Missing the Forest for the Trees?: Incongruous Local Perspectives on Ecotourism in Nicaragua Converge on Ethical Issues

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Recent writings on ethics in tourism do little to represent local hosts’ perceptions of the ethical nature of tourism and instead focus primarily on the role of industry and tour operators. In this paper, we bring local perceptions to the fore in comparing the ideal and the real in ecotourism. Using ethnographic observations and interviews, we describe how local residents near an ecotourism lodge along the Pacific Coast of Nicaragua first perceive and assess the ideals and sustainability of ecotourism in locally-grounded, realistic ways, often taking into account the broader social, economic, and environmental context of Nicaragua. Though people tend to be highly critical of the operation, they also acknowledge many relative merits of the ecotourism project’s work. We then focus on narratives related to the ethical performance of this project. Here, people were less generous in their remarks and found little about the ecotourism project to support. This analysis demonstrates how failing to capture critical local evaluations of ethical aspects of project performance allows greenwashing abuses to persist unchecked and, thereby, nullifies those elements which distinguish ecotourism from other forms of tourism. Future research and certification efforts must make a greater effort to assess local perceptions of ethical performance.

Key words: ecotourism, ethnography, sustainability, conservation, Nicaragua, ethics

Introduction

For more than two decades, ecotourism has been a global and collective experiment in sustainable development. Since publication of Our Common Future (Brundtland 1987), development agencies, foundations, and environmental organizations have promoted ecotourism as a potential strategy for conserving biodiversity while also meeting the needs of people. The United Nations declared 2002 the “International Year of Ecotourism,” and in 2003, over 160 nations attending the World Parks Congress endorsed ecotourism as an appropriate vehicle for supporting biodiversity in all protected areas. In the realm of commerce, ecotourism is the fastest growing sector in tourism, the world’s largest industry (UNWTO 2007).

With many researchers seeking to evaluate results of the experiment in sustainability, scholarly attention to ecotourism has likewise increased. Evidence for this is indicated by Social Science Citation Index searches for ecotourism in each of the previous three decades (1980-1989; 1990-1999; 2000-2009) which reveal 1, 108, and 300 studies produced in these respective time periods (and 139, 7,190, and 16,000, respectively, for similar timeframes in Google Scholar). In their excellent review of ecotourism scholarship over the past 20 years, Weaver and Lawton (2007) characterize this body of literature as having three primary foci: market segmentation, ecological impacts of wildlife viewing, and community-based ecotourism.

The growing scholarship on ecotourism is replete with competing and conflicting ideas on the merits of ecotourism for conservation and development (Higham 2007). On-the-ground examinations of ecotourism tend to reveal a gap between the principled, scholarly idealizations of what ecotourism should be and the pragmatics of what it ultimately becomes (Medina 2005; Ross and Wall 1999). This gap raises both empirical and philosophical questions, which many scholars have pursued. Is ecotourism a true alternative to conventional tourism (Cater and Lowman 1994; Kontogeorgopoulos 2004; Weaver 2001)?

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Does it have the power to change how the tourism industry affects the communities and environments of destinations, or is it simply an old idea repackaged in green (Cater 2006)? Can ecotourism reliably serve the development needs of local communities while also protecting the environment (Durham 2008; Stonich 2000)? What are the empirical benefits and costs of ecotourism (Kiss 2004), and how do they change over time (Stronza 2010)? How and by whose criteria should we measure and monitor impacts (Mathieson and Wall 1987)?

At the heart of these questions lies a concern for discerning greeningwashing, or the practice of falsely claiming to be sustainable (Honey 2008), from genuine efforts to use tourism as a tool for conservation and development. This divide is reflected in the gap between the practice and theory of ecotourism. On one end, projects have provided outcomes consistent with what ecotourism is theoretically promoted to achieve, such as income and employment opportunities (Campbell 1999; Langholz 1999; Stronza 2007), an improved environmental ethic (Stronza and Pegas 2008; Wunder 2000), and an enhanced sense of well-being (Scheyvens 1999; Stronza and Gordillo 2008). On the other end of the spectrum, operators and promoters may comply with accepted standards only to the extent necessary to maintain the consentment of tourists during visits or use eco-rhetoric to carry ecotourism to broader markets. Such hijacked versions of ecotourism stray substantially from the International Ecotourism Society’s definition as “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people” (TIES 1990).

Though it may be a simple task to characterize projects lying at one end or the other of a spectrum between responsible ecotourism and greeningwashing, most projects will likely fall into gray areas between these two extremes. Such a broad range of outcomes has led to a suggestion that “two ecotourisms” exist (Wight 1993); however, it is likely that the use of different evaluation criteria can result in a given project being characterized in multiple ways. This reality is further complicated by significant variation in meanings of terms like participation, community, benefits, and ecotourism, which depend on who is being asked (Medina 2005; Stronza and Gordillo 2008) and the level at which they are analyzed (Hunt and Stronza 2009).

