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Ecotopia's Prism

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ECOTOPIA'S PRISM

Written by Troy D. Abel

"Costa Rica. Rich coast." A name that derives from the great expectations of conquistadors and colonizers who thought this land would be teeming with gold. Columbus set eyes on a Caribbean coastline in 1502 that stretched for 132 miles (212 km). In letters a year after his travels, Columbus had this recollection. "I arrived in the land of Cariay, where I stopped to mend and provision the ships, and to give some rest to the crew members who were



Photo credit Abel Brothers 2010

quite ill . . . There I heard tales of the gold mines that I was searching for in the province of Ciamba" (July of 1503, quoted in Molina and Palmer 2007, 23). To the west of where Columbus first anchored, nearly 20,000 square miles of land undulates through 23 different ecozones (Holdridge, 1967). Framed on the other three sides by

a 192 mile northern border with Nicaragua, a 397 mile border with Panama, and 800 miles of Pacific coast on the western side, many later recognized that Costa Rica's riches were more green than gold.

Countless observers have documented Costa Rica's natural exceptionalism. An unknown observer in Richard Villafranca (1895) called it the gem of American republics. "A naturalist's paradise" proclaimed Alexander Skutch. One coffee table book labeled Costa Rica *The Last Country the Gods Made* (Colesberry et al. 1993). It was one of *The Living Edens* featured in a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) television series. An environmental historian labeled it The Green Republic (Evans, 1999). Others would proclaim that Costa Rica was the Switzerland of Central America. In a more infamous reference, conservative radio voice Rush Limbaugh exclaimed that he would go to Costa Rica if the 2010 health care reform legislation passed. Ironically, he would have found a nation with universal health care, a longer life expectancy than the U.S., and a larger share of land protected from development.

One New York Times journalist would celebrate Costa Rica's ban on oil drilling (Friedman, 2009), while another its seven decades without an army (Kristof, 2010). *"Maybe Costa Rican contentment has something to do with the chance to explore dazzling beaches on both sides of the country, when one isn't admiring the sloths in the jungle . . . Costa Rica has done an unusually good job preserving nature, and it's surely easier to be happy while basking in sunshine and greenery than while shivering up north and suffering 'nature deficit disorder'."* The nation's former



Ecotopia's Prism cont'd

Minister of Natural Resources, Alvaro Urmana (quoted in Honey 2008, 169), called his home “a biological superpower.” The accolades could be continued, but surprisingly few have associated Costa Rica with one of the most provocative environmental images: Ecotopia.

Wandering around my college bookstore in 1986, I saw Ecotopia for the first time. I was a wide-eyed freshman buying my first college books. None of them were about Costa Rica. I grabbed calculus, geology, and ecology; books representing the accumulated knowledge of scientific disciplines. But for English 101, the required book was titled *Ecotopia Emerging*. This wasn't going to be your typical freshman text. Ernest Callenbach's second novel was published in 1981 and served as a prequel for his 1975 book, *Ecotopia*. Inside each, I would find the fictional stories of a new nation forming when parts of northern California, Oregon, and Washington seceded from the United States to form a more environmentally friendly nation.

I now call this region home in Bellingham, Washington. The northwest of the northwest. I can see Canada to the north, the Puget Sound to the west, and in the right spots around town, the snowcapped Mount Baker to the east, The Olympic mountains are seen to the south, as is the majestic and often ghostly peak of Mount Rainer. This and the other parts of the North America's temperate rainforest zone are also imagined as the Cascadia bioregion. Or, as Joel Garreau (1981) would provocatively

argue, a geography whose features draw more attachment from its residents than their state or nation. He too would call the Pacific Northwest 'Ecotopia'. But Callenbach's imaginative and provocative nation never materialized in the northwest. The idea of Ecotopia, however, remains an inspirational image for many people and their places.

Callenbach's books, according to one journalist (Timberg, 2008), “. . . speaks to our ecological present: in the flush of a financial crisis, the Pacific Northwest secedes from the United States, and its citizens establish a sustainable economy, a cross between Scandinavian socialism and northern Californian back-to-the-landism, with the custom—years before the environmental writer began his campaign—to eat local.”

The following stories are not about the American Northwest. Nor will they be utopian. In several aspects, Costa Rica comes closer to Ecotopia than most regions. However, it falls short for other reasons. Our research explores these promises and pitfalls and we hope they inform and even inspire your own thinking about sustainability.





The Greenest Republic

Since 2003, I've taken more than 150 students of environmental studies to explore the landscapes, culture and economy of Costa Rica. Costa Rica's tourism bureau proudly proclaims "no artificial ingredients" to draw visitors from around the world. Situated at the confluence of two oceans and bridging two continents in the tropical latitudes, this small nation hosts some of the greatest concentration of biodiversity anywhere. Costa Rica is about the size of West Virginia, or 0.03% of the world's surface, yet it holds an estimated 5 percent of the world's biodiversity. Species from North and South America mixed on this continental land bridge for over millennia leading to new combinations of flora and fauna.

In the south central spine of the nation's Talamanca mountains, the highest peak of Chirripo reaches over 12,000 feet capped by Costa Rica's rarest life zone—an alpine paramo. To the east, an alluvial plain spreads into the Caribbean and north to the Nicaraguan border. On the Pacific side, the geography varies more with clusters of mountains criss-crossing the landscape to create numerous valleys. A second and distinct volcanic range rises up again north of the central valley. This undulating terrain and climate creates the variations of elevation, temperatures, and rainfall that form differentiated cauldrons where the alchemy of speciation led to new life forms. Over 87,000 have been identified and scientists expect they might discover a half million species across Costa Rica (Zamora and Obando, 2001). You can't really understand biodiversity in climax until you are immersed in a tropical rainforest.

This book is not just about tropical ecology however. We have offered a broader study of the environment annually for five seasons. Our expeditions monitor rare Scarlet Macaws, study deforestation from satellite images and explore botany, but they also take action to conserve



Howler Monkey. Photo credit Troy D. Abel

the rainforests by building trails and volunteering in the communities outside Costa Rica's conservation areas. We learn about globalization and how economic forces can help and harm this nation in studying the tension between profits and people. The essays that follow are not about a fictional nor a utopian experience however.

Like my course and students, however, the stories in here wrestle with these complicated webs of economy, ecology, and equity that will make or break Costa Rica's achievement of sustainability. Such strategies now join a whole range of environmental policies that contrast with the centralized, command-and-control style of environmental policy developed during the seventies and eighties. The history of top-down natural resource management is rapidly eroding as "fortress and fence" approaches gave way to sustainability initiatives in the nineties and two-thousands.

Costa Rica faces many challenges. Writing in the journal *Conservation Biology*, (Boza et al. 1995) would assert that: "Costa Rica Is a Laboratory, Not Ecotopia." In an assessment of the nation's conservation areas, Powell, Barborak, and Rodriguez (2000) found 11 ecozones of Costa Rica's 23 underrepresented in protected areas. They warned that a significant amount of the country's biodiversity was therefore at risk because it lay outside of conservation zones. Others also discovered that while little deforestation occurred within Costa Rica's parks, it was widespread just outside protected areas in a 10 km buffer (Sanchez-Azofeifa et al., 2003).



Costa Rica might be better understood as a terrestrial green archipelago; a chain of natural islands increasingly isolated from one another by the encroachment of agriculture, roads, and settlements. Moreover, this isolation undermines the functional conditions of the ecosystems that support the

wildlife which draws so many visitors to this tiny nation. We hope to bring you insight and inspiration from our experiences and research from this place I find closer to Ecotopia than any other place I've known.



Rio Tarcoles. Photo credit Troy D. Abel