

**Hosts and Hosts:  
The Anthropology of Community-Based Ecotourism in the Peruvian Amazon**

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*Abstract: For environmental anthropologists, ecotourism is an especially timely and practical topic. Increasingly, anthropologists are talking with conservationists, development specialists, tour operators, policy-makers, and local leaders about ecotourism and its impacts on local communities and ecosystems. This is good, as anthropologists are especially well suited to focus ethnographic attention on the general but critical question of what happens when people in host destinations near and in protected areas become involved in ecotourism. Do local “hosts” become better stewards of wildlife, forests, and other ecosystems when ecotourism is introduced? If so, what is the process by which that happens, and what are the challenges along the way? This paper highlights various methods and insights gained during four years of research on a community-based ecotourism lodge called Posada Amazonas, located in Madre de Dios, Peru. As a joint business venture between a private company and a local community, Posada Amazonas represents a new standard for local participation in ecotourism. Here, members of the local community of Infierno work not only as boat drivers, cooks, and guides, but also as directors, owners, and decision-makers in the company. Learning and telling the story of Posada Amazonas ethnographically and from both sides of the partnership allowed me to move beyond a standard impact study of costs and benefits. Anthropological analysis entailed adding nuance to “the local community” and unraveling why people were or were not choosing to participate in ecotourism, and how their decisions were often related to social and cultural roles and perceptions. The ethnographic approach also led to analyses of processes and impacts—that is, how and why there were gains and losses in Infierno, in addition to what the changes were. Answers to these types of questions can have important implications for conservation, beyond calculating jobs gained or income earned. Finally, in addition to deepening the analysis of ecotourism, anthropologists can play important roles as cultural brokers between ecotourism partners, helping to facilitate communication across an array of perspectives and expectations.*

**Key Words:** community-based ecotourism, conservation, local participation, ethnography, Amazon

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## **Anthropology and Ecotourism**

At first glance, tourism is hard to justify as a serious focus of anthropological study. In fact, tourism and anthropology seem to sit at opposite ends of at least a couple of spectrums. Whereas tourism has been called a series of “pseudo-events” (Boorstin 1969) and “staged cultural productions” (MacCannell 1976) in which authenticity lies in wait somewhere “backstage,” and local people live as they “really are,” anthropology is aimed at getting behind the curtain—cataloging, describing, and interpreting the most authentic of a society’s “social facts.” And while tourism generates glossy brochures and colorful stories that may or may not reflect any lived reality in a host destination, anthropology is instead intent on providing thick ethnographic description and accurate portraits of everyday life. Whereas tourism transports people to a liminal space in which social roles and responsibilities are abandoned or turned upside down, many anthropologists devote attention to the meanings and underlying structures of society—the “right side up,” so to speak, from which a tourist might depart. But, as authors in this volume will attest, it is precisely because tourism can help bring into relief the differences between authentic and staged, structured and liminal, or traditional and invented that it is such a rich field of study for anthropologists.

For environmental anthropologists, tourism is an especially timely and practical topic. So much of the discourse about the loss of both cultural and biological diversity revolves around tourism and tourists, key protagonists in processes of globalization. Ecotourism in particular has moved to the center of debates about the impacts of encounters between “hosts and guests” in destination communities and ecosystems around the world. It has been touted as a “win-win” solution, a magic bullet for getting people to value intact forests and other ecosystems. In the Amazon, ecotourism has been shown to have a relatively low impact on forests compared to other activities such as hunting, logging, or agriculture (Borman 1999, Epler Wood 1998, Honey 1999, Wunder 1999). Some have argued that too much tourism, however—particularly if it is unmonitored and unregulated—can spoil natural areas, disturb wildlife, and lead to habitat conversion (Giannecchini 1993).

Given ecotourism’s potential, it is no wonder that anthropologists are talking with conservationists, development specialists, tour operators, policy-makers, and local leaders about how best to implement ecotourism and then carefully measure its impacts. In fact, the concept and practice of ecotourism have received so much attention that the United Nations declared 2002 the “International Year of Ecotourism” and marked it as a time to take collective stock of the lessons learned. At the Ecotourism World Summit in Quebec, Canada, in May 2002, thousands of delegates from over 132 nations gathered to assess the pros and cons of ecotourism for people and ecosystems around the world.

Though so many are focusing on ecotourism, I would argue that anthropologists have unique contributions to offer to the debates and analyses. For one, anthropologists are well suited to apply ethnographic attention to the general but critical question of what happens when people in host communities near and in protected areas become involved in ecotourism. More specifically, anthropologists can test whether and how widely held assumptions about the conservation benefits of ecotourism actually play out in the local setting. Do people in local

communities become better stewards of wildlife, forests, and other ecosystems when they become involved as ecotourism hosts? If so, what is the process by which that happens? Are the new conservation behaviors prompted by changes in household social and economic activities; patterns of spending and saving; attitudes about conservation and resource scarcity; perceptions of wildlife (particularly the species tourists pay to see); or values or devaluations of local culture, ethnicity, and tradition? Few studies about ecotourism include such empirical data, either qualitative or quantitative. Those that do tend to focus on income and jobs, assessing economic changes brought about by ecotourism (e.g., Bookbinder et al. 1998, Lindberg 1991). Anthropologists can add new dimensions to the analysis, holistically assessing many other changes catalyzed by ecotourism and ultimately helping to discern what the local changes might imply for conservation.

