than she suggests, her observation illustrates the reluctant cooperation of some in the local community to stabilize the separation myth. Certainly, however, not all (perhaps not even most) Costa Ricans are unwilling participants. Individuals, such as the two that will be discussed in detail in the next section, have expressed that they are thankful for the economic opportunities that have come with these new ideas about nature, and one of them especially has demonstrated a personal
commitment to those ideas in, for instance, his explanation that “low impact” building techniques are important because of nature’s delicacy.

It is those who are most vulnerable, those with little training, education, capital, or the language skills necessary to take full advantage of the tourism industry, however, that are the most negatively affected by living in an area where ecotourism has replaced other economic activities. The requirement to uphold the society/nature separation myth on which ecotourism is based extends beyond activities directly related to the tourism industry. Those involved in activities that produce very obvious social-natures (such as farming, extraction of forest products, and hunting) have seen their social standing decline precipitously since ecotourism replaced agriculture as the dominant economic activity. Vivanco, for example, indicates that small-scale farmers have been targeted as the root of a deforestation problem, causing them to be re-figured as “obscene” and an impediment to successful conservation (2006, 28). An individual by the name of Carlos from Puerto Jimenez, for example, explained that while the growth of tourism in his area provided him with extra income from work as a taxi driver, he resented some of the changes it was bringing to life in his community. Carlos complained that, since tourism had become a major part of life on Osa, he was now considered a cazador furtivo (poacher), whereas he used to be just simply a cazador (hunter). He was expressing that the values that tourism brought to the Jimenez community were being imposed on him and redefining what activities were acceptable. Agricultural knowledge and other occupational skills are no longer as valuable in parts of Costa Rica today. While ecotourism has been beneficial for those willing to accept and able to adjust to its associated forms of nature, it has disrupted the lives of many others, causing social reconfiguration, upheaval, and conflict.
In the section that follows, I will continue to explore how an economy based on the concept of external nature is related to social reconfiguration by looking at the specific situations of two Osa residents. By contrasting their abilities to negotiate a place in the new system, I will identify some of factors that are altering the class system. This will provide insight into how the shift in economic activity and the dominant ideological perception of nature has been detrimental for some Costa Ricans and beneficial for others. I will show that those with the assets necessary to participate in ecotourism (such as mastery of a second language, training, capital, or a sufficient understanding of the tourists cultural values) are better prepared to prosper in the new Costa Rica and, therefore, are elevated in social standing. The purpose is to show that not only does society re-construct nature, nature re-constructs society.

Section II: “Remaking Reality” on the Osa Peninsula:
Intertwined with and inseparable from the physical and conceptual re-construction of Costa Rican nature has been the re-making of economic and social realities. Costa Rica’s transition from an economic system dependent almost entirely on agriculture to one predominantly dependent on tourism has received a great deal of attention in environmental discourse (e.g. Rainforest Alliance 2008b; Conservation International 2008) and academic literature (Evans 1999; Honey 1999; Minca and Linda 2000), but the re-configuration of the country’s social structure and power relationships has been a less prominent focus (Vivanco 2006 is a notable exception). This has left issues of class re-formation largely unexplored. It is unclear, precisely, how Costa Rica’s new natures and economic systems are re-shaping social relationships and hierarchies, and who, exactly, are emerging as the new elites.
In this section I will explore these issues of social re-configuration as they pertain to the newly re-made environmental and economic realities on the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica. In doing so, I will come closer to answering the third question I laid out in the introduction of this thesis: what does the newly constructed form of nature on the Osa Peninsula mean for its residents (paying particular attention to who is benefiting and why)? To do this, I will contrast two locally-owned tourism ventures on the Osa Peninsula: Merlyn Oviedo’s Danta Corcovado Lodge and German Quirós’ Finca Tilapias. I will explore the idea of “social capital,” how it is being redistributed in the new Costa Rica, and what that means for residents in the area. Finally, I will conclude the chapter by discussing the reconfiguration of social life on Osa since the introduction of ecotourism.

Danta Corcovado Lodge

Merlyn Oviedo is the founder of Danta Corcovado Lodge, a small family business on the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica. The lodge was built just a few years ago, in 2004, as tourist visits to Corcovado National Park began to rise. Prior to this, the Oviedo family, like many families on the Peninsula, relied heavily on agricultural production. Today, however, the Oviedo farm, which Merlyn’s father settled and cleared of forest 35 years earlier, has been converted into a haven for tourists preparing to visit Corcovado, the Peninsula’s greatest attraction. Merlyn’s guests enjoy a prelude to what lies inside the Park’s boundaries on the network of trails he has constructed through the rapidly growing forest that his father replanted.

Merlyn was born in the area, and grew up on the farm that is now Danta Corcovado. In fact, Merlyn built the main-lodge on the very spot where the old family house once stood – the floor boards are the original teak boards that his father laid down when he built the house. When Merlyn reached high school age, he was forced to leave home to continue his education because
there was no secondary school in the area. After high school Merlyn, facing a stalled economy at home, traveled to Portland, Oregon and trained as a welder. Eventually, Merlyn returned to Osa, and with savings from the United States, planned to start Danta Corcovado. Fortunately for him, Merlyn’s return to Osa coincided with the Avina Project, a selective “non-profit program aimed at generating environmentally sustainable work options for young people in the Osa Biological Corridor [the area around Corcovado National Park that is of great concern to environmentalists]” (MacKinnon 2004, W-8). Regarding his participation in the program, Merlyn was quoted in the Tico Times as saying that it “really changed my mind, not only about business but also about our social and environmental responsibility” (MacKinnon 2004, W-8). These unique experiences, without a doubt, afforded Merlyn an advantage over many of his neighbors.

From the moment it opened, Danta Corcovado has been a huge success. Despite being situated far from material luxuries (it can take an entire day to travel from San Jose over notoriously poor roads to a region that has only had electricity since 1996 and telephones since 2007), Danta Corcovado has seen a steady flow of delighted guests. Merlyn himself describes his accommodations as “rustic,” but this is, perhaps, part of the draw – at Danta Corcovado emphasis is taken off of material comfort and placed on environmental responsibility and community development. Merlyn’s operation is what many would consider to be “authentic” ecotourism.