Greenwashing is inextricably linked to the issue of ethics. Increasingly, scholars are calling attention to tourism’s ethical aspects (Fennell 2006; Wight 2007). Despite the concern for a more ethical implementation of tourism, Fennell (2001) has shown that 80 percent of the definitions of ecotourism do not even address ethical considerations. The recent writings on ethics in tourism do little to represent local hosts’ perceptions of the ethical nature of tourism and instead focus primarily on the role of industry and tour operators (Fennell 2006; Fennell and Malloy 2007; Fleckenstein and Huebsch 1999; Malloy and Fennell 1998; Smith and Duffy 2003). Mechanisms proposed to deal with these aspects include ethical frameworks (Fennell and Malloy 1995, 1999), codes of ethics (Malloy and Fennell 1998, Fennell and Malloy 2007), codes of conduct (Genot 1995), corporate social responsibility programs (Wight 2007), and the certification programs (Font and Harris 2004; Honey 2002; Honey and Rome 2001). Yet often these programs are created and implemented by dominant corporate interests that subordinate environmental interests to concern for profit (Sasidharan and Font 2001).

In this paper, we bring local perceptions to the fore in comparing the ideal and the real in ecotourism in order to contribute a much needed local host perspective of ethics in tourism. How are local peoples involved in such development, if at all? What do people perceive as benefits and costs of such development? Do their perspectives match or collide with broader and idealistic discourses on ecotourism? We shed light on the gray area between Wight’s (1993) two ecotourisms by comparing the theoretical notions of ecotourism promoted by international actors (i.e., scholars, consultants, marketers, and NGOs) and the views of locals who experience the practice of ecotourism firsthand (Zeppell 2007).

Using ethnographic observations and interviews, we describe how local residents near Morgan’s Rock Hacienda and Ecolodge along the Pacific Coast of Nicaragua perceive and assess the ideals and sustainability of ecotourism in locally grounded, realistic ways, often taking into account the broader social, economic, and environmental context of Nicaragua. Though people tend to be highly critical of the operation, they also acknowledge certain favorable outcomes. We then focus on specific comments related to the ethical performance of this project. Here, people were less generous in their remarks and found little about Morgan’s Rock to support. We will argue how such comments about ethics provide a key marker for distinguishing responsible ecotourism from its greenwashed counterpart and are thus essential for enhancing the sustainability of tourism as well as the effectiveness of sustainable tourism certification programs.

Study Methods

This paper is based on six months of ethnographic research in the Department of Rivas, Nicaragua, located along the country’s southwestern coast. Morgan’s Rock was chosen as the focus of our study on local perceptions of ecotourism—the ideal and the real—for several reasons. First, it gave the primary author an opportunity to build on previous experience and knowledge of in-country tourism acquired during work on an ecotourism project and organic coffee farm in another region of Nicaragua. Second, the operation is self-described as “a project of nature conservation, community development, and reforestation offering Agro- and Ecotourism at its best” (Morgan’s Rock 2009) and was the only project garnering extensive praise in travel magazines, websites including Trip Advisor, and other popular media at the time of the fieldwork.

Third, the owners modeled themselves after the acclaimed Lapa Rios Ecolodge in Costa Rica, with initial operations supported by Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality. Furthermore, their promotional materials also included convincing and elaborate descriptions of social and environmental accomplishments. Lastly, the study region in Rivas, Nicaragua lies just north of
the Costa Rican border and is the current nexus of tourism development in the country. As goes Rivas, and the municipality of San Juan del Sur more specifically, so goes much of Nicaragua’s Pacific Coast. The location is breathtaking, the facilities stunningly designed, and the service quite impeccable. From the initial visits to the “front of house,” all praise appeared well-deserved.

We gathered local views of Morgan’s Rock through structured and semi-structured interviews, participant observation, informal discussions, and site visits to tourism projects around the San Juan del Sur area. We also culled secondary data from the National Institute of Tourism (INTUR), the National Institute of Development Information (INIDE), the National Institute of the Census and Statistics, the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARENA), the World Bank, USAID, NGO documents, and previous research (Babb 2004; Barany et al. 2001; Ham and Whipple 1998; Hernández and Schwartz 1998; Weaver, Lombardo, and Martínez Sánchez 2003). Between January and June of 2008, the first author lived in San Juan del Sur. In February and March, under full research disclosure he was granted permission to stay in Morgan’s Rock Hacienda and Ecolodge employee dormitories by the lodge administrator in exchange for assistance with English instruction for the staff. This allowed total access to hotel staff, several work areas (reception, guiding, restaurant wait/bar/kitchen, gardening, maintenance, cleaning, security, driving), and tourist activities (dry tropical forest and riverbed walks, artisanal fishing, estuary kayaking, night walks, and excursions to Volcano Mombacho and the Islas de Granada). This work also entailed recording basic demographic information from 45 individuals employed at the hotel at the time.