### **Anthropologist as Cultural Broker**

In this paper, I will describe the various methods, challenges, and insights I have experienced during anthropological fieldwork on the impacts of ecotourism in the Native Community of Infierno of Madre de Dios in the southeastern Peruvian Amazon. My goal for the past several years has been to write an ethnographic and holistic account of the initiation and development of a community-based ecotourism lodge called “Posada Amazonas,” which was first conceptualized in 1996 and opened to tourists in 1998. Posada Amazonas represents an unusual experiment in ecotourism because it entails a joint business venture between a private company and a local community. Here, members of the local community of Infierno work not only as boat drivers, cooks, and guides, but also as directors, owners, and decision-makers in the company. They share the rights and responsibilities of ownership with Rainforest Expeditions, a private Peruvian tourism company based in the capital city of Lima. For its innovation as a partnership, its early economic success, and its proven concern for local participation, Posada Amazonas has received considerable media attention and won numerous awards from conservation and development organizations, including the “Equator Initiative” presented at the World Summit for Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa (2002).

In Posada Amazonas, I have found an ideal place to explore the ways in which local participation in ecotourism can—or cannot—improve chances for resource management and conservation. For my doctoral research (1996–2000), I used a case study format, relying on both quantitative and qualitative data gathered in interviews, written surveys, participant observation, and a range of participatory methods to record the ways in which ecotourism played out in the community of Infierno.

Throughout the research, I collaborated often with project managers from both the company and the community. My role as a cultural broker began to emerge, rather unintentionally, as I sought to communicate insights from my research—and, more basically, what I was doing—to the two partners. Often, I encountered points of disconnect between what actors on both sides of the partnership expected or wanted me to say, and what, in fact, I was learning. Exploring the divide between preconceptions and hopes about Posada Amazonas on the one hand and the ethnographic picture on the other became an important, if unexpected, part of my research. It also became my contribution as a practicing anthropologist to offer my data and insights to the company as the project itself was unfolding. In the following sections, I will

describe the project and what I was doing in the field research, highlighting the points of disconnect—either between the company, the community, and me, or between the expectations for the project and the realities I was discovering.

### **Context: Ecotourism in the Peruvian Amazon**

The complex of thatched cabins with open views to the rainforest known as Posada Amazonas is located along the Tambopata River in the Department of Madre de Dios in southeastern Peru (Figure 1). The Tambopata River is a veritable lifeline of biodiversity that flows from the Andean slopes of Puno near Lake Titicaca and through the low foothills and terraces of the Amazon plain before feeding into the Madre de Dios River and ultimately draining into the Amazon River. Along its trajectory, the Tambopata passes some of the most species-rich communities yet reported on earth for birds, butterflies, and dragonflies (Gentry 1990, Foster et al. 1994). Conniff and Bensonsen (1999:127) wrote, “Biologically, Tambopata is one of the world’s mother lodes. It is possible,” they suggested, “in a good half-hour, to see more species in Tambopata than the Italian primitives dared put in their paintings of Eden.” To add to this diversity, the three million hectare Department of Madre de Dios is important for conservation because it has one of the lowest human population densities in the entire Amazon basin. A “megadiversity hotspot” if ever there was one, Madre de Dios boasts three major protected areas: the Manu Biosphere Reserve, the Bahuaja Sonene National Park, and the Tambopata National Reserve.

Despite the enticing brochures that promise lands “teeming with wildlife,” much of the fauna in the Amazon is well camouflaged and surprisingly difficult to detect. In most places, having a guide—preferably a local one—is essential if one is to see anything. Tambopata is an exception. Even first-time visitors with ill-trained eyes for tropical wildlife are likely to see a great number of species in Tambopata. In fact, a typical stay of four to five days in Tambopata holds the promise of glimpsing at least 30 pairs of large macaws, a family of giant otters, four or more species of primates, and several varieties of the region’s most charismatic rodents, including capybaras and agoutis. Tapirs and peccaries are also quite common, and at least six or seven tour groups a year are lucky enough to spot a jaguar. Tambopata has always been especially popular among birdwatchers. Famously, it is the location of the world’s greatest single site birdlist: OVER 550 [572] species in an area of 50 square kilometers (by comparison, 914 bird species have been recorded for all of the United States and Canada combined) (AOU 1998). Of particular interest to many visitors is the fact that hundreds of parrots and macaws congregate frequently at several local salt licks called “colpas.”