While the debates about what actually constitutes ecotourism are very much unsettled and definitions remain contested, few would disagree that Merlyn’s operation embodies many of the core principles identified in the majority of ecotourism definitions (Fennell 2001). Beyond simply providing tourists access to tropical nature, Merlyn exercises a set of environmental ethics that seek to minimize the impact he and his guests have on the surrounding ecosystem. In addition to environmentalism, Merlyn demonstrates a commitment to his community by
employing local labor at fair wages and by allowing his neighbors to provide services such as horse rentals, taxis, guided tours, and souvenirs instead of providing these things “in-house.” Merlyn has gained respect and acclaim in his community and beyond (Chacón 2006) for the way he manages his business.

*Finca Tilapias*

About 45 minutes from Danta Corcovado, there is a small organic farm called Finca Tilapias which is owned by a man by the name of German Quirós. German has lived on the Osa Peninsula his entire life. He was born near Laguna Corcovado well inside the boundaries of what today is Corcovado National Park. The Park was established in 1975 when German was still young, and his family was moved by the government to his current residence several kilometers north of Puerto Jimenez, the Peninsula’s economic center. As compensation, they were given money, land, and food for a year, but to this day German feels the trade was not just. In the beginning German’s father was also very angry, but with time, the feelings subsided.

On the land they were granted, the Quirós family established a new farm where German, like most people in the region, worked producing agricultural goods for sale. Approximately eight years ago German was involved in an accident with herbicidal chemicals. The accident occurred one day when German was moving some sealed containers of herbicide that he had stored outdoors. Pressure had built up in one of the containers, and it exploded when German attempted to move it. He was sprayed with the chemical and inhaled a large quantity. German fell deathly ill, and required the use of a wheelchair. The doctors were not certain whether or not German would ever regain mobility, or even survive. Eventually and slowly, German recovered, but his outlook on life had changed dramatically. German needed to return to work, but because of his experience he swore not to do it in the same way as before. German would never use chemicals
on his farm again. After attending a government training session on organic farming techniques from the Ministry of Agriculture, German became one of the (if not the) first organic farmers in the region.

Today, even though he is a farmer, German relies heavily on the tourism industry. Costa Ricans, German explains, are not interested in organic produce because it is more expensive and usually smaller (due to greater labor overhead and less beneficial growing conditions). He found it difficult to sell his organic goods at the Sunday market and eventually stopped going. Fortunately for him, he was able to continue selling much of what he produces to the large resorts in Puerto Jimenez because, he explains, “the tourists want it.” Even with the tourist market German finds it difficult to make organic farming profitable, but he is adamant about never returning to the use of chemicals. Instead, German has found other ways to supplement his income. Together with his wife, German opened a restaurant that serves organic food. Tourists who eat there have the option of exploring the farm and learning about German’s decision to go organic while their food is being prepared. German explains with an air of disappointment, however, that tourists are much more interested in viewing wildlife and the dense forests of Corcovado than they are in learning about agriculture.

German is thankful for the development of tourism on the Osa Peninsula because it allows him to continue to farm in a way that otherwise may not have been economical. Tourists, however, are sometimes unsure of what to make of Finca Tilapias. They are usually delighted to learn that German is farming without the use of chemicals, but they are often troubled by some his other land management practices. A student from the Western Washington University group whose visit to Finca Tilapias I arranged was visibly uncomfortable with and complained of German’s
fish ponds, saying that she doubted it was very good to have “all that dirty water flowing right back into the stream.”

Contrasting Convictions

Several of the students who visited Finca Tilapias were skeptical of German’s commitment to “sound ecological practice.” Using a translator, German spoke to the group and explained that he was proud to be an organic farmer because, not only was it healthier for him and his family, it was friendlier to the wildlife. It later became apparent that several students were unconvinced. Clearly German had a genuine desire to be organic, but it seemed to many of the students that his motivation was personal health more than it was conservation of the environment; otherwise, they believed, he would have been more concerned about the effect his fish ponds were having on the stream ecosystem. One student commented that German wasn’t involved in “real ecotourism” because he was directly exploiting the land. German’s other farming practices, namely the fish ponds, seemed to contradict and outweigh the claims of being an environmentalist that he was making.

An interview with German helped to clarify his situation. In the interview, German was eager to talk about how much he cared for Costa Rica’s wildlife. He explained that he had once purchased a snake from a neighbor and released it on his property because he wanted to keep the man from killing it. It was not the content of the story, but rather the manner in which German told it that was most revealing part of the interview. I felt as though he was trying to convince me that he really did view nature as a valuable asset that needed to be protected, as if otherwise I would suspect him of being just another naïve campesino.22 Perhaps he had sensed that not everybody was convinced of his environmental convictions and was attempting to compensate. Or maybe he

22 Campesino is the Spanish word for a small-scale rural farmer. It’s closest English equivalent might be “peasant,” however “campesino” does not carry the same negative connotation.
was simply making a statement about his cultural identity, pushing back against unfair characterizations of campesino destructiveness that he knows are so rampant in environmental discourses (Vivanco 2006, 28). Regardless of what he intended by insisting that he had conservation-oriented values, it was clear that German recognized that he was not simply granted the benefit of the doubt.

Merlyn, on the other hand, has no such problem. He is constantly receiving praise for his accomplishments with Danta Corcovado Lodge (see, for example, MacKinnon 2004; Chacón 2006; “Merlyn’s Magic” 2007; “Tour lightly” 2007). The students whose visit to Danta Corcovado I arranged wrote about their admiration of Merlyn in their course-journals. While no journal question explicitly asked the students about their experiences at Danta Corcovado or Finca Tilapias, on 2 August 2007 they were asked to reflect on their most memorable ecotourism excursions. Significantly, not a single student mentioned German’s Finca Tilapias, whereas 16 of the 22 reviewed mentioned Merlyn’s Danta Corcovado Lodge with great praise and without being prompted.23 One student stated that it was “the nicest place [they had been] yet” and that it was “real ecotourism” unlike the resort areas they had visited near the city of Jaco. One student wrote:

Danta Corcovado Lodge is definitely one of the coolest places I have ever been …. I think Merlin’s [sic] place is a perfect example of what “ecotourism” has the potential to become when employed correctly …. This is definitely the best place we have stayed at on this trip.