To accompany the participant observation data, the primary author conducted structured interviews with 60 individuals. These included 20 employees indirectly involved in ecotourism at Morgan’s Rock Hacienda at the pre-existing farm and tree plantation (la finca), 20 employees directly involved in ecotourism at Morgan’s Rock Ecolodge (hotel), and the 20 heads of rural households residing adjacent to the Morgan’s Rock property. Finca and Hotel employees were purposively sampled to cover the range of occupations represented at Morgan’s Rock. For the hotel, these included maintenance, cleaning, gardening, cooks, waiters/bar tenders, and drivers; and for the finca, mache teros (unskilled laborers whose primary tool is the machete), trash collectors, tractor drivers, boat drivers, night watchmen, a mechanic, and an assistant administrator. Interviews took place while the first author was present on the Morgan’s Rock property, either in the administrative areas in the case of employees from the tree plantation or in the staff dormitories for the hotel employees. Local residents were interviewed in their homes, purposively sampled as the 20 households in closest proximity to the Morgan’s Rock.

The structured interviews focused on participation in the tourism economy, opportunities for involvement in management, perspectives on tourism in the region and Morgan’s Rock specifically, environmental concerns, and perceptions of overall quality of life. In addition to structured interviews, semi-structured and ad hoc interviews were conducted with key informants: the son of the hotel’s formal owners who is the project’s brainchild and oversees the reservation office operating out of San Jose, Costa Rica; the finca administrator; naturalist guides; former employees; a tourism consultant from Costa Rica; ex-patriot homeowners; employees of the realty office affiliated with Morgan’s Rock who sell nearby vacation properties; former owners of the agricultural cooperative where Morgan’s Rock is currently located; and numerous other tourists and foreign developers in San Juan del Sur. The first administrator of Morgan’s Rock shared dated journal entries of experiences during the initial years of operation.

The Study Region

The passing of Nicaraguan Laws 306 and 495, which exonerate tourism investors from importation, sales, materials, equipment, and vehicle and property taxes (INTUR 2009), has increased the development of tourist infrastructure dramatically in recent years. Coupled with relative political stability and a tourism-friendly attitude of the current Sandinista administration (Carroll 2007), tourist arrivals to Nicaragua have risen over 25 percent, and tourism revenues have nearly quadrupled between 1997 and 2009 (INTUR 2009). The Department of Rivas has the smallest and least dense population of all coastal departments, yet only the capital department of Managua has a greater number of lodging establishments (INTUR 2007). Although tourism is developing throughout Nicaragua, much of the focus is on the area between Managua and the coastal region of Rivas.

Located near the Costa Rican border, Rivas consists of a narrow isthmus flanked by Lake Nicaragua and the Pacific Ocean. National statistics estimate the 2008 population of the Department of Rivas at 167,139 out of the Nicaraguan total of 5.1 million (INIDE 2007). The fifth most populous municipality of Rivas is San Juan del Sur, home to 15,347 inhabitants (in 2007). A sleepy fishing village a few decades ago, San Juan del Sur is a longtime favorite among the international surf crowd. Cruise ships are arriving in increasing numbers, and foreign dollars continue to pour into hotel, vacation rentals, and all-inclusive vacation home and resort communities, including a Jack Nicklaus (2009) designed golf course community. In total, approximately 70 resort, vacation home, and residential tourist developments have been established along the 20 km to the north and south of San Juan del Sur. Century 21, REMAX, and Caldwell Banker maintain offices there, and foreign capital is having a visible impact on the Nicaraguan geographic and cultural landscape.

Morgan’s Rock Hacienda and Ecolodge

Morgan’s Rock was created on the site of a former cooperative of peasant farmers who acquired the land through
agrarian reforms of the 1980s. The wealthy Ponçon family of French descent began purchasing the degraded pasture land piecemeal from these local residents beginning in the early 1990s. The first years at Morgan's Rock were dedicated to the planting of commercially viable tropical hardwoods, an activity that employed many surrounding residents. Later, the Ponçon family developed an ecotourism operation inspired by the conservation and sustainable development philosophies of the acclaimed Lapa Rios Ecolodge in Costa Rica. The family followed in the footsteps of Lapa Rios by employing the specialty management group, Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality, to conduct feasibility studies, share in design and layout, perform start-up training, and install the first administrator. This firm manages several boutique ecologies certified with four and five green leaves under the Costa Rican Certificate for Sustainability in Tourism (CST) Program.