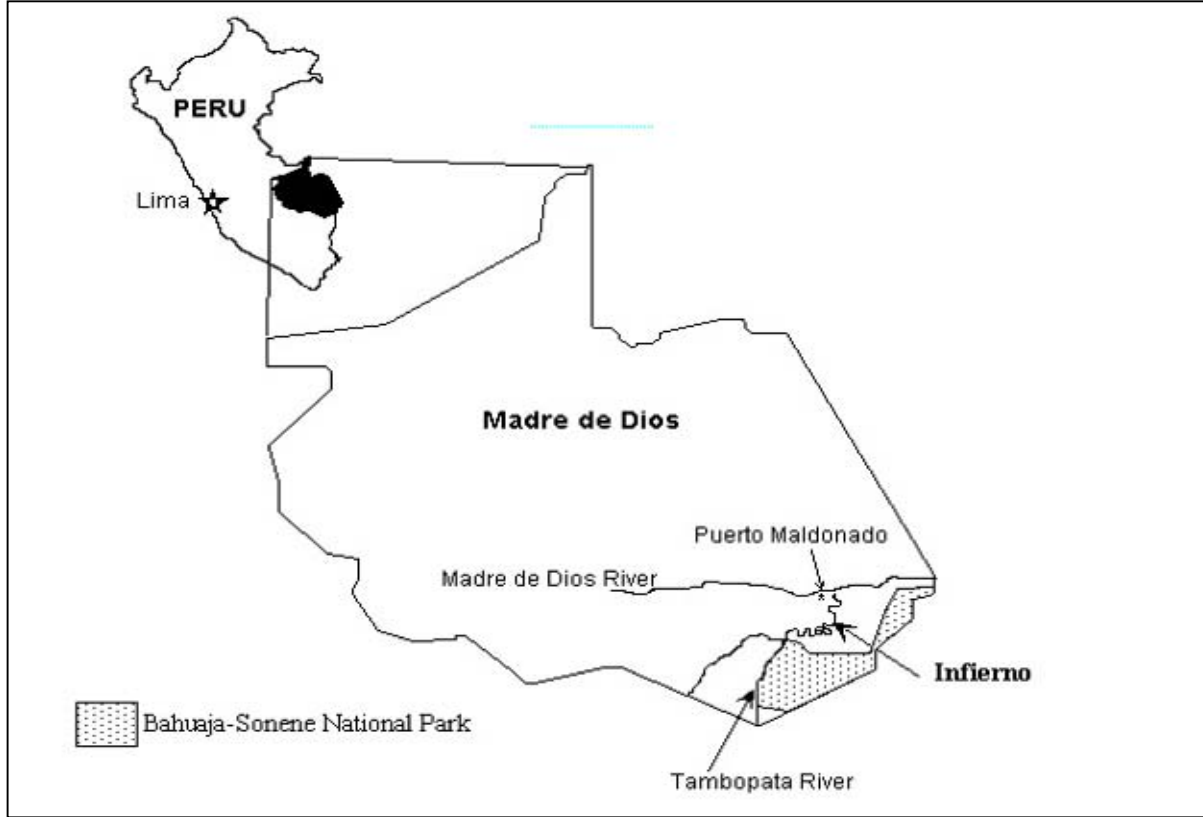


Figure 1: Department of Madre de Dios, Peru; Native Community of Infierno; and Bahuaja Sonene National Park

Until as recently as 1993, Tambopata was little more than a hinterland compared to southeastern Peru's more popular destination, Machu Picchu. For years, only a small enclave of neotropical biologists and conservationists frequented the forests of Tambopata, and the options for tourists were minimal. Today, increasing numbers of international tourists are adding Tambopata to their regular itineraries, and at least in part because of the sheer diversity and relative visibility of wildlife, Tambopata has become a prime site for ecotourism development in the past decade. In 1987, Groom et al. (1991) estimated that 6,520 tourists visited Puerto Maldonado in 1987; by 1997, the numbers had more than doubled (MITINCI 1998).

### **The Community-Based Lodge of Posada Amazonas**

Since 1990, the number of lodges along a small stretch of the Tambopata River has increased from three to nine. One of these, the community-based Posada Amazonas lodge, is situated in the buffer zone of Bahuaja-Sonene National Park (537,053 hectares), several hours by motorized canoe from the capital town of Puerto Maldonado. Featuring a complex of thatched, open-sided and traditionally designed buildings, the lodge includes five main cabins, each with six large guest rooms that can accommodate 60 guests. With an investment of half a million

dollars and two years to build the lodge, Posada Amazonas is a luxury lodge by Amazon ecotourism standards. Despite its rustic design and remote location, the lodge emphasizes comfort and service, accompanied by specially tailored itineraries, gourmet buffet meals, and naturalist guides trained in both ecology and hospitality. The typical tourist is from the United States or Europe, has at least a bachelor's degree, and is in a higher income-earning bracket. In its first three years of operation, Posada Amazonas was booked solid, attracting 3,000 to 4,000 tourists a year who paid between \$60 and \$100 per night's stay. A typical itinerary includes climbing a 45-meter tower that offers birds-eye views of the canopy, hiking forest trails, visiting a "colpa" frequented by macaws and parrots, visiting a local subsistence farm, and floating along the edges of an oxbow lake on a large catamaran, searching for giant otters and numerous bird species.

But Posada Amazonas warrants attention not merely because it is in the middle of a biological hotspot or because it has had success drawing boatloads of birdwatchers. Nor does it necessarily merit extra attention because it is located in the territory of a local Amazonian community, Infierno (Figure 2). Rather, what makes the lodge of special interest is the fact that it is co-owned and managed by the eighty or so Ese'aja Indian, riberenho, and Andean families who make up the community. This local ownership of Posada Amazonas came by way of an innovative partnership. In May 1996, the members of Infierno and the private company, Rainforest Expeditions, signed a legally binding contract to begin building and co-managing Posada Amazonas. Calling their joint venture the "Ke'eway Association in Participation," the partners agreed to split profits—60 percent to the community and 40 percent to the company—and to divide the management 50–50. A critical tenet of the agreement was that community members should be actively involved in the enterprise, not only as staff but also as owners, planners, and administrators. Further, they should join Rainforest Expeditions in making decisions about the future of the company and in providing services for tourists. The partners also agreed that after 20 years, the entire operation—the lodge and everything in it: short-wave radio, furniture, kitchenware, power generators, etc.—will automatically belong to Infierno, and the community will have the choice of either continuing to collaborate with Rainforest Expeditions or taking over as proprietors and managers. Meanwhile, the company oversees the day-to-day operations, hiring and training community members to assume increasing amounts of responsibility.

