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# Modernization and Its Effects in Loma Bonita: A Leap from Historical Subsistence Agriculture into the Precarious Commercial Market

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**Modernization and Its Effects in Loma Bonita:  
A Leap from Historical Subsistence Agriculture into the Precarious  
Commercial Market**



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SIT Panama Fall, 2013  
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## **Executive Summary**

This investigation studies the modernization effects on Loma Bonita and how these changes will ultimately shape the community in the future. By performing a series of 50 interviews and surveys, I used anecdotal and observational research to make conclusions about the effects of electricity installation, road construction, and foreign influences on the town. Although it is recognized that there are an abundance of factors contributing to modernization, the scope of this paper only focuses on the three components mentioned above.

Daily lives of Loma Bonita residents have already been drastically changed by the electricity, road, and foreigners. The community was originally inhabited by strictly subsistence agriculturalists retrieving all necessary living accommodations from the land. Currently, changes in transportation, technology, and value have transcended the campo from this traditional lifestyle. Now Loma Bonita is faced with the choice of remaining in subsistence agriculture or transitioning into the commercial market.

This article argues that the new lives brought forth by modernizing influences will require an agricultural reformation that encourages produce vending rather than restricting it to family consumption. If this reform is not made, the city could spiral into expanding inequalities between incoming wealthy residents and the already established rural poor. If some improvements are made in the system, however, Loma Bonita could conquer government intervention and establish itself as a successful community that maintains its traditional values while changing with the modernistic times.

## **Resumen Ejecutivo**

Esta investigación estudia los efectos de modernización en Loma Bonita y cómo los cambios afectarán la comunidad en el futuro. Después de yo colectaba 50 entrevistas y encuestas, he usado la investigación anecdótica y observacional para mis conclusiones sobre los efectos de la instalación eléctrica, la construcción de la carretera, y las influencias extranjeras en el campo. Aunque hay muchas formas de modernización este documento sólo habla sobre los tres componentes mencionados arriba.

Las vidas de los residentes de Loma Bonita se han cambiado drásticamente por la electricidad, carretera y extranjeros. La comunidad fue originalmente habitada por agricultores de subsistencia y recibían todos los componentes de la vida de la tierra. En la actualidad, los cambios en el transporte, la tecnología y las ideas han revolucionado el campo de este estilo de vida tradicional. Ahora el campo necesita escoger entre la agricultura de subsistencia o una transición en el mercado comercial.

Yo argumento que las nuevas vidas requerirán una reforma a la economía comercial. Si no se hace esta reforma, la ciudad tendrá más desigualdades entre los residentes ricos entrantes y los pobres rurales ya establecido. Si este sistema esa mejorada, sin embargo, Loma Bonita pudo conquistar la intervención del gobierno y establecerse como una comunidad que mantiene sus valores tradicionales mientras se cambia con los tiempos modernistas.

## **Acknowledgements**

A huge thank you goes out to the incredible community of Loma Bonita! I especially want to recognize Antonia, Catalino, Jessie, Jairo, and Belkis for providing an amazing three week journey full of delicious food, late night stories, and continuous Spanish lessons (especially greetings: Oooiiii!). The unforgettable friendships and experiences I have taken from Loma Bonita will continue to stick out as the best part of my study abroad excursion! I could not have completed this project without the assistance of Lady Loma's guidance through the outskirts of the community and translating confusing campo lingo into comprehensible sentences. The help of my advisor and academic director, Ruben Gonzales was also crucial in the completion of this project! Without his knowledge of the town, lessons in interviewing techniques, and the occasional pep talk this project would have hardly been as successful. Finally, I'd like to thank the amazing students in SIT and my family at home for dispensing continuous love and support during my voyage across Panama!

## 1. Introduction: One family populating a community

According to the findings of Gloria Rudolf, an anthropologist studying rural Panamanian communities, Loma Bonita began with the migration of a single family from Coclé. This family moved into the highland area due to the external pressures of the 18<sup>th</sup> century depression and family land confiscations. Because this area was nearly uninhabited and provided easy access to food and water, the family began their life in what is now Loma Bonita (Rudolf 39-40). Rudolf continued her investigation of the highland community and pieced together the majority of the town's history through anecdotal research and literature reviews of previous ethnologists which provides the basic foundation of knowledge for this investigation.

In previous years the community members of Loma Bonita lived humble lives. Water for bathing and drinking was retrieved from a nearby river, crops were grown to provide food for the families, and small caminitos, or dirt trails, we utilized for walking to and from the fields. Traditional houses were built from mud and tree trunks while food was cooked over an open fire.

A Loma Bonita resident reflects on her life in the early 1900s:

*“When I was seven I worked in my family’s fields before school. The teacher would always hit me when I showed up to class with dirty hands, but my skin wasn’t dirty, it was stained. The dirt roads then weren’t the big ones we have now; they were little paths that got muddy every time it rained. My feet were always sore at the end of the day from walking everywhere. The stoves we cooked on were big rocks above a fire. I would always need to protect my legs from getting burned when cooking with my mother. Loma Bonita only had six different last names then” (LBC5).*

The campo was extremely small in the early 90’s due to its population consisting of merely “six last names”. The church did not exist; therefore families practiced religion in their homes with neighbors and other community members. For Christmas and other vital religious ceremonies families from the surrounding areas of Pananomé, including Loma Bonita, would make a two

day journey by foot to the Catholic Church within the city. A local school only taught through third grade, however most children dropped out after first to help their families work in the fields. Having many children was important providing greater labor efforts agricultural work.