Merlyn demonstrated his ability to appeal to the desires of ecotourists in telling a story about a project he had decided not to carry out at his lodge. For a short time, Merlyn had considered diverting a small stream into a seasonal lagoon on his property. The lagoon dries each year when

---

23 Sixteen out of 22 students mention Merlyn’s lodge as a memorable ecotourism experience in response to the journal question on 2 August 2007. When the question from 20 July 2007 (prior to exposure to Finca Tilapias) is considered, Merlyn’s lodge is mentioned in all 22 of journals reviewed.
the rainy season ends, but since it is a place where many rainy-season tourists enjoy spending time, Merlyn wanted to make the lagoon available to his guests year round. He told me, however, that they had abandoned the project when they learned one night that even the dry lagoon was part of a complex ecosystem.

Earlier that year, in April 2007, Merlyn had invited several of his neighbors to watch a movie at his lodge. He told me they had a very interesting “problem” that night. They were unable to finish the screening because of the overwhelming noise being produced by thousands upon thousands of frogs. A “symphony,” he called it. It was the end of the dry season, and “the return of the rains” had brought the frogs out of their hibernation and, as Merlyn put it, “they were celebrating.” Merlyn and his neighbors stopped their film and ventured into the forest to investigate. Merlyn explained with the greatest enthusiasm what they experienced next. The frogs just “went crazy!” He told me that night they learned that the lagoon did not die every year when it dried up, but rather that it was part of an “ecosystem” that was supposed to go through cycles. Further, he explained that it was “natural” for it to go through this process, and that an attempt to divert the stream to make a year-round lagoon might disturb or disrupt the balance of the lagoon’s cycle. That could mean the end of the annual frog symphony. Merlyn, fearful of disrupting something he clearly regarded as extraordinary, abandoned his engineering plans that night.

The story of the frog symphony is but one example of how very skilled Merlyn is at communicating his appreciation for nature. The excitement with which he described this spectacular event and his decision to abandon the stream diversion project communicates a commitment to protecting nature with much more force than German’s insistent reassurances. Surely, both recognize the economic and social benefits of convincingly professing their
environmental convictions within a system that rewards conservation, but their success in doing so is dependent upon their performative abilities.

\textit{Social Capital}

Why is it that Merlyn receives such praise for his commitment to environmentalism while German, struggling to do the same, is met with great skepticism? The answer likely has a lot to do with “social capital” – the connections between and within social networks and the advantages that come with membership in certain groups (Bourdieu 2001, 102-103). Merlyn and German have very similar backgrounds – both come from campesino families, and both grew up on farms in the same region. The differences, however, begin with skills acquired in early adult life.

Merlyn achieved higher degree of education, mastered the English language, received specialized training in tourism development, and accumulated capital while working in the United States, whereas German had to overcome extreme illness and struggle through financial hardship. In addition to these obvious advantages, Merlyn’s time spent living in the United States likely helped him to learn the subtleties of American cultural values. Having learned to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of a cultural group not his own, he was better prepared to receive guests and to provide them with the experience they sought – hence, the success of his operation.

Because of his firsthand familiarity with North American environmental values, Merlyn knew he had to sufficiently distance himself from his roots, so as to communicate a divergence from the past and a sharp break from the old “destructive” ways, in order for his business venture to be a success. This is certainly not to say, however, that Merlyn is somehow concealing his “true desire” to exploit nature. Far from it, Merlyn has adopted and embraced many of the dominant discourses of environmentalism and ecotourism to which he has been exposed, as is evidenced by
his actions in the story of the frog symphony. This only enhanced his “authenticity” and increased his credibility as truly being invested in the agendas of ecotourism, which is confirmed by the positive reactions of the students that visited Danta Corcovado with my group and by the praise he has received elsewhere (Chacón 2006; MacKinnon 2004). Many of students praised Merlyn and Danta Corcovado in their journals. One student wrote in her journal:

I was very impressed. We learned the history of [Danta Corcovado Lodge] and I couldn’t help but to admire the man who started it all. … [Merlyn] decided to turn his father’s farm into an eco-lodge. … It is a beautifully artistic set of cabins. What I really admired about Merlin [sic] was that he wanted to get the whole community involved [sic] and profiting, rather than hogging the benefits to himself.

Another student wrote that Danta Corcovado “seems to really embody what I would idealize an ecolodge to be,” and a third explained that he believed Danta Corcovado “encompass[ed] the true meaning of eco-tourism.”

While Merlyn has been particularly adept at appealing to their desires, it has been a process learning how to please the aesthetic eye of tourists, and he hasn’t always gotten it right. A photograph of Danta Corcovado, pictured in an article of the Tico Times shortly after opening (MacKinnon 2004, W-6), shows a large television tower-antenna on the roof. Merlyn eventually removed the tower because it was unsightly and television disrupted the atmosphere tourists were seeking in such a remote location. A second example of Merlyn’s cultural fine tuning was in some design adjustments he planned to make on his recently completed “bungalows.” Merlyn explained that he receives frequent complements on the design and aesthetic appeal, but that he wanted to replace the plastic shower curtains with bamboo screens because they were the only part of the structures that, he was told, “didn’t look natural.” These things are minor faux pas, however, when considering the broader message that Merlyn conveys about his lodge and identity. A plastic shower curtain or television tower were never enough to call into question his commitment to environmentalist and ecotourism ideals.
German, on the other hand, has almost none of Merlyn’s invaluable cross-cultural intuitiveness, and thus has struggled to identify with the tourists on whose patronage he depends so greatly. While he was clearly aware that wildlife conservation and organic farming were important issues for the students in my group, he had difficulty fully engaging with them on those topics. Farm practices contradictory to his expressed environmental values undermined his credibility. German’s declarations of environmental concern, however, were not just empty rhetoric nor was he simply giving “lip service” to environmental ideals. Rather, German was genuine in his convictions, but unable to communicate them in a way that would resonate with the students. He valued conservation, but his understanding of and relationship with nature took a form unfamiliar to the students in my group: it was not based heavily on the ideal of a society/nature separation. German could appreciate wildlife, such as the snake he told me he had “rescued,” but not be disturbed by the very obvious social-nature that is Finca Tilapias.

A similar issue regarding the communication of values has been identified elsewhere. Schelhas and Pfeffer (2005), for example, conducted a study of forest values in rural communities in another region of Costa Rica. They assert that while many rural Costa Ricans express “genuine” conservation-oriented values, their commitment to acting on those values is “sometimes superficial and lacking motivating force” (Schelhas and Pfeffer 2005, 386). Their “genuine but superficial” characterization, however, perpetuates the perception that campesinos are uncommitted to conservation and, therefore, a “threat” to it. Instead, I would like to suggest that German is genuine in his convictions, but lacking the social capital necessary to counter the “destructive campesino” stereotype.
Making an Investment: What has the acquisition of social capital meant for German and Merlyn?