As long as they remain partners, the members of Infierno are obligated to maintain an exclusive contract with Rainforest Expeditions. No one from the community can strike a deal with a competing company to build a second lodge, nor can any individual independently create an additional ecotourism project within communal territory. Also, outside visitors must seek permission from the association before using ecotourism infrastructure in the community, including the lodge itself, trails through the forest, the catamaran in the oxbow lake, and the canopy tower.

Each partner has brought different resources and skills to the project. The company has offered financing, market savvy, experience in the logistics of transport and food service, trained personnel, knowledge of the preferences of Western tourists, and, perhaps most basically, an immediate demand in the form of several boatloads of tourists. The community has supplied labor, local knowledge of wild flora and fauna, title and access to 10,000 hectares of communally

owned forested land, and, importantly, an indigenous identity that has already been used to boost the lodge's marketing appeal. The community also boasts a variety of the relatively observable, accessible, and photogenic wildlife species that are so important to the ecotourism experience, including giant otters, macaws, and, during the first year of the project, a pair of nesting harpy eagles—the largest birds of prey in the Americas.<sup>1</sup>

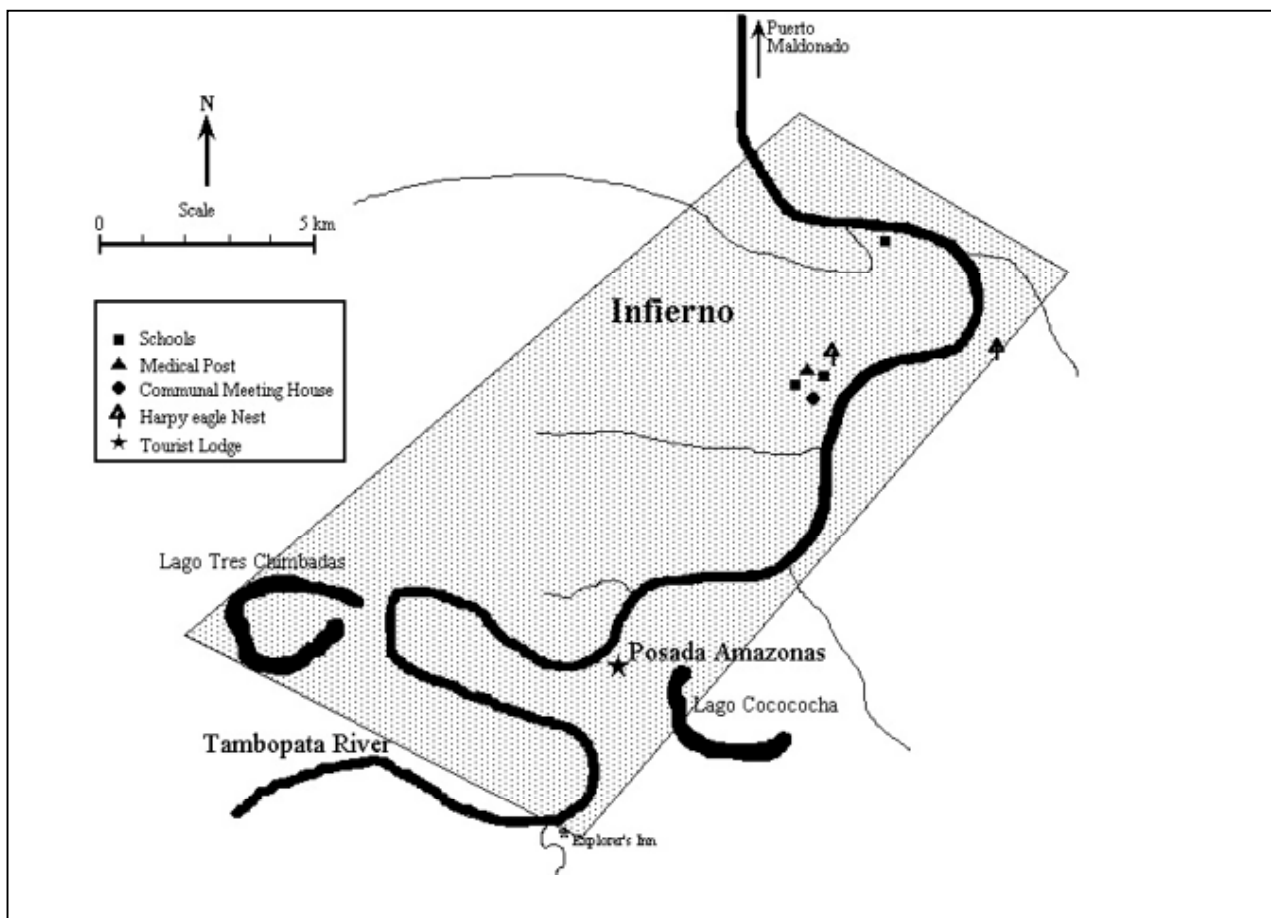


Figure 2: Communal Boundaries of the Native Community of Infierno, on Tambopata River

### Practicing Anthropology Between Hosts and Hosts

I began the research in May 1996, the same month the Native Community of Infierno signed the 20-year contract with Rainforest Expeditions to launch their ecotourism joint venture. Because of the fortunate timing, I was able to collect and analyze my data as part of a natural experiment. Rather than completing all of the field work in one extended visit to the study site, I collected data four times over a period of 13 months over four years. In the first field season, when the lodge was little more than an idea, I conducted a stakeholder analysis, which I will describe in greater detail below. In the second field season, as the lodge was being built, I collected baseline data on people's household economies and on their values with regards to ethnicity, culture, and tradition as these related to tourism and conservation. In the third field

season, when the first group of tourists arrived, I returned to ask the same questions I had asked in previous years, in addition to some new questions. Finally, in the fourth year, when the lodge was fully functional and people were beginning to focus on other concerns in the community, I returned to work in an applied capacity, leading focus groups and workshops to envision needs and priorities for the future. Since completing the research, I have joined with community leaders in Infierno to share and compare lessons learned in Posada Amazonas with other community-based lodges in Ecuador and Bolivia.