As decades passed, the town populated past the six original families, small dirt paths became widened roads, and travelers utilized horses or the occasional large truck as transportation. Agriculture slowly began focusing on coffee harvesting, although other produce was still grown for family consumption. Fathers and children walked sacs of coffee into El Cope to sell, while mothers began taking on more domestic roles (although field work was still part of the daily routine). When plagues and soil deprivation prevented the growth of coffee trees, the community transitioned into selling oranges while remaining dependent on yucca, rice, beans, and corn for family meals. Livestock were also kept on family property as supplementation to the home grown produce.

Over the past 40 years, government intervention has slowly entered its way into the highland town. ANAM, the environmental protection agency, became interested in the campo once the boundaries of the Biological Corridor established Loma Bonita as a Buffer Zone community. One of its first projects was an orange tree giveaway that provided free plants to every family in town. In return the community was asked to begin an eco-tourism sector that provided one attraction and a living accommodation to incoming tourists who were interested in experiencing rural activity near the Biological Corridor. Of course the community obliged without hesitation in light of their newfound orange trees. The town was also assigned a Peace Corps volunteer whose purpose was to aid in the eco-tourism establishment while providing educational programs that stressed the importance of environmental protection. Since then the government also paved the main dirt road through town due to increased demand by travelers



and agriculturalists bringing oranges into El Cope. Their most recent project has been installing electricity along this paved road and in the homes of Loma Bonita residents.

This is the frame under which my project takes place. It is my goal is to analyze the newly incorporated “modern” aspects in the community and assess the effects of these implementations on the residents in the campo. The idea of modernization, frequently discussed in this paper, simply refers to changes occurring in the town that advance its cultures and practices towards a 21<sup>st</sup> century style of living. Although numerous modernizing factors have changed the campo’s lifestyle only three pivotal incorporations will be discussed through the duration of this essay. In analyzing these aspects I aim to answer the research question: In what ways has electricity installation, road construction, and foreign influence in Loma Bonita affected the shaping of the community and its residents’ lifestyles?

## **2. Literature Review**

The current placement of Loma Bonita along the Biological Corridor is the driving factor behind government intervention in the community. The Mesoamerican Biological Corridor concept, developed around 1990, initiated the idea of defining an area throughout Central America that protected biodiversity. This program promoted the sustainable use of natural resources while also improving the quality of life of residencies in the region (IEG ix). The Corridor is divided into a system of land zones that have certain restrictions on human intervention in order to protect the natural flora and fauna of the area. Loma Bonita is located in the Buffer Zone, an area intended to absorb the impacts of negative activity happening on both sides of the corridor boundary. The idea behind these zones protects city farms from being attacked by wildlife, and the natural forests from enduring community manipulation (Miller 8). The same article further asserts that if these Buffer Zones are penetrated by surrounding wildlife,

incentives and payments will be issued for property damage as well the necessary changes in land use (Miller 9). These areas have primarily been targeted for eco-tourism and sustainable agricultural practices, which is why the preservation of the land is necessary: “for the definition of ecotourism is dependent upon the existence of the diverse ecosystems and most attractive species of the country for its success” (Aylward 15).

Many projects are taking place within the corridor to protect the area and its surrounding Buffer Zones. For example, on January 18, 2007 a GEF grant co-financed with an IBRD Loan issued a total of 16 million dollars to a Rural Productivity and Sustainable Development Project that aimed at growing the income of small-scale rural farmers and increasing the importance of biodiversity conservation throughout Panama. Thus far, 12.77 million dollars of the total 16 has been dispersed to areas throughout the country and received a moderately satisfactory mark in the overall implementation progress of the project (The World Bank 1, 2). Projects of this stature and others similar in nature have created subprojects affecting the lives of Loma Bonita residents specifically.

The ACP and MIDA have recently been working together to control the “coffee berry borer” plague which has been destroying coffee trees in Panama for over eight years. This group has planted over 1,500 hectares of trees in the areas of near Ciri Grande and Trinidad, along with the west area of the Canal Basin (Watershed). These project workers have collaborated with a select few Loma Bonita residents in replanting the produce previously destroyed by this plague. An article in La Prensa describes a different project, costing 180,000 dollars that establishes agroforestry and ecotourism programs within the areas of El Jobo, Loma Bonita, Bermejo, Piedras Gordas and La Mina due to their location in the buffer zone of the Omar Torrijos National Park in El Cope (Quezada). Finally, a Project in the "Development of animal breeding

in the Commonwealth of Loma Bonita” has been implemented for the price of \$18,825.83, paying farmers to breed commonly hunted animals so scavengers will no longer kill wildlife in the Biological Corridor (Corredor Biológico).

Other government programs help support the lives of Loma Bonita residents, as many families in this region fall under the Panamanian poverty line. Beginning July 20, 2009 a program called “Ciento por Setenta” gives 100 dollars a month to citizens whom are 70 years or older (Ministry of Social Development). Although there are some restrictions placed on possible beneficiaries, nearly all Loma Bonita residents satisfying the age requirement can receive these funds. According to a local in the community, Ojo de Agua is the closest town in which these payments can be received (LBC3). Red de Oportunidad is another program from which many residents get monthly checks. This program targets Panamanian citizens registered under the Poverty Map and Vulnerability Studies as “people living in extreme poverty”. According to the section of government leading the program, they reach “a total of 592 townships and homes that spread as follows: 33,863 in rural areas, distributed in 447 districts, urban area with 8,306 beneficiaries in 98 districts and indigenous areas with 21,076 beneficiaries in 47 districts who receive a combined total of 6,324.500.00 - 6.324 million five hundred dollars” (Ministry of Social Development).

