SEEING THE PEOPLE THROUGH THE TREES: CONSERVATION, COMMUNITIES AND ETHNO-ECOTOURISM IN THE BOLIVIAN AMAZON BASIN

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SEEING THE PEOPLE THROUGH THE TREES:
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Abstract

Ecotourism, generally defined as “responsible travel to natural areas that
conserves the environment and improves the well being of local people,1” is one of the
fastest-growing tourism markets; has been tied to the sustainable development strategies
of several nations and is linked to biodiversity protection initiatives worldwide. Still, the
track record for ecotourism is mixed. While responsible and effective ventures exist, the
term is frequently hijacked to disguise socially and environmentally unsound tourist
activities.

In the Bolivian Amazon, one form of ecotourism in particular is being promoted
by conservation actors as an alternative to extractive and environmentally damaging
activities and as means for promoting sustainable development in the area surrounding
two national protected areas. “Ethno-ecotourism,” that is tourism to areas with natural
and indigenous components, has flourished as a response to the perceived need to
preserve indigenous culture and customs, while providing market structures to try to
tackle the extreme poverty from which indigenous groups frequently suffer. This

1 (TIES, 1990). This definition has been expanded by many. At World Ecotourism Summit in Quebec City,
Canada in 2002, more than 1,000 participants from 132 countries discussed ecotourism, and came up with
the Quebec Declaration on Ecotourism: “Ecotourism embraces the principles of sustainable tourism,
concerning the economic, social and environmental impacts of tourism. It also embraces the following
specific principles, which distinguish it from the wider concept of sustainable tourism: contributes actively
to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage; includes local and indigenous communities in its
planning, development and operation, and contributes to their well-being; interprets the natural and cultural
heritage of the destination to visitors; lends itself better to independent travelers, as well as to tours for
small-size groups.”
phenomenon is by no means isolated. Indeed, in Latin America, thousands of indigenous
groups have chosen ecotourism as their preferred development alternative. Many
conservationists in Bolivia endorse these efforts, saying that ethno-ecotourism’s
substitutive economic role encourages sustainable development. With the support of
international donors, several ventures that link communities, tourism and conservation
together have been launched in the Bolivian Amazon basin.

This thesis analyzes three ethno-ecotourism projects inside or near two of
Bolivia’s protected areas: the Madidi National Park and the Pilón-Lajas Biosphere
Reserve. An analysis of findings from participant interviews, observations and secondary
data gathered during fieldwork, suggests that ethno-ecotourism in the area has had some
limited effects in promoting environmentally-sustainable socioeconomic development.
Immediate benefits have been documented in each of the cases, but these benefits are
generally limited to an already privileged population segment. In terms of functioning
economic substitution, that is how far ethno-ecotourism has gone in replacing detrimental
extractive activities (in conjunction with coordinated conservation efforts) – generally a
fair amount has been accomplished. An overwhelming number of those interviewed
indicate involvement in the commercialization of extractive forest resources prior to
national park influence and the arrival of ecotourism to the communities.

It should be noted that ethno-ecotourism in the region is closely monitored by
donor agencies, international NGO’s and other development players. Hefty sums have
been spent on project development and on training programs for indigenous guides,
managers, cooks, etc. But while these endeavors are succeeding, to some extent, in their
mission to provide a quality and sustainable product, no form of tourism is without
impact, nor is it immune from market fluctuations, political instability, corruption or natural limiting factors. Furthermore, conventional tourism in the region is by far the biggest player, and is having a noticeable, though under-documented impact on unique, ecologically fragile terrain.

Finally, Bolivia is facing unsteady times. Fulfilling an historic cultural struggle, governors from Bolivia’s so called medialuna provinces have tried to secure some degree of autonomy from a central government that is currently enacting an enormous constitutional transformation of the country. Rampant political instability has been the result, and at the time of writing seems unlikely to subside in the near future. This further underscores the volatility of the tourism market as well as the need for a unified resource management planning at both the local and national levels. As it stands today, ethno-ecotourism as a proposed solution to social and environmental problems in the country is threatened by unpredictable political will, regional insecurity, world economic turmoil and longstanding internal conflicts.

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Chapter 1, Introduction

Nearly two decades ago, at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, world leaders agreed on a comprehensive strategy for “sustainable development.” One of the key agreements adopted at Rio was the Convention on Biological Diversity. This agreement, reached among a majority of world governments, aims to maintain the planet’s ecological stability and wellbeing as we engage in the activities that constitute development. The Convention established three main goals: the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits from the use of genetic resources. Since the Rio Convention, the term “sustainable development” has grown, and now encompasses a wide range of attributes and connotations. Still, the concept’s foundational idea persists, that as our global society grows it is increasingly important to maintain the health of the environment that sustains us.

This chapter reviews one of the countless methods being employed today to endeavor to promote the conservation of biodiversity in a sustainable way: ecotourism.

1.1 Conservation and the Ecotourism Market

A great deal has been written in recent years about market mechanisms to promote biodiversity conservation. These mechanisms vary from Payments for Environmental Services (PES), in which states, regions or even individuals are recompensed by the international community for any variety of environmental services they provide\(^2\) – to direct and sustainable exploitation of natural resources, to the

\(^2\) For example watershed protection, recreation, genetic storehouses etc..
employment of international carbon credits and emissions trading (for countries or businesses) to a host of other methods.

The international NGO Conservation International has been at the forefront of encouraging a wide variety of alternative economic initiatives to support protected area management and conservation. While a few authors disparage these efforts – citing concerns about conservation “agenda-setting” (see Rodríguez et.al. in Science, vol. 317: 755-756. 2007), others see as integral the need for market structures that complement protection initiatives (Eagles, P., 2002).

One much-lauded market tool employed by conservation advocates is ecotourism\(^3\). The World Tourism Organization affirms that ecotourism one of the fastest expanding tourism markets. It is an industry that has received much attention in developing countries and in economically impoverished regions around the world and has been employed as a key development and conservation strategy by a variety of development professionals. Indigenous groups in remote and peripheral areas of the developing world have been experimenting with ecotourism for decades now (Wesche, 1997). Indigenous peoples see tourism as an attractive development alternative because it promotes and markets traditional knowledge, and permits the commercial utilization of natural resources without engendering outright exploitation and immediate destruction. Ecotourism also reduces a troublesome paradigm that many indigenous communities struggle under: the problem of market distances. By attracting visitors to remote areas, indigenous groups are able to tap into international markets. This form of tourism also

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\(^3\) This is not to say that experts see ecotourism as the ideal marriage of conservation and development. On the contrary, ecotourism is only so positively regarded when it works in conjunction with a diverse array of development platforms. See “A Perfect Storm in the Amazon Wilderness,” part 7 of Advances in Applied Biodiversity Science. Killeen, Timothy J., 2007.
gives indigenous communities vital international assistance from environmental and community development organizations when faced with making tough decisions about the exploitation of their natural resources.

There is a long-established relationship between conservation and ecotourism in Bolivia. For decades, conservationists have touted the practice’s potential for providing economic benefits to local populations while accruing minimal ecological impact. Further benefits to conservation are seen as extending from the merits of community awareness-building and visitor education. Ecotourism, advocates argue, is a way for visitors to gain a new appreciation for the inherent value of the natural environment. But it is also seen as a method for reinforcing existing protective structures, such as national parks. Currently, ecotourism is being adopted in many regions of Bolivia as part of a greater strategy on the part of the conservation community to protect the biodiversity our species relies on to exist.

1.2 The Value of Biodiversity: Environmental Services

Ecosystem or environmental services fall into four categories: the production of goods, regeneration processes, stabilization processes and life-fulfilling functions. The first category includes the most obvious or at least the most familiar service areas – such as food, fuel, or raw materials production. The last three, and especially the last service, are less obvious. These include process maintenance such as climate stabilization, but also things that we don’t often associate with services, such as the concept “natural beauty.”

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But while both ecologists and economists strive in their own unique ways to do so, ascribing value to biodiversity is a difficult matter. Economists usually view the problem as one of market imperfection – something that can be addressed by using sophisticated mathematical procedures such as contingent valuation. Most often though, values are achieved by looking at the values of raw materials or the potential from profits of the environmental services described above. Still, ecologists and economists agree that these economic techniques fail to describe the total real value of biodiversity – given that no method can entirely account for the absolute human need for biodiversity. Addressing this descriptive shortfall, one author has written:

> The value of biodiversity is the value of everything there is. It is the summed value of all the GNPs of all countries from now until the end of the world. We know that, because our very lives and our economies are dependent upon biodiversity. If biodiversity is reduced sufficiently...there will no longer be any conscious beings. With them will go all value--economic and otherwise.

Many environmentalists express a similar viewpoint – that it is a mistake to try to ascribe a dollar-value to the Earth’s biodiversity. Indeed, one Bolivian conservationist, when asked to put a dollar value on the bio-wealth of Bolivia, responded:

> If it is a sin to put a value on a human life, shouldn’t it be the same for any life? Don’t you see that right now you and I are both part of Bolivia’s biodiversity?

### 1.3 Indigenous Peoples, Biodiversity and Poverty in the Amazon

In the Amazon Basin, indigenous groups have faired much better at maintaining natural ecosystems than have other residents. Traditional livelihood methods that support village existence have historically been sustainable by nature. But indigenous groups are

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5 Using survey data, contingent valuation tries to determine the relative importance ‘users’ put on a particular area. It is now most widely accepted as a real estate appraisal technique, particularly in contaminated property. It is also used in Environmental Impact statements.

not impervious to the forces of development and it is important to recognize that indigenous peoples are not “naturally” conservationist – a misconception sometimes mistakenly projected by western writers, environmentalists and others. Still, since indigenous peoples’ territories coincide with some of the most biologically diverse areas on Earth, the clearing of forest in indigenous lands has a disproportionate effect on inhabitants – as these ecologically damaging activities destroy what could be their greatest source of future revenue: their credibility as stewards of the forest. An indigenous leader from the Tacana tribe in the northern Bolivian Amazon region described the situation in his community this way:

Reaping short-term benefits from environmental destruction would be a great error on our part. If we cut down the tree we may get money, but our children will no longer have the tree to provide them shade. If we shoot the monkey in the tree, we may eat, but our children won’t know have the [draw] of a monkey to show to visitors. And it isn’t just that we won’t shoot the monkey. We understand the monkey better than anyone. We will be better than anyone, than any group, at protecting the animal and its habitat.

The threats to this type of stewardship are many. Local and indigenous communities are especially affected by colonization, logging, industrial agriculture, mining, pollution, and by the many other effects of western style development. Indigenous peoples suffer this destruction of biodiversity in the form of a loss of resources and economic opportunity. Inevitably, this loss of opportunity leads to a loss of cultural diversity, of indigenous language, customs and ultimately knowledge – knowledge that conservationists are recognizing more and more as important blueprints for the sustainable management of natural resources around the world.

1.4 Protected Areas, Hotspots, and Ecotourism

In Bolivia, protected areas play a lead role not just in conservation, but in the livelihoods of local peoples as well. According to the Bolivian government, more than
60,000 people live inside of protected areas in the country, while almost 200,000 reside on the parks’ outskirts. As a result, local communities are very much involved in park activities and often have what might be considered a heightened interest in conservation. Because of this relationship, the National Service of Protected Areas (SERNAP) instituted a “Parks and People” agenda – further acknowledging the importance and role of protected areas for sustainable livelihoods, the alleviation of poverty and sustainable development in rural areas. This course of action is currently evolving into a national policy of shared management under the Morales administration, but currently its greatest benefit has been to secure national area representation in the national system of protected areas. At the same time, municipal protected areas and neighboring indigenous territories have also recently been acknowledged in Bolivia as key areas for biodiversity conservation.

Until the late 1980s, deforestation rates in Bolivia were among the lowest in Latin America. However, two national inventories of forest resources concluded that deforestation increased dramatically during the 1990s – and particularly after the implementation of the structural reforms during the same decade. As a result, deforestation rates have had a fourfold increase in the wake of structural reforms and policies introduced in 1993. Many studies since have suggested that structural adjustment has led to increased deforestation rates. In this light, community-based tourism has emerged as an alternative not simply to historic development pressures, but also to status-quo global economic practices that have been at the center of much debate.