When I began the fieldwork, I was questioned on numerous occasions about my role, my ethics, and my objectives. Some people suspected that I was a spy for Rainforest Expeditions and that perhaps my research would unabashedly favor the company. In *The Anthropology of Tourism*, Dennison Nash has found that many anthropologists refuse consulting possibilities with tourism companies for reasons like these. He notes a common assumption that “by getting into the tourism business one opens up the possibility of being ‘bought’ by one’s employer and, hence, the establishment” (Nash 1996). I had not been hired by the company—no one was paying me—but I did share my findings and insights with both the company and community, and that aroused suspicion. To compound the concern that I had been “bought,” I was perceived as biased because the owners of the company had been my good friends for several years prior to the joint venture. Particularly in my first year of research, my abilities to remain relatively impartial and objective as a scholar were challenged.

Despite the suspicions, the fact that I collaborated with both the company and the community presented several practical advantages. In particular, my role as an insider made me privy to the company’s financial records and archives, as well as to many candid conversations in staff meetings. Had I been more of an outsider, especially one opposed to the project (as many observers were), perhaps these privileges would have been curtailed. I imagine in such a case the research might have been slanted toward the hearsay, rumor, and marketing propaganda that surrounded the project. Instead, I tried to build the analysis on all aspects of the project: not only the published success stories produced for the public, but also the private discussions about the dilemmas and problems the project was facing from the beginning.

Also, as an insider, I was able to gain access to the lodge and its clientele on a daily basis. I observed the project not only from the perspective of a visitor, but also from the viewpoint of the owners, administrators, accountants, personnel managers, guides, cooks, waiters, housekeepers, and boat drivers. I accompanied people in their homes and farms in the community, and then I joined them in the lodge, watching and talking with them as they interacted with tourists, and paying special attention to how they were coping with their dual responsibilities, both in the lodge and as members of the community. In other moments, I accompanied the tourists on their activities and in the lodge, surveying them formally and informally about their opinions and impressions of what they seeing, and sharing with them what I was learning.

Though I was involved in many of the inner workings at Posada Amazonas, in many ways my role in Infierno was similar to that of a tourist. Though I lived in the community for weeks and months at a time, I was always more of an outsider in that setting than an insider. I was forever conscious then that I was very much a part of what I was trying to understand—that



is, the changes in Infierno brought on by tourists and other outsiders. Often, I felt I was in a hall of mirrors, watching the interactions between the locals and the visitors, while, at every turn, catching my own reflection. Many times, I would introduce myself to tourists, explaining that I was an anthropologist writing an ethnography about community-based ecotourism. Invariably, someone in the group would laugh, a bit self-consciously, and ask, “So, you’ll be watching me?” Well, yes, I often thought, but I’ll be trying to watch all of us, myself included.

I found, not surprisingly, that few people admitted to the status of “tourist.” Most preferred the idea of a traveler, or one who is more intent than others on exploring the real world—MacCannell’s backstage—behind the fake façade. I remember a couple of guests in particular who flatly denied the “tourist” label. They were backpackers who passed through Tambopata in 1996, stopping for the night in Infierno’s central commons (the area with the communal meeting house, the school, and the soccer field in Figure 2). The president of Infierno at the time, a young Ese’ija man, was a bit taken aback that the visitors had set up camp in the center of the community without prior notice. He waited for them to awake the next morning before approaching to question their plans. Politely, he asked how they’d slept (“Were you cold?”), and then gently informed them that Infierno was a private community—all tourists should check with the project office in Puerto Maldonado, or, alternatively, consult with the native federation, FENAMAD, for permission to stay. Obviously offended, one of the women crawled out of her tent, finished twisting the lid back on her Nalgen water bottle, and explained in broken Spanish, “Oh, but we’re not tourists. We were just passing through for the night.”

### **Anthropologist as Barometer**

There was also some uncertainty about who I was as an anthropologist and what I could achieve. At times, the company thought it useful to use me as a barometer of general sentiment in the community. They would ask, “How are things going? What does ‘the community’ think and feel about the lodge?” After all, I was living there, sharing meals with people—shouldn’t I have my finger on the pulse of the community? Though anthropologists have been known to claim entire communities as “theirs,” I knew I could not represent the diversity of opinion about Posada Amazonas in Infierno. The community extends over nearly 10,000 hectares on either side of the Tambopata river, and regardless of geographic spread, I simply could never capture the full range of perspectives. People were always changing their minds, and different sectors within the community—men and women, young and old, indigenous and *riberenho* and Andean—generally perceived and engaged in the project in fundamentally different ways.

I had learned this in the first year, when I conducted a stakeholder analysis (Grimble and Chan 1994) and tried to understand how ethnicity, gender, age, resource use, and geographical location within Infierno correlated with varying opinions about the ecotourism project and varying levels of involvement with Rainforest Expeditions. For this type of analysis, I interviewed members of Infierno as well as representatives of outside organizations about their hopes, concerns, and conflicting agendas surrounding the cooperative agreement between the community and Rainforest Expeditions. In focus groups, I used a series of hand-drawn posters to characterize various development phases of the tourism project and to serve as launching points for discussion.