### **3. Materials and Methods**

Observational findings were taken throughout the entire three weeks of my stay in Loma Bonita. The first week was strictly experiential as I participated in family gatherings, public events, and everyday conversations. This week was crucial in building my relationship with the community before formally interviewing its members. During this time I also familiarized myself with the layout of the town while taking notes of the modernized elements in the streets,

farms, and surrounding areas of Loma Bonita. Throughout the second week, I focused my observations on the homes themselves and the interactions between community members and their environment. The third week was utilized to conduct literature review and resolve any unanswered questions I held about the town through informal conversation with residents and outside resources.

Starting the second week, 6-7 interviews a day were recorded over an eight-day period resulting in the collection of 50 interviews. 43 of these interviews were performed in different households in order to gain an understanding of diverse living situations throughout the community. The average session lasted approximately one hour and was recorded through hand written notes. In order to decrease the intimidation of the interview, other materials such as a recorder were not used. At the beginning of each session the name, date, and age of each interviewee was logged as well as the time of day. After the session was completed, the families were asked to take a photo, documenting the experience. They were informed that the photo was not mandatory, simply a personal keep-sake I could show my friends in the study abroad program and in The United States. The names of the community members in the photos will not be released, nor will the photos be published.

Early in the process it became evident that women were more available to interview than men. Realizing this trend, I attempted to approach houses at night as the men were returning from their fields. I also specifically asked to speak with men and described my need for a balanced interview pool. If women were present at my time of arrival, the men hardly ever accepted this invitation. Due to this hurdle, my interviews are biased towards women. It seems socially acceptable for the wives and daughters to greet and converse with strangers, especially other women. The fact that I am foreign, young woman might have also had an impact on a

man's willingness to speak to me. Finally, I did not feel comfortable walking around the town past seven, as it is not socially acceptable in Loma Bonita to pasear, or stop and chat, after dark with strangers. In order to increase the amount of male interviews, I targeted houses with single and retired men during the evenings.

Surveys were also taken during these sessions. Having 17 short-answer questions intertwined throughout each interview, I could extract the one-worded responses and compile them onto an excel spreadsheet. If the questions were unanswered or a language misinterpretation was made, a U (unknown) was inserted in place of their response.

A code is used through the duration of this paper in order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants in this investigation. Each interviewed community member is identified by the letter "C" and given a corresponding number ranging from 1-50. For example, community member one is labeled as C1; community member two is labeled as C2, and so on. Before each code an "LB" will be placed to signify the participants are all Loma Bonita residents. Interviewees from outside areas are labeled with an "O" and allocated a number as well as a professional code. PC will signify a Peace Corps participant while TC will stand for a teacher response. An example of an outside source would have the following formatting: OPC1 or OTC1. The naming of the Peace Corps volunteers and other community members given in surveys and interviews will also be changed to conceal the identities of the fellow inhabitants in Loma Bonita.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Electricity Installation**

The installation of electricity in the community began in early November 2013, right around the time of my arrival in Loma Bonita. The majority of interviewees claimed to receive

power starting November 8<sup>th</sup> through November 15<sup>th</sup>, however, the school and several outlying houses are having power installed as late as November 30<sup>th</sup>. I was informed that the installation fee was 13-15 dollars depending on the proximity of the house to the street but no one could educate me on the cost of power per month. Nearly every connected home informed me that the first pay-period is free of charge. During interviews, the average monthly bill estimate was \$4.75, although guesses ranged from 1 to 11 dollars. Of the 43 houses I visited, 12 did not have electricity and 10 were not planning on receiving power in the near future. These houses, along with other disconnected homes were located further from the street, past the installation point of road lights and electric wiring. Although a hydroelectric project in a neighboring community utilizes a nearby river, the majority of Loma Bonita is in agreement that the dam's power is being exported to other cities in Panama or Costa Rica. Therefore, the source of the power is unclear.

The physical connections of the wiring to the houses are basic. Lines are attached from the street lights to a roof antenna which connects inner wires powering the circuits inside. The sustainability of this system is questionable. People have already reported of their houses losing power during storms and heavy rain due to the exposed wires. One community member allowed me onto her roof to observe her connection system. The line linking her roof and the nearby electric pole was wrapped around her antennae and held down with electric tape.

Although the installments are mediocre, the popular attitude towards electricity in the campo is extremely positive. Community members rave about the educational benefits of power, work improvements, new household appliances, and the ability to see at night:

*“It's a huge help! Here we work with wood and can use electric tools now to get jobs done faster. The light at night also helps; it's progress for the whole community” (LBC18).*

*“It helps us a lot! My brothers and sisters can study much longer, we don’t need batteries for flashlights, cooking is much faster, we can listen to the radio, we can have a fridge, and we can clean our clothes in a washing machine. These are all necessary items in a household” (LBC13).*

After dark, adolescent boys play soccer in the street by a local tienda, or store, where men can be found, organizing nightly poker games. Women sit on their porches crocheting clothing or weaving hats while their children finish homework inside. The hum of radios and televisions are heard in several houses along the street, proving that Loma Bonita has already begun purchasing new appliances. Throughout my second week, I spotted five washing machines, eight televisions, and four refrigerators in near proximity to my interview locations. I would imagine that several other households had such appliances placed out of sight.

Although the community is in agreement about the benefits of electricity in the campo, the affordability of the system is still being debated. A few families are currently using gas generators to power washing machines and lighting inside their homes. These community members claim that the price of gas tanks required to fuel their generators far exceeds a monthly electric bill. They predict that the installations will in fact, save their family money! Different homes consider an electricity bill affordable and will not hesitate to pay private companies for their services. For example, one family reasoned:

*“I think it’s a necessity because the things we use now always break. I’m sure the electricity bill will be covered by the money we spend replacing batteries and flashlights” (LBC10).*

Other families recognize that paying for power will require sacrifices, but ultimately benefits the household with their newly available lighting system and appliance connections.