Social capital refers to a person’s ability to connect and relate to others in social situations and the benefits that can be derived from those relationships. Within the context of ecotourism on the Osa Peninsula, the acquisition of social capital is related to a person’s ability to effectively communicate to tourists an appreciation for nature and a desire to protect it. For the residents of Osa, especially entrepreneurs of ecotourism, success in communicating these ideals is directly linked to social status, as power is often derived from aligning one’s self with wealthy and influential North American (and also Costa Rican) individuals who and organizations which are concerned with the preservation of nature. In effect, a person’s receptivity to themes of nature preservation (and their ability to communicate it) is increasingly re-defining their position within Costa Rican society.

Merlyn, as a result of his success at negotiating a place within Costa Rica’s ecotourism society, has seen his social standing enhanced by the new realities of life on the Osa Peninsula. He now enjoys a prominent position both within his community and beyond. Locally, he is a leader who is looked to for advice and training; for instance he was recently elected President of ASEDER (Asociación de Emprendedores para el Desarrollo Responsable), a local responsible development organization. Internationally, he has been heralded by The Nature Conservancy as a model for “voluntary conservation” in a publication titled Conservación Voluntario en Costa Rica (Chacón 2006).

German, on the other hand, because of his limited ability to convince tourists and ecotourism activists of his authenticity, has not been able to realize the maximum potential of his tourism venture. As a result, German does not have access to influential circles or the political leverage
that Merlyn enjoys. Instead, he must struggle daily for legitimacy in order to make a living.

Once possessing a roughly equal social status as Merlyn (both being landed farmers in rural Costa Rica), German is now, arguably, in a relatively less influential position. Vivanco has shown that environmentalism is “an apparatus of power” that is “provoking social conflict and exacerbating existing inequalities” (Vivanco 2006, 9). We see here that it is also re-ordering social structures and power relationships and, thus, creating social inequity where it did not exist before.

This is not to say, however, that an economic system based on agriculture is somehow inherently more egalitarian than one based on ecotourism – indeed, countless examples of (perhaps more egregious) inequity and uneven development in Osa’s previous economic systems could be cited; the exploitation of workers and land by the United Fruit company is just one (Evan 1999, 36-37). Nor is it to say that ecotourism inevitably leads to inequity and should, therefore, be discredited. All economic activities have those who benefit more greatly than others; by virtue of an individual becoming empowered, others are necessarily by comparison disempowered. From this standpoint, classless society is unattainable, and accepting this shifts the focus away from questions of how to eliminate class, towards questions of how power is consolidated and for what purposes. The purpose of exposing ecotourism’s propensity to create social inequity is, then, not to discredit or disavow it, but rather to encourage a critical interrogation of it, so as to minimize unfair advantage and injustice.

Here I would like to make the case that ecotourism is especially conducive to diverting attention away from issues of social inequity and uneven development because of its concern with nature. As others have shown (Castree 2001, 8), nature is frequently invoked as an impartial metric against which moral judgments can be measured. This notion is rooted in the idea that society and nature are distinct and separate entities, where society is a symbol of destruction and impurity.
and nature a sign of perfection, beneficence, and redemption. From this viewpoint, issues of environmental preservation transcend issues of society, and thus, social justice can be determined by appealing to what is “natural.” Those who seek to protect and preserve nature, then, are seen to always stand on the moral high ground.

As others have shown, however, nature is never separate from society. Rather, the two “intertwine in ways that make their separation – in either thought or practice – impossible” (Castree 2001, 3). Nature is socially constructed and therefore inseparable from the value judgments and positioned viewpoints of society. Those with the power to define nature necessarily imbue it with culturally specific characteristics. Therefore, it cannot be appealed to as an impartial source of moral guidance.

What we have seen on the Osa Peninsula is that individuals such as Merlyn have successfully aligned themselves with the dominant discourses and perceptions of nature that have been defined by powerful, politically connected, and wealthy individuals and organizations. Merlyn is not as much carrying out a morally superior lifestyle by protecting nature as he is carrying out one that is more readily accepted by those who control the political arenas and wealth. In doing so, Merlyn has gradually elevated his social status to the ranks of the elite and, as a result, has experienced an enhanced ability to define nature, ecotourism, and the sorts of activities that are acceptable in each.

Merlyn, from his investment of social capital, has gained a seat at the negotiating table where questions of environmentalism and ecotourism are hashed out. He has, for example, been able to introduce activities at his lodge that push the boundaries of what might be acceptable within the frameworks of ecotourism; namely, he offers guided gold-panning excursions and a taxi service
up the riverbed to the entrance of Corcovado (both of which, an environmentalist might claim, have questionable ecological impacts). Having earned respect and credibility within ecotourism circles, however, Merlyn is able to incorporate these activities into his operation without discrediting it. In a way, he has gained the authority to re-define what actually constitutes ecotourism.

That authority, however, is of course limited. Radical or excessive departures from accepted frameworks of ecotourism would not be tolerated, resulting in displacement from his social position and failure of his business (it is not likely Merlyn would be able to, for example, promote poaching as an appropriate ecotourism activity). Merlyn’s elite status can, therefore, at most be considered probationary, and his authority to re-shape ecotourism always constrained. Merlyn also accepts much greater risk when participating in these negotiation processes (as compared to, for example, the director of The International Ecotourism Society) because his livelihood is on the line. Even as a relative elite in his local community, Merlyn must still struggle against uneven and unfair differentials of power on the global scale.

German, on the other hand, because he has not achieved acceptance as committed to environmental values, has an even more limited ability to re-define the meaning of nature and the activities of ecotourism. In fact, it is not clear that he has been successful in doing so at all. He cannot, as readily, make the case that any given activity be a component of ecotourism or an acceptable way of using nature because it would likely be met with skepticism in the way his fish ponds were by my group of students. As Vivanco points out however, the disadvantaged may sometimes be induced to take more drastic measures to re-assert control and demand justice when

---

24 Neither of these services is listed on the Danta Corcovado website (DCL 2008). Though this could be interpreted as an effort not to publicize such controversial activities, Merlyn assured me that their omission was not intentional.
the situation becomes so dire that they feel no alternative exists (2006, 184). Often in the past, rural Costa Ricans have used land invasions as a tool to push back against unfair treatment. On Osa, for example, campesinos “illegally” settled on land granted to the Osa Productos Forestales timber company to protest suspected bribery and the company’s nefarious administrative practices (Brandon and O’Herron 2004, 158-159). In another area, such a land dispute recently resulted in a shooting that injured 20 (Soto 2007).