Without doubt, Bolivia’s and the world’s biodiversity is in a dire crisis. To try to effectively address this crisis, conservationists are prioritizing what can be done. In 1988,
Dr. Norman Myers of Oxford University proposed the idea of biodiversity hotspots, or areas with a high concentration of species diversity. Hotspots, according to Dr. Myers, are areas that feature “exceptional concentrations of endemic species” that are “experiencing exceptional loss of habitat.” Myers and the international NGO Conservation International have identified a total of twenty-five hotspots around the globe. These hotspots constitute just 1.4 percent of the world’s land surface area, but contain 44 percent of all known plant species and 35 percent of all known terrestrial vertebrate species. By focusing their efforts for protected area creation on these zones, conservationists hope to have a greater effect on biodiversity conservation.

Figure 1.1 Biodiversity hot spots as identified by Dr. Norman Myers and colleagues.

![Map of Earth's 25 terrestrial hot spots of biodiversity](image)

Source: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2007

There is an historic link between protected areas and ecotourism (Boyd, 2000). The relationship of nature and eco-tourism, parks, communities and economics has become a focal topic for academics and development strategists in many nations. Several

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studies suggest that there is a reciprocal relationship at work. That is, tourism and conservation need each other (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). This growing interest stems from several socio-economic motivators. Biodiversity is in decline. Habitats are disappearing. Today, most of the nations of the world are attempting to enact measures to protect some portion of their remaining natural resources. But, at the same time, competition for scarce resources is pushing against this trend and many governments are struggling to justify “hands-off” policy measures. In periods of economic decline, the pressure to roll back environmental legislation is even greater.

Concurrently, conservation budgets worldwide are facing crises. In developing nations, collapsing budgets have increased the incentives to exploit the productive capabilities of protected areas. And where financial viability is difficult to achieve, it has been shown that protected areas are more likely to be converted into other uses (Loon, et al. 2001). But at the same time the market for ecotourism in undisturbed wilderness settings is growing. Tourists, motivated by their desire for “pristine natural areas” are flocking to the world’s protected areas. Today, parks and protected areas are some of the most popular tourism destinations on the planet. And, as others have noted, this interest is unlikely to quiet in coming generations (Boyd, 2000).

Recently especially, there has been growing support for linking protected areas and conservation management with the necessities of neighboring local communities. And it has been shown that often it is the needs of communities that threaten the well being of protected areas. In northwestern Bolivia this phenomenon can be seen in the
occasional conflicts between national park managers and local populations. There is the perception that the parks are preventing economic development.⁸

The creation and consolidation of protected areas often cause abrupt changes in the ways in which communities survive. Access to resources is almost always reduced. Residents are sometimes required to relocate. It is clear that for protected areas and communities to coexist, there must be broad support among local residents for the conservation platform that protected areas embody. In the developing world, these points of concern are of the utmost importance.

While tourism is now widely seen as a positive means for improving people’s standard of living, it is acknowledged that this improvement generally occurs with varying degrees of environmental and social impact, especially in rural areas. Areas popular among ecotourists are often those which are the most vulnerable to damage. Wilderness is fragile, and growth caused by tourism will therefore be more devastating (Wall, 1994). There is therefore an internal contradiction in the practice of ecotourism, in that revenues are based on the number of tourists. Because of the many potential contributions and impacts that ecotourism can have, more scholars are warning that such project impacts should be carefully weighed against the conservation platforms of protected areas. The question that is begged is: will ecotourism really contribute to the conservation of a particular area?

Tourism can help to meet the needs of local populations by providing economic alternatives, especially in isolated areas. This is where ethno-ecotourism thrives, in underdeveloped regions where the demand for natural beauty is closely linked to

⁸ In interviews, managers from both Madidi National Park and Pilón-Lajas Biosphere Reserve described these conflicts, as did community members.
protected area development. But the relationship between protected areas and local communities is complex, if not baffling at times. Public consultation in park management is essential, or conflicts can erupt. The benefits generated by sustainable development-conservation projects are very much dependent upon effective local participation (Brandon, 1996). But frequently, communities in and around protected areas are overlooked when boundaries are being drawn (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). This exclusion is one of the key causes behind poorly integrated conservation and development projects – something that threatens to weaken the resource base and reduce tourism’s potential at a destination. Indeed, in the Bolivian Amazon, one indigenous
leader underscored this point saying, “these boundaries were drawn up on a big desk in La Paz and we were not consulted.”\footnote{Interview with Celín Quenevo, CIPTA, the Centro Indígena del Pueblo Tacana.}

Even when economic benefits are retained locally, they are often inequitably distributed among community members, as a result of pre-existing disparities in income and development. These disparities generate the potential for social stratification within communities, and foster a climate of conflict (Brandon, 1996). Additionally, job opportunities for locals stemming from ecotourism may be limited. Ecotourism only produces a small variety of jobs: managers, guides, cooks, porters, etc. Finally, training, and access to capital must be offered if locals are to benefit from ecotourism.

It also should be noted that a rapid tourism growth can limit locals from effectively getting involved in tourism. This frequently occurs when external investment is greater than the capacities of communities (Place, 1991). Furthermore, tourism can be an unstable revenue source. It is an industry subject to great fluctuations based on world economic stability, internal conflict, seasonal visitation and weather fluctuations. Because there are so many obstacles to the successful implementation of community tourism destinations – including a lack of training, access to funding, outside competition, etc – some studies have concluded that very few local communities have managed to reap “significant benefits from nature tourism on their own lands or in nearby protected areas” (Wells, 1997). One other complicating factor is that local communities, when faced with an activity that does not provide immediate, tangible benefits, are more likely to remain indifferent towards long term tourism development processes. At the same time, when
benefits are absent due to crisis, local people are that much more likely to turn to resource-exploitative activities to sustain themselves.

Until local, regional and national planners, governments, NGOs and the other actors involved in its propagation find ways to make ecotourism meet the economic needs of communities while consistently and positively contributing to the protection of biodiversity, it will be a languishing work in progress.

1.5 Research Objectives

During the past two decades, Northwestern Bolivia has become been a bona fide hotspot for conservation activities. Large areas of land in the region have been consolidated into two national protected areas. While these efforts have greatly advanced conservation interests they have established restrictions on economic activity for populations living inside of and around the protected areas. With the arrival of the protected areas, these populations (many of which are indigenous communities) often found themselves working on the wrong side of the law.

Through the early 2000’s the region was in the midst of a timber-boom, and many residents worked as employees for so-called “timber barons,” who contracted teams of workers to locate and extract valuable woods such as mahogany and cedar. Until the protected areas began operating at current levels of efficiency, much of this logging activity took place illegally, inside national park or biosphere reserve boundaries. Many communities also found that the national park regulations were difficult to understand and this elevated their frustrations. Little advance warning of the establishment of protected areas was given to the local indigenous populations, and when activities such-as materials collection, fishing, hunting, small-scale mining, and various other economic
pursuits were banned (or were allowed within a stringent and confusing set of rules), the communities’ exasperation increased. As a result, conflicts often arose between park managers and indigenous communities, while economic options for many dwindled.

Residents of the community of San Miguel del Bala, one of the communities highlighted in this study, coined a phrase for this difficult period of time “la larga Semana Santa,” (the long Holy Week) because for nearly two years they couldn’t afford to eat meat (a staple food for the community) as they were forbidden to enter the park to hunt on what had been their traditional hunting ground.

International NGOs, working with the Bolivian National Park Service (SERNAP) saw in these conflicts a challenge to biodiversity conservation and to sustainable development. To help curb the potential for illegal and environmentally harmful activities, and to give communities a new lifeline, national and international NGOs (with funding from international donors) began to invest in the implementation of various alternative economic initiatives. One important part of this strategy has been to encourage ethno-ecotourism in several of the region’s indigenous communities.

This thesis analyzes three ethno-ecotourism initiatives: the Chalalán ecolodge (inside the Madidi National Park); the San Miguel del Bala ecolodge; and the Mapajo ecolodge (inside the Pilón-Lajas Biosphere Reserve). The study’s aim was to determine how well ethno-ecotourism functions as a substitutive economic activity, while discovering how this activity benefits the broader conservation agenda. Research was conducted through a series of participant interviews in the three communities. Surveys addressed the following two areas of interest:

1. How is ethno-ecotourism directly substituting for less ecologically sound activities?
2. Is ethno-ecotourism providing benefits to a wide population segment?\textsuperscript{10}

An analysis of findings from participant interviews, observations and secondary data gathered during fieldwork, suggests that ethno-ecotourism in the area has had some limited effects in promoting sustainable socio-economic development. Immediate benefits have been documented in each of the cases, but these benefits are generally limited to an elite population segment. In terms of functioning substitution, that is – how far ethno-ecotourism has gone in replacing detrimental extractive activities – generally a good deal has been accomplished. An overwhelming number of those interviewed mention being involved in the commercialization of forest resources prior to national park consolidation and the arrival of ecotourism to the communities.

It should be noted that ethno-ecotourism in the region is closely monitored by donor agencies, international NGO’s and other development players. Hefty sums have been spent on project development and on training programs for indigenous guides, managers, cooks, etc. etc. But while these endeavors are succeeding, to some extent, in their mission to provide a quality and sustainable product, no form of tourism is without impact, nor is it immune from market fluctuations, political instability or natural limiting factors. Meanwhile, conventional tourism in the region is by far the biggest economic player, and is having a noticeable, though under-documented impact on ecologically fragile areas.

\textsuperscript{10} In the framework of sustainable development. According to the General Economic and Social Development Plan of Bolivia (PGDES), “sustainable development” must include measures of equality.
Chapter 2. The Zone of Study: Northwestern Lowlands Bolivia

Northwestern Bolivia is renowned for its biodiversity richness. Large and intact humid and dry forest ecosystems house over 1000 species of birds, 300 mammals, 200 reptiles and over 6000 plant species. Here also is a high level of species endemism. Conservation International carried out its very first Rapid Assessment Program (RAP) in 1991 and has since identified the area as one of 25 of Earth’s biodiversity hotspots. Parallel to this biodiversity, the region is home to 12 indigenous groups.

Figure 2.1. The Madidi National Park and Integrated Natural Management Area and Pilon-Lajas Biosphere Reserve, in context. Source: Parkwatch.org.

**Figure 2.2** Chaqueo, deforestation in process in the Bolivian Amazon. Author’s photo.

Deforestation in the zone went from less than 20,000 hectares/year in the early 1990s to more than 100,000 hectares/year by 1998. A decline in logging came with the severe Bolivian economic crises. Today, while legal and policy strides have been made, some illegal clearing persists and increased pressure from government-endorsed colonization threatens the effectiveness of protection. Conservationists are keen to point out that without proper management, planning and implementation, the zone could slip back into an extractive paradigm.
Economically the region has experienced a series of extractive booms, beginning with the rubber boom of the late 19th century and followed in close succession by: quina\textsuperscript{11}, animal hides, cocaine production and finally logging. This last boom period was characterized by extreme exploitation of the region’s timber resources, in particular of valuable tropical cedar (Cedrela odorata) and Mahogany (Swietenia macrophylla). In a short time this latter species was nearly wiped out.

\textsuperscript{11} Quina, or Cinchona, is a shrub from which Quinine can be extracted. This boom fed the anti-malarial market.
Many of the area’s local inhabitants worked as laborers during these booms, but the vast majority of benefits ended up in the hands of wealthy investors residing outside of the region or country. Accordingly, the region’s various indigenous tribes were frequently conscripted as labor for these endeavors and arguably benefited the least from these activities.

The vestiges of a hierarchical labor system based on these booms still dominate much of the economic workings of the region. Workers often rely on “adelantados” or advances – because this system is seen as a way of guaranteeing payment from (often corrupt) employers. But this payment structure fosters a system of debt and contributes to a severe distrust between employers and workers. Daniel Robison, a Bolivian consultant who lives in the Beni region of the Bolivian Amazon Basin witnessed this system:

Laborers never accumulate wealth, due to a system of debt. The norm has been loans of supplies and equipment but also money. Laborers would then return with a product (be it lumber or even coca-paste) and would then trade this product to cancel their debt. However, it was the usually better-educated businessperson who both loaned out supplies and received harvested materials – so that laborers were often taken advantage of through a system of perpetual debt. Adding to the problem has been the fast and hard life of frontier living – much of payment being spent in bars and brothels and on extravagances, instead of on an investment in the future. It is, in a way, a sort of indenturing.

To Robison, this system of exploitation and the boom town mindset are the natural products of the region’s extractive economic history. Today, 75% of the area’s economic activity is tourism-based. As will be shown in chapter 4, a long history of booms has fostered a culture of rapid exploitation, one that still threatens the wellbeing of conservation initiatives today.