A different tier of households, however, are not receiving a steady income and therefore wince at the idea of an electric bill. Throughout my surveys, 22 of the 50 participants gave an estimated monthly income averaging at 140 dollars. This approximation includes government

program supplementations and/or help from family members in the city. The annual income in Loma Bonita is hard to pin-point however, due to the fact that the many families opted out of answering money related survey questions. I'd imagine that interviewees were embarrassed to talk about assets with a North American, given that residents have a presupposed idea of "white-skinned people" being wealthy. In reality, many families work subsistence agriculture and don't depend upon a monthly paycheck. Instead, they work occasional jobs and supplement meals with homegrown produce such as rice, beans, yucca, and guandoo, or a type of popular bean grown in the campo. Due to this living style, many homes are not prepared to pay monthly bills.

*"I don't make any money, I work in the field. The only things I buy are rice, sugar, and meat with the money my children give me" (LBC47).*

Children and foreigners are predicted to move to Loma Bonita with the new installation of electricity. A handful of families had explained their kids' desire to move back to the campo with new business opportunities and better living conditions. Two homes had specifically mentioned plans to expand their house or construct a new one on the family property. Other community members also mentioned that land in Loma Bonita would attract outsiders looking for a cheap investment. 17 interviewees described new families wanting to buy land in Loma Bonita while 37 knew of new houses already being built in the area. From my observations, I discovered five houses under construction; however, a few community members claimed they've seen as many as ten. Whether these houses were brought with the incoming electricity could not be determined. This figure simply shows that Loma Bonita is populating.

## **4.2 Road Construction**

Since the construction of the road, a transformation in the transportation system has altered the lives of community members in Loma Bonita. Trucks with small cages and wooden benches act as a bus system connecting El Cope to neighboring, agricultural communities like



the highland community. A ride from the Loma Bonita into town is 60 cents one way. This system allows the large town amenities of El Cope to become easily available to local residents. In turn, several drastic changes have taken place over the past 20 years: Adolescents are continuing education past 9<sup>th</sup> grade due to the accessibility of high schools in neighboring cities; families are incorporating varied food items into their diet due to the diversity of supermarkets scattered throughout El Cope; medicines and basic health care are being provided by the local infirmary; and job opportunities can be sought after in different communities.

The bus system not only allows families to travel to El Cope, but also to the capital city of Pananamé as mentioned above. This opportunity gives the community members a taste of life outside of the campo. Modern eating establishments, schools, hotels, shopping centers and other city amenities are in abundance in the capital. When venturing to the city, Loma Bonita residents always dress in their most fashionable attire. It seems that families have specific outfits for traveling outside the campo. The quickness of the bus system also allows a visit to Pananamé to remain a day trip, costing \$1.20 each way (not including the 60 cent bus ride to El Cope).

Leaps in business opportunities have also been taken advantage of since the construction of the road. Large trucks drive through town, buying oranges from local families and selling them to distant cities at a higher price. Truck drivers purchase bags of approximately 100 oranges for 25 cents. In turn, families in Loma can sell their oranges to passing trucks, rather than walking bags of fruit to El Cope. I have not heard of any other produce items being purchased by these vendors. Woven hats, however, are bought by similar companies, purchasing the artisanal crafts at a low price and selling them in the city. Cold meat distributors are also seen taking advantage of the paved road. Lottery ticket workers can also be seen once a week selling tickets in the campo. This is a surprisingly popular attraction that a large majority of the

population participates in. Daily motorcycles and trucks with coolers of meat pass by homes, honking to signify that fish, chicken, and occasionally beef are available for purchase. Families can be seen waiting on the roadside for such vehicles between the hours of 7am and 10am. This system allows households to cook fresh meat without needing to kill one of their own livestock.

*“The amount of businesses that have come in with the road is... pssssh...unbelievable. Now we can buy fish and chicken right next to our house. Something we would have gone to El Cope for in the past. Selling oranges is also MUCH easier!” (LBC25).*

Other vehicles have also taken advantage of the newly paved road. Farmers, wealthy residents, and travelers utilize this road on a daily basis. According to Gloria Rudolf’s work in Loma Bonita, as many as 20 different trucks passed by over the course of 1-2 weeks in 1993. (Rudolf 203). As of 2013 we see at least 20 different cars a *day* including buses, pick-ups and other small cars that couldn’t travel the dirt roads in the 90’s. Politicians have recently utilized this road to its fullest capacity. Stopping by houses along the highway and chatting with community members gives a new personal approach in campaigning. Loma Bonita residents have mentioned that these candidates were coming long before the road, however, now they pass by nearly three times a week on some occasions. Children of families in Loma Bonita are also seen visiting on multiple occasions, typically bringing a newspaper or magazine to give to the residents. The road has generally become a link to outside news mediums and influences.

Finally the road has proven to reshape the construction of houses in Loma Bonita. Traditional homes were built of clay and tree trunks gathered in the community. Currently, trucks can import cement blocks to build more aesthetically appealing houses. These cement blocks can be painted or left grey, as both types are seen throughout Loma Bonita. Although a handful of mud houses remain, the majority of families have adapted the cement walls and tin roofing (both of which can be purchased in El Cope). This accessibility to construction materials

and location next to the road has also lead to the increased population of Loma Bonita over the past decade.

