

A *fairunterwegs*-Interview with Arturo Silva Lucas

Bigna Gysin, *fairunterwegs*: In which areas of sustainability in tourism is Costa Rica doing well – and an example for other countries?

Arturo Silva Lucas: The Costa Rica's tourism brand can be explained starting with two elements, of course there are other elements that play a role, but we can start with a robust body of environmental laws and regulations, which transcends formal tourism policy, particularly visible in the large number of protected wildlife areas. It is also explained by the origins of the international tourism experience starting from the structural reforms of the 1980s that came to represent a parallel income to traditional economic activities: this is a tourism offer with a strong component of micro, small and medium enterprises along the entire chain of services that remains to this day according to official data, mainly beneficial in rural destinations. And well, it should be mentioned that this type of business fabric tends to be more environmentally friendly. This has led over the years to the professionalization of a niche market for tourist activities in natural areas.

It is undeniable that the Costa Rican tourism seal is marked by experiences associated with ecotourism, nature, rural community and scientific tourism. As well as traditional sun and beach tourism. In fact, the two most visited destinations by national and foreign tourists are beaches and protected wildlife areas. The Costa Rican Tourism Institute (ICT), as the governing body, has made an effort to organize and translate all these characteristics with the granting of the Tourism Sustainability Certificates to tourism companies or activities. This is supposed to be a guarantee of sustainable management in environmental, cultural and community terms in accordance with the promotion of the country. Later on, we can discuss how much this certificate could be extended to all of Costa Rica. Because it can be questionable especially in regions that in recent years have experienced a touristic over-specialization under the exclusive logic of capital.

If I had to make a recommendation based on the best Costa Rican experiences, it would be to promote a tourism offer with an important community content through local linkages, together with a professionalization of the actors and social groups that benefit directly from tourism. In addition, it is necessary to conceive tourism as an activity that forms part of a wider range of economic activities wherever it is carried out. And finally, it should be taken into account the importance of safeguarding natural spaces and the rational use of its resources, not only for their tourism value as such, but as part of a coherent local, regional and national project. But if I had to say it in one sentence, it would be to give more or equal importance to the host communities and ecosystems as to the tourist.

And where can they do better?

Undoubtedly, territorial planning should be improved through continuous work with local organized groups, municipal governments and institutions or ministries linked to environmental and tourism issues in the country. I also believe that the economic benefits of tourism, for example, taxes on tourists, among others, should go to a fund destined to supply the needs in training and natural protection that grassroots organizations can carry out, and not only destined to the ICT. On this same line, we have seen how the Ministry of Environment and its affiliated institutions have suffered cuts in recent years, this is worrying because it should be remembered that these based officials are the first line of defense in the care and

maintenance of protected wildlife areas. Well, why not think about a financial support that comes directly from the current income that tourists bring to the country.

How is it possible for the tourism industry in Costa Rica to continue to expanding while simultaneously becoming more sustainable? Are economic growth and sustainability not mutually exclusive?

I believe that to answer this it would be necessary for Costa Ricans to ask ourselves how we want to continue growing and then if it's possible to do it in a sustainable way. It is evident that the pretension of perpetual growth, as established by the economicist bias, is one of the worst threats to the reproduction of ecosystems. Moreover, the problem with sustainability is that its increasingly used as marketing, as a commercial hook adaptable to any kind of needs and interests. I would say that tourism-sustainability always carries the threat of being a hollow word.

All indicators related to tourism activity in Costa Rica -number of tourist arrivals, public and private investments in infrastructure, attraction of foreign exchange, international positioning, etc- show very satisfactory results in recent years. The contribution of tourism to the GDP, except for the pandemic period, has been growing from 6% to approximately 10% in the last decade.

However, the pandemic situation revealed a clear interest of powerful business chambers in influencing public policy regarding tourism with proposals that are questionable from a social and environmental point of view. For example, they have made concrete requests to reduce the country's forest protection coverage, make environmental controls more flexible, and also request that they have a major role in the design of territorial plans for the country's 32 Tourist Development Centers. At the same time, the Senate has blocked any attempt to grant veto power to local communities when they do not agree with investment projects, especially important in regions of high added value such as coasts and beaches.

I believe that in recent years there has been a rediscovery by powerful groups of an unexecuted economic potential of the tourism industry in Costa Rica. The problem is that many of their aspirations seem to be directed towards the construction of mega structures, transnational resorts, residential tourism and other types of initiatives that appeal to mass tourism in regions coveted by big business. Contrary to the tourist seal that has characterized us as a country. Intentions to develop large resorts have been seen even in destinations that are characterized by having a business network of small and medium enterprises surrounded by abundant protected natural areas, as is the case of the Costa Rican Caribbean coastline. In this part of the country there has been an open and clear intention to develop a tourism model similar to the one seen in Cancún, Mexico.

Costa Rica does not escape the narrative that characterizes developing countries, where the attraction of capital and investments becomes an end in itself. As a result of the pandemic, we have detected a monopoly of the discourse on the part of tourism and business chambers, which in turn have been captured by names linked to large development and investments in the tourism services segment, and which understand growth mainly as global competitiveness and placement of foreign direct investment.

The key would be to ask whether this type of tourism development is compatible with sustainability, especially in vulnerable areas such as protected wildlife areas and beaches. Some will tell you that yes, that is why there are tourism sustainability certificates or institutional controls. I am rather suspicious, and I would ask if institutional controls are really effective. I think there are reasons to believe that they are not that reliable or effective when it comes to large projects.

I believe that the covid19 pandemic has been a turning point in tourism activity in Costa Rica. To a certain extent a discourse has crept in that puts economic growth and the "recovery of tourism" before any type of environmental regulation or real participation of local communities, and that goes against a sustainable model of tourism development.

Your latest article on Alba Sud is about the ZMT, the Maritime Terrestrial Zone, and the initiative to modify the law to make the ZMT more attractive to external investors. How will coastal tourism change in the next years, and is there a way to avoid the privatisation of this land?

It must be understood that the ZMT represents an area of tourist activity; and therefore, of accumulation; fundamental in tourism. As I explained in that article, in Costa Rica the ZMT is regulated by a principle of public law, this new law is intended to undermine its public nature in exchange for greater private control. It should also be noted that this law does not come in isolation but is part of a broad repertoire of recent pro-liberalization and anti-public regulation proposals.

I dare to say that beach tourism is the one that shows the greatest potential for socio-environmental conflicts because of what I explained in the previous question. The strategic control of coastlines is key when you want to place investments in the Sun and Beach segment such as all-inclusive resorts and residential tourism. For example, our Pacific coastline has been the scenario of constant conflicts between real estate developers and coastal communities for the control of the ZMT, deforestation or sources of drinking water. In most cases, the inefficiency of the municipalities ends up benefiting the real estate developers.

Precisely last year, two laws were passed to encourage the arrival of resident tourists. The first is aimed at young foreigners with high purchasing power who can work remotely; the second seeks to attract pensioners from developed countries. The problem is that parallel to this we have noticed that the real estate market has not stopped growing even in times of the pandemic. Especially in regions with high commercial value such as beaches. It is well known that second home tourism model leads to a dynamic of spatial segregation, rural gentrification, displacement of native populations and de facto privatization of common goods. The real estate market has a lot of freedom in Costa Rica. It consists of minimum regulations by the board of engineers and architects and the final building permit from the municipal governments. And if we take into account that many beaches in the country don't have territorial regulatory plans, it creates a favorable scenario for land speculation and quick profits.

The way I see possible to avoid an underhand privatization of coastal areas is to have a greater presence of the public in territorial management. But not public as a synonym of the State regulation, but rather to pressure and facilitate spaces for real participation in decision making by neighbors and historic residents in these areas with high capital gain.

General elections campaigns are currently underway in Costa Rica. What would the different outcomes of the election mean for the sustainability program of the country?

First, we must consider the atypical nature of these elections in Costa Rica. Not only because of the unprecedented number of presidential candidates (25), but also because of the economic crisis resulting from the Covid19 pandemic. To this must be added a fiscal crisis that has been dragging the country for the last 12 or 15 years. This has provoked a polarization in the electorate centered on the interventionism that the State should have, which broadly explains the high number of presidential candidates. Regarding

the environment, this polarization pits conservationist positions, in favor of the environment, against others that call for more market freedom and more flexible environmental controls. What is important here is that in Costa Rica the environmental component is intimately linked to tourism.

Now we have reached a runoff scheduled for April. We have two candidates for the final election, the first one is a former president questioned for acts of corruption who comes with an environmental agenda very much aligned with the trends that dominate the international debate such as alternative energies, mitigating global warming, etc. The second is a candidate of an emerging party, questioned for alleged sexual harassment while working at the World Bank. This second candidate comes with a fiscal agenda but in his government plan there is little development of environmental proposals, in fact the word environmental is only mentioned twice in the document.

On the other hand, the next senate will be very fractionated, with senators very well defined in terms of ideological tendencies, which only foreshadow a conflictive scenario in order to reach agreements. It would be hasty to predict what will happen in the next four years. But if the trend continues, we will continue to see an active Costa Rican environmental movement taking positions depending on the debates that the political discussion will bring.

The thermometer that I am betting on to follow the course of tourism development is what is going to happen with beach tourism and protected wildlife areas. Because those are the ones that present the greatest risks. The great discussion that concerns tourism and sustainability in Costa Rica is whether we want to follow the path that other countries have already exhausted or if we are going to seek to be faithful to our brand.