Over the past two decades, a series of state reforms and new laws have begun to work towards undoing the rampant practice of unsustainable natural resource harvesting.

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12 Author interview with Daniel Robison. 02-15-2008
One part of these efforts has been the consolidation of protected areas. Another has been the trend of ethnic groups organizing to demand ownership of their traditional lands – the result of the 1996 agrarian reform law (INRA).

But there is a widespread understanding in the conservation community that these reforms, by themselves, have been unsuccessful in promoting socioeconomic alternatives for development in the area. Several authors say that alternative economic initiatives are needed to reinforce the effectiveness of reforms, or the region’s broad conservation efforts will be doomed to failure.

Bolivia is one of the most biologically diverse regions on the planet is housed in the poorest country in South America, a country where both socioeconomic stagnation and reckless ambitions for development have lead to substantial biodiversity degradation and loss. Conservation International and the World Wildlife Fund have placed the Bolivian Amazon forest at the top of their global protection-priority list because of the levels of peril the region faces (Dinerstein, et.al, Conservation International, 1995).

Conservation efforts have advanced from the creation of the first species-protection-laws in the late nineteenth century and followed by the creation of the first national park in the mid-twentieth century, the implementation of the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity, the formulation of a national biodiversity strategy, and a current national protected-area-coverage of more than 16% of the national territory. But severe conflicts are arising as development in the country accelerates. Sensitive eco-regions see growing threats in the form of population shifts from the Andes to the forest lowlands, increasing agricultural activities, a growing oil and gas sector, deforestation and climate change – as well as a host of other activities.
2.1 Ethno-ecotourism

Ethno-ecotourism, that is, tourism to an area with both a “natural” and “indigenous” component is just one of a wide variety of alternative economic initiatives proposed by conservation actors in the region of study. Beyond perceived environmental benefits, ethno-ecotourism is presented by these actors as a means by which indigenous populations can maintain cultural relevance through economic sustainability (see Parkswatch.org web-inform, Pilón-Lajas Biosphere Reserve). Still, it is acknowledged that such initiatives have a marked impact both in terms of cultural autonomy as well as with regard to biodiversity conservation\textsuperscript{13}.

The Landscape Conservation Program, a USAID-funded consortium of national and international NGO’s has assisted in the development, implementation and ongoing assessment of several ethno-ecotourism initiatives in their project to “integrate governability, participation, planning and local capacity building” to promote “sustainable economic growth and biodiversity conservation” in the Amboró-Madidi Conservation Corridor.\textsuperscript{14} With these initiatives the project aims to strengthen income substitution incentives\textsuperscript{15} impelled by these ethno-ecotourism endeavors, while promoting biodiversity-conservation. The economic viability of these substitutive activities as well as their conservational capacity is often a matter of discussion. Many studies point to the

\textsuperscript{14} Internal memo, Programa de Conservación de Paisajes, 2006. Conservation Corridors are linkages between protected areas. In part, the strategy looks to connect wide swaths of protected areas. Studies show Conservation Corridors especially benefit populations of “mega-fauna” such as elk and wild cats – that have a wide migratory range. The AMC runs from the Peruvian border to central eastern Bolivia, covering 139,000 hectares and spanning 4 Bolivian provinces. It is part of the larger Vilcabamba-Amboró Conservation Corridor.
\textsuperscript{15} Income substitution here refers to the mitigation of biodiversity loss through the replacement of a previous economic endeavor with one that works more closely with sustainable development strategies – though does not refer always to complete replacement, but supplementation (Interview with Conservation International Bolivia Projects Coordinator José Ayala).
overarching importance of protected areas legislation and natural resource management in conservation. But conflicts between protected areas managers and local populations are common, as the perception on the ground is often that conservation-minded laws infringe upon communities’ potential to develop economically.

Bolivian representatives from the NGO Conservation International (CI) say that without an alternative, these communities have little recourse for socioeconomic wellbeing and that a planning strategy to maintain sustainable growth and biodiversity conservation is crucial. They advocate formation of viable alternative initiatives – like tourism – not only to reduce the instances of those activities they deem to be environmentally harmful – but also to reinforce the effectiveness of national and international protected areas legislation.

“Ethno-ecotourism” is employed as an alternative economic initiative (to presumably more harmful environmental activities), to great acclaim. Understanding how effectively these projects are implemented and sustained will provide greater insight for managers. Therefore, in seeking to explain these presumed successes, this thesis seeks to appraise the sustainability of this type of alternative economic initiative via market and environmental evaluative procedures.

Specifically, this thesis reviews income substitution incentives\(^\text{16}\) impelled by these alternative initiatives, while examining the extent to which ethno-ecotourism in the region of study is succeeding in promoting biodiversity-conservation. Key to this assessment is the appraisal of the economic viability of these substitutive activities as

\(^{16}\)Income substitution here refers to the mitigation of biodiversity loss through the replacement of a previous economic endeavor with one that works more closely with sustainable development strategies – though does not refer always to complete replacement, but supplementation (Interview with Conservation International Bolivia Projects Coordinator José Ayala).
well as conservational capacity – as expressed in levels of community capacity levels and environmental awareness.

A thorough examination of these initiatives will help to shed light on these issues for the immediate actors involved and, additionally, for those conservation and natural resource managers worldwide who might consider these classes of initiatives in protection and conservation development.

2.2 Recent Legislation, Laws and Norms

A series of key policy initiatives came into being in the mid 1990’s that greatly affected natural resource use-dynamics in Bolivia. The key aims of these strategies are: promoting sustainable forest management; implementing a less-corrupt forest-fees system; reducing illegal forest use; stimulating community forest management; increasing land security for various stakeholders; legalizing traditional and indigenous forest-use structures; and creating stronger institutional frameworks.

Chief among these initiatives is the forestry law (No 1700), which was ratified in 1996. The forestry law is a guide for regulating forest-rights access, taxation and management and defines the roles of various institutions in implementing and maintaining this policy. Implementing this law has been tied to the success of other laws, especially the law of agrarian reform (INRA), the law of popular participation, and the environmental law – which emphasizes the protection and conservation of rainforest, and the sustainable use of forest resources.

The Law of Popular Participation decentralized a series of responsibilities related to territorial planning – transferring them to municipal governments and allocating a
portion of the national budget to the effort. As a result of this law, municipal governments were given control over local taxes, while local representational groups – including organized groups of local farmers, municipal committees and indigenous groups (called Organizaciones Territoriales de Base or OTBs) were entrusted with part of the municipal budgets.

In 1994, an amendment to the Constitution granted indigenous communities the exclusive use of their ancestral lands. The new designation of Indigenous Communal Land or Tierra Comunitaria de Origen (TCO) gave these groups the legal right to commercially use forest resources on their land. Prior to this amendment, indigenous groups had access to these resources, but no formal land title provided exclusivity, and most indigenous land was considered public.

The confusion over what claim indigenous groups had to the resources on their lands led to several conflicts under previous legislation – as many cattle ranchers, migrant peasants and industrial forest operators would infringe on what indigenous groups claimed was rightfully theirs. Often, indigenous lands overlapped with forest concessions or national parks and frequently, local authorities sold historically indigenous lands to private interests.

In the Beni region, conflicts between protected area managers and indigenous groups were frequent before the normalization of tribal lands, as park officials often punished indigenous populations for not adhering to protected area norms. On more than one occasion these conflicts threatened to turn violent\(^\text{17}\). Today, these conflicts have not

\(^{17}\) Interview with Madidi park guards, 10.10.2007.
entirely subsided – while new conflicts have emerged as a result of large-scale migrant colonization – spurred on by president Evo Morales’s land reform agenda.

2.3 Alternative Economic Initiatives and Sustainable Tourism

Because of continued threats to the region’s exceptional ecology, the zone continues to be a focal point for international conservation advocacy. National and international conservation and development actors in the region employ a wide variety of tactics to combat deforestation and environmental deterioration while promoting sustainable development. One secondary tactic (as opposed to regional planning and protected area management) is the encouragement of alternative economic initiatives over less sustainable established activities. These initiatives include the development of renewable agro-forestry products such as jatata and estera (palm products), cacao, brazil nuts, coffee, honey and renewable timbers. It also includes less materials-based productive initiatives like “ethno-ecotourism.”18 Versions of this kind of tourism have flourished worldwide as a response to the perceived need to preserve indigenous culture and customs, while providing market structures to combat the extreme poverty from which indigenous groups frequently suffer. It is also presented as a means for promoting alternatives to potentially damaging, extractive economic activities (see Parkswatch.org web-inform, Pilón-Lajas Biosphere Reserve). Still, it is acknowledged that such initiatives can have a negative impact both in terms of cultural autonomy as well as with regard to biodiversity conservation (Ham, Sam H., PH.D research, 2001).

18 The term is growing in scope in the academic literature. Ecotourism is broadly defined as “travel to destinations where the flora, fauna, and cultural heritage are the primary attractions” - by the UN World Tourism Organization. Varied definitions exist.
Sustainable tourism has seen a surge in growth in the region. Within this sphere, ethno-ecotourism is considered the activity with the highest growth-potential for countries in the region, and endeavors are flourishing in Brazil, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia. But what are the factors that distinguish tourism as ‘sustainable?’ Social inclusion, equal access to opportunities and benefits and low environmental impact are usually sited as prerequisites to “sustainability.” But providing equal job market access to groups with historical difficulties in market-inclusion can be a challenge. Indigenous communities are often far-removed from urban entrepreneurial centers. But their product, an unparalleled cultural, historical and natural richness, is unique. These elements are strengthening the actions and projects of indigenous and community tourism, emphasizing not only natural wealth and biological diversity as a tourism driver, but also the unique cultural wealth of indigenous and rural communities, factors that combine to create a greater comparative advantage for the industry.

Among all of Bolivia’s productive activities, tourism, for many years was considered in inappropriate development tool, despite its known local and rural economic potential. In 2005, tourism was Bolivia’s third most productive industry, after the natural gas and soy sectors. Tourism brought in $187 million and directly or indirectly was responsible for the creation of more than 60,000 Bolivian jobs (UDAPE 2005). However, investment in tourism has historically been quite low. Between 1991 and 2004 only $314,000 of public funding was earmarked for tourism.

Tourism in Bolivia grew 4.5% with 390,888 arrivals in 2005. At the same time, tourism to Protected Areas increased 28% (SERNAP 2004) with a growth of more of the 100% in the last five years (SERNAP 2004, Maple & Shepherd 2000). As a result,
tourism has taken on a new importance within Bolivia’s development discourse. Sustainable developers believe that this activity, if treated properly, can have a multiplying effect in rural areas while allowing a greater redistribution to population segments who find themselves marginalized from other economic activities. Furthermore, the aim of all of the ethno-ecotourism ventures in the area is to achieve self-sustainability, and self-management. But making a micro-enterprise such as ecotourism viable requires more than just aspiring to do so. As Rodrigo Mariaca, who runs a guide training program for Conservation International points out, there are a number of things a community needs before it can engage in ecotourism. Primarily, a community has to have some sort of attraction. “Ecotourism that simply visits the forest isn’t usually viable and so there needs to be something that can be sold, such as a geologic or natural phenomenon, or particular catalogued wildlife,” Mariaca explained in an interview. “Furthermore a community has to have the real desire and capacity to implement a business; and what I mean to say here is that a community has to have leaders who have vision.” Finally, Mariaca says a community will eventually have to have training to make a project work. “Guides will have to be trained in natural interpretation, ecolodge staff need to know how to cater to visitors, and managers will have to learn how to sell their product.”

While a variety of NGO’s and international donors were on board for the founding of the tourism projects highlighted in this study, two of these endeavors have achieved complete autonomy from these organizations – mainly because of their ability to see their work through autonomously. And so it can be said that today, ethno-

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19 Author interview. (11.01.2007)
ecotourism is playing a major part in the development of sustainable tourism, which can itself serve as a greater tool for promoting viable bases for local development and biodiversity conservation.
Chapter 3, Methodology

This thesis investigation was conducted under the broad framework of sustainable development. Sustainable development is broadly defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

The concept of ethno-ecotourism is consistent with the theoretical tenets of sustainable development that promote integrated environmental, socioeconomic and cultural development. A relatively strict definition of ethno-ecotourism, as defined by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), has been adopted for this study: “environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed natural areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature (and any accompanying cultural features – both past and present) that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations.”