### 4.3 Foreign Influence

In 1972 Gloria Rudolf, an anthropologist exploring rural Panama, traveled to Loma Bonita to study the community and its people. Living here for approximately 15 months, the researcher became the first in a long line of foreigners to immerse herself in the daily life-style of this small highland community. The initial reaction to Gloria was one of fear and mistrust. Without prompting Gloria related questions in my surveys, 19 of the 50 interviewees mentioned how nervous they were around the first gringa, or white person. Through her efforts to ease their anxieties, the anthropologist conversed with the locals, adapted the campo diet, and lived with a host-stay family until the inhabitants became comfortable with her presence. Community members described this transition numerous times throughout my stay here and have embraced her studies in years after. One woman wrote a song in memory of Gloria's visit:

*“...Yo le doy gracias a Gloria  
Que ella fue la que me enseño  
Cuando llego por primera vez  
Yo tenía pena  
Pena pena pena  
Y no hay que tener pena  
Peina pena pena  
Y no hay que tener pena”*

*“... I give thanks to Gloria  
She was the one who taught me  
When she came for the first time  
I was shy  
Shyness shyness shyness  
And you don't need to be shy  
Shyness shyness shyness  
And you don't need to be shy”(LBC3)*

After the anthropologist left Loma Bonita, a new wave a gringos came into the campo: The Peace Corps. Gloria mentions volunteers from neighboring communities visiting the as far back as 1993; however, the stationed Peace Corps members did not arrive until the early 2000's. Loma Bonita has had four volunteers over the past 10 years. Each volunteer enters with a generally assigned topic, such as environmental education, and is assigned a host family to stay

with during the first three months of their excursion. This time is utilized to familiarize themselves with the town as well as the community members they will be living with for the next two years. The volunteer then proceeds to hold a town meeting discussing the specifics of their work. During this meeting, the locals are given the opportunity to vote on the type of projects they would like to see carried out by the volunteers. This meeting is highly encouraged for the community members to attend, but not mandatory. The program attempts to place the volunteers on site with overlapping timelines, providing a constant stream of projects in the community. This has not been the case in Loma Bonita, however, given that volunteers have come in months after previous ones have left.

The community reaction to the Peace Corps volunteers has been very receptive. As was the case with Gloria, locals are intimidated to converse with the new coming volunteers until conversations are initiated by the foreigner themselves. The community seems to expect volunteers to reach out to them in order to build the foundation of relationships. If a motion isn't made by the volunteer, most community members will refrain from speaking to them. This pattern can describe the differences in relations with the Peace Corps members. Families whom housed, spoke frequently with, or often saw volunteers would describe the foreigners and their work as impressive. Conversely, families who didn't see the members often described the volunteer with less enthusiasm. For example, two different interviewees help equal yet opposite opinions about past Peace Corps members:

*“Kaitlin didn't really do very much. She had a boyfriend and always left the community without talking to us. Marry though; she has worked on a lot of projects! She's learned Spanish really quick and has become one of my better friends here” (LBC3).*

*“Kaitlin, she was a good person, the entire community liked her and her work. I don't really know Marry too well; I think she's making stoves?”(LBC13).*

The work in the community completed by volunteers has been heavily environmental based. The most recent volunteers had constructed eco-stoves for households in order to reduce the smoke released into the atmosphere and the consumption of fire wood. The project does not give away free stoves, but allows community members to sell raffle tickets and collect readily available materials such as sand and wood in order to receive the appliance. 64% of the participants in my survey claimed to have an eco-stove or the materials ready for its construction. 100% of the homes with stoves were satisfied with the final product. This appliance can be seen as the primary method of cooking, as well as a supplementation to previously owned gas stoves. Homes typically use it for slow-cooking items such as beans in order to save money on gas. Community members also informed me of the educational work done by Peace Corps members. English classes were frequently mentioned by the interviewees as well as a few recycling and deforestation courses. Small afterschool programs such as “ambientalistas” encouraged school girls to promote environmental safety in the community. However, this and other groups were terminated after the departure of the Peace Corps member, due to the absence leadership in the groups. Many classes taught by previous volunteers are discontinued after their leaving.

*“Kaitlin had the Niñas Ambientalistas group that my girls loved during the semester. The director doesn’t want to continue it though and he has the last word. Now it doesn’t exist” (LBC10).*

Community involvement in Peace Corps programming varies. Eco-stoves seem to be the most sought after amenity provided by the volunteers. A local resident works with the organization in constructing the stoves and continues to encourage the others to participate in the project. Different programs, however, have not been as successful. Besides English classes, long-term teaching based services provided by the Peace Corps have been forgotten. As soon as the Peace Corps volunteer leaves, their program dies out. A few projects, however, have begun to

spread by word of mouth. The current Peace Corps volunteer described her frustration when only five community members showed up to her recycled bag seminar. Since the class however, women have seen the economic opportunity in selling these purses and have taught one another how to construct them. Currently, multiple households sell these artisanal crafts.

During the same decade as Peace Corps' introduction, study abroad students, like me, began staying with families in Loma Bonita as part of their school curriculum. The first semester of students were introduced into the town by a community member who had befriended a connection in the SIT program. Beginning with four students, the curriculum allowed foreigners to live in a rural community for seven days and experience the daily activities of a family in the campo. After 10 years, the enrollment in SIT has increased to approximately 13-20 students a semester. In turn, more community members have accepted foreigners into their homes and expect new groups at least twice a year.

