

Rural Development through Heritage Tourism: Guidelines for the Caribbean
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INTRODUCTION

Concepts of appropriate tourism development have evolved rapidly over the past several years, as the negative environmental, economic, and social impacts of large-scale mass tourism have been felt in country after country around the world. There is increasing interest in alternatives that are distinguished by a philosophy of environmentally and culturally sensitive development that contributes to conservation and provides direct economic and social benefits to local communities. At least in theory, tourism therefore can be a means of providing novel and sustainable livelihoods for local communities, while respecting the local culture and causing limited negative social impacts.

Unfortunately, today in the Caribbean, these concepts are generally poorly understood and abused. Ecotourism has become the buzzword of the '90's, as the governments of the region eagerly introduce new marketing strategies based on each country's natural and cultural attractions. These promotions are designed to attract an elusive ecotourist more likely to be interested in the rainforest of Costa Rica or the mountains of Nepal. The "ecotourism attractions" that are offered are generally indistinguishable from the qualities that have appealed to visitors to the region for decades; that is, white sand beaches, sparkling water, coral reefs, exotic wildlife, picturesque villages, and tropical landscapes.

Consequently, in practice, most of the region's so-called ecotourism ventures differ very little from mass tourism in their economic, social, and cultural impact on local communities. Ecotourism is simply a marketing tool – a new label for business as usual.

Against this backdrop, the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute, in collaboration with Martinique's regional Agency for Tourism Development and the Ajoupa Bouillon Office of Tourism, conducted a three-day seminar from November 28 to 30, 1995 in Martinique to examine the relationship between ecotourism and rural development in the Caribbean. The seminar, which was sponsored by the Caribbean Environment Programme and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, brought together a group of persons from around the region with practical experience in nature-based tourism development.

An important conclusion of the workshop was that ecotourism, as the term is generally understood, may not be an appropriate model for much of the Caribbean. Instead the group felt that precisely because most Caribbean countries cannot compete with the more spectacular regions of the world for the nature or adventure tourist, they have the opportunity to develop a different kind of tourism, one that gives prominence and value to the region's unique and fascinating cultures, whose vitality, and even survival, have been threatened by the forms of tourism currently promoted.

The guidelines and recommendations resulting from the seminar are presented in this publication.

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