Social Reconfiguration

Many aspects of Merlyn’s and German’s lives (the way they see and relate to nature, their livelihoods, and their social networks) have been greatly influenced by the new realities of life on the Peninsula. Once only at the periphery of their attention, nature conservation has become a prominent part of their lexicon and daily activities. For Merlyn especially, who has more fully adopted these idea(l)s, the forests have become spaces of intrigue and appreciation. Where his father once tilled the soil, Merlyn now sees a delicate ecosystem at risk of being damaged or destroyed, as his telling of the frog symphony indicated. Tourism has brought new meaning to the landscapes of Osa, and the behavior of the people that live there has adjust according their new beliefs.

From an environmentalist perspective, the temptation is to interpret the residents’ new vision and understanding as a conversion to a pre-established framework of environmentalist values and to celebrate this as the “accomplishment of several central ideals of ecotourism” (Vivanco 2001, 90). It is important to recognize, however, that this process is not complete – both in the sense of having come to an end and in the sense of having replaced all previous ways of knowing. Instead of resulting in the loss of meaning, the residents of Osa have developed new layers of meaning in their continual process of making sense of the new realities they encounter (Vivanco 2006, 6).
They have also altered their lifestyles and livelihoods because of tourism; some by choice to take advantage of a development opportunity, others grudgingly as certain other activities have become unacceptable under the new system, while still others have defied the forces of change by continuing activities (such as hunting) that are increasingly becoming taboo. While tourists can come and go, enjoying their “time away” in the “pristine” environments of Costa Rica, the residents live there permanently. They must live day-in and day-out with the nature that has been constructed there. While this “pristine” nature has brought economic opportunity for many, it has meant only greater restrictions on the lives of others and lifestyle compromises for all (in the requirement that they must maintain the illusion of a society/nature separation).

More subtle, but perhaps bearing the most dramatic consequences, is the effect ecotourism has had on the social networks of Osa. Residents of Osa, particularly those who have successfully implemented tourism ventures, have formed relationships with wealthy, politically connected, and influential people and organizations around the world. Merlyn, for example, because of his success, has been able to attain the position of President in an internationally funded responsible development organization, ASEDER. As I have shown, however, not all individuals have seen the same degree of success or accumulated as much social capital as Merlyn. In fact, many residents benefit very little from the opportunity ecotourism has brought to the region (Kent 2003, 188); for many reasons (including resistance to the concept of external nature, the desire to continue their current lifestyles, or a lack of necessary skills), they derive little economic or social capital from ecotourism. The reconfiguration of society on Osa has (re)stratified the social hierarchy, causing a level of disquiet and unrest yet to be fully realized. As time progresses and

---

25 It has been explained to me by several individuals that hunting (or “poaching” as it has been termed since Costa Rica’s environmental movement) is gradually losing its status as commonplace and acceptable activity, coming to be viewed by many Costa Ricans (even those who once partook in the activity) as something only the poorest families do.
the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” widens, conflict will, no doubt, increase and the situation will worsen.

It is clear that nature’s re-construction as “pristine” and separate from society has effects far greater than simple alterations in the meaning and form of an object. It has also re-made the social system that originally began the re-construction process. These cyclical interconnections between society and nature are denied and concealed when the two are considered in the conventional dichotomous fashion. To consider nature outside of society is to ignore society’s direct influence on it, and to consider society without regard for the nature it has created is to ignore the far-reaching effects nature’s meaning and form has on social relationships.

Ecotourism development cannot be reduced to a balancing of nature conservation policy with issues of social justice; indeed, such an approach would continue the treatment of the two as distinct and separate entities. Rather, from a social-nature perspective, it is a question of “who constructs what kinds of nature(s) to what ends and with what social and ecological effects” (Castree and Braun 2001, xi). To approach ecotourism from a social-nature perspective is not to place social justice before the conservation of nature, but rather to acknowledge (and work towards the reversal of) the fact that the most powerful stakeholders in the debate control the processes of nature’s construction, creating natures that benefit them – often without regard for the wider social and ecological effects they may be having.
Chapter IV: Conclusion

The Scarlet Macaw, Resplendent Quetzal, and other birds closely associated with ecotourism receive greater attention these days than do birds like the Clay-Colored Robin. This is emblematic of an ideological shift in the dominant perception of Costa Rican nature since the arrival of ecotourism. The industry idealizes nature as exotic, pristine, and wild. Spectacular birds like the Macaw and Quetzal communicate these ideals. The Robin, on the other hand, represents nature that has been worked by humans and transformed by society, and it conveys an image of nature that does not sit well with the messages of “pristine” nature promoted in ecotourism discourse. The decline in appreciation for and recognition of the Clay-Colored Robin is symbolic of a corresponding decline in the social status of many Costa Ricans, particularly rural Costa Ricans. In this thesis, I have explored how powerful individuals and organizations that control nature’s representation in Costa Rica have created unjust social and ecological conditions that have had far reaching effects in Costa Rican communities (including the re-construction of natural areas and the reconfiguration of social structures). I also showed how ecotourism is reconfiguring society and nature so as to privilege those who welcome an ideological separation between the two.

I sought answers to the following questions: how is nature, in both thought and practice, being re-constructed on the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica; who is in control of this process; and what does this mean for the residents of the region? I argued that nature on the Osa Peninsula is increasingly being re-made as an object external to society, that this is occurring largely through ecotourism development, and that the entire process is controlled by an elite minority that has access to social and economic capital. I also argued that the re-construction of nature on Osa is re-ordering social relationships and creating conflict where it did not exist before. My intention
has been to show that society and nature are intertwined in a mutually re-constructive process: society re-constructs nature at the same time that nature re-constructs society. In the pages that follow I will briefly review the major arguments I made to support these claims. Following that, I will discuss the implications of my research, and finally, I will conclude by making the case for why it matters.

**Theoretical Framework**

I began my inquiry with a review of relevant literature on the subject of tourism. Early scholars of tourism were highly concerned with the issue of authenticity in tourism activities. Much effort was devoted to discerning which cultural encounters in tourism could be considered “real” and which were simply staged performances. This distracted from many other more pressing questions regarding uneven development and social injustice in tourism development. Despite his concern with the issue of authenticity, one well-known scholar in the debate, MacCannell (1976), made an important contribution in framing the formation of tourism realities in the context of a social process (Urry 2002).