The reaction to the students has evolved since their initial introduction into Loma Bonita. Interviewees whom housed first year students reminisce about their preoccupations with serving appropriate meals and providing comfortable accommodations:

*“At first I was extremely shy around the students because I had no idea what they wanted to eat or how to speak English! Julio had to reassure me that you guys ate everything and if I talked really slow the students could understand me” (LBC21).*

*“I really didn't want to have kids here at first because we're poor and don't have proper beds for students. There are also a lot of my kids running around this house! (LBC9).*

Since then, the community has lost its hesitations towards of students and welcomes them graciously. Houses that don't participate in the program respect the work of the visitors and don't appear to have any problems with constant visitors. Participating homes agree that the incorporation of students has brought their families closer to other residents. Due to the fact that

houses are scattered throughout the hills of Loma Bonita, some families rarely see others unless they are congregating for a student function. The host stays all enjoy exchanging stories with their students, and learning about cultural differences, and an occasional English phrase.

Interviewees with their children's' attachment to incoming students:

*"I like having the students come but the kids LOVE them. It's nice to be able to see my children connect with them. They always feel at home here" (LBC23).*

After this week is over, many students return during their independent research projects to continue their studies near the end of the semester. The local involvement during this period in much less structured, however, the community is just as accepting. It seems that many of the independent students have not spoken with community members past the main road. Although no one refused to interview, a handful of families seemed uncomfortable answering my inquiries. Whether their hesitation was towards me or the interview could not be determined. Houses on the road, conversely, are accustomed to foreigners walking about the community. Opportunities for photos and story-telling were much more available in these homes.

## **5. Discussion**

### **5.1 Daily Lifestyle Changes in Loma Bonita Residents**

Between the installation of electricity, road construction, and foreign influence in the town, daily lives of Loma Bonita residents are slowly modernizing. The children of families in the campo seem to be absorbing the largest impact of new technologies. Computers and televisions have become a primary source of entertainment. When interviewing the community, children in several households had invited their friends to watch television rather than go outside. Kids were also seen gathered around computer screens, watching one another play downloadable games. It was surprising how many children gathered around a single screen. USB memory

sticks with music and movies were also passed around between friends at school. The older generation continually expressed their concern for the rapidly increasing popularity in technology:

*"I bet fewer students will begin showing up to classes. They will constantly want to watch TV!" (OTC1).*

The electricity installation does benefit families with children, however, saving a 50 cent per day charging cost at the local primary school. The available light during evenings also aids in homework completion. Education has been further stressed with the construction of the road. Due to high school availability in neighboring cities, nearly every family sends their adolescents into town to receive an education. It has become clear that school training is vital in succeeding in the current decade. A few illiterate Loma Bonita residents describe their limitations in having a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade education:

*"There are no options in life nowadays without an education. I wish someone could give me a lesson on business because I'm not capable of it. I went to school in 1<sup>st</sup> grade and 3 months in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, and that's it. My mom educated us herself, which I'm grateful for. You learn everything from education because it helps with discipline, studies, and everything you need in life" (LBC47).*

Kids and adults alike have benefitted from the new devices that come with electricity. Domestic appliances spark the largest excitement among residents in Loma Bonita. With the purchase of a washing machine, wives do not need to spend time hand-cleaning family clothing. By not performing this chore, a woman can save nearly three hours if children are abundant in her family. Refrigerators have already begun to impact the community eating style. Cold meats, which could originally only be consumed the day of purchase, can now be saved for two or three days. Fruits and vegetables can also be preserved in the refrigerator and removed from sun and insect exposure. Local stores that sell these items will provide closer meat availability for families, especially those without electricity. Finally, working appliances for men have doubled



labor efforts in some cases. For example, the local wood worker can make an assortment of handmade chairs and tables with greater precision and less effort when using electric tools. Every day now, I have seen new appliances being dropped off in front of homes throughout Loma Bonita. Just recently a political candidate actually gave away a stove, refrigerator, and washing machine during a raffle contest; an event that would have never taken place without the road or electricity installation.

With modernism has also come a change in community dynamic. According to Gloria Rudolf's *Panama's Poor*, neighboring families were known to work in collaboration to balance the lack of food diversity and materials needed around the house (Rudolf 43). If one family grew yucca and corn, the other would grow rice beans to exchange. This system of working provided a close connection between residents in the campo and most likely sparked the stressed importance of socialization in Loma Bonita. Currently, however, families are becoming more independent. Although the residents continue to be humble hosts and offer food and chiche, or sugar fruit drinks, to visitors passing by, money seems to have dissipated the family cooperation system. Instead, the community relies on children to work in the city and send money as needed. This money is rarely shared as any monetary income is a rare resource in the Lomas that is hard to come by. One resident reflects on the changing community dynamic:

*“My grandparents say that the neighbors were like family. They always visited each other even though the houses were farther apart then. It isn't like that anymore” (LBC22).*

The three modernizing components discussed throughout this study have also exposed Loma Bonita to a world beyond the campo. A wealth of current events and political campaigns can be accessed through television, radio, and the newspaper. Information will no longer depend upon word-of-mouth; residents can hear for themselves what is happening in other parts of

Panama. Children living in the city also relay information into the campo through their stories and gifts brought during visits. I walked in on one family in particular huddled around a magazine full of Hollywood celebrities and fashion articles brought by the eldest daughter. It then occurred to me that Loma Bonita is no longer secluded from the outside world.

Students and Peace Corps volunteers bring similar influence as they show pictures and tell stories of their lives in the United States. During my in particular homestay, the family listened in awe to descriptions of teenagers receiving cars, parents working in different countries, and details of university life through the eyes of its students. When thumbing through the pictures on my camera one afternoon, my host stay sister paused in the most unexpected places. Mistaken photos of wall shots or room corners were analyzed for every detail; any shoes in the closet, articles of clothing on the floor, and accessories lying around became long topics of conversation. This seems to be the downside to student excursions; stereotypes of rich white people are being reinforced and wedging a gap between campo residents and visitors. Although the community is graciously accepting of SIT groups, an unmentioned aura of hierarchy surrounds the foreigners.