What I learned from the stakeholder analysis was that conflicts outside the community, usually on the part of people who sincerely wanted to help Infierno, often intensified conflicts within the community rather than providing much guidance. For example, tour companies that were vying for the same “socially responsible” ecotourism market had the members of Infierno asking, “Who should we deal with?” Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were competing, too, over the role of who should advise the community in dealings with Rainforest Expeditions. The members of Infierno seemed generally open to working with any group willing to offer support. However, once they became enmeshed in the political relations among stakeholders outside the community, they were resigned to taking sides. The result was that outside relations were replayed and then intensified inside the community.

### **Fomenting Participation**

In my role as cultural broker between the community of Infierno and Rainforest Expeditions, I often encountered points of disconnect between what people expected I would say or do as an anthropologist and what I was in fact able to contribute. A first point of disconnect was on the issue of participation.

My intent in the first year was to carry out exploratory research with the applied task of helping to coordinate a process of participatory planning among the members of the community, Rainforest Expeditions, Conservation International, and other NGOs involved in the project as advisors. Essentially, the company wanted to be sure that people in the community knew about the project. The first thing I learned was that the community’s vote to sign the contract had been unanimous—but in fact many people were either ill-informed or, as in the case of most women, completely uninformed. The company also wanted to give people the chance to decide whether or not and how they would like to participate in the project.

Faced with this reality, all of us involved with the project had different strategies for fomenting participation. Figure 3 from Arnstein (1969) shows different strategies for fostering local involvement in a project. Especially in the first year of Posada Amazonas, the company saw me—the anthropologist—as a resource for going house to house and getting people to participate. Their strategy for how I might do this was somewhere between “persuade” and “inform.” In fact, I *was* going house to house for interviews, but my concern was to ask for opinions about the project and to encourage people to weigh for themselves the costs and benefits of getting involved. In my mind, the best way to foment participation was somewhere between getting people to “share in decision making” and “catalyzing group decisions.”

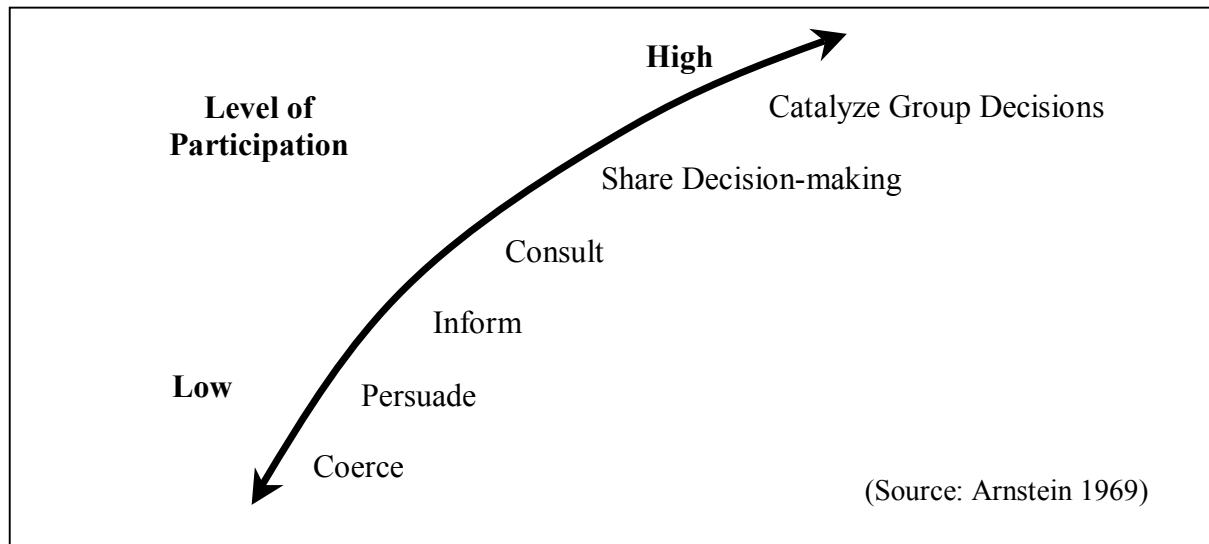


Figure 3: Ladder of Participation

### Understanding Participation

Another point of disconnect between the partner hosts and me was how to define participation. All of us—the community, the company, and I—were concerned about participation, but for different reasons. For the company, “participation” was little more than a means to fill labor needs. Especially in the beginning, as they were building the lodge, they literally needed enough hands to haul equipment, lumber, and appliances up steep and muddy riverbanks, to nail down thousands of floorboards, blaze several kilometers of trails through the forest, and collect enough palm fronds to weave together nearly 20,000 panels of roofing thatch. The details were endless, down to the last handmade towel rack. Coordinating all this labor required both leadership and a significant investment of time away from people’s farms, forests, and families.

When the lodge opened, so too did many new opportunities for getting involved. Everyone talked about participation. Who was participating and who wasn’t participating? Did some people have an unfair advantage over others? Were some people earning more or less than others? Who determined who got to participate and in what ways? In my mind, the importance of participation was as much conceptual as practical. I was less worried about getting hammers in people’s hands as I was about encouraging people to think critically about tourism, reframe their relationships with the company, and gain a sense of ownership over the lodge.

For many people, the idea of participation was altogether confusing. Never before Posada Amazonas had they been invited to participate actively in a project of such magnitude. So often in the past, the responsibilities of conceptualizing, planning, and decision-making for any kind of development project had been left to outsiders. People had little experience in being architects of their own plans for change, and they had even less experience building from the ground up a luxury ecotourism lodge with hundreds of thousands of dollars of capital investment. Without firsthand experience, people felt limited in their ability to contribute. Compounding the lack of experience was a general complacency about social roles. Many felt uncertain about how to treat the company as a partner rather than as an employer. In fact, this new kind of interaction was a

leap for both sides. In the initial months of the joint venture, the owners of Rainforest Expeditions were accustomed to lining people up in rows and delivering lists of things to do. The intention of acting as equal partners was there, but neither side was prepared, either practically or psychologically, to deal with the other on such progressive new terms. It would take time, and yet the company needed the community to get involved. It wasn't just a noble social experiment; it was a new kind of business model, built on the very real need to have active participation of the people of the community.

### **Who Participates?**

As everyone grappled with the issue of how to foment participation, we discovered another point of disconnect on the question of *who* should participate and *how*. I found we needed to pay attention to the heterogeneity of needs and priorities within communities, as well as to different kinds of participation. Not everyone in any host destination will participate equally in tourism. Some people may join directly, interacting with tourists on a regular basis as guides or performers, while others may become involved only behind the scenes, working as support staff or as wholesalers of foods and supplies. People differ also in terms of how much time and energy they can invest in tourism: some will work as full-time wage laborers; others will contract their labor occasionally, or earn cash only through the sale of goods. Others will choose not to participate at all.

The expectation for Posada Amazonas, especially from the perspective of outsiders, was that participation would broadly lead to economic benefits and could be summed up as cash earned or employment gained. But, as an anthropologist, I observed and perceived participation and its impacts in Infierno more holistically. Participation in this community-owned lodge became more than just income and jobs. There were and are many ways to participate in Posada Amazonas, including joining the Ecotourism Committee, a community "board of directors" created to meet regularly with Rainforest Expeditions, as well as many others, and I was interested in all of them. As a method, I created an index derived from several kinds of indicators to measure whether a person was deeply involved in ecotourism, a little bit involved, or not involved at all. These included different scores for level of interaction with tourists (e.g., high for guides, low for artisans), percent of income earned from tourism, whether or not a person was part of the Ecotourism Committee, etc. With this index, I was able to make "participation" an ordinal variable rather than a simple binary variable. Every person and household I interviewed in Infierno had a score from 0 to 18, low to high participation, which could then be correlated with many other economic and social variables collected in interviews to generate quantitative analyses or to be described in qualitative, ethnographic fashion, characterizing changes brought on by different kinds of participation in ecotourism.

With attention to such differences, I discovered that gender was a key variable that determined who participated in tourism (see Swain 1995). With the descriptive quantitative analysis of participation scores, it was easy to see that virtually no women were represented in the "high participation" end of the index, at least not at the beginning of the project. This is not surprising, as gender roles in Infierno assign women as responsible for childcare. It was very difficult for women to work at the lodge—which is far upriver from people's homes—and also attend to their gender-based responsibilities at home.

But with ethnographic data, more details about important changes prompted by gender-biased participation in ecotourism became clear. Especially in the first year of the project, most of the women had no plans to get intensely involved, but situations in their households were changing nevertheless. Though women were not clearing trails, debating the bylaws of the agreement, or participating in guide training, they were affected by the project, often through the participation of their spouses. If their husbands or older sons were involved in the project, that meant there would be new constraints on men's time for farming and other productive activities.

Changes for the men certainly implied subsequent shifts in women's responsibilities. Women whose husbands and sons were involved were generally spending more time alone as they maintained the household. In addition to their normal chores, which included a full day of washing clothes in the river, cooking, caring for young children, and keeping chickens and other small livestock, several women also became responsible for attending meetings in their husbands' stead, working on the farm, and selling produce in Puerto Maldonado. For every man who became involved in tourism, there was a woman who was taking on more and more responsibilities in the household, essentially becoming a single head of household.

Not only were women doing more, they were also doing different *kinds* of things. Maria, a woman who later began to work at the lodge herself, first became involved when her husband took on the position of community coordinator. In the first months, she often cooked for groups of men who were involved in planning or building the lodge. Even *what* she was cooking changed: her family no longer relied on food they had produced, but rather on food they had purchased (or had been purchased for them by Rainforest Expeditions). Also, there was new income available to purchase new clothes and medicines and new items for the household, such as cooking utensils, plastic food containers, radios, or even, in a couple of cases, battery-operated televisions.

### **Defining Success**

As more and more people did begin to get involved, including women, the definitions for "successful" participation also varied. For many community members, success per se hardly mattered. They seemed focused on *limitations* rather than on what they could achieve. Leaders were mainly concerned about potential new conflicts in the community and about how tourism might favor some over others. The general question was not "What can we achieve?" but rather "How are we getting along?"

I encouraged people to pursue small but concrete and locally initiated goals—such as getting organized to pool resources and purchase a two-way radio. This approach was based on a philosophy of self-determination and the need to build organizational capacity within the community so that people could negotiate for themselves and plan their own future. This entailed learning to gather ideas and concerns from their neighbors and families, transforming these ideas into proposals for support, however small, and then learning to deal confidently with politicians and NGOs to negotiate for their needs.

While the company supported small-scale ideas, they also encouraged larger projects, including a \$50,000 World Bank initiative to promote handicraft production. Our different definitions of success emanated from our broader visions. I was thinking about the need for autonomy and social sustainability; the company was thinking about getting things done, preparing their community partners to become better businesspeople (e.g., taking risks, cost-benefit planning for the future, etc.), and ultimately ensuring a good return on their investments. As a profit-making enterprise, they could ill afford to think like an NGO and give priority to notions of self-determination over practical needs for efficiency.