More recent scholars of tourism broke out of the authenticity debate by taking a somewhat agnostic position on the issue of “truth” and “reality.” John Urry (2002) was one of the first to depart from the authenticity debate. He offered a refined theoretical argument concerning the social production of tourism “site/sights,” primarily through the structured social relationships of economic activity. Bruce Braun (2002) supplemented Urry’s approach by incorporating the geographical theory of social-nature into tourism study and utilizing a post-structuralist approach that focused on discursive social relationships. Braun’s motivation for incorporating these ideas into discussions of tourism is to redirect attention to issues of power and struggles for control. This is similar to that of Luis Vivanco (2006; 2003; 2001), who has offered one of the most
sophisticated commentaries in the study of tourism. Vivanco brings a much-needed critical perspective to the subject, focusing specifically on ecotourism and environmentalism in Monte Verde, Costa Rica. He is concerned with the changes in people’s lives caused by ecotourism development and the politics of nature conservation. Like Braun, Vivanco highlights the role that uneven power relations play in the formation of social (in)justice. Vivanco’s argument, however, could be strengthened by engaging with the theories utilized by Braun (2002) (i.e. the concept of social-nature and the recent geographical tradition of interrogating nature’s privileged position as an external source of moral guidance).

I identified this as the area where my research would be focused; I would utilize the rich theoretical framework of social-nature to interrogate ecotourism and the presumption of a nature external to society on which it is based. Like Vivanco and Braun, the concern would be with how uneven power relationships led to uneven control of ecotourism development. The first step in doing this was to review the literature relevant to the study of social-nature.

I began with a critical analysis of Marxist and neo-Marxist contributions to the subject. While Marx himself never formulated a clearly articulated argument on nature, those who came after him (particularly Alfred Schmidt and Neil Smith) elaborated his “scattered reflections” on the topic and offered the first theoretical formulations of nature’s production under society (Castree and Braun 1998, 7). This framed the processes of re-making nature in terms of class struggle and social justice and showed how uneven power relationships “systematically generat[ed] patterns of geographically uneven development” (Castree and Braun 1998, 9). The production of nature thesis, however, tends to privilege the role of structured social relationships, particularly those mediated by capitalist economies, at the expense of understanding the role of unstructured social relationships. Escobar (1996), for example, encourages the exploration of questions regarding
“how discursive relations – and not just market relations – organize social and ecological change” (Castree and Braun 1998, 16). From this constructivist perspective, it is argued that language organizes knowledge of the world and that these “knowledges have material effects, insofar as people may believe and act according to them” (Castree 2001, 13).

There are several implications of understanding nature from this perspective. First of all, meaning is created rather than discovered, so constructivists often seek to show how humans create objects through discursive representation instead of trying to identify the “true” characteristics of a pre-discursive reality. Secondly, an emphasis is placed on historical context and particularity, as knowledge is believed to always be “situated” in specific contexts (Castree and Braun 1998). And third, what is taken to be “normal” or “natural” is challenged, drawing attention to the processes that conceal alternative perspectives, exposing the operation of power, and widening “what is taken to be the domain of politics” (Castree and Braun 1998, 19). I devoted considerable time explaining how the social construction of nature works and how proponents have defended it because of the attacks that have been leveled on it by critics. Radical forms of constructivism, those that are caricatured by the critics, are rejected just as strongly by most proponents of social-nature. Castree, for example, explains that society is constrained in its ability to construct nature, for nature is not “a tabula rasa [clean slate] on which societies can write at will” (2001, 17). Finally, I explained that, taken alone, these theoretical concepts are abstract and border on irrelevancy without connections to “real world events” (Castree 2001, 18). Applied to the study of tourism, however, strengthens not only the discussion of the activity, but also the theory itself.
Historical Review

After providing an explanation of the theoretical framework, I presented a brief, process-oriented historical account of Costa Rica. I explained that much of the writing on Costa Rica provided only short outcome-oriented historical backgrounds and that this allowed many assumptions about the country, its society, and the nature it contains to go unexamined. Much of the scholarly work on Costa Rica gives the reader the impression that the country is defined by its extremely high level of biodiversity, expansive system of protected lands, political stability, and peaceful history with little or no explanation of the complex conditions that gave rise to that situation (Honey 1999; Boo 1990; McLaren 2003, 119; Fennell and Eagles 1990). Most accounts of Costa Rica’s history also approach the topic as if the country’s social and environmental histories are discrete, albeit related, topics, providing either a detailed ecological history (Evans 1999) or a detailed social history (Wilson 1998; Booth 1998), but rarely bringing them together to show how each contributed to the construction of the other. My account, on the other hand, showed that the two were intertwined at all points throughout Costa Rica’s history.

Before Costa Rica’s ecological stardom, interconnections between society and nature are obvious and abundant, though many historical accounts (including Evans 1999) conceal or underplay their extent. I showed that the period of Costa Rica’s history prior to European contact is often characterized as having had almost no impact on the natural environments. Social-natures were produced during the indigenous period through, for example, farming practices and resource (over-)exploitation, in the period of Spanish colonization through settlement patterns, in the early independence period through agricultural expansion, and most recently through ecotourism development (as well as continued agricultural production). By the 1970s and 80s foreign scientists and conservationists had become deeply disturbed by the increasing rate of landscape
conversion, and they took action to reverse the trend. With the help of a few prominent local figures, they began a new period in Costa Rica’s history.

From the mid-1970s onward, Costa Rica’s reputation was transformed by efforts to protect and preserve the country’s last remaining “pristine” landscapes. While scholars usually interpret this as an effort to keep society separate from the last few vestiges of untouched nature, I showed that these areas, too, were socially constructed; they were defined and established through processes of social negotiation and struggle and, therefore, are directly connected to society. Costa Rica’s famed ecotourism industry was built on this illusion of a society/nature separation, however, and has had far-reaching social and ecological consequences within the country – a central topic addressed in this thesis. Despite the way some have characterized it (e.g. Honey 1999, 132), Costa Rica’s famed ecotourism industry and environmental reputation were not the product of universal support at the national level and its renowned environmental ethic was not held by every Costa Rican person. Instead, the historical relationships with the natural landscapes were much more complex and always rooted in issues of social justice and equity.