## **5.2 A Cry for Occupational Reformation**

Loma Bonita has developed an identity crises in the face of electricity installation. Are the residents subsistence agriculturalists or supporters of the commercial economy? Currently, the town is demonstrating a combination of both. On one hand, men continue to farm traditional produce in order to provide food for their families. On the other, cultural shifts described above are bringing in attitudes such as modern appliance dependency. The spending required to fuel these new habits does not seem sustainable in the long term. In order to compensate for the new

lifestyles brought forth by electricity, households will need to change their strategies in gaining monthly revenue.

Some women have already begun utilizing the Peace Corps as a system of commerce. A variety of artisanal crafts are given to the current volunteers to sell at program gatherings and city seminars. Moving beyond the traditional sombreros, women have created headbands, miniature hats, coin pouches, and soda-top purses to increase their variety of sellable merchandise. The Peace Corps member in turn sells these crafts at city prices and provides a larger profit margin to the women who'd otherwise sell their items in bulk to passing trucks. Women have also sold their merchandise to incoming students who purchase the crafts at full price as well. These newly available resources are a premium opportunity to make a profit, yet few families utilize the system to its fullest potential. Although the current volunteer brags that she never returns with unsold merchandise, only four to five families have partaken in her service. She explains:

*“Take this conference for example. I go to these things and never return home with unsold crafts. You'd think the people would realize what a great way to make money this is. So far only three women have given me items this year, that's even less than last year! It's easy money” (OPC1).*

Many community members foresee small businesses coming into the campo due to the electricity. Multiple wives described their desire to sell duros, or small bagged popsicles, with the incorporation of new refrigerators. Others assume that more stores will come in with larger cold meat varieties and ingredient selection. Although a few homes will benefit from these jobs, the majority of the town will still face the dilemma at hand: a variety of goods to buy with no revenue supporting the opportunity.

A handful of spouses work city jobs and return home weekly or biweekly to provide a monthly paycheck. By working in the city, husbands can afford the modernistic appliances

desired through electricity consumption. This connection to the city separates these families from the majority of Loma Bonita residents however, as most men remain inside the campo.

Occasionally, random opportunities for work can be found inside the campo. For example, with the incoming electricity installation, government officials hired local men to dig the holes and cut down trees for the incoming road lights. Although the government occasionally provides these opportunities, they are merely temporary.

The majority of Loma Bonita residents are far from transitioning out of agricultural work and into wage labor, due to their laid back working style. Don't get me wrong, these men and women are amongst the hardest working group of individuals I've met; they rise with the sun and work long hours in their fields and households. However, it isn't uncommon to spark an hour long impromptu conversation with any given community member. The people here take their time, appreciating the social aspect of their community, visiting to chat with other residents throughout the day. As an interviewer, it is astonishing to watch every interviewee drop their work in the immediate moment to complete an hour long session. Due to the stressed importance of socialization, however, it would be hard to convince Loma Bonita to partake in the time efficient, structured jobs seen in the city. Therefore, I do not see electricity bringing a Panamomé type lifestyle into the campo. I do believe, however, that residents will need to begin structuring an agricultural system or artisanal business geared towards the market economy if they wish to continue their lives with electricity.

The government is already sparking such movements in the form of a coffee tree regrowth project. One community member described that MIDA had thousands of coffee trees to 8 families across the Lomas for selling purposes. Years earlier, Loma Bonita had harvested beans until a series of plagues and soil nutrient deprivation would not support the large scale

reproduction of the plant. After several decades, the government believes the highland community can sustain coffee tree regrowth and begin harvesting the beans for profit. The interviewee was hesitantly confident in the project potential as her donated trees were growing, but not yet fully mature. The incorporation of the road also aids in the potential agricultural readjustment. It was already mentioned above how private trucks that buy produce and sombreros from community members have already taken advantage of this powerful tool. Jobs of this stature would allow all of Loma Bonita to maintain the modernistic lifestyle they have just recently began to experience. Without this reshaping of the agricultural system or increased involvement in artisanal vending, however, Loma Bonita could plunge into an unequal division of power between wealthy and impoverished residents.

### **5.3 Foreseen Divisions in Power**

There is already a generation gap forming between the youth and elders of the community. Long-time residents with very little education, if any, continue living traditionally off the land as they had done in years past. Hard work is defined by hours spent in the fields and the amount of produce brought to the table each night. Younger families contrastingly are placing a higher importance on education as stated above and are no longer taking their children away to help tend their lands. In turn, a slow separation of values is taking shape between older and younger residents: hard working field labor vs. educational preparation for city life. I predict the costs of this division could mean trouble for the traditional inhabitants of Loma Bonita. First, a desire to sell land will overwhelm the children given family estates, especially if this land serves no purpose in their immediate occupation. Second, a migration of families withholding city jobs and bringing money into the town will begin inhabiting the community in light of its beautiful location and access to technology. Finally, the inequalities between residents who

currently hold profitable occupations and subsistence farmers will grow, further dividing the community.

This prediction can already be witnessed in glimpses throughout Loma Bonita. Residents with income are seen in nicer homes and already purchasing appliances and home amenities that provide for comfortable living styles. Foreigners have also made an appearance over the past four years, building estates in the highest parts of the Lomas as vacation homes or impermanent residencies. Fountains and modern house designs can be seen on these properties, separating them from the basic cement houses in the middle of town. The land owners are also receiving preferential treatment throughout the electricity installation process as these homes are lit in an area where most are not receiving power. Lastly, an increased interest in Loma Bonita has been taken by children with city jobs, which will therefore slowly begin populating Loma Bonita with income earning families.