The amenities read like an ecotourism wish list. The 15 luxury cabins sit on forested bluffs with optimized views of the secluded, private white sand beach. A spacious open-air lobby and poolside dining area are all framed in volcanic rock adorned with artisan-crafted wood. Additional buildings include a massage bungalow, beachside yoga platform, and shore-side thatched roof huts complete with hammocks and lounge chairs. Black-mantled howler monkeys, two-toed sloth, green iguanas, black stenosaurs, and a plethora of tropical bird species are highly visible on the property. Traditional artisan fishing, rum tasting at the sugar mill, farm visits, horseback riding, mountain biking, and excursions to nearby sites of interest are also offered, with rates per night per person exceeding $350 in the high season. Though not high by international ecotourism standards, this price point made it the most expensive place to spend the night in Nicaragua in 2008.

While the remainder of this paper will focus on local perceptions of the ecotourism project, it is useful to foreground our analysis with a few revealing comments from the perspective of the owning family. During the single interview the family granted to the primary researcher, the son of the owners explained the motives for the development of Morgan's Rock. First, the family acquired the land in order to develop a forestry project—the Hacienda. In exploring further development options for the property, it was in their other business interest (e.g., hardwoods, furniture, residential vacation properties, future resort development), to do something that would "improve Nicaragua's image and draw attention to what it had to offer." An extension of this motive was to provide a place where "they can come in 30 years with their kids and families to enjoy." Indeed, a larger full-sized cabin exclusively for family use is located right on Ocotal Beach, at a short distance from the main tourist cabins. Interestingly, at no point was biodiversity conservation nor community development mentioned, though I was informed that if I intended to speak with local residents, I was likely to encounter animosity towards the project. To the perspectives of these local residents and project employees we now turn.

**An Ethnographic Analysis of Ecotourism in Nicaragua**

Daily life among the employees at Morgan's Rock offered a view of ecotourism distinct from that available to the tourist or short-term visitor, and here our resulting assessment weighs local outcomes next to the larger realities of Nicaragua. In light of the country's harsh socioeconomic history of rural life, and the rapid, unchecked nature of tourism development taking place in the Department of Rivas, we aim to answer the question: what are the local perceptions of Morgan's Rock Hacienda and Ecolodge? The following three sections elaborate on local descriptions of project performance and reflect largely conflicted views of the project's economic, environmental, and social outcomes. Despite a lack of consensus on these issues, the final section reveals wide agreement among locals' evaluations of the project's ethical performance.

**Economic Issues: Income, Employment, and Opportunity Costs**

"The greatest problem in Nicaragua is the lack of work," stated a hotel restaurant server when interviewed in employee dormitories after returning from a breakfast/lunch shift. Nicaragua's economy has historically been based on agriculture and labor-intensive crops such as coffee and sugar cane. Jobs were often seasonal, as a young female member of the kitchen staff noted, "Before, I worked during the season in a sugar processing plant. The job only lasted four or five months." Along with agriculture, free trade zones dominated by textile factories have been built in several clusters around Managua since the 1990s. Some interviewees have prior experience in these factories, including the hotel maintenance chief who explained, "Where the work is back there, the treatment is not the same—it is bad. There are lots of bad habits, vices. You have to work with vagrants." These forms of work involve leaving the family and working long hours in overcrowded, difficult conditions, with minimal wages and leads many local residents to perceive tourism as an easier source of livelihood.

According to the Morgan's Rock finca administrator, local residents were initially employed in the clearing of land, the making of roads, and the planting of saplings during the development of the tree plantation. Interviews with residents in 20 adjacent households confirmed eight had at least one member who had previously worked at the Hacienda. However, the administrator claims the local residents were ultimately unable to abide by the rules and regulations of the job, including conservation policies that prohibit hunting or harvesting of flora and fauna. These employees were also distracted by the proximity of their homes and too often were tempted to visit their families and return to work late. Few of these neighboring residents were retained as employees.

As a result, Morgan's Rock has recruited staff from other areas of Nicaragua. Of the 45 hotel employees surveyed, only four were residents of the municipality of San
Juan del Sur, while 26 came from not just other municipalities but from departments outside of Rivas. As one hotel worker noted, “Here there is no one from right around here working at Morgan’s Rock. We are from León, other places. The locals do not see any benefits from Morgan’s Rock, only the dust that blows up when they go by with tourists.” A similar recruitment pattern occurs on the finca. Of the 20 employees interviewed there, only one was from the municipality of San Juan del Sur, and eight were from other departments.