Social-Nature on the Osa Peninsula

In the third chapter I presented a study of social-nature on the Osa Peninsula of Costa Rica. The study focused on the social and ecological changes being brought about by the introduction and expansion of ecotourism in the region. My goal was to show how, contrary to the conception advanced in ecotourism discourse, society and nature are linked in a mutually re-constructive relationship – society constructs nature at the same time nature constructs society. I showed how an economic shift from agriculture to ecotourism is producing and discursive relationships of that activity are constructing new natures in Costa Rica – always through relationships of uneven power. This discussion provided answers to the first two research questions of this thesis: how is
nature being re-constructed on the Osa Peninsula, and who is in control of that process? The
discussion was then reversed to examine how the newly constructed natures of the Osa Peninsula
were re-configuring social relationships, re-ordering social structures, and creating inequity.
Specifically, the situations of two individuals who have had differing degrees of success
negotiating their places in the new social order on the Osa Peninsula were discussed. This
provided answers to the third research question: what does the newly constructed form of nature
on the Osa Peninsula mean for its residents?

I followed the lead of Luis Vivanco who has conducted extensive critical research on ecotourism
and environmentalism in another region of Costa Rica. Like Vivanco (2006; 2001), my approach
was interpretive and based primarily on participant observation. The purpose was not to make
universal claims about Costa Rica’s experience with tourism, but rather to explore specific
“emblematic encounters” with select individuals (Vivanco 2006, 17), shifting attention towards
the processes through which Costa Rican society and nature are constructed and away from
descriptions of essential characteristics.

In the first section of chapter three, I showed how society has shaped nature’s meaning and form
in Costa Rica; first through the structured relationships of tourism economies, and second through
unstructured relationships of discursive representation. In the Marxist sense, Costa Rica’s
economic transition from agriculture to tourism transformed society’s relationship with nature,
causing new forms of nature to be produced. Beyond issues of conservation, however, this
economic transformation is troubling. The mechanisms of production are controlled by certain
elite groups (including scholars, activist organizations, and government) to which few Costa
Ricans, especially rural Costa Ricans, have access. While ecotourism in Costa Rica has tended to
be presented as an essentially benign innovation in which everybody wins, development of it usually means the loss of rights and opportunity for certain segments of the population.

The production of nature under ecotourism is far-reaching and has had a dramatic effect on the ecological situation in Costa Rica, but nature’s transformation under society also takes place through unstructured social relationships. Ecotourism also brought new ways of thinking about and understanding nature to Costa Rica through discursive representation of idealized sights/sites. I showed that nature was represented as exotic, pristine, wild, separate from society, and in many other ways that are appealing to potential tourists. Examples included a poster produced by the Costa Rican Institute of Tourism, several travel brochures produced by private travel companies, several guidebooks to Costa Rica, a vacation provider’s website, an online review forum, and a personal weblog. Despite the diversity of these sources, the same general themes and messages about nature ran throughout. These idealized images settle in the minds of prospective tourists and create detailed imaginative geographies, as was demonstrated in an analysis of the students whose visit to Costa Rica I helped coordinate. I showed that these fantasies, however, were not merely hopeful possibilities for tourists, but rather that they became expectations on which the Costa Rican hosts were expected to deliver. For many reasons (including the desire for business success, to align themselves with the ideals of the powerful and politically connected, to increase social status, and because of adopted ideology), Costa Ricans involved in the tourism industry did their best to provide the experience tourists wanted, re-constructing nature to fit the dominant image conveyed in discourse, even when it required significant adjustments to domestic life.

It is not enough, however, to simply observe and describe how these processes are taking place. It is important to be critical about the implications of nature being re-constructed in this way. Ecotourism is based on viewing nature that appears to be separate from and untouched by society.
For it to be successful, local residents must conceal and deny nature’s social construction and any sign that humans have manipulated it. Many Costa Ricans accept this as the cost of doing business in ecotourism, but the injustice is that many others never wanted ecotourism and never agreed to compromise their lifestyles. Campesinos, for example, were once highly respected figures in Costa Rican society, but since the arrival of ecotourism, they have seen their social standing decline because farming creates very obvious social-natures. This decline has gone as far as campesinos coming to be considered “destroyers of nature” and a great “threat” to conservation (Vivanco 2003, 67). Though these perceptions are typically held by foreign parties, as more and more Costa Ricans become reliant on ecotourism, they will likely gain traction in domestic circles. While ecotourism has been beneficial for those willing to accept and able to adjust to its associated forms of nature, it has disrupted the lives of many others, causing social reconfiguration, upheaval, and conflict.

Next, I showed how two individuals from the Osa Peninsula, Merlyn Oviedo and German Quirós, were dealing with the re-production and re-construction of nature due to ecotourism development. The purpose of this was to further show the interconnections between society and nature by looking at how Costa Rica’s new nature was reconfiguring social relationships and structures. Merlyn and German have had differing degrees of success with their respective tourism ventures. German has struggled to gain acceptance of his farm and restaurant within the mainstream conceptions of ecotourism. The student-tourists I discussed, for example, viewed German’s Finca Tilapias with a level of skepticism and caused a degree of discomfort with the activities that take place on it, especially with regard to the fish ponds. The connections between society and nature on German’s farm were too obvious for the students to accept German as being involved in “true” ecotourism. Merlyn, on the other hand, has had no such problem. The same group of students that were unsettled by Finca Tilapias had a very positive reaction Merlyn and his Danta
Corcovado Lodge. Merlyn is particularly skilled at conveying his appreciation for nature, and his guests are generally more accepting of the social-natures he has constructed because they mostly take the form of re-forested landscapes. The differing degrees to which Merlyn and German were successful in providing tourists with the experiences they sought was the result of their different skill sets and their unequal possession of social and economic capital. Merlyn had many skills and assets that German did not. His obvious advantages included a higher degree of education, command of the English language, specialized training in tourism development, accumulated capital, and physical health. Significantly, Merlyn had also spent time living in the United States and was, therefore, more familiar with the subtleties of American cultural values. These skills and assets were what Merlyn needed to be successful, and German’s relative lack of them was why he struggled to reap the same benefits.