Each case will be evaluated against this definition.

In any evaluation of ecotourism, it should be recognized that those impacts revealed will differ depending upon what perspective is taken. For example, from an industry perspective, the impact of tourism is generally weighed in terms of economic indicators – so that employment rates, income levels and foreign exchange earnings are evaluated in terms of their contributions to national accounts and multiplier effects.

Governments typically adopt this perspective and treat tourism like any other industry in the economy. While a community-based perspective does not ignore economic impacts, it

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20 This definition was created in 1987 at the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission). It is similar to the “seventh generation” philosophy of the North American Native Iroquois Confederacy, which mandates that indigenous leaders always consider the effects of their actions on their descendants “seven generations in the future.”

views tourism as a strategy for stimulating positive change at the site level, in terms of how community welfare is improved. The scope of impacts is widened to include a variety of socioeconomic, cultural and environmental costs and benefits. In this approach, economic impacts (in terms of employment and income generation) are important. Still, there is concern for the kinds of opportunities that are being created, who receives benefits, and how economic benefits are distributed. Additionally, there is an unambiguous acknowledgement that economic impacts are tied closely to and even responsible for, social, cultural and environmental impacts (Ross et al., 1999). This study evaluates ecotourism from a community-based perspective.

The primary research question sought to determine to what extent ethno-ecotourism in the region of study succeeds in promoting biodiversity-conservation. Key to this assessment was an appraisal of the economic viability (via income substitution) of these initiatives. As a result, this thesis is as much about socioeconomic development as it is about conservation. Reinforcing sustainable activities is seen as a key to the development future of the region, especially given the environmental toll of a series of historical extractive economic booms.

3.1 The Cases: Research Methods

Three community-based, ethno-ecotourism ventures are active in the area: the Chalalán ecolodge, the Mapajo ecolodge and the San Miguel del Bala ecolodge. All three endeavors profess to be the flagship enterprises of each respective community. Marketing literature for all of the ecolodges point to community participation, and a patron-beneficiary relationship. Project leaders aim to reinforce the local economy’s agricultural and artisan sectors by somehow incorporating these activities into their business plans.
The project was conducted as a case study and comparative evaluation comprised the primary analytical procedure. Research involved interviews with project participants and partners involved in the ongoing evolution and administration of the identified subject cases: three indigenous communities and the ethno-ecotourism ventures they administer.

The research project entailed both descriptive and analytical tasks. The descriptive section begins with an introduction to the state of conservation and natural resource management activity in the area. Subsequently, an examination of the historical development of ethno-ecotourism in the region – and how it relates to sustainability – is set out. Informing this historical chapter are 1.) previously published work on conservation in the region, both academic and from periodicals, and 2.) information obtained from survey-interviews with actors involved in the implementation of alternative economic initiatives from the region (with an obvious emphasis on ethno-ecotourism) and from others possessing key knowledge of these topics.

The analytical section of the project acknowledges the key link between conservation and economic initiatives. The evaluative criteria for the thesis’s focus area are: income substitution, economic throughput and conservational capacity. A project’s economic viability will have broad impacts on its ability to achieve a stated aim: in this case, at least in part, ecosystem conservation.

It was believed that the effects of income substitution upon the economic and physical landscape would be measurable. Through a survey process, this research sought to determine the levels of those residents currently engaged in ethno-ecotourism who otherwise are or have been engaged in practices that are considered less environmentally-
sustainable. Through survey collection, research sought to show extant levels of functioning income substitution, but also to generally highlight incidence of participation in so-called harmful practices prior to protected area consolidation. But as research advanced, it became apparent that establishing direct income measurements was a virtual impossibility. Life in these communities, for the majority of residents, has been and remains one of day-to-day existence based on subsistence farming and supplemented by small economic endeavors.

Of parallel interest to this study is the importance of protected areas and conservation legislation in the area of ethno-ecotourism. All of the cases saw their lives and livelihoods transformed immensely when the land they inhabited acquired protected area status. Many have envisioned ecotourism as “the only possibility left” to those communities whose development dreams didn’t match the vision extolled by the Bolivian national park service (SERNAP).

Benefits that stem from expenditures on conservation – and income that can be attributed to, even in a relational way, the existence of the protected areas were to be detailed. Isolating and measuring the economic benefits tied to protected areas and ethno-ecotourism in the area has also turned out to be a broad and difficult task. It was hoped that by examining percentages of visitors to the region who engage in this kind of tourism or who visit protected areas and by comparing these figures to the overall economic landscape, a relative fiscal impact could be determined. But tangible data in this area has been scarce or very difficult to procure.

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22 by Conservation advocates and Sustainable Development proponents working in the zone – who identified certain activities they are attempting to mitigate. i.e. logging, cane-plantation, large-scale coca production, illegal hunting, other commercial development opportunities.
The conclusion to this analysis highlights the implications revealed in this case study while providing a frame of reference for those interested in employing similar practices in other conservation hot spots.

### 3.2 A Note on the Difficulties of Investigation in the Region

Travel around the Beni region is fraught with difficulties, and accessing the case sites was frequently a daunting task. Reaching the village of San José de Uchupiamonas, for example, consisted of an arduous journey that started by boat, proceeded by thumb and finally entailed a strenuous 8-hour hike through the jungle. Many factors, most notably weather and social unrest delayed research. Any researcher working in the area will need to contact the communities in advance as surprise visits often find a lack of receptivity, and generally require the planning of a second, long and arduous journey.
Chapter 4, Local Development and Protected Areas in Northern Lowlands Bolivia

As mentioned in chapter two, conservationists advocate the formation of viable alternative initiatives – like tourism – not only to reduce the instances of those activities they deem to be environmentally harmful – but also to reinforce the effectiveness of national and international protected areas legislation. This section seeks to highlight the history of the protected areas in the zone of study.

Twenty-five years ago there was just one protected area in all of Bolivia, the Sajama National Park (Latin America’s oldest protected area). In 1992 Bolivia’s National System of Protected Areas (known as SNAP) was established with the ratification of Bolivia’s Law of the Environment. As a result, today, Bolivia has a network of more than 20 nationally recognized protected areas that cover nearly 17 million hectares, or 15% of the national territory.

Madidi National Park and AMNI

The Madidi National Park and Natural Area of Integrated Management (AMNI) was created by Supreme Decree No. 24123 in 1995. In 1990 Conservation International carried out their very first Rapid Assessment Program (RAP) and confirmed the Area’s biological importance (Conservation International, 1991). However, only in 1992 were formal steps taken by the Secretaria Nacional del Medio Ambiente (SENMA) in the form of a project for the proposal of the Park. During that same year, the NGO Fundación Eco-Bolivia, with support from the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), initiated a process of discussion with the local communities, which lead to the signing of letters approving the creation of a Park. Subsequently, the civic representatives of the Franz
Tamayo and Iturralde Provinces also expressed their support of the Park in a meeting with the National Council for Biodiversity Conservation (DNCB).

**Figure 4.1** The Madidi National Park & Integrated Management Natural Area. Source: Parkswatch

Madidi National Park and AMNI has an estimated total area of 1,895,750 hectares (SERNAP, 1999) located entirely within the Northwest of the Department of La Paz in the Provinces of Franz Tamayo and Iturralde. Three Municipalities have jurisdiction in the Park: Apolo, San Buenaventura and Ixiamas. The Park is divided into three zones: a Northwestern area of 1,046,750 hectares and a Southeastern area of 224,750 hectares both with the category of National Park and in between these two, runs a corridor of
624,250 hectares with the category of AMNI. In this AMNI there are a number of communities of Quechua or Quechua/Tacana roots. On the West side, the Park boundary shares a long stretch with the frontier with Peru and is adjacent to the National Park Bahuaja Sonene, the Tambopata – Candamo Zona Reservada and the Santuario Pampas del Heath in that Country. To the South, it is adjacent to the Apolobamba National Park and AMNI (which incorporates the smaller Ulla Ulla Biosphere Reserve) and to the East it has a 40 km boundary with the Pilón Lajas Biosphere Reserve and Indigenous Territory (TCO).

**Pilón Lajas Biosphere Reserve and Indigenous Communal Lands**

In 1975, Pilón Lajas was named as a National Park under the Ley de Vida Silvestre, Parques Nacionales, Caza y Pesca (Legal Decree No. 12301) but it was not formally recognized by the Bolivian Government. In 1977, it was designated as a Biosphere Reserve by the Man and the Biosphere Program (MAB) of UNESCO but no attempt was made to implement its management during subsequent years. With the opening of the Yucumo – Rurrenabaque road in 1978 there was spontaneous colonization in the region and logging companies began working in the forests. In 1991, the Indigenous communities affected by this colonization, officially requested that the Area become a National Park and Indigenous Territory.

The Pilón Lajas Biosphere Reserve and Indigenous Communal Territory was created in 1992 by Supreme Decree No. 23110. It includes 400,000 a hectare area, nearly 70% of the Rurrenabaque municipal jurisdiction and parts of the Sud-Yungas and Franz Tamayo provinces in the department of La Paz.
This region area has been important for the exploitation of valuable forest species such as mahogany (Swietenia macrophylla) and cedar (Cedrella sp.) since the end of the 1970’s. A sizeable portion of the region’s semi-urban population traditionally earned a living extracting and quarter-cutting logs with a chainsaw, earning the nickname “cuartoneros” (quarter-cutters) or “motosierristas” (chainsaw men). Various lumber companies also operated in the area with some kind of logging authorization generally obtained prior to the declarations of the protected areas (though some of these permits were of questionable legal origin). Several of these companies adjusted to the system
promoted by the 1996 Forestry Law while others gave up their areas due to problems of judicial insecurity.

The *motosierristas* traditionally enjoyed a great deal of influence over the local government of the semi-urban town of Rurrenabaque. Logging used to be the municipality’s main economic activity, and the lands that became the two nearby protected areas were the major field of operations for this business. This group, together with the settler communities surrounding the protected areas, systematically and unrelentingly boycotted Veterinarians without Borders (VSF), an international NGO that had obtained the rights to administer the Pilón Lajas RB-TI in 1996, and on several occasions, the offices of the Madidi National Park. Despite attempts by VSF to form a management committee, administration of the Pilón Lajas area failed because of strong opposition from a local population that felt threatened by the protected areas.

Toward the end of the nineties, the area was restored to the national Protected Areas Service (SERNAP). The new administration dissolved the management committee to avoid local political interference. It also established strong links with the indigenous communities residing within the area and formulated a tourist development project with indigenous participation aimed at generating direct benefits for the conservation of these communities. A new management committee was then proposed with majority participation by representatives of the indigenous communities in the area to reduce the pressure from other local stakeholders.

The area’s current administration has strongly fought the informal activities of logging interests within the reserve and has been quite successful thanks to support from the Forest Supervisory Office and thanks also, to backing by indigenous organizations.
The possibilities of creating a municipal forest reserve was a factor that partially helped reduce the pressure on the reserve from the motosierristas. In the new setting, the area’s administration expanded its alliances with local groups, including the municipal government, to keep the logging companies from coming inside the area with forest concessions. Now, park officials have to struggle with a host of new threats – from migrant peasants to foreign interested mining and gas groups. The challenge for indigenous communities and policy makers is to discover or create opportunities that will provide sustainable development to subvert or avoid these threats. Tourism is seen as one sector that could possibly provide such opportunities.

4.1 Land Use in the Region: A History of Extraction

Authors Ruth Silva, Daniel Robison, Sheila McKean and Patricia Álvarez describe seven historical periods that have had great influence over the development paradigm that survives today in the northwestern Bolivian Amazon. A series of economic booms have created what Robison calls a “frontier, boom-town mentality.” This mindset, as Robison describes it, is reminiscent of the “tragedy of the commons” described by Garett Hardin in his 1968 Science essay of the same name. In this area of Bolivia, this mentality owes as much to historical factors as it does to market tendencies.

The Pre-Hispanic period.

Anthropologists in the region conclude that it is likely that the pre-conquest population was much larger than it is today. A large number of tribes, with great linguistic diversity lived in this tropical zone. There is evidence of a limited late-Incan “military” presence in the zone and it is thought that for centuries prior, the tribes of the

23 Author interview, 02.12.2008
lowlands engaged in trade, both of products and knowledge, with their distant highland neighbors. The same exchange routes used by Incans and lowland tribes alike became the paths for Spanish conquistadors. The effects on natural resource use at the time would have been entirely sustainable; the groups depended on fishing, hunting and limited agricultural technology for their survival.