## **Commodifying Culture**

Aside from the issue of participation, the company and I disagreed substantively on the role of culture in Posada Amazonas. The company was eager to promote culture as an added attraction. Here, again, they hoped to have an anthropologist who could help push this through—referring again to the “persuade” level of participation. As anthropologists are known to “deal in” culture, some in the company thought my presence would be helpful in identifying and “rescuing” Ese’ija ethnic identity. Rather than helping objectify and showcase for tourists certain features of indigenous culture in Infierno, I perceived the contribution I could make as quite different.

Early on, there was a great deal of attention on Posada Amazonas and, by extension, on the community. Over the course of research, I encountered seven anthropologists, five biologists, four filmmakers—including the BBC and Discovery Channel—four volunteers, and six NGOs—all in one community with 80 households. Other anthropologists carrying out research in the community joined me in expressing concern about how so much attention might affect how culture in the community was being interpreted, represented, and exploited for profit, as well as who would be making decisions about such matters. Specifically, we encouraged community members in Infierno to consider how displaying aspects of their culture for tourists might challenge local meanings. This was a subject of great anthropological interest, beyond the need to put more “local color” in the brochures. Because Posada Amazonas is a locally managed tourism project, people in Infierno were becoming not only the subjects of brochures but also active participants in determining what was being said and depicted about them.

This became especially apparent to me one afternoon when I was showing a small stack of photographs to Diego, a young Ese’ija man who had been deeply involved in the tourism project from the beginning. One of the photographs in the stack portrayed Gustavo, an Ese’ija man in his 40s, dressed in a traditional tunic called a *cushma*, clutching a bow and arrow, grinning slightly, and gazing directly into the camera. Diego studied the picture for a few moments, and then, holding it up for better perspective, declared, “This will be great for the brochure!”

I was immediately taken aback, for I had not once considered using the photograph for a brochure. Though I could see that it was a provocative image, it was one that Gustavo had requested I shoot for his own use, not for public consumption. Later, I thought about Diego’s comment, and how much it revealed, in so few words, his consciousness of public image, his awareness of tourists’ desire for a “real-looking” Ese’ija, and his knowledge of the fact that

Infierno had become a place to be seen and, in that way, consumed. I realized also that not everyone in Infierno perceived things in the same way Diego had, and perhaps that was precisely the point: Diego had been involved in tourism from the beginning, and his involvement had already somehow influenced his sense of self and his desire to project the “right image” to tourists, one that would be perceived as ethnically authentic and adorned with the appropriate accoutrements of Ese’jea culture.

As an ethnographer, I perceived that my contribution to Posada Amazonas was to characterize these kinds of changes in Infierno rather than to do what the company hoped, which was to help market culture. Often my conversations with both sides entailed asking people to consider what culture and ethnicity meant for them and why. Do some people have “more culture” than others? What does it mean to be Ese’jea or riberenho (a riverine person) or Andean, and why are some of these characteristics perhaps more interesting to tourists than others? These types of discussions were invariably rich and animated, and, after just one year, we could all see more conscious planning about how to manage the community’s cultural resources for tourism.

### **Conclusion: Mediating Between Hosts and Hosts**

As I describe all the points of disconnect, I’m afraid I might be making the case against the brokering role of anthropologists in ecotourism projects. But in fact my experience practicing anthropology between Infierno and Rainforest Expeditions proved both effective and enlightening in several respects. For one, learning and telling both sides of the story, especially through ethnography, allowed me to reveal the whole story of Posada Amazonas, beyond just the economic costs and benefits of ecotourism. This meant unraveling why people were choosing to participate in ecotourism or not and how their decisions were often related to social and cultural roles and perceptions within the community, as opposed to a mere lack of understanding. The ethnographic approach also forced me to include analyses of process, in addition to impacts—that is, how and why there were gains and losses in Infierno, in addition to what the changes were. Answers to these types of questions may ultimately have more important implications for conservation than do the more unidimensional analyses of jobs gained or income earned.

In the case of Posada Amazonas, process-oriented analyses helped define the concept of “participation” and clarify the usefulness or difficulty or confusion participation presented for different kinds of actors in the project. The process-driven, ethnographic approach also added nuance to the idea of “the local community,” highlighting the ways in which diverse sectors within the group perceived, reacted to, and defined success differentially. The holistic assessment extending beyond economics also focused attention on issues surrounding the commodification of culture, and how it could and should be represented (and by whom) in the setting of Posada Amazonas.

Finally, in some ways, my role as a mediator between the two hosts helped to create a level of transparency and openness in the working dialogue between them. As I pointed out differences in their perspectives and expectations, each side gradually learned more about the other, and the partnership actually seemed to gain strength rather than becoming debilitated. When I pointed out disconnects between what was being said, done, and felt, the company was able to gain greater insight into its own actions and into those of the community, while the

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members of Infierno also began to affirm that their partnership in Posada Amazonas represented a new kind of development, one in which they stood on equal ground with their partners, despite so many economic and social differences with Rainforest Expeditions. In time, as more and more local communities become involved in ecotourism operations, the role of mediator, sometimes played by anthropologists, will be able to add new understanding to such partnerships.

## Notes

A Google search for “Posada Amazonas” reveals a huge number of links to tour companies promoting this ecotourism destination, usually accompanied by many pictures of local flora and fauna.

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