

Case Study 4 PPAs and tourism: A site-based example from Lapa Rios, Costa Rica

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The Lapa Rios, a leading conservation tourism initiative in Costa Rica, showcases the power of a tourism business as a vehicle for conservation, of well-articulated and embedded conservation goals which permeate through the business (Principle 5.4), the importance of collaboration (Best Practice 5.1.2) at different levels, and how using an approach such as the 4Cs framework (Box 8.3) integrates Conservation, Community, Culture and Commerce to strengthen the conservation impacts of the business to further secure biodiversity outcome into the future (Principle 1.5).

Overview

The Lapa Rios Reserve is located near the point where the Golfo Dulce meets the Pacific Ocean, in Costa Rica's Osa Peninsula. The Peninsula contains some of the highest levels of biodiversity in the most carbon-dense forests in the world (Taylor et al., 2015). In the 1990s, at a time of human population increase when unsustainable and extractive business practices threatened the Peninsula, John and Karen Lewis purchased 420 ha of land, stretching from the ocean to the spine of Osa. They set out to demonstrate that “*However you cut it, a rainforest left standing is worth more.*” Their goal was to protect the over 300 ha of primary forest, regenerate 80 ha of pasture patches, and “*...provide livelihood opportunities to local communities and improve awareness about conservation and sustainable environmental management*” (Karen Lewis, founder).

Using an approach linking Conservation, Community, Culture and Commerce (the 4Cs) they managed just that. There has been a dramatic recovery of the forest; vigorous secondary forest growth now covers all previously degraded areas. The area hosts 400 species of birds, 500 tree species, four species of monkeys, and jaguars, tapirs and sloths to name a few (Toft & Larsen, 2010). It demonstrates that ecotourism can be a competitive economic driver for conservation. Creative thinking, persistence, core values and strategic collaboration were all ingredients contributing to this success.

Responsible tourism as an opportunity to conserve the Osa Peninsula

The owners' motivations for purchasing land were to establish a lodge and reserve as a means to protect the contiguous rainforests in the Peninsula. They realised that a competitive alternative to existing economic drivers was necessary; both to provide sustainable livelihood options locally and financially support the reserve. The location and rich biodiversity of Lapa Rios created a unique opportunity for tourism.



Lapa Rios was included in the WDPA after being verified by experts from IUCN's World Commission on Protected Areas @ Protected Planet, UNEP-WCMC

From the onset, goals integrated land conservation, community and commercial objectives. This combination enabled conservation to be part of the DNA of the business (Best Practice 5.4.2). Thus, alongside its conservation objective, Lapa Rios set out to demonstrate best environmental management practices for ecotourism. Its bungalows and buildings were inspired by the area's indigenous culture, renewable materials were used, water is solar-heated and local food is celebrated (see Best Practice 2.3.2). The open design allows air to circulate, removing the need for air conditioning and provides guests a wildlife experience separated only by screening. Visitor experiences revolve around nature and the lodge's low impact existence. The 2010 Sustainability Master Plan creates a framework for new development for the business. Over the years, the operation has been able to invest more than US\$1million in the conservation of the reserve.

An inclusive success

To achieve long-term success the tourism enterprise had to be inclusive (Best Practice 2.3.2). Thus, Lapa Rios focused on:

- Providing preferential employment and business opportunities to Osa Peninsula residents.
- Creating basic capacity building through on the job training.
- Ongoing environmental education for employees, community members and visitors.

All 55 Lapa Rios employees are from the region (Best Practice 2.5.6), and most of the food is sourced locally. The owners actively invested in their team, providing continuous training and a stimulating working environment. As a result, there is very low turnover of employees (2-4 yearly) and 10+ members have worked there more than 20 years. Employees are part of all Lapa Rios community endeavours. As such, they are given time to support community initiatives of their choice and are considered community leaders. This has strengthened the relevance of Lapa Rios' community actions



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and the engagement of employees in Lapa Rios conservation objectives. Investments in education and capacity building have taken many forms, from school infrastructure development, to environmental education, and initiating a naturalist-guide school in 2017. In 1991, Lapa Rios built the area's first primary school, and since then, it has expanded its impacts to over 600 children and in 13 other Osa schools.

Many opportunities are created for the local people and the lodge's guests to experience, learn and care for nature. One example is the 'Families Hike' programme where staff members are taken on a guided hike with their families, to experience the forest, its flora and fauna with a guided interpretation; and by doing the 'Twigs, Pigs and Garbage' tour, they gain insights into ways to reduce waste, water and energy consumption. Over lunch, staff members and their family discuss what was experienced as well as its relevance to their lives. As a result, employees are proud of what they do and, excited by their experiences, children become advocates for conservation at an early age.

Addressing challenges

Collaboration has been particularly significant in securing Lapa Rios into the future (Best Practice 5.4.2). Conscious about the challenge of protecting Lapa Rios' biodiversity beyond their ownership, the Lewises convened an 'Ec lodge Owners' Dilemma' conference, inviting conservation NGOs, environmental lawyers and tourism experts in 1999. The meeting aimed to brainstorm: *"How owners could protect the land and people supporting their tourism business after they move on"* (Principle 4.1). Several solutions were explored, and the obvious responses were to secure the land legally and only sell to environmentally and socially-conscious buyers. The Lapa Rios owners learnt about the opportunity for conservation easements/covenants to restrict development and land division, which would threaten the capacity of the reserve to remain an economic driver for the region and flagship conservation business. At the time, the easement option was available in Costa Rica's legal system but was untested within a private land context. Subsequent

to the meeting, the Lewises met numerous potential buyers, some of whom were aligned to their vision. Most focused on the financial bottom line. Although they realised that this was not something all buyers wanted, the owners signed the easement in 2013 *"To make the selling process easier and remove the need to negotiate re conservation vs. expansion or development."* This became Costa Rica's first easement applied to a private business (Best Practice 4.1.1).

The second outcome of the workshop led the owners to bring in Cayuga Sustainable Hospitality, a management company which fully aligned with their vision. The management company has brought professional management, improved skills, guest satisfaction, community connectivity and economies of scale. This enabled the owners to step back from the day-to-day running of the lodge but allowed the conservation and community elements to continue underpinning the business, until the time when they could find a suitable buyer. Undergoing The Long Run's GER® recognition processes (Box 8.3) and the Costa Rica tourism certification process ensured the owners' requirements continued to be met (Best Practice 1.1.3).

Summary

- The economic success of Lapa Rios' ecotourism operation is fundamental to the sustainability of the PPA (Best Practice 5.4.1).
- To reduce the tension between profit and conservation, clear goals for the business that integrate conservation, commerce, as well as community and culture considerations are useful (Best Practice 5.4.2).
- Community *inclusion* is important to securing biodiversity outcomes into the future (Best Practices 2.3.2 and 2.5.6).
- Collaborations bring skills to PPAs, support advocacy, expand impacts and offer solutions to specific issues (Best Practice 2.5.4).
- Securing the land with an easement for conservation in perpetuity has brought peace of mind to the owners and made the selling process straightforward (Best Practice 4.1.1).