**The Colonial Period (1536-1824)**

In their search for El Dorado or El Paititi\(^24\) - the Spanish undertook several military expeditions that brought them to the zone of study. Later, various missionary expeditions arrived and several missions began the work of consolidating the various ethnicities under the banner of religion. Several missions from this period still exist today, now as towns or villages – including Ixiamas, Tumupasa and San José de Uchupiamonas (one of the three communities examined in this study). These missions were founded, destroyed and re-founded on several occasions. There are various reasons for this instability, but the two most recognized causes are disease, brought by the Spanish, and inter-tribal warfare. Due to decreases in population and, as a result of population-concentration, environmental impacts during this period were likely low, whereas the socio-cultural impact of this period was severe. Several cultures disappeared entirely during colonization, and others, such as the Tacana, have been consolidated into much less diverse cultural entities.

**Early Republic and Quina (1825-1880)**

This period was characterized by the explosion in the exploitation of quina or Cinchona bark for Quinine production. Here, we see the first establishment of a patron-system of land use – in which species are exhaustively exploited (the boom mentality

\(^24\) Paititi was one of several Spanish conceptions of lost Incan “cities of gold.”
described above). The majority of the population worked solely in this endeavor – leading to large population displacement, the creation of new communities and the opening up of once untouched productive zones. As a result of economic activity and the demand for quinine, various haciendas were established to provide coca and alcohol – putting further social pressures on local populations. Besides merely seeking quina, workers subsisted from hunting and fishing. This was the beginning of a long period of fauna-overexploitation, one of the secondary effects of extractive natural resource booms.

**The Rubber Boom (1880-1917)**

This boom was also defined by increased social and environmental impact. The area saw increased depopulation with the rise for labor demand in the principal rubber area to the north, near Riberalta and the Brazilian border. Eventually, this boom migrated south, and the early 20\(^{th}\) century saw severe rubber exploitation in the lands that are today the Madidi National Park and the Pilón Lajas Biosphere Reserve. Again, a hacienda system was created to meet the coca, alcohol and food demands of laborers. During this same period, cattle farming began to take its toll on natural lands, feeding both the new populations and growing Peruvian demand. Agricultural activity began during this period to have its effect on ecosystems, notably near the mission town of Apolo. New inroads into forests were developed to service agricultural activity, and these roads remain today as paths for resource exploitation, illegal logging, and new colonization.

**The Hacienda Period (1917-1964)**

This period is also marked by extractive activities – especially those related to the Second World War. During this period, transforming the area north of La Paz into a development zone became part of the political agenda. The high expectations for wealth
and development born during this period remain in place, and largely unrealized, today. During this period, and particularly in the 1930’s mineral and oil exploration become a new driving factor for the region’s development. Also during this period, as a result of agrarian reform, communities begin the process of unionization – and this structure starts to replace traditional social structures.

**Fur, Hide and Cocaine (1964-1985)**

This boom period had a disproportionate social and environmental impact, given its short time span. The boom began with a surge in fur and hide harvesting that had great impact on the populations of so-called megafauna in the region. Soon after came a short boom in drug trafficking within what is today the Madidi Park and its “zone of influence,” which has had some lasting effects on illicit trade practices in the area. During this period also there was a noted boom in migration – the result of a government development call for “marches towards the north of La Paz.” It was at this time that national and regional leaders began to envision the area as an agro-industrial sugar cane center.

Finally, this period is characterized as a time of road penetration. At the beginning of this epoch, the main forms of transport in the area was by horse or burro or via precarious boat travel. By the end of this period there were highways, although not entirely consolidated, which united Ixiamas in the North with Apolo in the South. These highways served as inroads for scouts and other workers who were employed in the region’s next, and perhaps most ecologically damaging economic boom.

**Logging (1986-2001)**
This boom, which lasted until very recently, was characterized by extreme exploitation of the region’s timber resources, in particular of mahogany (Swietenia macrophylla). In a short time this valuable species was nearly wiped out.

Many of the area’s local inhabitants worked as laborers during these booms, but the vast majority of benefits ended up in the hands of wealthy investors residing outside of the region or country. By the same token, the region’s various indigenous tribes were frequently conscripted as labor for these endeavors and arguably benefited the least from these activities.

Over the past two decades, a series of state reforms and new laws have begun to work towards undoing the rampant practice of unsustainable natural resource harvesting. One part of these efforts has been the consolidation of protected areas. Another has been the trend of ethnic groups organizing to demand ownership of their traditional lands – the result of the 1996 agrarian reform law (INRA).

As part of these reforms, the Madidi and Pilón-Lajas protected areas came into existence. Finally, as a result of the Law of Agrarian Reform (INRA), and after strong cooperation between indigenous movements, different ethnic groups began to organize themselves into Indigenous Communal Lands or Tierras Comunitarias de Origen (TCO). Today, some in the region see the advent of tourism as just another economic boom

4.2 Conservation Conflicts

As mentioned above, through the early 2000’s, the region of study was in the midst of one of many economic booms. Logging represented nearly 80% of all economic
activity in the town of Rurrenabaque. With the emergence of an operating Pilón-Lajas Biosphere Reserve administration and with the creation of the Madidi National Park, local residents often found themselves on the wrong side of the law.

During the past decade the zone has remained a center for conservation activities. While the national parks have greatly advanced conservation interests, they have established restrictions on economic activity for populations living inside of and around the protected areas. During the timber-boom many residents worked as employees for so-called “timber barons,” who contracted teams of workers to locate and extract valuable woods such as mahogany and cedar. Until the protected areas began operating at current levels of efficiency, much of this logging activity took place illegally, inside national park or biosphere reserve boundaries. Many communities also found that the national

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25 Personal Interview with consultant and Rurrenabaque resident Dan Robison, 02.12.2008
park regulations were difficult to understand and this elevated their frustrations. Little advance warning of the establishment of protected areas was given to the local indigenous populations, and when activities such as materials collection, fishing, hunting, small-scale mining, and various other economic pursuits were either banned (or were allowed within a stringent and confusing set of rules), the communities expressed frustration. Addressing these conflicts, one community member of Tacana origin said, “we didn’t know what a Madidi Park was.” Most of those interviewed expressed this same sentiment – usually coupled with resentment at the lack of any forewarning to the park’s creation.

Conflicts often arose between park managers and indigenous communities because economic options had dwindled for many. Residents of the community of San Miguel del Bala coined a phrase for this difficult period of time “La larga semana santa,” (the long holy week - a reference to the traditional Easter fast) because for nearly two years they couldn’t afford to eat meat (a staple food for the community) and they were forbidden to enter the park to hunt on what had been their traditional hunting ground.

Residents of San Miguel said that their conflict with the Madidi National Park began with the park’s conception. One activity prohibited by the park was the collection of materials for local construction (mainly Jatata – a palm-leaf roofing product) at the confluence of the Tuichi and Beni rivers – the traditional gathering collection area for such materials for Bala community members. After the formation of the national park in 1995, this activity – as well as logging, hunting and fishing was prohibited. Other community members described the confiscation of timber by park authorities. Many “Migueleños” said that they worked as chainsaw operators, porters or contract labor for
timber agencies during the 20-year boom in the industry in the area and most recounted occasions when park authorities tried to confiscate their product. These confiscations lead to frequent confrontations that on more than one occasion threatened to turn violent.

Members of the community of Asunción de Quiquibey, inside the Pilón Lajas Biosphere Reserve had a similar story. As Guido Mamani, a community leader and project coordinator said:

We have to acknowledge that our community was deeply involved in the legal and illegal timber trade. When [park rangers] from the Reserve came and said we couldn’t do this anymore we were lost. The [Mapajo] tourism project is what happened when we couldn’t continue to do what we were doing...We told the Reserve that this is what we wanted...

International NGOs, working with the Bolivian National Park Service (SERNAP) saw in these conflicts a challenge to biodiversity conservation and to sustainable development. To help curb the potential for illegal and environmentally harmful activities, and to give communities a new lifeline, national and international NGOs (with funding from international donors) began to invest in the implementation of various alternative economic initiatives. The region already had a long history of so-called adventure tourism and, in fact, some indigenous communities were already informally involved in housing visiting (mostly European and Israeli) backpackers. These efforts have increasingly been coupled with intensive environmental education initiatives. The fundamental importance of this educative effort was underscored by one member of the international conservation community who works in the region this way:

The environmental movement that we see today is a relatively recent phenomenon. For many indigenous groups that reside in natural areas, the idea of ‘environmentalism’ can be a difficult thing to internalize. While mother earth is sacred for them, and is the provider of all their needs, that doesn’t necessarily mean that they have a...conservation
mindset. Making communities aware of the fragility, or of the exceptionality of the ecosystems they live in remains...a bit of a chore for us.26,

As a result of these efforts, and in the wake of land titling for indigenous groups, a new conflict threat is emerging in northern Bolivia. Migrant colonists – spurred on by president Evo Morales’s land reform agenda – have been pushing into Bolivia’s lowlands in search of new coca-growing (for example) regions. These groups often ignore legal protected area or TCO boundaries in their quest for a new home. Generally employing disquieting slash-and-burn techniques to create the conditions for agricultural cultivation or raising livestock, these incursions are putting a strain on protected area and TCO managers who are forced into a policing role. Legal boundaries are not being respected, and this is playing out as a struggle for survival, pitting indigenous communities against each other.

In the next chapters, three of these communities are highlighted. Each has its own history of conflict, and each is attempting to employ new development methods to try to avert two essential and persistent problems: extreme poverty and the continued assault on the region’s exceptional biodiversity.

26 Interview with Canadian Development volunteer. 02.13.2008
Chapter 5, The case of Asunción de Quiquibey

5.1 Site Description and Overview

The community of Asunción de Quiquibey, on the Quiquibey River inside the Pilón-Lajas Biosphere Reserve created the “Proyecto Mapajo” in 2000 with assistance from the United Nations Development Programme, the Regional Support Programme for Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon Basin and donor agencies from Canada, United States, France and Britain. The project was modeled after the CI/San José de Uchupiamonas Chalalán project (see chapter 7) but at a fraction of the cost. The community consists of over 400 residents of Tsimán and Mosetén origin who are administrated by the Consejo Regional Tsimane Mosetén (CRTM) the governing head of the relevant TCO (Tierra Comunitaria de Orígen)\(^\text{27}\).

Figure 5.1 A tourist bungalow at the Mapajo ecolodge. Author’s photo.

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\(^{27}\) As described in chapter 4, TCO is the legal term referring to indigenous territories (after a titling process) in Bolivia. In 1996, the concept of indigenous territory was included in Bolivia’s new agrarian reform law after an extensive push for inclusion by indigenous-rights leaders.
As in the other communities highlighted in this study, in the past the areas surrounding Asunción experienced a severe process of timber extraction, which caused an increase in deforestation and a dramatic decrease in valuable wood species. Many indigenous people from the area were involved in this activity, working as guides, chainsaw operators, porters or hunters. Many residents of Asunción claimed that no other income-producing opportunities were available to them during this time period. With the creation of the protected area in 1992, these activities – cited by environmentalists as drivers of deforestation and habitat loss – were suspended, and isolated tourism in the immediate area began – generally led by external private agencies. This situation rarely benefitted indigenous locals. In 1998, the official community and government entity of Asunción, (the Organización Territorial de Base, or OTB) engaged in investigating ways to combat the communities growing crisis of means. Only after considering and rejecting other alternative productive initiatives (including fruit farming), did leaders from Asunción embrace the idea of a tourism project. Originally this project was meant to incorporate several other villages in the area, but the distance between these communities – and a lack of leadership proved too great for a coordinated effort to occur and eventually, the community of Asunción became the sole participant.

The name “Mapajo” comes from a tree of the same name – a tropical hardwood with an exceptionally large canopy. One project leader said that residents of Asunción say chose the Mapajo as their symbol because it represented “a return to respecting the forest.”

Here is this tree that has long been seen as a protector of the forest. Now our job should be to do the same.
5.2 Findings: Income Substitution and Conservation Relationships

Most of the residents surveyed in Asunción complained that opportunities stemming from the Proyecto Mapajo are limited and that benefits go to a small few.

One woman interviewed repeated a common complaint this way:

I don’t really care about [the Mapajo tourism project]. They keep saying this is to help the community of Asunción. That’s what all the tourists are told. But they should stop using our name, the name of Asunción, until they are really giving us jobs; until they are really helping us.

On this point managers from Mapajo say they assisted in the construction of a schoolhouse in Asunción and pay for educational supplies. Still they admit that operational costs and low tourist revenue to date has been an obstacle to achieving better results in the community. According to administrators at the ecolodge, a number of factors have limited their success to-date. Primarily, Mapajo’s distance from the population and tourism center of Rurrenabaque hinders accessibility, especially in the wet season. The boat journey to the village of Asunción is nearly 4 hours and many tourists, who visit the region with limited time to spare opt for a less-distant outing. The majority of those who engage in tourism in the region are either on route between destinations or on a very temporary side trip from the more visited Bolivian tourist venues of the Uyuni Salt Flats and Lake Titicaca. Those who come are often unwilling to dedicate the time it takes to get to the Mapajo lodge.

Income substitution levels are currently negligible as most residents are engaged in subsistence farming. Many community members engaged in logging through the late 1990’s. The cessation of this activity resulted mainly from efforts to curb illegal clearing by administrators of the Pilón-Lajas Protected area, and is not a result of the ethno-ecotourism project. However, it bears repeating that the objective of these
initiatives, according to conservation advocates, is to reinforce the environmental standards put in place by the protected area while providing an alternative means of earning for local communities.

Of the 22 residents interviewed in this case, 68% (n=15) said that at least one family member had been involved in timber extraction during the recent boom in that activity. As in both of the other cases, residents of Asunción rely mainly on subsistence agriculture for their survival, especially in the wake of reduced job opportunities. Over 40% (n=9) of those interviewed said that someone in their family had lost employment after the 1992 establishment of the Pilón Lajas Biosphere Reserve. Soon after the reserve’s creation there occurred what several residents remembered as a “large exodus” from Asunción, where many families, perhaps as many as 15, relocated to other communities in search of a more stable livelihood.

Since that exodus, representatives from the Pilón Lajas Reserve have worked with the community to help them delineate the best areas for hunting and engaging in small agriculture legally on their lands. Still, illegal harvesting in the area is not unheard of and occasionally small quantities of illegally harvested timber are confiscated by park officials. When asked about these confiscations, residents of Asunción said that other villages inside of the 400,000 a hectare park were likely to blame – but that even when local and indigenous residents harvest illegal products “it is outsiders who are paying for the work and who are taking the wood.”

Very few residents of Asunción had a grasp of the reasoning behind the creation of the reserve. Two residents even believed the reserve was actually a private facility

28 From interview with an elderly Asunción resident. The comment calls to mind the exploitation of local labor during many of the other regional extractive booms.
owned by a foreigner. Only 5 mentioned forest protection as being an important reason for maintaining the preserve – while several residents expressed an interest in returning to commercialized hunting and logging, if such an opportunity presented itself.

When asked whether the establishment of the Pilón-Lajas Biosphere Reserve had had a positive or negative effect on their livelihood, 68% of the residents interviewed described the reserve as a negative, citing reasons like decreased work opportunities, lack of understanding about park regulations and economic stagnation.

5.3 Social Welfare Benefits

Many residents of Asunción say that little has been done toward mitigating the crisis of means that struck the area in the wake of the creation of the Pilón-Lajas reserve. But some note that without the work of community leaders and volunteers from the various organizations involved, the situation may have been even direr. As one of the communities seven interpretive guides told me:

We don’t yet have the money to fix everything that needs to be fixed. We haven’t been trained as translators. We haven’t made the school what it could be, or given everyone who needs it employment. This takes time. But this is what we have.

One eco-lodge manager echoed this statement when he said:

Look, we’ve accomplished a great deal with very little. We’re far away [from Rurrenabaque]. So many of us worked as chainsaw operators and as guides or porters. Even…I used to kill monkeys to feed our crew and now I know that that is something that can be damaging to the…ecosystem. So we are getting somewhere, but it is slow… We know that in the future this effort will pay off.

And it seems that many of those who had the greatest complaints about the management of the Mapajo ecolodge left the community to pursue other avenues and opportunities.

Again, it is worth noting that subsistence farming is – and for generations has been – the mode for existence in the village of Asunción.
5.4 Chapter Conclusions

In Asunción, the few financial benefits that are accrued as a result of the tourism project are still limited to a small segment of the population. But it is lack earnings, not their distribution that is Asunción’s greatest obstacle to success. Asunción also suffers from a shortage of effective local participation, defined as “the ability of local communities to influence the outcome of development projects such as ecotourism that have an impact on them.” (Drake, 1991, p.132). The community has been most frustrated
in working effectively by ineffective business management and slim marketing. Efforts by local NGOs, most notably PRAIA (Programa Regional de Apoyo a Los Pueblos Indígenas Amazónicos) are underway to correct these problems. PRAIA has helped fund an ethno-ecotourism knowledge-sharing campaign and is also assisting Mapajo with enhanced marketing in Rurrenabaque, in La Paz and online. But it is too soon to say whether Mapajo will go the way of many other failed ecotourism ventures, or whether it will evolve into a functioning sustainable project.

Figure 5.3 On the way to Asunción. The Beni River is the main conduit of tourist traffic in the region. Author’s photo.
Chapter 6, The case of San José de Uchupiamonas & Chalalán Ecolodge

Applying the same format used in Chapter 5, research findings from the village of San José de Uchupiamonas are presented and discussed. As at San Miguel del Bala, the purpose of this case study was to assess the extent of income-substitution and the impacts of tourism on the community, in the framework of sustainable development. A study site description for San José (6.1) is followed by a discussion of the relationship between the local community, the protected area and tourism (6.2) and findings are presented. The chapter concludes with a discussion of management and policy issues, and their influence on the relationships between the various stakeholders (6.3).

Figure 6.1 Tourist transport to the Chalalán ecolodge on the Tuichi River. Author’s photo.

6.1 Site Description and Overview

Opened in 1998, Chalalán is located on the outskirts of the indigenous community San José de Uchupiamonas inside the Madidi National Park. The community of San José was founded in 1716 by Franciscan missionaries and is currently home to some 120
families – 600 people – of Tacana, Esse-eja, Mosetén and Quechua origins. This project was spearheaded and largely funded by Conservation International (CI) with support from the BID – and the cost of carrying out the final implementation was nearly 2 million US dollars. Since 2001, Chalalán has been administrated by community members. As will be elaborated further in this chapter, many residents of San José, the theoretical beneficiaries of the project, say that Chalalán provides real income for only a small few (though other, intangible benefits are frequently cited by project managers, and occasionally by residents).

Nearly 33% of interviewed San José residents (n=24) said that during the recent logging boom at least one member of their family worked in timber extraction-related positions. But while ecotourism to the Chalalán ecolodge is world-renowned, many of those interviewed complain that little has been done to ameliorate their day-to-day struggles. Income-substitution and supplementation can therefore said to be moderate at best.

6.2 Findings: Income Substitution and Conservation Relationships

Surveying in San José showed moderate levels of income substitution and supplementation as well as a very mixed range of marks among residents for the management of, and their relationship with, the lodge. The community members in San José continue to live in a nearly self-sustaining manner, earning their livelihood from small farms, hunting, fishing, and gathering in the rain forest. One interviewee said that community members did not have too substantial a need for monetary income – but that a nominal quantity was absolutely necessary as certain staple necessities are not naturally

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29 Chalalán has won numerous awards for being a flagship community ecotourism project.
30 Percentages yield from author interview data.
produced in the village. But further interviews revealed that the ability of villagers to earn any income is severely limited because of the lack of a community-dedicated transportation system linking the village of San José to the nearest market center of Rurrenabaque.

Most of those interviewed (17 of 24) said that one of their main concerns was the above-mentioned lack of access to goods and services unavailable in the village but necessary to their wellbeing. Salt and soap were two frequently sited items. Villagers had had the expectation that Chalalán project would make certain things available to them: a boat, for example, to engage in trade with the population center of Rurrenabaque. Instead, the majority of those interviewed said that the project had, as one resident put it “cut the community out of the community tourism project.” To engage in necessary trade and to make vital purchases, many of those not connected to the ecolodge walk an arduous 8 hours to the village of Tumupasa. Then, to bring their produce, wares, etc. to Rurrenabaque – they flag down a truck to take them the remaining 2 to 3 more hours over unmaintained dirt roads. And all of this to sell simple goods and buy basic necessities. “It is,” one resident said “exactly how our ancestors would have done it 200 years ago – carrying everything on our backs like slaves.”

6.3 Social Welfare Benefits

Prior to the creation of the Madidi National Park and the eventual creation of Chalalán, many of the best hunters from San Jose were employed at the settlement of

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31 In fact, one resident lamented that “San José would be paradise, if we could just [grow] salt.”
Santa Rosa\textsuperscript{32} as hunting guides. But, according to several reports they were exploited as laborers “much in the same way as occurred during wood boom.” This work entailed

Figure 6.2 The main hall at the Chalalán ecolodge.

![The main hall at the Chalalán ecolodge.]

guiding mainly French hunter-tourists on three day to weeklong camping trips in search of game – particularly jaguar, wild boar and monkey. There were several historically good locations for finding these precious species – one ‘mud hole’ up river from Santa Rosa in particular – that the guides would utilize with frequent success. From the mid 1980’s and continuing for a decade, the trade in illegal animal hides “spiked in the region” according to the Beni Regional Tourist Office in Rurrenabaque. But the creation of the national park and the arrival of a dedicated protective service in the form of

\textsuperscript{32} Lodge owned by frenchman-deceased-on Tuichi River that is now a cafetal, or coffee plantation.
national park guards made this trade, as well as sport hunting in the Santa Rosa, illegal.

Most residents had a firm understanding of the reasons behind the founding of the Madidi National Park. Residents of San José were frequently consulted by the national park service during the time of the park’s conception and there is an obvious sense of “ownership” among those interviewed. One interviewee had this to say:

In the 40’s, our grandparents tell us, many came to the lake [Chalalán] during the hide boom. River otters and the jaguars were hunted a lot, but the boom didn’t last. People investigated commercial agriculture. They cultivated coffee, chocolate, vanilla, honey, and brown sugar from sugar cane -- all of this for sale in Rurrenabaque. Jatata a little and Estera as well and handicrafts. But then we were being exploited by outsiders. Exploited as laborers, because of our necessity. People came in search of Mahogany and Cedar and Oak and other woods. And when we realized that we were losing out, the community decided to assist with the efforts to protect the area - to protect ourselves.

Understanding of the park structure and regulations is also high in San José, as is indicated by the following responses given in four independent interviews.

If it weren’t for the national park this would be a different place, an empty place. There was hunting. We still hunt in our TCO in specific zones, but during the wood boom, huge amounts of habitat was being killed and the loggers were hunting to feed themselves. They hunted many many monkeys.

[People] said that if the area became a park we wouldn’t be able to participate in our normal activities. But there are two areas to the park -- the national park and the natural management area – where natural resources are harvested in a sustainable manner.

Through trainings we have learned the impacts upon the environment that some activities have. We learned our responsibility and we have achieved a level where we understand that all of life are part of a balance. If we don’t conserve, we destroy and there is an imbalance.

We have lived the effects of what not conserving is. In my community, the majority now understand the importance of protecting natural resources.

But when it comes to economic benefits, employment and community investment, there is some discrepancy between what ecolodge employees say versus what non-employed community members report. In interviews, administrators said that fifty percent of Chalalán’s profits are reinvested in the community of San José. But many residents reported a lack of transparency and an overall frustration with the use of these profits.
This money is managed by the OTB (organización territorial de base), a village community council. The leader of the OTB, elected by the community, decides how to invest that fifty percent. A porter who works at Chalalán said that such investment “can be for small things like transportation costs to get some products to market or to help a sick person or for working on infrastructure.” But many members of the community complained that too little was being done to assist them, particularly those who were not employed by the ecolodge. Several interviewees also reported that elections for a new OTB representative have been delayed for years – and that this was prohibiting effective representation.

When it comes to the work of Chalalán in the community, managers point to tangible improvements such as the increased opportunity for villagers to sell their wares or the reconstruction of the village’s school. But they also highlight a host of intangible benefits like an increased understanding among residents of the region’s biodiversity, or a renewed “indigenous pride.”

But there are still two conflicting representations of village life – demonstrated in the following quotes – which underscore the general social climate in San José. One villager, a Chalalán ecolodge employee said that “many people from the community benefit by selling their wares to Chalalán – be it food products like brown sugar or beans – or even handicrafts.” But another, non-employed villager said “almost all of us still work in agriculture, but only a few are getting any work from the ecolodge.”

6.4 Chapter Conclusions

In San José, the financial benefits accrued as a result of the tourism project are still limited to a small segment of the population. But while the distribution of resources
is of some small concern to villagers, it is the unfulfilled expectations generated by Chalalán managers and their NGO patrons that has had the most notable influence on residents. Small changes in the community would do a lot to alleviate the pressing needs (and daily worries) of these villagers. But small changes are often less small than they seem to be at first glance. The (at least perceived) promise of a boat for transporting goods to and from Rurrenabaque is more complicated than it might seem. There is the price of fuel for the long journey – which, depending on fluctuating fuel prices, might actually be more than the potential earnings of getting goods to market.

Figure 6.3 The San José schoolhouse and administrative center. Author’s photo.

Also absent in San José is a functioning structure for community participation. The OTB leadership of the community is, at the moment, mostly a titular position. The influence of residents on decision-making, especially those not employed by the ecolodge
is severely limited. Effective leadership could do a lot towards fostering active participation, and to communicate effectively some of the limitations of ecotourism.

Finally, there is common ground between Chalalán administrators and non-employed villagers in that they share mutual pride for their role in the creation of the Madidi National Park. Every resident interviewed (n=24) suggested that they were content with the creation of the park. Many reminisced fondly on the struggle that was the creation of the national park. Leaders and NGO partners could capitalize on this shared pride to create a more effective linkage between ecotourism and daily life in the village of San José de Uchupiamonas.
Chapter 7, The case of San Miguel del Bala

Using the format from the previous cases, research findings from the village of San Miguel del Bala are here presented and discussed. A study site description for San Miguel (7.1) is followed by a discussion of the relationship between the local community, the protected area and tourism (7.2). The chapter concludes with a discussion of management and policy issues, and their influence on the relationships between the various stakeholders (7.3).

Figure 7.1 Arriving at San Miguel del Bala. Author’s photo.

7.1 Site Description and Overview

A project of the TCO of the Tacana People, San Miguel is at the southern end of the Tacana TCO territory and sits just outside the boundaries of the Madidi National Park.

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33 One tribe of speakers of the Amazonian Pano-Tacana family of languages, administrated by the Consejo Indígena del Pueblo Tacana (CIPTA).
on the Beni River. Thirty-two families (about 230 inhabitants) live in the community of San Miguel. The San Miguel eco-lodge was built with the participation of the NGOs Conservation International, Care, and the Wildlife Conservation Society and with the support of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Thirty-five community members are considered “partners” in the business, which began operating in 2002.

Until recently, many residents of San Miguel worked in the timber industry. Through the early 2000’s the area was in the midst of a timber boom, and more than half of those interviewed in San Miguel had, one way or another, been involved in this industry. But with the arrival of the Madidi National Park, the community faced a crisis and had to adapt. Ecotourism was conceived-of by community members as a solution to this crisis partly because informal tours were already bringing tourists to the village, and because of the limited success of other villages in the region. Recently, the community constructed a potable-water system with the support of the NGO CARE Bolivia. Capitalizing on this connection, the village approached CARE and successfully petitioned assistance in the elaboration of their original ecotourism plan.

Figure 7.2 The water facilities at San Miguel. San Miguel stock photo.

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34 Partners, in most cases, are those who made a commitment to donate time, resources and material support to the project from its conception.
Ecotourism in San Miguel has only recently begun to pay off, according to employees, managers and community members interviewed. “At first we only had the idea to do tourism,” said a resident and ecolodge partner. “When we approached CARE, we didn’t know what making the project operational would entail.” Early on the community built cabins for guests, a kitchen and dining hall, and an interpretation center – a space for exhibiting Tacana indigenous customs and history. Then they had to learn how to operate a business, what it means to be a guide, how to attract customers and all of the various ins and outs of daily ecotourism management.

7.2 Findings: Income Substitution and Conservation Relationships

Surveying in San Miguel del Bala showed a high level of operational income substitution and supplementation as well as satisfactory marks among residents for the management of, and their relationship with, the lodge.

Every interviewed resident of San Miguel (100% of n=19) said that during the recent logging boom at least one member of their family worked in timber extraction-related positions. Despite successful implementation of the law of Agrarian Reform (the Tacana Communities were granted their TCO in 1998), after the arrival of the national parks, “Migueleños” suffered steady job loss. Over 55% of those surveyed said that they or someone in their family had lost a job after the establishment of the Madidi National Park. At this time, several members of the community began to search for work elsewhere. Those who stayed struggled through a long and difficult crisis of means.

35 Through the conception of the ecolodge, CARE Bolivia was working with the community of San Miguel. The idea of starting an ecotourism venture was presented by community members to NGO staff in 2000.

36 Percentages yield from author interview data.
Several of those interviewed recounted conflicts with Madidi National Park rangers soon after the formation of the park. The Tuichi River had been a traditional hunting and materials gathering area for the community and these activities were prohibited after 1995. Several residents recounted that early on, the community complained to the park. “We live on drier, less-fertile land,” said a program administrator from the San Miguel Ecolodge. “It was unfair to take that away from us. Many of us had farms up by the Tuichi River. It was where we went to get Jatata, to get materials for our village.”

Many described similar conflicts during their employment with illegal timber farmers who mined the park for valuable mahogany and cedar until significant efforts were launched by the Madidi Park administration to halt logging inside the park. One interviewee recounted his experience this way:

I worked as a chain-saw operator for different people. The truth is that I worked as a porter for the first couple of years. But I wanted to work with chainsaws because they made better money. Eventually I learned how to operate a chainsaw, and then I stayed in that position until the end. It was hard work, but there was lots of it. There was so much wood. Then, when people heard that they were going to stop the logging, we worked even harder. People wanted to get the wood before the government came. But it became harder and harder to find mahogany, to find cedar... Then, when the park guards arrived they would stop our boats and take everything we had cut. And then the park would sell that.

As suggested above, because of poor soil conditions, community members had frequently engaged in small agricultural activities inside the boundaries of what is today the Madidi National Park. Members of one family claimed to be engaged (illegally) in the clearing of land for farming in the park today. But most residents have adapted to this shortfall by adopting diverse alternative activities to maintain themselves. Despite soil

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37 A Palm leaf product used by villagers for construction.
38 Personal interview, village of San Miguel del Bala. 02.01.2008
conditions, 84% of those surveyed (all but three) said they were involved in subsistence agriculture on the land available to them. To complement this subsistence activity, community members engage in fishing and raising livestock (mainly pigs). San Miguel’s location outside of the protected areas and its relative proximity to a larger population center (the town of Rurrenabaque, pop. 23,000) makes it a unique case among those studied – in that more economic options are legally and readily available to them (some commercial fishing, the commercialization of agricultural excesses, handicrafts etc.). Seventy-four percent interviewed suggested that the sale of hand made materials, cane derivatives, fruits and nuts, and livestock products allowed them to buy goods not available in the village. All of those interviewed said that these small sales had increased after the arrival of the ecolodge.

As a rule, most residents are involved in subsistence farming, supplementing this with minor commercial sale of surplus at the local market in Rurrenabaque. This has been a standard for most of the indigenous communities in the area. As is mentioned in chapter six, certain necessities, perhaps most notably salt are not readily available in the areas surrounding the villages. That is to say that village life has never been one of complete self-sufficiency. Even so, most residents acknowledge that during the various booms and busts the region has played host to, they managed to survive as a result of subsistence agriculture.

Today, the reliance on natural resources in the community is very high. This is one of the reasons conservation actors have identified nearby indigenous groups as potential threats to protected areas. Some have noted that because of the poverty of
village life, many residents have no choice but to cut trees, hunt or commercially farm natural resources – regardless of restrictions, so as to be able to provide for their families.

Despite bans on logging and hunting, illegal harvesting in the Madidi Park still occurs, but much more infrequently than before the park’s creation. Park officials say that this is the result of new legislation, but also owes to the scarcity of accessible high-market woods. Today though, the problem is not so much one of current illegal activities by the residents of San Miguel, as it is one of development. In recent years the national park authority, SERNAP recognized that more work was needed to help develop relationships and understanding in communities. Working in conjunction with NGOs in the area, SERNAP has become more involved in fostering a strong relationship with these communities. In San Miguel, various residents noted that Madidi Park Guards had made donations of confiscated game, or other materials to the community.

All of interviewees in San Miguel were had a good understanding of why the neighboring national park was created. Most residents listed protection of the forest/animals/resources as reasons for ‘Park’ designation. Interviews also revealed a widespread understanding that forest protection is important. All (100%) respondents (n=19) indicated that protecting the forest biodiversity was important to them. The top 2 reasons cited by residents were that protection positively influences the local environment and that protection helps foster tourism.

When asked if the establishment of the nearby Madidi National Park had impacted their livelihood in a positive and/or negative way, 53% of San Miguel residents responded positively. Of those that cited positive effects, more than 80% attributed this attitude to local economic development from tourism. Others, (15%) indicated the Park
has had a negative impact on their lives because of job loss and reduced access to resources. Nearly a third of residents (32%) responded that the Park has had both positive and negative effects.

While in the other two cases addressed in this study, community members frequently complained that only a small cadre of residents received tangible benefits from ecolodge operations, in San Miguel this commentary was largely absent. Most residents pointed to the good work accomplished by San Miguel’s community leadership organization (Organización Territorial de Base, or OTB) as a result of funds and training made available by tourism.

7.3 Social Welfare Benefits

Residents and officials have also recognized some non-economic, tourism-related, benefits. These include a renewed interest in the village’s unique cultural history, a rebirth of what several respondents called “indigenous pride,” and a “concerted unification” of the community. Residents were particularly quick to acknowledge the role of the ecolodge as a point of local pride. One woman from San Miguel had this to say about the new role of ecotourism in the village:

Many Migueleños were leaving here to find work. This place was nowhere. When tourism first began [here], we didn’t know what it would lead to. But now we are proud of the village of San Miguel. Now some of the families that left are returning because they are proud of where they are from.

In fact, the word “proud” was used by more than half of respondents when describing the work that the community has put into the lodge. A common sentiment in San Miguel was that residents felt like they had part “ownership” in the ecotourism project. This expression, and a general sense of well-being in the community points to the major
improvements, both tangible and intangible, that have been made since the *larga Semana Santa* of the late 1990’s.
7.4 Chapter Conclusions

Surveying in San Miguel showed a comparatively high level of contentment among residents regarding the operation of the ecolodge. For ecotourism to function effectively, there must be a positive relationship between residents living in or near the Park and the Park itself, including both natural resources and the staff that manage them. This appears to be the case at San Miguel, as many residents reported that they have, on occasion, even acted as stewards of the Park, supporting protection and conservation efforts. In return, San Miguel has benefitted from this resource protection: they receive sustainable access to resources that improve their livelihood.
Many San Miguel residents also acknowledged a connection between forests, climate and water resources, suggesting that forest and watershed protection provide valued benefits to their own community and to the global community. This was a common comment – that could be the result of frequent visits from NGO and Park Guard capacitors. This further demonstrates the strong ties between San Miguel and the conservation community at large.

The extensive buffer zone surrounding the Madidi National Park has had a significant role in providing San Miguel community members with increased access to natural resources and thereby reducing demand for Park resources. It will be important for park managers, regional government officials and NGOs to continue to support research into alternative and sustainable livelihood strategies that do not rely on Park resources, and to bring this same level of benefit to other communities.
Ecotourism is, by definition, an activity that attempts to achieve a balance between the economic exploitation of natural resources and native communities’ cultural heritage without threatening their existence. In practice, this requires a set of criteria defining what makes an activity “sustainable”, enabling the balance between profitable economic exploitation and conservation of natural and cultural environments. Unregulated ecotourism may contribute to the lowering of genetic capital and cause environmental harm. It may also engender negative social impacts, such as prostitution, commercialization of culture, and changing of social norms and values. The Amazon has a very high potential for ecotourism due to its sprawling biodiversity and natural beauty.
This is a potential that indeed should be exploited to attract investments and create jobs while at the same time preserve ecosystems.

Ecotourism in the Bolivian Amazon is a growing economic activity. The economic exploitation in the Amazon, however, is still predominantly predatory and the region faces a number of environmental social problems such as high levels of illiteracy, precarious access to basic sanitation and high rates of deforestation.

Despite the efforts undertaken by concerned actors, the legal framework regulating ecotourism activities at the national and local level is still, for the most part, incipient. The relevant legal means at the international, regional and national levels are, respectively, the 1992 Convention on Biological Diversity, the 1978 Amazon Cooperation Treaty, and national rules dealing with environmental protection, such as the Law of the Environment, and respectively, those laws which effect tourism in general.

Ecotourism has a unique set of concerns, compared to traditional tourism including the preservation of the natural environment as well as how interactions with local communities and cultures are accomplished. A specific set of means and legal regulation will be needed to address these concerns. Still, the general principles of environmental law apply to ecotourism. The same responsibility vis-à-vis environmental damage applies, as do common environmental impact assessment principles. There is headway being made in terms of national and the international regulation, but at the local level these rules are often ineffective because of limited oversight. A clearer set of parameters that defines interactions with the natural environment and with local and indigenous populations is needed. Eventually, the (admittedly) increased importance of ecotourism might lead to more specific legal regulation on ecotourism and its impacts in Bolivia.
With time national and regional planners might begin to reconcile the country’s economic growth with its stated desire to conserve the natural and cultural heritage of this rich area of the Amazon Basin. But to date, the historic dreams of exploitative development are still the norm, colonization of the region is straining resources and limited alternative development options are creating unacceptable default choice-paradigms.

8.1 Relationships Between the Local Communities and Parks

Many nature-based tourism concepts, including ecotourism, have become a popular way to integrate parks and people in the rural areas of developing countries (Place, 1991). But when the establishment of national parks alters the local economic base, often the result is a reduced access to resources for local inhabitants. This has been the case at all of the communities highlighted in this thesis. At times, the frustrations of communities even turn violent, as the then director the Madidi National Park reported:

Community members often storm the park offices. Park employees have been attacked – one was even run over by a truck and survived. Our camps are sometimes burnt to the ground and on occasion we receive death threats.

These actions are the result of the widely held view among community members that the Protected Area is preventing them from pursuing their natural and historical “inheritance” (be it logging, oil exploration, soy or cane farming, etc.). Interestingly, the occasional wrath of the communities is not limited to the national park. Community leaders in some areas have even banned certain NGOs. This is an expression of frustration: some NGOs have promised rapid improvement in quality of life - to then spend years engaging research into how to accomplish such a goal. But as the head of the Madidi Park Guards Association said, “you can't eat research.” Here, a point worth stressing is that if quality
of life remains low, protected areas will have a harder time accomplishing what they’re charged with: conserving biodiversity.

Despite great advances in protection, illegal resource harvesting does occur in both the Madidi National Park and Pilón-Lajas Biosphere Reserve. Residents in the communities visited noted they had lost jobs or land, and that it is now harder to make a living, highlighting the need for alternative growth opportunities. Interviews reveal differing interpretations of the success of the alternatives being employed, with some citing no benefit whatsoever and others declaring the initiatives largely ineffective.

On the whole, ecotourism in the region of study is increasing. Because of training initiatives put in place by concerned international actors, an argument can be made that community-based ecotourism is having a less destructive effect on the natural environment than is other commercial tourism in the area. Ecotourism has brought with it increased employment opportunities for some segment of these communities’ population. But for some, these projects have made little difference – in terms of economic or educative advantages. Further strategies are needed to compensate for these shortfalls.

One factor that is critical at ecotourism destinations is the relationship between local residents and tourism. For ecotourism to develop successfully, communities need to have a minimal and autonomous strength. Whether or not residents have a positive attitude with regard to tourism will depend greatly on whether or not they receive socioeconomic benefits or other compensation in return for restricted access to resources they may have been dependent on prior to the establishment of tourism and protected areas. When residents are satisfied, there is a greater opportunity for a more complete tourist experience resulting from positive intercultural interactions with local residents.
If development planners fail to involve local people in the decision-making process, the result can be poorly integrated and poorly conceived conservation-development projects that damage the resource base, thereby reducing tourism’s potential to generate benefits. Effective local participation has been defined as “the ability of local communities to influence the outcome of development projects such as ecotourism that have an impact on them.” (Drake, 1991, p.132). If community members have a vested interest in these practices they will be more likely to become advocates for the Park and the environment, and more likely also to support the further development of ecotourism. Still, participation can be a time-consuming and complicated process in which individuals are quickly disillusioned and frustrated. Though the overall goal may be to give community members a voice in the decisions that affect them, determining who will participate, by what means and for what purpose can be a difficult process. There is the danger of prematurely raising peoples’ expectations that their views will make a difference. Some studies have suggested too that residents may not be in a position to make appropriate decisions (Boyd, 2000). But while the challenges are many and substantial, the alternative of not providing participation opportunities – presents risks that arguably outweigh any potential costs.

When residents face hardship as a result of the restriction of resource-use, local and national governments should work together to provide economic alternatives, as many of the threats conservation and protected areas managers face are due to the need of local communities to use resources to survive (Norris, 1992). A community’s and indeed our species’ dependence on natural resources is high, but this is especially true for
indigenous groups in the region of study – groups who’s immediate livelihood is framed by and contingent upon the forest ecosystem.

Currently, many of the communities in this region are engaging in territorial planning. Conservation actors are trying to influence the direction taken - but there is a distrust of international NGOs and other conservationists here. In some communities a common held sentiment is that one NGO or another is preventing the community from realizing its dream of, for example, sugar cane cultivation. In fact, this perception is not far off base. Environmental NGOs are engaged in trying to influence the development outcome of biologically diverse areas – but all have the stated aim of providing viable, sustainable alternatives to the activities they intend to thwart. Sadly, these alternatives are, so far, limited. As pressure mounts, especially in periods of economic downturn, conservationists are going to have a difficult time making a case for natural resource protection.

8.2 Biodiversity, Climate Change and Livelihoods

Deforestation in the Amazon Basin is currently advancing at an alarming rate. For many years scientists and climatologists have been decrying this trend – because of its damaging effects to biodiversity and climate and to the indigenous peoples who depend on forest for their survival. In Bolivia, planned infrastructure projects and a large scale development colonization plan have the potential to further speed deforestation, logging, commercial mining and other forms of degradation in the coming years.

The role played by forests in providing environmental services (including the mitigation of global warming, maintenance of the hydrological cycle and biodiversity protection) represents an opportunity for the region to obtain financial and political
support for preventing forest loss. Bolivia is a signatory of the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, and to date there is some progress being made to take advantage of payment for environmental services and climate mitigation models in the region. But these financial mechanisms need to be more thoroughly explored and more widely employed. At the time of writing, there is great hope among scientists and environmentalists that a new global climate initiative will be established during negotiations at the Copenhagen conference on climate change in December, 2009.\textsuperscript{39} Managers should stay abreast of any new financial mechanisms established and work with relevant professionals to capitalize on the climate mitigation potential of sustainable development projects.

The benefits of, indeed the need for biodiversity conservation today should be all but obvious to the readers of this thesis. But it is important to note that according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s fourth assessment report, climate change is expected to have a more devastating effect on the poor and indigenous communities around the globe who rely on natural resources and have minimal reserves and capacity to cope with the expected changes. An aggregating problem is that climate change will accelerate the continued loss of biological diversity that is the basis of healthy ecosystems on which all life depends.

Climate-changing greenhouse gas emissions from land-based activities, including agriculture and deforestation, are responsible for nearly 30 percent of total human output. Because of this, sustainable land-based activities are a vital component of climate change mitigation. Finding ways to decrease deforestation can therefore help to cut back on

greenhouse gas emissions, while reforestation and agroforestry initiatives can remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Finally, when these initiatives are properly designed, they can assist local and indigenous people by creating sustainable livelihoods in the form of agricultural diversification, natural resource protection, direct employment and non-extractive forest product capitalization – including ecotourism. Additionally, they can make a substantial contribution to biodiversity conservation by restoring and protecting natural ecosystems and contributing to the worldwide struggle to lessen the impacts of global warming.

8.3 Re-evaluating Ethno-ecotourism

It is difficult to assess the role that ethno-ecotourism has in supporting sustainable development in Bolivia and in the world, for a variety of factors. Primarily, the industry on the whole is still a nascent activity. When markets fluxuate, enterprises that have longevity are more able to cope than those that do not have the same roots. But the concept is simple enough. Through tourism, a local population will have an incentive towards conservation - the goal being sustainable, community ecotourism. More stable, linkages between ecotourism development and conservation goals in the Bolivian Amazon could yield significant results.

Bolivia is one of the most biologically diverse countries on earth. A large percentage of the biological diversity is found in the northern lowlands – an area that politically and historically has been opposed to indigenous constitutional reform, particularly due to fears that highland Quechua and Aymara would “overrun” this rich

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40 This kind of language is often employed in casual conversation in the region of study, by self-identifying non-indigenous “Cambas.” The terms Kolla and Camba are regional racial slangs. A Kolla (pronounced
terrain. But this region also encompasses a great range of indigenous diversity and history. In past decades, many of these indigenous people and their mestizo neighbors were antagonistic to the development of nature tourism in their regions because often enterprises were developed without local involvement. But as ecotourism increased in popularity, indigenous federations in the Amazon, and around the world have taken a more active posture and communities throughout Bolivia have expressed strong interest in involvement in ecotourism as a form of community development. More than 15 years ago, the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples’ Organizations of the Amazon Basin, or CONFENIAE, published a set of guidelines for ecotourism management in the indigenous areas of Amazonia. But too many communities began to see ecotourism as a magic bullet that would quickly fulfill all of their development needs. Disappointment within communities – the result of high expectations – led to cases of greater local and indigenous compliance in exploitative development initiatives, including unsustainable farming, mining and logging.

In terms of the social impact of ecotourism, it appears that this is a mostly marginal factor, compared to other social influences. However, the literature suggests that those indigenous communities situated nearer to westernized communities may be lured into some of the perceived vices attached to that society, including alcohol and prostitution. Still, the designers of ecotourism projects need to keep in mind the social influences inherent in the endeavor, and to work to foster businesses that utilize already extant traditional decision-making processes. Each community has its own unique set of rules and social norms and these should be revered and in fact utilized, and never

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COY-uh) is an indigenous Quechua or Aymara highlander and a Camba is generally a mestizo or white person from the northern lowlands.
supplanted by so-called “best practices.” Generally, communities involved in ethno-ecotourism link benefits with sustaining a traditional life in undisturbed rain forest zones. Very few indigenous communities see in ecotourism a method for achieving “development” in the Westernized sense of the word.

In the Bolivian Amazon today, it is difficult to say whether more NGO funding should go to ethno-ecotourism. Macro analysis of the market is severely lacking. Though data is being gathered in many instances as to what types of tourists visit local ecotourism projects – it seems that, at least in the cases covered in this thesis, very little is being done with this data. Any feasibility study done for an ethno-ecotourism project cannot proceed without this analysis. As it stands, in the Beni region, the majority of tourists are vacationing student backpackers, a demographic that seems to be drawn to other ecotourism activities over ethno-ecotourism. Unquestionably, a large scale, coordinated study of extant projects of this type and the demographic market they currently attract is long overdue.

Today, there is a building worry among conservation managers and scholars worldwide that ethno-ecotourism projects are doomed to fall far short of expectations. Many fear that community ecotourism projects are not viable business ventures; that these communities lack the marketing and management capabilities necessary to succeed. A review of the literature seems to justify these concerns, especially when considering the overall success rate of these programs – not merely as business ventures – but also as tools for sustainable development.

In Bolivia, there are scores of community ecotourism ventures that today do not attract enough business to offer viable, sustainable development alternative to their
communities. Unfortunately, although many indigenous communities in the region are choosing (and indeed are being influenced to choose) ecotourism over other forms of development, the feasibility of their choice is not entirely supported by current interest in the marketplace. Perhaps more marketing is the answer to this problem. Certainly, assistance at the local and national level to provide reliable information on ethno-ecotourism programs on the internet and elsewhere would be welcomed. But on the grander scale, a coordinated national effort that supports and evaluates these ventures is notably absent, and would definitely be welcomed by conservation managers in the area. Unfortunately, since the 2006 dissolution of the Bolivian Ministry of Sustainable Development, and due to increasing instability in the country, any such effort has been derailed.

For the most part though, it can be said the efforts of NGOs, regional planners, and local government officials to engage in territorial planning are a primary step forward toward achieving a coordinated sustainable development plan. And though there have been pitfalls, ethno-ecotourism is one of a broad range of alternative economic initiatives that could have a promising, sustainable future in the region and in the developing world.
References