While the owners of Morgan’s Rock seem to favor imported employees over local residents out of self-interest, there is no doubt the opportunity for a steady salary is providing a strong incentive for individuals from other parts of the country to migrate to the region. As one finca worker originally from the Matagalpa highlands put it, “The salaries are bigger than in the fields. Back home we only earn a misery. Here in the tourist zone we earn triple. There we earn C$30/day ($1.60). Here we earn C$100/day ($5.25). It is a great source of work.” Another hotel cleaning staff member elaborated on the impact of steady work, “My job used to be more difficult… and it wasn’t permanent. It was six months at a time, and afterward I would be without a job. Here, I have gotten out from under that worry—the concern about money.” Still, given that rates exceed $350 per night per person, employee salaries are also surprisingly low. More than half of the 45 member hotel staff work in demanding manual labor positions like gardening, maintenance, cleaning, and kitchen. As quoted above, these positions offer salaries of approximately $150/month, or $5/day. English-speaking restaurant and bar staff, receptionists, drivers, and naturalist guides in particular, earn two or three times more, especially through tips.

For many employees, their four monthly vacation days involve long public bus rides to their homes in distant regions. After taking meals along the way, as much as 25 percent of their earnings are spent on these trips home. Monthly food expenses average another 59 percent of this salary, leaving approximately 15 percent of income for all remaining expenses such as medicine, schooling, clothing, utilities, rent, etc. One member of the cleaning staff responded, “Unless my wages go beyond what they are now, I won’t have any income. I don’t have any money to buy anything else—just the food, it isn’t enough for anything else.” Another hotel employee stated, “There is no perspective (of the future). We have no hopes of improved salaries. Here we only break even.”

Nevertheless, the Hacienda and the Hotel together employ approximately 125 individuals at any given time, and among those interviewed, 70 percent say it is the most important source of income for their household. Even those earning at the low end of the pay ranges earn significantly above the national averages. With a staggering 80 percent of the country surviving on less than $2 per day (UNDP 2005), an income of $5 per day is significant. Employees’ acceptance of conditions of the work, including a 26-day monthly shift far from family, indicates that Morgan’s Rock is offering economic options people perceive as opportunities. Word of mouth has resulted in several family members or hometown friends of existing employees acquiring jobs at Morgan’s Rock. Thus, despite the complaints about conditions, fines, lack of bonuses and overtime pay, and overall feelings of underappreciation, many employees are making their brothers and cousins aware of the employment opportunities at Morgan’s Rock.

Environmental Issues: Managing for the Trees or the Forest?

The Morgan’s Rock website describes how reforestation and tree farming are practiced at the Hacienda. The casual visitor is left to believe equal effort is invested in both endeavors. Though they claim to have reforested more than 1.5 million trees in an effort to restore local ecosystems, a closer reading reveals that all but 100,000 of these trees have been planted with future harvests in mind. For every tree dedicated to reforestation, 15 are dedicated to tree farming. While promotional materials asserted that “endangered primary forest wilderness” is being protected, the naturalist guides confirm no primary forest exists. The property contains a governmentally decreed private protected area—a 300-hectare private forest reserve formally titled “El Aguacate”—located along the estuary emptying into the horseshoe bay of Ocotal Beach. Although marketed as an effort to protect ecologically significant wetlands, interviews with the staff revealed the estuary was given protected status because the salty, marshy land is otherwise unsuitable for the project’s primary land use—the planting of marketable exotic tropical hardwoods.

No fewer than 1,000 of the property’s 1,800 hectares are dedicated to single-species tree farming plots, a land use little different than agriculture in its intensity. The remaining 500 hectares are dedicated to agriculture, fruit trees, grazing, roads, administration areas, and the premises of the ecologue. A priority placed on tree farming was communicated in the following employee commentary, “It is a lumber business. They don’t maintain the forest in a natural state. They plant only to export. There are 200 manzanas (approximately 141 hectares) of recently cut forest right now.” Indeed finca workers were regularly observed pruning and clearing underbrush in the tree plot areas, ensuring regular disturbance of wildlife habitat. One day while accompanying the plantation administrator and a tourist guide to areas rarely visited by tourists, the first author observed workers felling regenerating secondary forest in order to plant marketable species. The accompanying naturalist guide noted that on the several occasions during his three years of leading tourists he had encountered such cutting. “I have tried explaining it different ways but there is just no way to make it look good.”

Yet on a positive note, the perception that wildlife is more abundant on the premises of Morgan’s Rock than outside the property is prevalent in the interviews among staff and neighbors. As a machetero and carpenter at the finca noted, “Animals are cared for—that doesn’t exist where I live. The children don’t know many of the animals for that reason.” A
neighboring resident likewise indicated, "They have all kinds of animals. They look for refuge there—all the animals from this zone." Despite the intensive agriculture, tree farming, cutting of secondary forests, lack of reintroductions, and absence of primary forest, the above comments reflect the dominant perception of staff and neighbors that conservation is occurring. This is most likely due to the policy against all hunting or persecution of animals, which is confirmed rather ironically by the nightly intrusion of hunters at Morgan's Rock. Higher density of animals is precisely what attracts these hunters, and thus hunting pressure serves as a perverse proxy indicator of the conservation success of the project.

In sum, the 300 hectares of estuarine habitat protected by Morgan's Rock, combined with the 150,000 reforested trees, have created refuge for a concentration of wildlife. Employees generally characterize the area as having a fresher, cooler microclimate, something many of them miss in their own communities. One male member of the hotel cleaning staff commented, "The preservation of the forest, the plants, the animals...that which they call ecotourism avoids contaminating the environment. Here in Morgan's Rock, one sees the preservation of what the animals—the pure air we are breathing." Meanwhile a former Sandinista guerilla and current maintenance worker stated, "Even the climate has improved—it is cooler now because they are taking better care of the trees." The pace of resort and vacation home development, coupled with the very small presence of formal biodiversity protection in this region of Nicaragua, makes these evaluations especially meaningful.

Social Issues: Behind the Façade of Local Involvement

When asked about efforts to incorporate social sustainability into Morgan's Rock, the hotel administrator mentioned two initiatives. The first involves a patronal relationship established with five local primary schools where tourists distribute notebooks, pens and pencils, erasers, and backpacks brought along in suitcases. One mother explained the fate of many of these donated items: "When they come with donations, the teachers collect everything and the kids end up with nothing. The teachers take things and then say, 'They were stolen.' All the kids know the teachers take things." Meanwhile, the requests for assistance to dig wells in order to provide drinking water to the schoolchildren fall on deaf ears. As another mother noted, "In the school, there is no well. They began to make one but never finished it. The people asked them once again for a well and they were told NO. They denied us that assistance." Morgan's Rock seems content with public relations and photo opportunities provided by the distribution of school supplies during tourist visits.

A second initiative involves an annual roadside trash pickup coordinated by Morgan's Rock staff with labor provided largely by volunteers from the surrounding communities. The primary author inadvertently found himself leading a group of "volunteers" from communities up and down the rural dirt road between Rivas and San Juan del Sur known as La Chocolata. While post-cleanup compensation in the form of t-shirts and a field day celebration involving complimentary food, beverages, and a DJ was promised to those who participated, the author's dirt-caked group arrived to the event after five hours and 80 bags of trash collection under intense tropical sun only to find the t-shirts already given away and the food and beverages being hoarded by Morgan's Rock employees, all of whom still wore pristine white t-shirts indicating little evidence of any cleaning. When these volunteers later returned home, they found the favor had not been returned. The section of La Chocolata at the entrance to their communities was still blanketed in trash. Clearly, these two initiatives identified by management are doing little to enhance social sustainability.

Compounding the lack of meaningful engagement, local residents now experience restricted access to important woodland and coastal food resources of what was formerly a shared peasant cooperative. Though inhibiting access or discouraging environmentally damaging behaviors is a frequent by-product of conservation projects, Morgan's Rock made no effort to provide any compensation for this prohibition. One nearby resident echoed this frustration, "We cannot even cross to the next beach. They have shotguns in there everywhere at night. Supposedly, the beaches are public [property], but they don't let us pass there.... I tried to go collect some crustaceans on the next beach over and they shot at me! I had to climb into the woods to hide from them. They have an enclosed river that is full of shellfish and a shrimp farm, but they don't let us take anything, us poor people. What nerve!" Another resident described what these changes mean for locals, "A lot of people go around looking for something to survive on, like an armadillo, and they just can't. Their guards are walking around. Even just to feed themselves they cannot hunt."

Because virtually no neighbors are employed in Morgan's Rock, they have little incentive to abide by the company's newly imposed rules. Hunters trespass nightly to access these important sources of subsistence that no longer exist outside of the Morgan's Rock property, such as iguana, armadillo, and deer. In an effort to curb these activities, the Hacienda administrator has asked local police to arrest trespassing hunters. This led to an unfortunate incident that has been well communicated among local residents. One interviewee explained, "There was a man looking for something to eat in the woods there with his dog. They shot him, under [plantation administrator's] orders," and as a result, "that poor family lost their son, their husband." A security guard working at the plantation corroborated the incident, "We carried weapons, and we would set up ambushes just like we did during the war."

Much like the economic benefits, positive social outcomes of Morgan's Rock are thus reserved for those employed by the project. Though little influence is felt beyond the property, the changes among employees are notable. First, most employees of both the finca and the hotel, particularly those who did not have a steady income previously, noted an improved sense of well-being. A reliable salary allows for a
longer term outlook, budgeting for larger purchases on credit, and less worry about how the next income will arise, as noted in these comments of one hotel maintenance worker: "Before I used to work very little [there were no jobs]. I never had any money for anything. Now, I don't feel good necessarily, but I don't feel bad either. I feel better than before. The salary is not very good, but it is fixed, it is certain. I never had that before.... With a fixed income, I can pay for the things."

Employees also find a sense of cultural pride from their work in tourism, as explained by a member of the cleaning staff: "I am a peasant! It makes me proud that the guests value us, they make us feel good and we to them." Staff seemed to take delight in explaining local customs, foods, and traditions to intrigued tourists. "In my case, the advantage is getting to know what tourism is, the culture of other countries, the way people are treated. I have tried to understand why there are differences, the history. We exchange culture. The Nicaraguans give their own culture. I have benefited greatly from that." The exchange is often two-way as one hotel employee reported: "[I have] gotten to know other people and cultures from other countries—a German, a Canadian, an Arab—here, I have seen and I have talked with them."

While securing stable employment was usually cited as the reason for working at Morgan's Rock, many staff members noted a greater appreciation for nature and the reduction of destructive activities. One hotel maintenance worker spoke to this issue, saying, "To keep up a forest, put in more plants, help the environment. Before, that didn't matter to me at all. With my machete, I would cut any old thing. I thought protecting the environment was foolish. Now, I see that it is a reality. We are going to have a desert here in a few years.... Now, I try to raise other people's consciousness." Whether they have gained an awareness of the eco-rhetoric, which they now recite to outsiders, or have indeed acquired a new conservation ethic is not clear. What is clear is that by witnessing the different values that tourists have for nature and by having adherence to the conservation practices imposed as a condition of employment, workers have at least been forced to reconsider their own attitudes and behaviors towards nature.

Lastly, while a detailed analysis of the three interviewed groups by their levels of involvement in tourism is beyond the scope of this paper and is being prepared for publication elsewhere, one very notable consistency is unwavering support for tourism development in Nicaragua across all interviewed groups. Interviewees showed reluctance to identify anything bad about tourism or to cite disadvantages of working in tourism versus other employment. This was equally true in hotel employees, tree plantation workers, and neighboring residents. Even when interviewees perceived morally questionable practices, certain destructive behaviors, loss of subsistence access, or poor treatment of the staff at Morgan's Rock, they did not generalize these negative outcomes to tourism in general. Finca workers are only indirectly involved in tourism and many of the local residents are currently unemployed, suggesting that direct income is not a necessary condition for expressing support for tourism development.

Finding the Forest Among the Trees: A Consensus on Ethical Issues

When considered on their own, the mixed economic, environmental, and social outcomes just described make a conclusive evaluation of Morgan's Rock difficult. On this basis alone, the question of whether Morgan's Rock represents a successful example of ecotourism or a case of blatant greenwashing could remain open to debate. This seems to reinforce the notion that two ecotourisms exist (Wight 1993) and that measured outcomes will always depend on the level of analysis chosen (Hunt and Stronza 2009). Here, however, we show how examining an additional component of local resident and employee perceptions of Morgan's Rock force a more decisive conclusion.

During the fieldwork, and especially the two months of on-site participant observation at Morgan's Rock, it became clear the project was engaged in many highly unethical, deceptive practices. For starters, the sugar and rum mill highlighted on the website has been out of operation since the lodge's first season. Although this is ostensibly explained by the difficulties encountered in cultivating sugar cane on the property, Rivas is located in the heart of one of the largest cane producing regions of Nicaragua. Likewise, the butterfly farm at Morgan's Rock was out of service, with staff claiming that it is a seasonal operation only. Nevertheless, many other projects in other areas of Nicaragua and Costa Rica maintain live specimens year round, and charismatic blue morpho butterflies are regularly seen darting along the creek bed walks.

The deception extended to description of food provision. The website stated, "Some of the products we use are organically grown and raised at our Hacienda including a variety of fruits and vegetables, milk, cheese, eggs, lamb, and even our own brown sugar." It also included an account of their irrigation system: "Rice, corn, and wheat are the most important grains harvested in the hacienda. These grains, as well as all the vegetables grown in the hacienda such as tomatoes, cucumbers, or zucchini, are watered by this ingenious irrigation system." Despite these claims, we found no vegetables or grains being cultivated on-site, organically, or otherwise. According to nature guides whose employment predates the construction of the hotel and who have extensively explored the property, there has never been organic produce or grains cultivated on-site.

On the contrary, nearly all vegetables are delivered in pickup trucks multiple times a week. More than once, the first author assisted with unloading of shipments from outside producers. On other occasions, he accompanied drivers to Morgan's Rock head office on the outskirts of Managua, returning in a large king cab pickup loaded to the brim with sides of beef and numerous canned or jarred food items. Similarly, the shrimp farmed on-site, which Morgan's Rock stated "will probably be the cleanest, freshest tasting shrimp you will ever savor," do not meet claimed organic standards. The finca administrator indicated the shrimp are fed standardized commercial feed in order to meet export

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Discussion and Conclusion

The need to maintain “authentic” images of ecotourism, as West and Carrier (2004) note, is a challenge for owners and operators of ecotourism projects and thus an underlying cause of greenwashing in this sector of tourism. Since no formal tourism certification program currently exists in Nicaragua, Morgan’s Rock negotiates this authentic imagery in creative though ethically suspect ways. Regrettably, tourists and tourism media representatives on brief visits to ecologodes have proven incapable of revealing deceptive and ethically objectionable practices. This is due both to the brevity of their visits and to the lack of reliable information beforehand about impacts that tourism purchases will have on employees and local residents. Thus, in terms of curbing these types of abuses of the ecotourism concept, the burden falls on scholars and certification bodies. If certifiers are to provide tourist consumers with meaningful information prior to making a purchase decision, then including these local voices is essential.

The owners of Morgan’s Rock modeled this project after the highly acclaimed Lapa Rios lodge in Costa Rica by adopting a prescriptive “checklist approach” to identifying and then attempting to implement what are considered ideal ecotourism components. Lamentably, they were unable to carry out or sustain such “lofty” ideals over the long term (e.g., employ, train, or establish goodwill among local residents; provide organic vegetables and farmed shrimp to clients; and operate a butterfly farm or sugar mill). This highlights several intriguing questions. Do idealizations of ecotourism as dictated by certification lead tourism operators, owners, and managers to cut corners to fit the preconceptions, and thus in a way contribute indirectly to greenwashing? That is, does principled concern for making ecotourism truly revolutionary ultimately enable greenwashing (which ultimately makes it anything but revolutionary)? Comparative ethnographic research in multiple ecotourism contexts will be valuable for clarifying this complex relationship between the scholarly discourse and the greenwashing of ecotourism.

The data here indicate few neighboring residents or employees of this project have any previous exposure to ecotourism rhetoric or the lofty expectations of ecotourism as a conservation and development panacea. Therefore, they did not necessarily share in our critique of the outcomes of ecotourism in and around Morgan’s Rock. Yet, while locals may have little comparative perspective on ecotourism and other forms of tourism or how tourism development might and should be better for them, no such comparative perspective is necessary to object to the sheer lack of ethics. While people can quickly and easily elaborate on both positive and negative economic, environmental, and social outcomes of the ecotourism project, their evaluations yield an overwhelming consensus on poor ethical performance at Morgan’s Rock.

In terms of promoting community well-being, Morgan’s Rock is so uninvolved in the local community that even the disharmony often associated with unequal distribution
of benefits, such as documented by Belsky (1999), doesn’t occur for the simple reason that no one at all is benefitting. The locals who are affected by the project clearly exhibit the symptoms of exclusion that Scheyvens (1999:249) describes, such as feeling “confused, frustrated, disinterested, or disillusioned” with ecotourism. While a majority of ecotourism studies tend to focus on “impacts,” the problems of deception and exclusion we found in this case transcend such material evaluations and suggest the need for careful analysis of ethics as well.

In recent years, a number of scholars have produced commendable writings on ethics in tourism (Fennell 2006; Fleckenstein and Huebsch 1999; Malloy and Fennell 1998; Fennell and Malloy 2007; Smith and Duffy 2003), though their writings generally address the role of industry operators. This body of work suggests only an indirect concern for local residents and the treatment of employees in the tourism sector. It does little to effectively represent local hosts' perceptions or contribute new understanding to how to make tourism more sustainable, either economically, environmentally, or socially. Certification schemes suffer the same shortcomings (Honey 2008).

In this paper, we make an important contribution to this body of literature on ethics in tourism by foregrounding local resident evaluations of ethics. Ethnographic narratives highlight a number of morally and ethically objectionable aspects of Morgan’s Rock, thereby indicting what might otherwise be considered a relatively successful ecotourism initiative given Nicaragua’s socioeconomic realities. In characterizing these local perspectives and evaluations of this ecotourism project, we thus contribute new understanding to the ways that evaluations of the ethical performance of ecotourism go beyond, and may even override, more typical evaluations of economic, environmental, and social factors.

Furthermore, this analysis demonstrates how failing to capture these critical local evaluations of ethical aspects of project performance allows greenwashing abuses to persist unchecked and thereby nullifies those elements which distinguish ecotourism from other forms of tourism. Improving ethical performance, as evaluated by local residents, will be critical for making tourism more sustainable and to developing certification criteria which are more effective for addressing greenwashing abuses. This case indicates how future tourism researchers and those developing tourism certification initiatives in Nicaragua and elsewhere must pay greater heed to local perceptions of ethical performance. Anthropology remains the discipline best equipped to make this contribution.

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