Before the arrival of ecotourism, Merlyn and German had a relatively similar standing within their community; both were from campesino families, both grew up on farms in the same region, and both were landowners. Even if Merlyn had obtained a higher degree of education and training it would not have meant rapid upward progress within a society based on small-scale farming. Since tourism, however, the social situation on Osa has been reconfigured and Merlyn’s skill set has suddenly become of great value. This re-valuation of social capital in Costa Rica caused an upheaval in the social structures of the Osa community. Individuals like Merlyn found themselves in positions of relative influence, whereas individuals like German found that they were falling behind. Merlyn, for example, now enjoys a prominent position both within his community and beyond. Locally, he is a leader who is looked to for advice and training; for instance he was recently elected President of ASEDER (Asociación de

---

26 I do not intend to imply that small-scale agriculture is somehow inherently egalitarian or that the lifestyle levels the playing field (indeed, the historical record has shown a large degree of inequity in past agricultural systems). I am arguing only that Merlyn and German, specifically, would have been on relatively equal footing.
Emprendedores para el Desarrollo Responsable), a local responsible development organization. Internationally, he has been heralded by The Nature Conservancy as a model for “voluntary conservation” in a publication titled Conservación Voluntario en Costa Rica (Chacón 2006). German, on the other hand, does not have access to influential circles or the political leverage that Merlyn enjoys. This reconfiguration of society on Osa has (re)stratified the social hierarchy, causing a level of disquiet and unrest yet to be fully realized. As time progresses and the gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” widens, conflict will, no doubt, increase and the situation will worsen.

**Implications and Conclusions**

In this thesis, I have argued that the nature’s re-construction as “pristine” and separate from society has had implications reaching beyond simple alterations in the meaning and form of objects. The re-construction of Costa Rican nature has also meant the re-making of the social systems and relationships that initiated the entire process. I showed that these cyclical interconnections between society and nature are inevitable and that, despite conventional representations, the two cannot be disassociated. Most importantly, I showed that the processes through which Costa Rican social-natures are constructed are steeped in uneven power relationships and, therefore, often result in unjust outcomes. Specifically, wealthy and influential individuals and organizations (including scholars, activist organizations, and government) have worked to construct a form of nature in Costa Rica that appealed to their interests, providing little or no consideration for the will of local communities. This has reconfigured Costa Rican society so as to privilege those who welcome its ideological separation from nature, the consequences of which are yet to be fully actualized.
Understanding ecotourism from the perspective of social-nature has several implications. While there has been no attempt in this study to formulate generalized claims about ecotourism (in that it has been limited to ecotourism in a particular context, in a particular place, in a particular country, at a particular time, with particular people, and, of course, carried out by a particular researcher), some important lessons can be drawn from it and used to frame studies of other particular cases. Conventional approaches to the study of ecotourism are based on a fundamental separation between society and nature and, therefore, do not recognize many of the unjust conditions identified in this thesis; ecotourism development can be understood to operate on society as well as nature, but always on each independently. This means that the root cause of injustice is concealed and responsibility can be denied. Approached from a social-nature perspective, on the other hand, the unfair social conditions that arise from the construction of “pristine” nature are undeniable and must be confronted. This, I argue, is why a social-nature approach is required in order to properly achieve one of ecotourism’s most fundamental principles (as expressed by The International Ecotourism Society; TIES 1990, par1-2): sensitivity towards the host culture and improvement of local people’s well-being. Acceptance of social-nature will aid in the achievement of this principle by redirecting scholarly attention to questions such as what social-natures ought to be constructed, for what reasons, and to what social and ecological ends.

Social-nature means that ecotourism ventures cannot be evaluated on the basis of how successfully they have achieved or implemented a pre-established framework for acceptable activities. The criteria for success is no longer how well they have “reduced their impact” on nature, but rather how the forms of nature they construct affect the communities and social systems in which they operate. It becomes less a question of devotion to ideology and more one of responsibility to local community. It also means a broader definition of what activities
constitute ecotourism and reduces the power of outside agents to control what local communities can and cannot do.

The use of a social-nature approach certainly does not mean nature conservation is inherently detrimental to society, nor does it mean that all forms of nature are valued equally so resource exploitation can/should take place in whatever fashion society sees fit regardless of the ecological results. It simply means that all questions concerning those topics must consider the societal implications of the type of nature to be constructed. In certain very real ways, conservation of nature means healthy and stable communities and is, therefore, essential for the achievement of social justice. This cannot be denied, just as it also cannot be denied that the preservation of nature is not simply an innocent activity to protect what is pure and unspoiled. In the case of ecotourism in Costa Rica, it must be acknowledged that Costa Rica’s economic transition from agriculture to tourism has not been a progression towards an enlightened new order, but rather that it has been a mixture of benefits and problems. While exploitative industries such as banana production have declined, social injustice has continued in the activities that have replaced them. A negligence to consider such issues is shared by exploitative agriculture and environmental activism. Despite the expressed concern for issues of cultural sensitivity within the principles of ecotourism, development and implementation of the industry has yet to effectively confront the injustices it causes because they are concealed by the society/nature dichotomy on which it is based.

More broadly, this thesis has been concerned with nature as a vehicle through which power operates. Nature, because it is constructed within the context of cultural values and social struggle, is not simply an innocent object separate from society and disconnected from human interests. Nature is imbued with meaning specific to the individuals and organizations that
defined it and, therefore, cannot be separated from that cultural point of view. Certain conceptions of nature, however, deny these connections, making it a powerful entity that can be invoked to ground claims in supposed impartial terrain. By appealing to what is “natural,” it is possible to mask that there are societal interests attached to whatever claim is being made. Nature is an apparatus of power that is utilized to disembody arguments and disguise political agendas. The authority of claims based on appeals to nature, however, is removed in the framework of social-nature.

This thesis has shown that socio-natural theory is an effective means of interrogating ecotourism’s status as a universally beneficial development activity. It demonstrates that the conception of external nature on which ecotourism is currently based causes certain issues of social justice and equity to go unaddressed in conventional evaluations of the industry. The framework of social-nature that this thesis promotes, on the other hand, can be used to rethink ecotourism and the effect it has on local communities. From this perspective, ecotourism development is not simply about providing economic incentive for nature conservation, it is also about the social conditions that result from new ways of understanding and using nature. Social-nature opens up unexamined issues of inequity and uneven development in nature conservation for discussion. This forces consideration of social justice issues and strengthens ecotourism by helping to achieve its core principle of concern for local well-being. In a period when ecotourism is rapidly expanding around the world, the importance of exposing its tendency to not only perpetuate and exacerbate but also create social injustice has never been greater. In order for ecotourism to truly confront the social inequity it perpetuates, it is essential that it be approached from the framework of social-nature.
Works Cited

Primary Documents:


Secondary Documents:


