

Chapter 11

**COMMUNITY-BASED ECOTOURISM AND
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN MEXICO:
A SYNERGETIC STRATEGY OR TRENDY SLOGAN?**

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous and community-managed Protected Areas are currently being promoted and backed financially by governmental institutions and international Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) as a way of enhancing voluntary conservation efforts. In this context, strategies and means focus on sustainable resource use and often emphasize community-based and/or nature-based tourism. While broader socio-cultural shifts in western societies and market trends related to them are promising, there is still little evidence that tourism effectively supports biodiversity conservation, local development, and cultural self-determination in the long-term.

To address these issues, this chapter presents a case study that sheds light on the complex socio-political transformations triggered by fast-paced tourism development in La Ventanilla, an increasingly popular destination on Mexico's Pacific coast. In order to study the community-based tourism development, the authors apply an actor-oriented analysis, that takes local population, government institutions, NGOs, multilateral institutions, and businesses into account.

The chapter concludes that despite genuine attempts to enhance community-based tourism development, the aims originally established have not been achieved, as many projects conceived to promote nature-based tourism have altered conditions of local development in La Ventanilla; such as social cohesion, a sense of community, and mutual trust. Well-intentioned interventions by non-place-based actors have exacerbated socio-

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economic disparities and compromised the potential for future sustainable tourism-driven development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent transformations in the tourism sector (eg., proliferation of post- and neo-Fordist production structures), and in sociocultural macro-tendencies (new values and modalities of tourist consumption) have led to the incorporation of new destinations into global tourist markets that seek to set themselves apart from traditional sun-and-sand tourism [Ioannides and Debbage, 2004; Torres, 2002]. Those resorts are located, preferentially, on sites marked by relatively pristine rural landscapes and natural areas in less socioeconomically developed nations or regions [Mowforth and Munt, 2009]. They are given numerous, and often ill-defined, labels that reflect distinct segments of emerging markets; for example, adventure-based tourism, nature-based tourism, agro-tourism, alternative tourism, rural tourism, ecological tourism, ethnotourism, ecotourism, community-based ecotourism, responsible tourism, and sustainable tourism. In the late 1990's, Mowforth and Munt [1998] compiled a list of more than 25 names for these new forms of tourism.

In this context, a now classic work by Urry [1990], related this new attitude among tourists to nostalgia for certain lifestyles associated with landscapes – real or imagined – and a growing environmental awareness that responded to changes in the values of modern western society. Later, Hiernaux-Nicol as [2002] explored this issue and identified four “tourism ideals”:

- a) The quest for happiness, or the adoption of hedonism as a central value pursued, preferably, in certain tourism spaces;
- b) Eluding the mundane everyday world, or the displacement that tourists undertake to escape from oppressive daily grinds;
- c) Encounters with the ‘other’, or the desire to travel to distant lands and have contact with “exotic” peoples and places; and,
- d) A return to nature, seen as a source of physical and mental health. All four involve a common desire: a search for styles of tourism that fulfil such experiences.

These ideals became articulated and significant in the so-called “global south nations” in what can be called the Nature-Based Tourism sector (NBT) that allows travelers to “pursue happiness in nature, escape from themselves, and discover other milieus and peoples” [Hiernaux-Nicol as, 2002: 27]. NBT thus includes all forms of tourism that take place in natural areas, where natural life, in one form or another, exercises a special attraction [Strasdas, 2001: 4], regardless of their possible social, economic or environmental impacts. Thus, NBT is by no means a synonym for “ecotourism”: as explicated below, the latter term is frequently considered a prescriptive strategy to foster sustainable regional development which focuses on providing benefits to local communities, minimizing negative impacts, and environmental education [TIES, 2006b].

Among the activities characteristic of NBT, we find watching wildlife –especially large land or sea mammals, birds, and rare or exotic species– hiking, hunting, fishing, sports, and excursions in alluring natural settings, often with the additional attraction of experiencing

indigenous cultures deemed “autochthonous” [Pearce, 2007]. The importance of NBT is best manifested in its growth in global tourism markets. Though this is difficult to quantify exactly due to a lack of conceptual clarity and reliable statistics, it is currently considered the segment that has the highest growth rates [Drumm and Moore, 2005; European Commission, 2002; Hawkins and Lamoureux, 2001; Tapper, 1993; TIES, 2006a; Wood, 2002]. Indeed, studies cite a yearly expansion in the number of tourists that seek these activities and spaces that ranges from 10% [Drumm and Moore, 2005] to 20, or even 34% [European Commission, 2002]. This growth is also reflected in specific tourist destinations that have re-oriented their offerings to take advantage of this market, such as Costa Rica, South Africa and Indonesia, where tourist flows have increased at above average rates since 1990 [Wood, 2002]. As a result, the market for NBT has garnered interest among both development planners in global south nations and numerous tourism businesses seeking to increase their market share [Weaver and Lawton, 2007].

Parallel to the advance of the NBT market, concern intensified in international circles over the need to preserve fragile ecosystems and geographical areas distinguished by high biodiversity [see, for example Glowka et al., 1999]. In the spheres of international environmental policy, this situation took on even greater importance in territories where community-based management is the norm [Galvin and Haller, 2008], based on local institutions that control access to, and the use of, an area’s natural resources [Harris, 2009]. Thus, community-managed lands, that in 2004 represented 11% of all temperate and tropical forests in the world [Molnar et al., 2004], came to “coincide” with both the aforementioned tourism ideals and emerging environmentalist discourses. In this setting, community-based ecotourism (not tantamount to NBT) began to gain strength as an explicit, normative concept related to ecotourism in that it specified responsible trips to natural areas that help preserve the environment and improve the conditions of the population [TIES, 2006b].

Moreover, it places great emphasis on the importance of local, environmentally sustainable development and community participation as strategies for taking advantage of existing sociocultural and economic tendencies and, consequently, potentiating environmental conservation [Borrini et al., 2004].

Thus, projects to foster community-based ecotourism have most often emerged in natural areas –some legally protected, others not– that have preserved great biodiversity, thanks in large part to ancestral knowledge and careful management by local residents, and that, moreover, have potential as tourist destinations because they are located near established tourism centers [Vargas del Río, 2010]. The most widely accepted strategy consists in convincing local peoples –often idealized as “communities”– to voluntarily adhere to this emerging concept by appealing to such interests as protecting wild flora and fauna, or obtaining economic benefits and financial support to produce and/or improve local tourist attractions [Borrini et al., 2004]. Such initiatives constitute attempts to combine modern conservation strategies based on the environmental and social sciences with traditional, indigenous ecological knowledge as a means of obtaining institutional support and financial resources –from the state, NGOs, or multilateral institutions– to foment community-based ecotourism; a way to compensate local people for accepting the new environmental restrictions imposed on their lifestyles [Kothari, 2006].

However, because tourists demand apparently sustainable practices as one element of their experience and consumption [Milne, 1998; Mowforth and Munt, 2009; Pigram and Wahab, 1997], many tourism service providers began to proclaim themselves “ecological”

and to promote any and all forms of NBT as “ecotourism”, at the same time as local populations exalted their “conservationist spirit” and “communitarian attitude”. Thus, it was that ecotourism and community-based ecotourism became tangled, interchangeable terms [Page and Dowling, 2002] as they evolved from (originally normative) developmental concepts into profit-oriented NBT controlled by diverse actors, all eager to adapt their practices to the growing “ecological market”. Precisely because community-based ecotourism refers to both a normative concept and a burgeoning market segment that exploits particularly fragile natural and sociocultural environments, we must first review some of the criticisms that question the viability of putting its ambitious objectives into practice [Cater, 1995; Fernandes, 1994; Pigram and Wahab, 1997; Ryan et al., 2000; Waters, 1995; Wheeller, 1991, 2006]. At least four broad critical currents stand out with respect to the usefulness and viability of the concept of community-based ecotourism.

First, the contradictions inherent in a concept that seeks to pursue highly ambitious objectives in economic settings still dominated by the conventional tourism sector. In such a milieu, traditional mass tourism, commercial NBT, and community-based ecotourism tend to overlap spatially; a fact reflected in a specific geographical pattern in which community-based ecotourism initiatives are dependent on nearby mass tourism centers [Kontogeorgopoulos, 2004; Wheeller, 2006]. This suggests that unless their offer is truly exceptional, such projects will continue to rely on the economic structures of traditional tourism in order to achieve a “critical mass” in terms of demand and infrastructure [Weaver and Lawton, 2007]. Such communities are thus dependent on the interests of powerful external actors. It can also be inferred that they will tend to reproduce a pattern seen in numerous conventional tourist destinations; i.e., benefits are concentrated in the hands of actors who are better positioned in the market, while the environmental and social costs weigh upon the spaces and actors recently incorporated into “alternative tourism” [Brenner and Vargas, 2011]. Moreover, it implies a tendency in which tourist flows may increase in response to the market controlled by those actors, and not to the criteria of the area’s carrying capacity [Mowforth and Munt, 2009]. In a context of growing demand, the administrators of community-based initiatives often confront the following conflict: admit larger tourist flows to improve profitability, or tighten the restrictions that prioritize environmental conservation [Wheeller, 1991].

A second criticism concerns the dynamics of tourist destination development [Boyd, 2006; Brenner and Vargas, 2011; Butler, 2006; Clarke, 1997; Marois and Hinch, 2006; Vargas-del-R o, 2010; Weizenegger, 2006; Wheeller, 2006], including such elements as investments in access routes, publicity, infrastructure, etc., designed to attract tourism. During start-up, such costs may be limited, but they will tend to increase as a project begins to enjoy greater economic success. With time, this may generate mass forms of for-profit NBT that the community may be ill-equipped to control [Clarke, 1997; Ryan et al., 2000; Weizenegger, 2006]. Therefore, community-based ecotourism requires a certain degree of social cohesion in order to resist the temptation to strive to obtain benefits from tourism markets too quickly; but this can generate contradictions as well. At a broader spatial level, if one particular local group manages in preserving its internal social cohesion and defends itself successfully from the power of actors interested in non-sustainable forms of NBT, it may find that tourist flows are being diverted towards some other area or community that is more fragmented in social terms [Wheeller, 1991]. Such a process can lead to a greater spatial dispersion of tourist

activities that ends up putting pressure on even more fragile ecosystems and cultures [Ryan et al., 2000].

The third line of criticism reflects the subtle effects and complex challenges that community-based tourism entails as it developed in the context of everyday practice. Such issues are difficult to avoid, even at sites with several, sophisticated management plans. For example, by their mere presence, tourists almost inevitably impact the natural milieu in some way; perhaps by producing noise, introducing pathogens, polluting the soil or water, or upsetting plant and animal dynamics [Buckley, 2005]. Similar comments apply to tourism's sociocultural impact. As Norberg-Hodge [1991] describes in her study of the cultural influence of visitors on localities formerly quite isolated from modern cultural tendencies, tourists transmit, intentionally or unintentionally, consumption and behavioral patterns to local peoples; patterns that exalt certain attributes of the western culture they represent and denigrate the meaning of the local culture they visit. Moreover, when local culture constitutes the main attraction, the process of commercialization can turn it into a kind of spectacle; one presented to please tourists, while the meaning of the tradition portrayed is lost [Wearing and Neil, 1999].

Finally, a fourth area of criticism involves the sociopolitical complexity entailed in the integral, participative management of community-based tourism [Brenner and Job, 2011; Brenner and Vargas-del-Río, 2011; Vargas-del-Río, 2010], where the concrete policies and measures adopted involve assigning resources, elaborating and implementing management plans, and promoting and enforcing new environmental regulations that, by their very definition, are administered by external actors such as government agencies or NGOs. In this way, some key natural resources and useful assets that formerly had only social value come to take on exchange value as well, through a process that not only transforms them into goods for the environmental and tourism markets, but can also set off conflicts over the distribution of ecological elements formerly subject to shared usufruct rights. Thus, as the number of political actors eager to control those resources increases, the political context becomes much more complex [Brenner and Job, 2006; Painter and Durham, 1995; Vargas-del-Río, 2010]. In this sense, implementing and administering "community-based" projects may well entail negotiations with a substantial number of actors; bargaining that, in all likelihood, will end with external actors becoming the main recipients of the environmental and/or economic benefits of such projects, instead of local ones [Wearing and Neil, 1999]. But even in cases where the principal economic beneficiaries are local actors, the distribution of benefits can generate disputes and conflicts, simply because "communities" are not homogeneous beings but, rather, social groups with local elites and differences of class, gender and ethnicity (The Ecologist, 1993). The probable result is that this process propitiates the emergence of new sub-groups of "winners" and "losers", and an increasingly fragmented, unequal social milieu.

With these concerns as its starting point, this chapter analyzes the results of a study conducted at a site considered a hallmark case of community-based ecotourism: La Ventanilla, a community-managed territory on the southern Pacific coast of Mexico. Briefly, it presents a chronological analysis of how fostering environmental conservation and tourism came to be articulated with the system of local environmental management. It is important to note that La Ventanilla earned national, and even international, attention for its exemplary, responsible community-based environmental management; even earning the epithet "model project" [Ávila Foucat, 2000, 2002; Becerril-Morales, 2001]. For these reasons, it was considered a model for community-based tourism management that promotes social cohesion,

equality, and a keen interest in conserving and managing its lands [ vila Foucat, 2002; Eugenio-Mart n and Avila Foucat, 2005]; precisely the factors that won it fame in Mexico and around the world [Betz, 2004]. The end result of La Ventanilla's success is that it has become a flagship for fomenting community-based ecotourism in Mexico's coastal areas.

This analysis of the interaction between tourism and local environmental management was conducted from a perspective centred on the configuration of the actors involved in different historical phases. This approach made it possible to evaluate the changing relations among social, economic and political structures, and different forms of appropriation and exploitation, while also taking into account the differences and inequalities among the diverse groups interested in utilizing local natural resources. The specific factors assessed were: power, interests, strategies, and the geographical scale of the operations of the different actors involved. Meanwhile, the actors were classified into five categories: local population, government institutions, NEOs, multilateral institutions, and businesses [Bryant and Bailey, 1997].

The following section briefly describes the geographical and socioeconomic setting of the study area, and elucidates the methodology applied, before presenting the results, which have been grouped into two historical-sociopolitical configurations. The effects of the political transitions that have taken place were evaluated using functional cartography and a socioeconomic analysis at the household level. Key results are then discussed, and the chapter ends with some general recommendations.

2. LA VENTANILLA: SOCIOECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL SETTING

La Ventanilla is located in an agrarian community called Santa Mar a Tonameca (241.1km², or 93mi²) in the coastal area of the Mexican state of Oaxaca (Figure 1), which is well known as the state with the largest number of indigenous peoples, and one of the highest indexes of biological diversity [Toledo et al., 2001]. This combination of cultural and biological diversity is due, on the one hand, to the collective administration and traditions of the human groups that inhabit the region [Toledo, 2001]; and, on the other, to the fact that Oaxaca has long been on the sidelines of Mexico's national tourism development policies and programs, which have caused severe environmental deterioration in other areas of the country [Brenner, 2005]. Because of factors such as these, Oaxaca also has one of the highest rates of socioeconomic marginalization in Mexico [CONABIO, 2006].

The coastal region of Oaxaca is characterized by granite cliffs broken by bays with sandy beaches and coastal lagoons fed by rivers that flow down from the adjacent mountains. Its vegetation includes large extensions of mangroves in the wetland zones and well-preserved medium deciduous forests in neighboring hilly areas [CONABIO, 2004a, 2004b]. Together, the coastal and mountainous zones contain a broad diversity of environmental niches and species, some of which are endemic or endangered [La Ventana A.C., 2006]. The adjoining maritime area teems with species of endemic fish, endemic species of kelp, molluscs, echinoderms and crustaceans, and is crowned by an abundance of charismatic species of marine mammals such as dolphins (various species) and humpback whales (Megaptera novaeangliae), and different species of sea turtles [Lepidichelys olivacea, Dermochelys

coriacea, *Chelonia agazzi*]. Indeed, the community's coastline is home to one of the most important nesting areas for *Lepidichelys olivacea* turtles in the world. For all of these reasons, it is considered a high priority region for terrestrial and marine conservation [CONABIO, 2004a, 2004b].

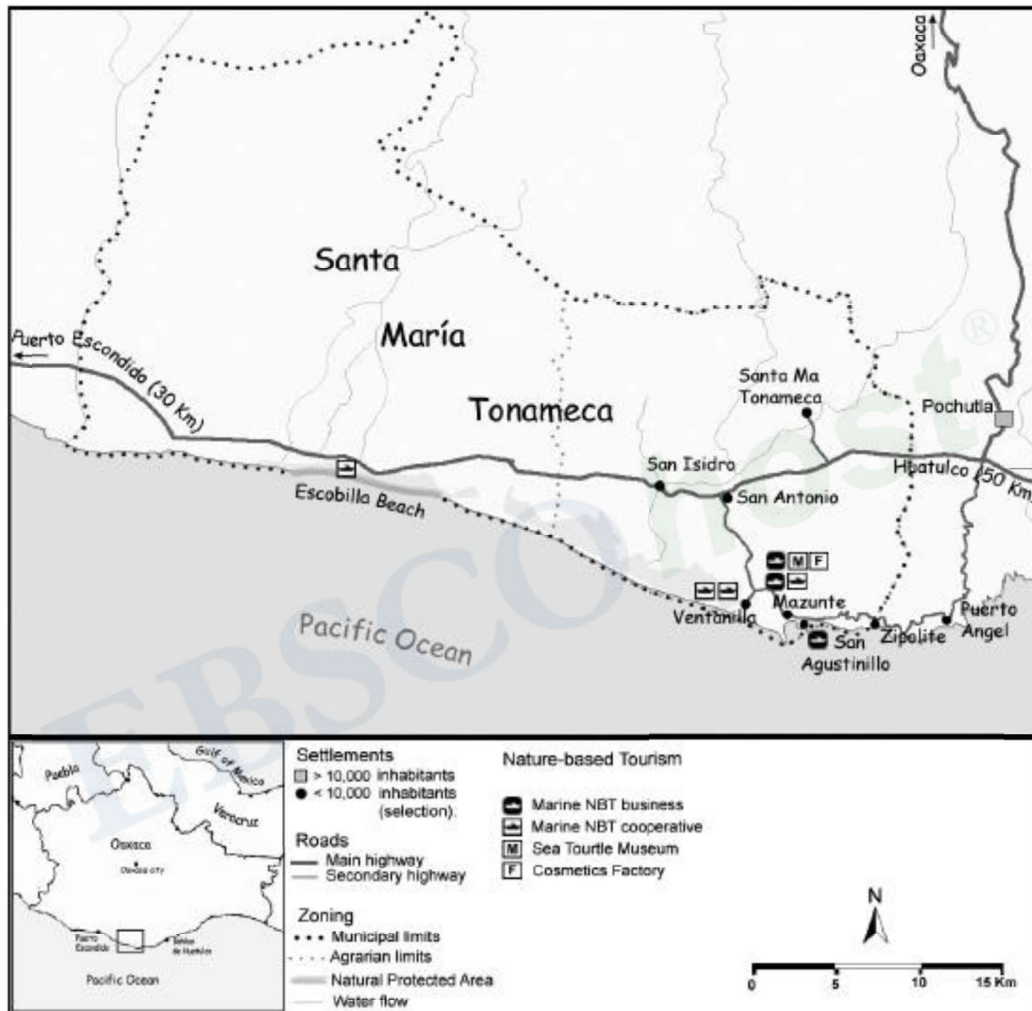
At present, the government provides substantial financial support for locally-administered conservation programs and the promotion of a "community-based nature reserve" in the agrarian community of Santa María Tonameca [La Ventana A. C., 2006]. Programs are currently being promoted by different agencies of Mexico's Department of the Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT for its acronym in Spanish) and by a national NGO established in the region. All of these initiatives focus on voluntary, locally-administered conservation measures backed by the federal government and spelled out in a Territorial Ecological Ordinance,¹ which holds out the possibility of obtaining additional funds to develop tourism and other activities [CONANP, 2006]. This strategy coincides with the concept of Indigenous and Community-Conserved Areas that the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines as "natural and/or modified ecosystems containing significant biodiversity values and ecological services, voluntarily conserved by (sedentary and mobile) indigenous and local communities, through customary laws or other effective means" [Kothari, 2006]. This concept –widely promoted and supported by the IUCN– works to motivate governments around the world to support the conservation efforts of local communities. In 2008, the agrarian community where La Ventanilla is located opted to commit to accept a Territorial Ecological Ordinance plan as a first phase in establishing a Community-Conserved Area that proposes to preserve 48% of the territory involved [La Ventana A.C., 2008].

Since 1970, this region has gradually increased its involvement in tourist-related activities, heavily influenced by the parallel growth of several nearby tourism destinations, the first of which (Zipolite) started to develop in March 1970, when a solar eclipse clearly visible from the area coincided with the heyday of the hippie movement to attract large streams of backpackers. The beauty of the area's beaches and good connections between the coast and the national highway network gradually led to the consolidation of the town of Zipolite –a neighbor of Santa María Tonameca (see Figure 1)– as the most important backpacker destination on Mexico's Pacific coast [Brenner and Fricke, 2007]. By 1997, a second site, Mazunte, had begun to expand, thanks in part to the influence of Zipolite, but also on its own merits as a tourism project promoted by a national NGO. Thus, as Figure 1 shows, Mazunte consolidated its status as a backpack-oriented, "ecologist" tourist destination with a sea turtle museum, projects that encouraged visitors to observing marine flora and fauna, and sales of locally-made products [Morales-Gómez, 2009; Vargas del Río, 2010].

Important influence arose also from two sun-and-sand tourist destinations promoted by Mexico's federal government that provide visitors with easy access to La Ventanilla through the services of tourism operators. Those resorts are Puerto Escondido, located some 30km (19m) to the west, and Huatulco, 50km (31m) to the east, two destinations that are cogs in Mexico's national mass tourism development policy, designed to offer sun, sea and beaches;

¹ The Territorial Ecological Ordinance is a conservation strategy promoted in Mexico for over a decade; it consists in participative planning and spatial control of productive economic activities in a given territory, defines the uses of land and water allowed, and sets regulations that apply to all government agencies and actors living in its jurisdiction.

all promoted by a government agency set up specifically for this purpose (for more details see Brenner and Aguilar, 2002; Brenner, 2005; Clancy, 2001). But those resorts have stagnated somewhat in recent years in terms of the volumes of tourists they attract and are currently striving to “rejuvenate” their image and diversify their attractions [Agarwal and Shaw, 2007; Brenner 2005].



Source: Vargas del Río, 2010.

Figure 1. Location of La Ventanilla and the agrarian community of Santa María de Tonameca.

La Ventanilla, a village of approximately 100 inhabitants [INEGI, 2009], was originally settled by people from the agrarian community of Santa María Tonameca (Figure 1) who formally gained possession of the land in 1969 with the consent of the latter. The territory includes part of the coastal lagoon that forms at the mouth of the Tonameca River with flora and fauna typical of mangrove stands, a beach zone where sea turtle nests abound, and flood-free areas around the coastal lagoon and on the slopes of the hillsides that border the neighboring town of Mazunte, where deciduous forests and agricultural fields dominate the

landscape. The people that settled on this site began to cultivate the land, but complemented their incomes by trafficking in sea turtle eggs, crocodile skins and certain protected species.

The lands were governed by a communal property regime; part of the land tenure system that emerged in Mexico's post-revolutionary period in which the State redistributed agricultural land for collective tilling as part of the country's development policy, but also in an effort to establish a stronger presence in rural areas [Hansen, 1984]. In this communal regimen, decision-making on the basis of what are called "local uses and customs" has been ratified by the federal government [Carlsten, 1999]. This model of social organization is similar to one that has developed among other indigenous peoples and peasant communities in the state of Oaxaca, where most of the immigrants to the coastal areas are from. It stipulates that decisions be taken collectively by an Assembly, the maximum local authority and the institution that negotiates with external actors, vents issues of concern to the locality, and imposes sanctions. Participants in the Assembly are called *Avecindados* (neighbors or residents), the heads of household that have resided for over a year and have been so recognized by the Assembly, and *Comuneros*; i.e., *Avecindados* legally recognized by the federal government's Department of Agrarian Reform [DOF, 1992] and the *Comisariado de Bienes Comunales* (Commissary of Communal Property), a council that depends on the Assembly, which is headed by leading *comuneros* and tends largely to administrative matters at the local level.

It was into this setting that tourists from Puerto Escondido, Huatulco, Zipolite and Mazunte began to arrive in the early 1990's and gave rise to the emergence of the first local tourism service providers; men who offered guided boat tours through the nearby mangroves to observe the flora and fauna. That local initiative proved successful and tourist flows soon increased markedly. As a result, local people petitioned for, and received, substantial technical support and funding from different government agencies and an NGO to carry out activities in the areas of conservation and restoration though, as we discuss in greater detail below, their main involvement now revolves around tourism and environmental conservation.

Thus, two forces acted upon La Ventanilla to rapidly diversify local economic activities. The first is related to environmental conservation and attempts to implement strategies of "community-based" management or, better, environmental management activities based on instruments promoted by state actors in coordination with the NGO that seek to strengthen local participation. The second is the tourism sector, which works to broaden and diversify attractions at the regional level. In this context, there is a consensus with respect to fomenting "community-based ecotourism" as the best option [see: La Ventana A. C., 2008; Redes Consultores, 2000]. Though tourism was first promoted by environmental groups in the early 1990's as a form of activism oriented towards fomenting conservation and more egalitarian forms of socioeconomic development [Bori-Sanz, 2000], various NGOs, government institutions, and even residents who have benefited economically from this activity have recently begun to participate in these initiatives. Therefore, tourist activities are growing at an accelerated pace and now includes turtle-watching, boat tours in the marine area or mangroves to observe coastal flora and fauna, and conservation initiatives, among other elements (Figure 1). However, perceptions of just what constitutes "community-based ecotourism" and of the best strategies for attaining it differ, and the private interests of certain actors in fomenting economic development on the margins of environmental or social issues have transformed La Ventanilla into a highly-politicized locality. As a result, tourism companies, government institutions and NGOs devoted to environmental conservation, as

well as different groups within the local population, are now manoeuvring to control the area's natural resources and turn them to their own purposes.

3. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

In order to identify the social actors linked to tourism and conservation activities, the study made use of the so-called "snowball" technique, which led to the elaboration of the following categorization of actors: government institutions, businesses, multilateral institutions, NGOs, and local residents [Bryant and Bailey, 1997]. Once identified, this constellation of actors was analyzed on the basis of the interpretation of interviews and secondary data to determine the alliances and conflicts among them in different diagnostic periods, and how their interaction was reflected in the appropriation of natural resources. Interviews, from semi-structured to in-depth, were conducted with representatives of all of the formally established groups in La Ventanilla (two tourism cooperatives, the municipal government, and a cooperative network), as well as with four other local residents. In addition, 12 interviews were held with representatives of regional level actors (two NGOs, five government officials, one agrarian authority and four tourism operators). The duration of those sessions ranged from 30 minutes to two-and-a-half hours; average time was one hour. All interviews were taped and transcribed for later analysis using an assignation process consisting of a series of codes to recover the information based on a classification of analytical categories [Coffey and Atkinson, 1996]. In addition, researchers attended several Assembly meetings and regional forums, as observers, that promoted conservation activities and tourism-related initiatives.

Fieldwork was conducted in January, September, October and November, 2007. The month of January is the peak tourist period, when it was possible to appreciate firsthand both the pressure exerted by tourism and local level dynamics. The months from September to November are characterized by low-to-medium tourist flows; the season when locals are more willing to be interviewed. With a few exceptions, local people were open and interested in presenting their points of view. Assessments of the relative power of the different actors in each phase were achieved through a qualitative examination of the distinct types of power or resources, following the scheme devised by Uphoff [2005] that synthesizes resources into six categories: economic, social, political, moral, information, and physical. The economic type includes issues such as control of capital, labor, land, and the goods and services derived from them; social resources concern social status or position in a given social structure and entail the capacity to mobilize other actors; political resources emerge from the formal normative authority and legality that support the actions of certain actors; moral resources are those associated with perceptions of legitimacy or reputation that some actors may enjoy; information resources consist in the possession of, or capacity to accede to or transmit, information and the ability to utilize certain techniques or knowledge; finally, physical resources refer to the force that an actor is capable of exerting on others to oblige them to cooperate or conform.

The next step consisted in a historical analysis of the social organization of La Ventanilla, which led us to define two temporal phases based on the scheme proposed by Johnston [Johnston, 2001a, 2001b], which suggests distinguishing between two different triggers of

socioeconomic change at the local level: (a) critical events, those that occur suddenly, come from outside, and provoke rapid, profound changes; and, (b) gradual processes, which act slowly and cumulatively. In the case that concerns us here, the first phase (1969-1995) was characterized by the predominance of such activities as hunting, artisanal fishing, subsistence agriculture, and incipient tourism; while the second (1996-to-the present) is marked by the boom in tourism and activities related to environmental conservation. Having defined the constellations of actors and sociopolitical structures that correspond to the two historical phases, we then elaborated a functional map of all dwellings and public places, and conducted a household survey in all the dwellings on the map. All households were surveyed except for three that were unoccupied because they served as second homes. The aim was to gather socioeconomic and demographic data, as well as information on people's adscription to different producer groups. Also, a list of variables and questions adapted to the needs of the study was added to collect data from the environmental managers in the coastal zone [Bunce and Pomeroy, 2003]. These quantitative data complemented the results of the qualitative fieldwork and helped triangulate the information.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Constellation of Actors 1969-1994: The Origins of the Agrarian Community and Incipient Tourism

The first inhabitants to settle in La Ventanilla arrived in the late 1960s after migrating from an agrarian community located further inland called Santa María Tonameca [Ávila Foucat, 2002]. Three families began to prepare the land around the coastal lagoon for agricultural use and obtained permission for communal exploitation from the Commissary of Communal Properties in 1969 [Zamora, 2009]. The acquisition of those lands was deemed a critical event because it led to the establishment of a permanent population: the locality now known as La Ventanilla. At first, economic hardships forced the families to migrate seasonally, so permanent settlement did not take place until the early 1980's: "We came to work in 1969, but left because of poverty, to earn [money]. We'd go away [but] we've stayed here since 1980" [Comunero, 01.11.2007]. The principal economic activity was subsistence agriculture (mainly corn and beans), but it was complemented by fishing in the lagoon, hunting for domestic consumption, sales of agricultural surpluses, and selling some species of turtle eggs in regional markets [Zamora, 2009].

Because it is politically dependent on Santa María Tonameca, land management began under the model of communal exploitation backed by the federal government and the aforementioned principal of "uses and customs". This led to the emergence of the sociopolitical structure shown in Figure 2. As the collective actor responsible for all important decisions at the local level, the Assembly enjoyed considerable moral, political, social, information and physical power, as it represented the interests of residents and was the agent entrusted to carry out all negotiations with external actors. Also, it was invested with the authority to impose sanctions. Those who interacted in the Assembly were classified as comuneros and avecindados. As Figure 2 shows, though both groups of actors could speak and vote in the Assembly, the avecindados were weaker than the comuneros because they did

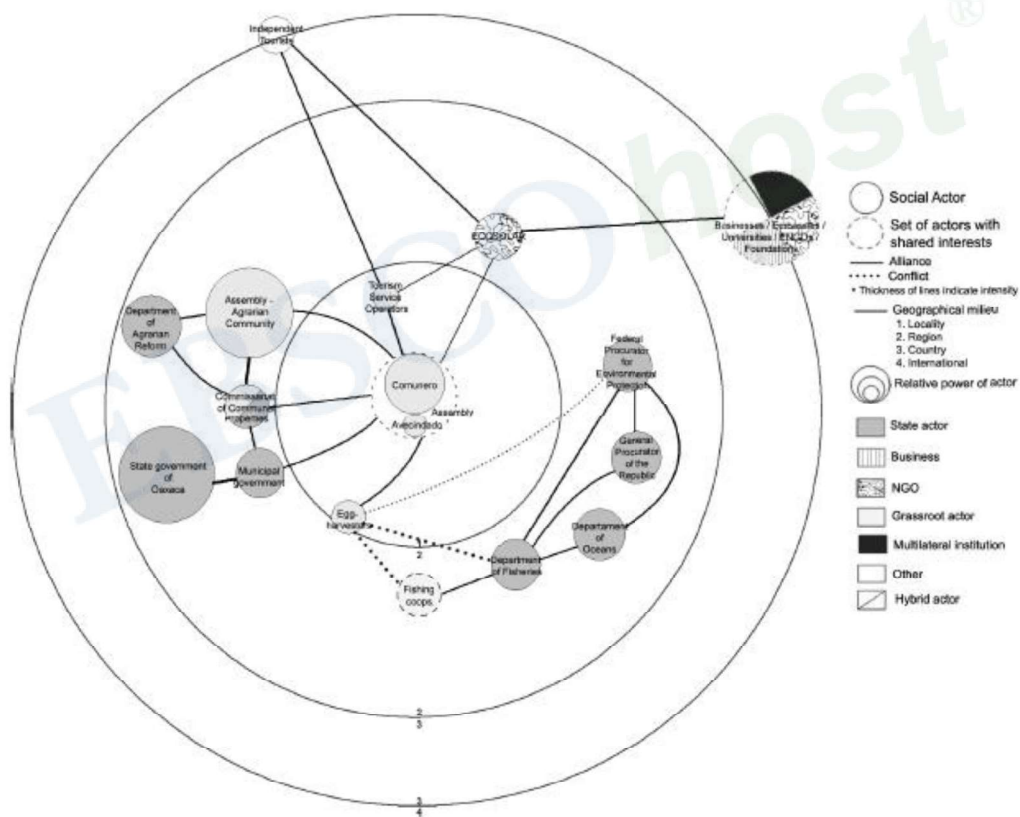
not own agricultural fields and did not enjoy the moral recognition of the agrarian community; therefore, they had less economic, political, social and moral power. Both groups were articulated at the regional level with other actors:

- i) The Assembly of the Agrarian Community of Tonameca, which had power resources similar to those of the local Assembly described above;
- ii) The Commissary of Communal Properties that represented the Assembly of the agrarian community of Tonameca through leading comuneros and was the actor responsible for carrying out administrative work, which endowed it with moral, political, social and information resources; and,
- iii) The municipal government of Santa Mar a Tonameca that, in turn, had the political support of the Mexican state through the government of the state of Oaxaca, and thus represented the state power structure and held considerable moral, political, economic, physical, social and information power.
- iv) Finally, a fourth actor was the Department of Agrarian Reform, the federal government agency responsible for regulating land tenure at the national level.

The principal interests of the state actors centred on fomenting the socioeconomic development of towns in the region and strengthening its own presence in peripheral areas. Because the interests of the State and the local people generally coincided, conflicts were few. During this phase, no important activities were developed in the marine area due to the strong waves and sea currents and the fact that the colonists were peasant-farmers with no experience in fishing. Also, regional fishing cooperatives already exercised extensive control over the marine space. Therefore, the people of La Ventanilla did not belong to any cooperative, nor were they employed at the plant (rastros) that was set up in the nearby community of Mazunte in 1967 to process and commercialize meat from sea turtles caught by the cooperative organizations [Bravo Fuerte and Molina Ramos, 1994]. Though the plant was an important source of employment in the region, the residents of La Ventanilla only benefited economically through the illegal sale of sea turtle eggs that they gathered from the nesting areas along their beach [Zamora, 2009]. As Figure 2 illustrates, when harvesting turtle eggs was made illegal in 1971 [Tennesen, 1999], the egg-gatherers (called hueveros) from La Ventanilla came into conflict with actors committed to conserving sea turtle populations or, at the very least, maintaining them stable. At that time, the fishing cooperatives were coordinated with the Department of Fisheries, which supported the fishing industry and monitored the rastros, the Department of Oceans, and the General Procurator of the Republic, two government agencies responsible for exercising physical power on the sea and land, respectively. Later, after 1992, coordination began with the Federal Procurator for Environmental Protection (PROFEPA), a recently created government agency responsible for enforcing environmental norms. Those state actors carry considerable political and economic weight because all marine areas are under federal ownership and no private property rights can be recognized without the government authorization. However, their real influence was limited because the respective areas of competence of those government actors were fragmented; as a result, there was no effective coordination among those institutions during the first phase (Figure 2).

The 1990 decree that outlawed all kinds of exploitation of sea turtles had a huge impact on the settlements in the region that depended largely on this activity. This critical event hit

La Ventanilla especially hard as it led to increasingly tight restrictions on harvesting sea turtle eggs but, even more importantly, because it indirectly spurred tourist development in an area that potential visitors had always avoided due to the fetid odor and unpleasant appearance of the rastro in Mazunte. While those gradual processes did not modify the local sociopolitical structure in the years 1990-1994, they most certainly contributed to the emergence of a markedly different local sociopolitical structure after 1995, when independent visitors to Mazunte and Zipolite began to explore La Ventanilla on their own, especially after 1992 [Roldán Vera, 2002]. The fact that some agricultural products that had begun to enjoy demand in the region (mainly coconuts and ornamental plants for the regional tourist market) were already being transported through the lagoon in small boats gave some local men an idea: taking tourists on informal tours to observe the flora and fauna in the mangroves, "Because some had agricultural fields they used a little canoe to get to (...) But tourists had begun to go to Mazunte (...) so they started to take them in [their] little boats" [Member, Cooperativa Servicios Ecoturísticos La Ventanilla, 26.10.2007].



Source: Vargas del Río, 2010.

Figure 2. Constellations of actors in La Ventanilla, years 1969-1994.

Those tours through the lagoon gradually gained popularity as they gave tourists the opportunity to watch American crocodiles (*Crocodylus Acutus*) in their native habitat [Ávila Foucat, 2002]. As Figure 2 also shows, various actors linked to these incipient tourist activities soon appeared as more independent tourists began to explore the region. As a

consequence, tourism services emerged in La Ventanilla. However, tourist flows were still relatively modest and the local service providers were not formally organized, so their social, moral and economic power was limited and activities were disorganized at best: “There was no concession or cooperative, everything was just communal. We had no document that said: life insurance, life preservers... nothing” (independent service provider, 03.11.2007). In that setting, a national NGO called ECOSOLAR that had been active for some time in the nearby town of Mazunte sought to incorporate La Ventanilla into one of its projects and channel independent tourists there. ECOSOLAR was interested in conserving the area’s natural resources and promoting community-based ecotourism, and had substantial funding derived from its image of successful conservation projects. Consequently, it received significant financial support from the business sector, universities, embassies, international NGOs, and numerous foundations. It soon took on the task of training and providing advice to local service providers: “But finally in 1992-93, a civil association called ECOSOLAR arrived in the community of Mazunte and began to visit La Ventanilla too” (member, Cooperativa Servicios Ecotur sticos La Ventanilla, 26.10.2007).

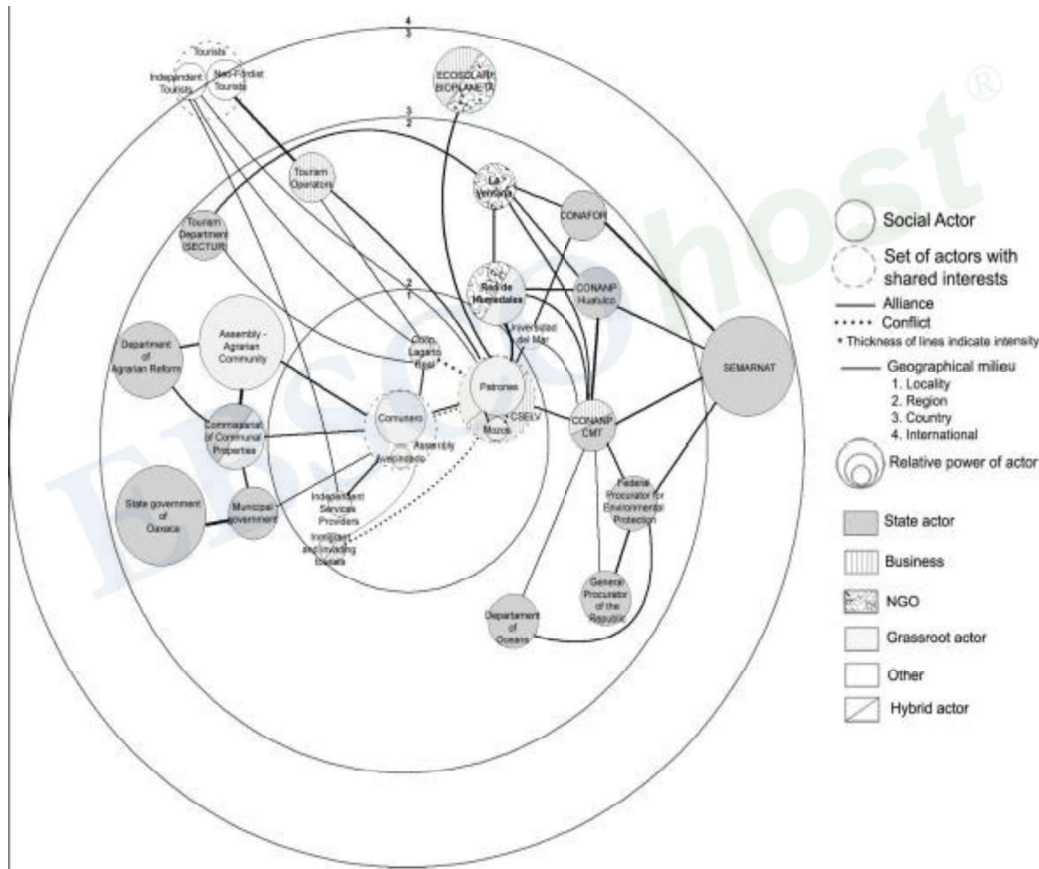
Constellation of Actors 1995-to Present: Tourism and “Voluntary” Environmental Conservation

In this phase, ECOSOLAR advised service providers to coordinate and consolidate their activities into a communal tourism cooperative. The objectives were to strengthen community organization and enable them to offer competitive tourism services: “Then, what he (a member of ECOSOLAR) told us was: ‘You should get organized, because if you don’t, someone else will come and beat you to the punch, and you’ll end up working for them like in so many other places’. And that’s how we got organized and began to work collectively” (member, Cooperativa Servicios Ecotur sticos La Ventanilla, 26.10.2007). As a result, in 1995, six locals founded the Cooperativa de Servicios Ecotur sticos La Ventanilla (CSELV). The appearance of this group as an actor at the local level is considered a critical event because it led to a marked increase in tourist flows. As the reader shall see, this situation did indeed strengthen local service providers and increased their economic incomes; however, though it also brought the imposition of tighter environmental restrictions, the substitution of economic activities, social fragmentation at the local level, the marginalization of part of the population from productive activities, and a loss of control over communal lands.

Figure 3 shows the current configuration of actors: today, the CSELV is a powerful local actor, whose principal resources are moral, information, social and economic since it is a formally organized group linked to diverse actors that provide economic support and professional consulting. Moreover, as it is independent of the local Assembly it is free to pursue its own interests, which do not necessarily coincide with those of the community as a whole: “They said they were a communal cooperative, but that wasn’t true. So just like that the cooperative separated from the community at an Assembly: the cooperative on this side, the community [on the other]...” (comunero, 01.11.2007). A second distinctive characteristic of the cooperative is its hierarchical structure, with “bosses” (patrones), whose power resources are moral, economic, information, and social, precisely because they are recognized as local leaders who founded the cooperative, and because they are the owners of the properties on which the cooperative’s main assets were built (two restaurants, a visitors’

center, several lodgings, a jetty, a small museum, and conservation exhibits open to the public). Also, they control the finances and administer the funding provided by government institutions and the NGO, and negotiate the conditions for cooperation with regional tourism operators (Figure 3). This considerable concentration of resources gives those patrones the political clout they need to control the cooperative and remove any member of the groups who question the lack of equality (independent service provider, 03.11.2007).

On the other hand, there are employees(mozos); i.e., wage workers who perform daily tasks such as cleaning and maintaining the installations, and attending to tourists, among other activities. Though numerous, the mozos are a weak group within the cooperative, so their share of the distribution of economic benefits is unequal. They consider their wages insufficient, lower even than those paid in formal jobs in the region [Zamora, 2009]. Hence, it is hardly surprising that there are serious conflicts between patrones and mozos (Figure 3).



Source: Vargas del Río, 2010.

Figure 3. Power interactions in La Ventanilla in the second phase.

At present, the cooperative is associated with an NGO called BIOPLANETA that provides technical assistance and publicity for its tourism project. BIOPLANETA is an offshoot of the ECOSOLAR NGO that operated in the region from 1991 to 1998. In the early years of the second phase, funding for tourism in La Ventanilla came from ECOSOLAR; but when sociopolitical conflicts emerged in the nearby town of Mazunte it was forced to suspend

its activities in the region. After that, funding was provided by the national-level NGO BIOPLANETA (Figure 3). The technical assistance and publicity from ECOSOLAR and then BIOPLANETA allowed the cooperative to accede to other sources of funding from actors interested in environmental conservation [ vila Foucat, 2002]. Figure 3 illustrates that the CSELV received economic and technical support from foundations, foreign embassies in Mexico, and universities, among other sources. ECOSOLAR, and later BIOPLANETA, not only promoted the project at the national level, but also provided consulting services in negotiations for economic support and training, and encouraged the cooperative to construct the visitor's centre. Meanwhile, a local university (Universidad del Mar) provided technical assistance and consulting to negotiate other forms of support linked to environmental conservation and restoration. Those alliances allowed the CSELV to receive more and more resources, not only to foster tourism but also to develop and carry out conservation projects.

Thus, in 1998, the CSELV undertook a project to reforest the mangroves with funds from the Department of the Environment and Natural Resources and Fisheries (SEMARNAP). By the year 2000, similar funding opportunities began to appear [Par  and Marcelli, 2002], allowing the cooperative to elaborate a plan for a "Management Unit for Wildlife Conservation" (part of a government strategy to promote initiatives in the area of environmental conservation and restoration) and receive significant funding from government agencies interested in promoting environmental conservation: first, the SEMARNAP; and, since 2000, after a series of restructurings and paradigmatic changes in Mexico's national environmental policy, the National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR) and the National Commission for Natural Protected Areas (CONANP). Among the activities that received support were the incubation of American crocodile and sea turtle eggs, the supervised release of hatchlings, and breeding and releasing of white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus acapulcensis*) [Becerril-Morales, 2001]. It is important to emphasize that all of these projects explicitly demanded the proactive acceptance of restrictions on the use of, and access to, natural resources on the part of the community; particularly with respect to hunting, traditional agriculture, forest exploitation, and the harvesting of turtle eggs. Because these conservation measures were largely successful (the populations of species such as the American crocodile, white-tailed deer, and iguanas all increased), additional tourist attractions were generated. However, the new restrictions intensified conflicts with the sectors of the local population that did not participate in those initiatives, because they received no economic benefits whatsoever despite the fact that they too were obliged to renounce their right to gather sea turtle eggs, use wood for construction, or hunt animals around the lagoon (Figure 3): "We had serious problems because we barred people from entering [the lagoon]; and even today there are some people who don't agree with conservation because, well, that was their old way of life" [member CSELV, 26.10.2007].

The success of the different conservation projects and the promotion of tourism in La Ventanilla transformed the village into an example to be followed by other localities: "The regional ecotourism program is led primarily by the La Ventanilla project; it's the ultimate goal of many groups" [member, Red de Humedales de la Costa de Oaxaca, 09.11.2007]. As a result, after 2001, other cooperatives and groups in the region began to organize and, in 2004, the Red de Humedales de la Costa de Oaxaca was founded under the leadership of members of the CSELV. Today, it includes 18 groups from the coast of the state of Oaxaca and receives technical assistance from the La Ventana regional NGO. The objectives of the Red de Humedales are to strengthen the position of its members in relation to tourism companies,

and obtain government funding to foment tourism and environmental conservation [member, Red de Humedales de la Costa de Oaxaca, 09.11.2007]. It has considerable power resources, especially of the moral and social kinds, because it is seen as a “communal” organization allied with environmental conservation; and in terms of information, thanks to the technical support provided by the community of La Ventanilla; all of which have allowed it to obtain social and economic resources from a variety of institutions. Among the latter, CONANP and the Mexican Turtle Centre stand out for they are entrusted with the tasks of promoting conservation of sea turtles through an information center, monitoring activities, and environmental education [Asamblea de la Red de Humedales de la Costa de Oaxaca, 04.11.2007]. CONAFOR, meanwhile, contributes funding because it is the institution in charge of restoring ecosystems considered as “high-priority” through programs that offer financial support. With backing from the Red de Humedales, CSELV succeeded in receiving additional funding from the Department of Tourism (SECTUR) to develop tourism-related infrastructure. As the government agency that promotes tourism throughout Mexico, SECTUR controls substantial economic and political resources. In La Ventanilla it provided economic resources to the CSELV for construction of cabañas and a jetty in front of the lagoon.

The formalization of the CSELV, added to the easier access to La Ventanilla along the Puerto Ángel-San Antonio highway (built in 1993, see Figure 1), led to larger tourist flows after 1995. Most visitors now purchase all-inclusive packages offered by tourism operators in Huatulco and Puerto Escondido. The economic and information power that those operators enjoy allowed them to charge the CSELV high commissions for directing tourists to La Ventanilla; as much as 30% of the tariffs that the cooperative charged for its tours. However, the fact that the CSELV was recognized in the region, and nationally, soon enabled the local people to lower those commissions by half: “They paid us a commission of 10 pesos, but the time came when they saw that a lot of people were coming (...) so at one point they just said, pardon the expression: ‘the association of guides [i.e., tourism operators] can go f--- themselves, we’re only going to give them 5 pesos’” (tourism operator, 06.11.2007).

The weak position in which the tourism operators found themselves awoke an interest among them to break up the cooperative so as to increase their commissions: “At some point, one guide really tried to separate the cooperatives... well, actually the cooperative” (tourism operator, 06.11.2007). That strategy was facilitated to some extent by the social inequality that existed inside the cooperative; so, in 2004 nine former members (all of them *mozos*) of the CSELV founded the *Cooperativa Lagarto Real*: “They didn’t keep clear records of incomes and outlays, and never accounted to us for the funds they took out (...) But in terms of everyone collaborating, well... they never did; so we got really angry and decided to form the other [cooperative]” (member, *Cooperativa Lagarto Real*, 03.11.2007). At present, the *Cooperativa Lagarto Real* is still considerably weaker than CSELV, as it has no links to NGOs or government agencies (Figure 3), and thus lacks CSELV’s economic resources and is barred from including conservation projects, which are tourist attractions in and of themselves (member, *Cooperativa Lagarto Real*, 03.11.2007). Because of this, its services and installations are of lower quality, but still it is able to attract a certain number of visitors, and some tourism operators prefer to deal with it because they can reap greater profits (pers. comm., tourism operator, 06.11.2007). In this way, competition between the two cooperatives improved the position of the tourism operators, allowed them to raise their commission back to 30%, and gave them the possibility to choose between service providers. At the same time,

competition generated a serious conflict between the cooperatives and deteriorated the locality's "communal" image: "We even came to blows (...) fistfights, especially in front of tourists; well, that's awful. Y'know, it doesn't really make the tourists want to come back" (member, Cooperativa Lagarto Real, 03.11.2007).

On another point, the area's market potential combined with its scenic beauty made this locality attractive to tourism investors eager to buy communal lands. Prominent in this group were U.S. citizens and middle-to-upper class urban Mexicans looking for alternative lifestyles. Transactions in real estate were facilitated by corruption by the Commissary of Communal Properties, increasing prices for lots in the region, internal social fragmentation, and the growing marginalization that affected certain sectors of the community. Soon, some tourism investors were able to acquire lands in La Ventanilla and then build second residences [Municipal Agent, La Ventanilla, 03.11.2007]. Though land sales are part of a still incipient process, they represent a potentially attractive business for some people in the town, especially those who participate only marginally in tourist-related activities, but own lands whose value has increased markedly; for example, independent service providers who offer tourists food and drink, the members of the Cooperativa Lagarto Real, and the *mozos*: "I could build a big house. But my father says: 'I still don't want to sell my land'" (independent tourism service provider, 01.11.2007).

Given these circumstances, the members of the CSELV sought to regulate land sales and changes in land use by proposing a locally developed territorial ordering plan designed to legally establish certain land uses in the town's different zones, together with a series of norms to regulate construction [Mart nez de Velasco, 2000]. But this initiative has not yet won wide local level support or government backing. In reality, changes in land use are currently controlled as follows: first, all individuals interested in acquiring land must go before the local Assembly and publicly recognize its regulatory faculties: "That's the strategy: to speak with new people who arrive in the community, then reach an accord and say: 'welcome, you're now a resident of the community, but you're going to have to go along with the way we operate here'" [Municipal Agent, La Ventanilla, 03.11.2007]. Second, the CSELV uses its relations with the conservationist sector to impede construction of any infrastructure it considers incompatible with its interests. For example, in 2006, a North American tourism investor tried to build a multi-story hotel right in front of the beach, but the local Assembly and the CSELV, in coordination with the Red de Humedales de la Costa de Oaxaca, PROFEPA, and the Mexican Turtle Center (CONANP Official, 13.11.2007), successfully blocked the project. However, the effectiveness of these regulations in the medium and long-term is doubtful at best, since the growing social fragmentation in La Ventanilla hardly seems to hold out great possibilities for consensus-building in the face of the temptation to quickly obtain substantial economic profits. It will surely prove increasingly difficult to impede land sales to tourism investors, or to impose regulations on the construction of dwellings and tourism infrastructure. For example, one now sees recently built brick and cement houses that completely contravene the ordering plan, which limits construction materials to those considered typical of the area such as adobe. Another example of the limited efficacy of local regulations was the visually unattractive paving of the highway to La Ventanilla in 2006: "We wanted cobblestone or paving stones (*adoqu n*), not asphalt (...) But some people just weren't that interested in the project; people who said: 'I want a highway, and that's that! But, well, it wasn't my decision, the community just decided to go ahead'" (member, CSELV, 26.10.2007). In summary, the tourism activities and conservation

projects that were consolidated in this phase gave rise to a more conflictive milieu; one fragmented and unequal at the local level. In addition, the area's capacity for environmental management was affected by the actions of external actors who, in practice, proved very difficult or impossible to control.

Changing Land Use as a Consequence of Social Fragmentation

The visible consequences of the changes in productive activities and internal conflicts are shown in Figure 4, which shows the results of the mapping of La Ventanilla carried out in October 2007. A total of 28 dwellings were identified, which housed a population of 101 inhabitants. Three different zones can be appreciated, which reflect the social dynamics and changes in land use brought by the expansion of tourism activities. Zone 1 contains public spaces (including the church, a school, and the sites where Assemblies are held) and the homes of some residents who settled before 1995. The quality of the houses in this zone varies: three were built with funding from the ECOSOLAR. They are made of adobe enriched with cement and have palm roofs and a professional design (Figure 4). Three other residences of relatively high architectural quality with gardens and swimming pools are located beside the highway. In contrast, the other 10 houses were built by their inhabitants using brick, cement and a variety of other, locally-available materials. They reflect the low purchasing power of those families because the walls are made of reeds, the roofs of palm leaves, and they have earthen floors. In Zone 2, we found the homes of the rest of the town's inhabitants. Their quality and design criteria also show marked contrasts, but local conflicts show a distinct dynamic to the one seen in Zone 1, as this area is the site of the parking lot and other places that visitors are obliged to use. Thus, it is a point of greater tourist activity that often witnesses acute expressions of competition, such as verbal disputes, that can turn violent, between the cooperatives that strive to attract more clients. The higher quality businesses are operated by the CSELV and include two sets of relatively well-equipped cabañas that were financed by SECTUR and a foreign university, respectively; tourists and environmental volunteers are often lodged there. Also, there is a visitors' center funded by the Cooperativa de Cosméticos de Mazunte and an organic restaurant built with the support of BIOPLANETA. Zone 2 is also the site of the Cooperativa Lagarto Real's reception centre and adjoining restaurant, financed by SECTUR. In addition, this zone has a hotel that is property of a tourism investor—but was closed down in 2007—and a facility for the incubation of sea turtle eggs, both of which face onto the beach (Figure 4).

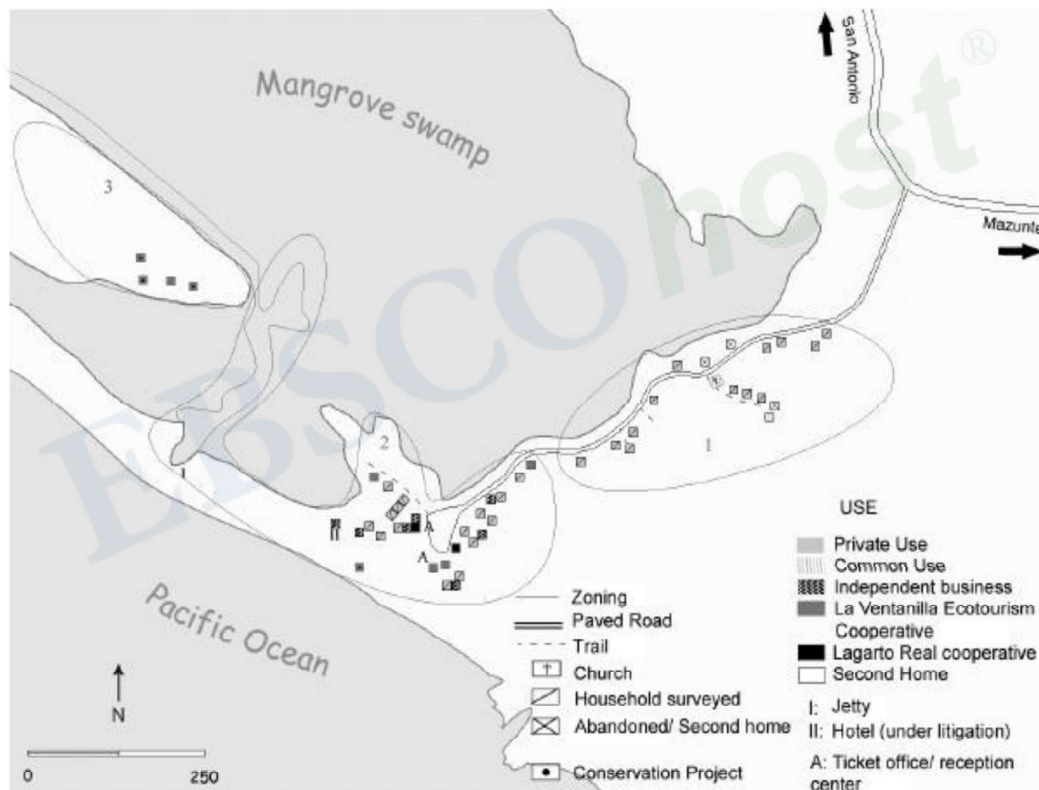
Finally, Zone 3 is an island controlled by the CSELV. Initially, it was an agricultural area, but today it is an additional attraction that is included in the tours that the cooperative offers. It has a restaurant and three conservation projects open to the public: a deer sanctuary, a crocodile pen, and a nursery for mangrove plants. Clearly, the change in productive activities and the power struggles that tourist activities set off have generated greater social fragmentation and inequality, as is reflected in the distribution of space.

On another point, land use has changed increasingly since transactions in real estate began to expand. Since the year 2000, at least six plots have been sold (pers. comm., Municipal Agent, La Ventanilla, 03.11.2007). When we consider that the value of land in La Ventanilla has risen (to between 60 and 150 US\$/m², depending on location), and that 53.6%

of households claim to own additional land beyond their own lots, it is highly likely that sales will continue to grow in the short and medium terms.

The Transformation of Economic Activities and its Consequences

The traditional economic activities in La Ventanilla, such as agriculture, fishing, and sales of sea turtle eggs, have now been replaced by tourism. As Tables 1 and 2 illustrate, today only 7% of the people are active in agriculture and fishing, and these activities represent an important source of income for only 10.7% of all households. In contrast, tourism-related activities occupy 34.7% of residents and represent 70.1% of the economically active population. Therefore, they constitute the principal source of income for 67.9% of all households.



Source: Vargas del Río, 2010.

Figure 4: Functional mapping of buildings in the locality of La Ventanilla.

In this case, both technical and financial supports tend to favor the formally organized local groups that are able to establish alliances with government institutions and NGOs. Similarly, tourism activities tend to be concentrated in those same groups, as 70% of all tourists arrive in organized package tours (pers. comm., member, Cooperativa Lagarto Real, 03.11.2007); a market controlled by a handful of tourism operators in the region (Table 3) who work exclusively with legally established institutions with infrastructure that meets

certain quality standards. Hence, belonging to an organized group is a precondition for participating in the economic benefits that tourism offers in La Ventanilla. In this regard, it is important to mention that only 37% of the over-18 population is formally organized (Table 4) and, therefore, able to participate fully in tourism-related employment. Nevertheless, we must also take into account the internal hierarchical structure of those organized groups, especially the CSELV, which results in an unequal distribution of benefits. For these reasons, 77% of the members of the CSELV are *mozos* who work for a wage equivalent to between 72 and 90 US-\$ per week –according to the time of the tourist season– an amount insufficient to satisfy their families' needs [Zamora, 2009]. Moreover, the members of the most successful cooperative (CSELV) represent only 27.7% of the over-18 population; which means that 72.3% of the inhabitants in this age group are forced to offer their services to enterprises that receive no support from any government agency or NGO. This substantial segment of the population might well come to damage the community's still positive image, due to a proliferation of low-quality tourist services and installations, as has occurred already in Mazunte and Zipolite [Brenner and Fricke, 2007].

Table 1. Occupations of the inhabitants of La Ventanilla, year 2007

Occupation.	Principal		Secondary	
	Structure all occupants (In %).	Structure occupants above 18 years (In %).	Structure all occupants (In %).	Structure occupants above 18 years (In %).
Traditional (agriculture or fishing).	7	13	3	5.6
Tourism (guide, employee, business owners, rental of lots, sale of souvenirs).	34.7	59.3	14	24.2
No productive activity (homemaker, student, retired or unemployed).	50.5	13	80.9	66.6
Other (commerce, driver, construction worker, mechanic).	8	14.9	2	3.7
	100	100	100	100

Source: Vargas del Río, 2010.

Table 2. Sources of income in La Ventanilla, household level, year 2007

Activity	Principal source (In %)	Secondary source (In %)
Traditional (agriculture or fishing).	10.7	10.7
Tourism (guide, employee, business owner, rental of lots, sales of artisanal products).	67.9	67.9
Remittances or government support.	0	7.1
Other (commerce, driver, construction worker).	21.4	3.6

Source: Vargas del Río, 2010.

Table 3. Tourism operators active in La Ventanilla, year 2007

Name of tourism operator	Tourists/year*	Local cooperative with which it works	Operator's price**	Amount paid to the cooperative***
Bahías Plus	15,000	CSELV	21	2.5
Prometour	22,000	CSELV	22	2.5
Azteca Tours	7,000	Lagarto Real	17	2
Paraíso	300	CSELV	35	2.5
Dimar	-	Lagarto Real	-	2

* Normalized estimate by tourism operators.

** Price per adult in US-\$ for a tour through the region (1US-\$ = 12 pesos = 0.80 Euros in 2007).

*** Amount in US-\$ paid per person who participates in tours through the lagoon (without commission).

Source: Vargas del Río, 2010.

Table 4. Organized groups in La Ventanilla, year 2007

Organized groups.	Members (In % of the population).	Members older than 18 years (In % of the over 18 population).	Number of boats.
CSELV.	14.9	27.7	10
Cooperativa Lagarto Real.	5	9.3	3
Total of organized groups.	19.9	37	13
None.	80.2	63	0

Source: Vargas del Río, 2010.

This analysis of recent processes in La Ventanilla demonstrates the emergence of social structures that are more fragmented and unequal, with a higher risk for changes in land use and -possibly- environmental deterioration. In short, this is a situation where winners and losers can be clearly identified. At the local level, a small group of comuneros and service providers has reaped the greatest benefits. It is represented by middle-aged residents who began to develop the incipient tourist industry there and turned out to be quite astute in establishing strategic alliances at the regional level. In particular, four local leaders stand out, the so-called 'bosses' of the CSELV who, by taking advantage of the alliances they forged, succeeded in obtaining substantial support for tourism and environmental conservation, and developed local institutions that allowed them to control most of the economic benefits. In addition, they made connections with other institutions through which they were able to increase their possibilities to obtain greater financial and logistical backing. However, this produced a situation that is unfavorable to the majority of the population, which lost the right to exploit the area's natural resources and began to see itself displaced both physically and economically, as people were forced to sell their lands, take low-paying jobs as *mozos*, or set up their own business operations in the town, most of which are of poor quality and less profitable.

In contrast, the study identified several external actors who have benefitted from these processes. First, there is the conservationist sector (including government agencies and national-level NGOs) that successfully implemented environmental conservation projects that

limited exploitation of natural resources. Those actors apparently succeeded in fomenting environmental conservation “from below”; a result that justified their efforts (and their *raison d'être*) to their donors and agencies interested in backing “communal” projects, and thus improved their standing and potential to expand their activities. Also benefitting was the tourist sector, especially the tourism operators, as attractions in the region diversified considerably. At the same time, a group of immigrant tourists acquired valuable second homes on formerly communal lands.

5. CONCLUSION

On the basis of this series of developments it can be concluded that the capacity of the community of La Ventanilla to control land use has been severely constrained by the more fragmented, unequal socioeconomic context and the presence of a growing number of external actors who are difficult to regulate with any efficacy. Thus, on the one hand, the expanding communications infrastructure and tourism activities at the regional level have raised the commercial value of the lands around La Ventanilla and favored access by actors interested in second homes or the local tourism business. On the other, the “community-based” tourism and conservation projects give a higher monetary value to the use of communal lands, but with marked consequences in terms of the exploitation of those territories. In this setting, external actors have fomented, though unintentionally, a clearly unequal access to the economic benefits that derive from tourism by channeling resources exclusively to certain formally organized groups. The result is that the natural resources used to attract tourism have become spaces of conflict among different groups of local actors who seek to control use and access. Also, resource management has become much more complex due to the serious conflicts of interest between the sector of the local population that opted to reject the former communal land tenure system and external actors interested in purchasing lands.

Nonetheless, a superficial assessment of these facts from a technical-administrative perspective might well give the impression that the substitution of traditional activities by tourism has served to reduce pressure on the ecosystems and the environment in general, while improving the local population’s standard of living [Avila Foucat, 2002]. In effect, one could argue that promoting tourism and conservation projects reduced the environmental impacts of the illegal sale of sea turtle eggs and eased pressure on the area’s agricultural lands. Moreover, the village consolidated its status as a space that promotes sustainable management and offers environmental education to various types of tourists. The closing of the hotel on the beach, thanks to the concerted efforts of local actors and the conservationist sector, might also be interpreted, at first glance, as the result of local sociopolitical structures that are capable of regulating tourist activity and changes in land use. However, it must be noted that the replacement of traditional activities by tourism generated other gradual processes that are difficult to control. Because there are no effective regulations in place to prevent changes in land use, the town is now more vulnerable to the gradual emergence of more intensive kinds of tourism that may deteriorate both its “communal” and “ecologist” image.

Turning now to local social participation –an indispensable element of community-based ecotourism– the case of La Ventanilla could be considered an example of a situation in which government actors coordinated with NGOs and the local population to give the project more consolidated support. Here, in contrast to what usually happens in areas subject to conservation strategies promoted by actors external to the locality, the principal environmental restrictions were, apparently, not imposed “from above” but, rather, developed through models that involved the participation of local actors interested in obtaining benefits through other means than direct exploitation. However, as we have shown, the way in which intervention took place failed to respect local management institutions and, instead, generated new ones that produced a more hierarchical, fragmented context. As a result, social participation in La Ventanilla is now represented by only one small segment of the population and has little legitimacy. This, in turn, impedes the emergence of an inclusive and efficacious form of community-based resource management.

An evaluation from the critical perspective on “community-based ecotourism” discussed above shows a distortion of the legitimate argument that calls for greater decision-making capacity at the local level. In this view, a local elite allied with the conservationist sector utilized the environmentalist discourse to idealize the community of La Ventanilla as a homogeneous being in order to commercialize its communal properties and appropriate the economic benefits that derive from them. As a result, fomenting tourism profoundly modified the way in which the area’s natural resources were exploited by constraining traditional forms and favoring tourism activities. Finally, new ways of using local natural resources were developed that entailed the participation of numerous local and external actors, at the same time as the local setting became more and more vulnerable and traditional institutions of environmental management became obsolete.

When we take into account that the discourse on “community-based ecotourism” –not only in Mexico, but also in developing countries more generally– entails setting up cooperatives, financial support for recently formed groups, beautifying the locality, and promoting a new market segment; our recommendation for promoters with a genuine interest in conserving and aiding local populations is that they conscientiously evaluate the assumptions and idealizations that sustain their actions and, especially, that they assess the social structures for which they may authorize financial and logistical support. As this study shows, in the medium and long term, the principal beneficiary is not the local community as a whole.

In summary, the situation analyzed herein suggests various challenges for the future: on the one hand, it demands the presence of an actor with broad social support, one capable of regulating external actors and coordinating resource distribution; especially investments in infrastructure. Parallel to this, stricter regulations on land sales must be put in place, and social legitimacy and equilibrium must be strengthened, including recognition of, and support for, local management institutions. This is important because when traditional communal institutions are no longer recognized as actors eligible to receive support, the formation of new cooperatives or enterprises is stimulated, a process that inevitably generates new power relations at the local level that tend to modify local sociopolitical structures, segregate spaces, fragment the local context, and produce greater inequality. In short, it is time to transform heteronomous NBT into true community-based ecotourism.

At the same time, we recognize that several questions remain unanswered: Who is the external actor that should regulate the economic flows and changes in land use? Who is the

local actor that should receive support and participate in planning? Or, in more general terms: Who is the local actor whose demands are “fair”? We invite our colleagues and researchers to help us in our search for answers to these queries.

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