As I mentioned earlier however, Loma Bonita is not headed out of agricultural work in the near future. Families are proud to own land in the community and brag at the chance to turn down foreign investment in their property.

*“I’ve already had people asking for my land and I say the same thing to everyone-no. This land is so beautiful. I can have my chickens and pets here. I do not want to give any of this up. Besides neighbors never get along anyway” (LBC1).*

Although youths are being trained for city jobs, many are returning to continue their family farm. In a household of eight children, only one needs to revert back to the slower lifestyle with an ambition to continue his or her parent’s legacy. The passion for living a simple, nature immersed lifestyle still burns throughout the community. Changes described above would take several generations to fully take shape.

#### **5.4 Modernization in the Campo through a Broader Context**

Due to the structuring of my research methods, modernization in Loma Bonita has been discussed in the frame of the town itself. Perks and downfalls of road construction, electricity installation, and foreign influences are captured through the anecdotes of the residents and my community observations throughout my three week excursion. In reality, however, inhabitants can only provide clues to the larger forces driving modernization in Loma Bonita and the potential results of its presence. Grander corporations such as the Panamanian government and sizable private companies hold the real power in reshaping rural communities.

Because Loma Bonita acts as a buffer zone to the biological corridor, ANAM will intervene in town expansion and agricultural reform in order to preserve the nearby national forest. The initial orange tree giveaway was merely the beginning of government efforts to transition the campo out of traditional practices and into the modern market. The following Peace Corps introduction and current coffee tree donations further demonstrate this desire. Whether the campo intends to modernize or not, projects will continue to invade the community until the face of Loma Bonita has been completely reformed.

The problem with these projects doesn't lie in their intentions, but the execution. Rather than successfully establishing a teaching system that guides community members through reformations the government plants ideas, gives the community cash and leaves. For example, after given thousands of orange trees the community graciously accepted the request of the Biological Corridor to begin an ecotourism group, construct a rentable house, and clean a path to a nearby waterfall. The organization then assumed that a grant and newly implemented Peace Corps volunteer would suffice in jumpstarting the entire project despite the community's incomprehension of the term "ecotourism". The group ultimately faded from over thirty members to eight, the house remains unfinished due to grant expenditure, and the path to the

waterfall has barely been touched. In order to try and spark interest in trail construction, the current Peace Corps volunteer asked my SIT group to begin trail maintenance as our community service project. After our departure, however, the eco-tourism group took little interest in finishing its construction. The lack of motivation of the town and limited training of Peace Corps volunteers has led to a stand-still in the Biological Corridor program.

ANAM also seems to pick and choose which battles are important in environmental conservation. Large companies building hydroelectric dams have no problem entering the corridor and rerouting rivers into man-made canals. However, when small farmers use pesticides in the fields, the government immediately sends out pamphlets to schools educating the children on river contamination due to poor agricultural practices. It's ironic to see pictures of dead fish and shallow rivers in these educational pamphlets due to the fact that hydroelectric dams are causing the same results. The organization also preaches against deforestation yet allows the wealthy outsiders described above to cut down trees for vacation homes.

The point of this section is not to rant about the mediocre environmental protection agency in Panama, but to reassert that the government takes advantage of Loma Bonita despite the desires of its inhabitants. They give away free articles that create a false sense of support towards causes community members do not understand. There is no relay of information or productive teaching system that can establish a sustainable reformation project in the campo. Projects that could actually *help* rural communities transition into the modern economy are currently making it worse. Therefore, the residents are fighting for themselves against their continuously changing environment.



## **6. Conclusion: Proactivity Advancing the Community**

It is clear that electricity installation, road construction, and foreign influences have altered the lives of residents in the campo. With appliance usage easing domestic work and providing educational benefits, the electricity installation has made some positive impacts on the everyday lives of families. The road also complements these advantages through accessible transportation and possible community expansion. Foreigners such as Peace Corps volunteers can help in this transition by providing new ideas in the utilization of these powerful tools. A plague of governmental puppetry however, has swept over the community, challenging the ability of Loma Bonita to dictate its own future. Wealthy outsiders are given opportunities that community members might only get a taste of due to lack of funding and little political influence.

Gloria Rudolf argues in her investigation of Loma Bonita that “although local actions may not pose an immediate challenge to the structures of power imposed by global or local agencies, they sometimes plant seeds, often unintentionally, with the potential to blossom later in ways that do promote historical change” (Rudolf 14). Although the government makes it hard for rural residents to thrive in the modern economy, I believe that the campo has the strength to overcome the foreseen socioeconomic inequalities and power struggles. Through proactively educating themselves in new agricultural techniques, artisanal craft vending, or other unique economic services Loma Bonita has the chance to utilize the current modernizing elements to their advantage. They can take a stand against unwanted intervention through community protests and develop the seemingly useless donations into profitable economic opportunities. The time to “promote historical change” is now, in the midst of this pivotal period where modernization confronts traditional campesino values. Families can live in a future they had only imagined and begin to create innovative opportunities for the success of their community!

## 7. Appendix: Interview Questions

Questions asked to community members\*:

1. Do you have electricity?
  - a. If no: Are you going to receive electricity in the future?
2. Do you know how much the electricity costs?
  - a. If no: How much do you think it will cost?
3. Are you in favor of the electrification project in Loma Bonita?
  - a. Why or why not?
4. What do you think will be the results of electricity in Loma Bonita?
5. What are the advantages and disadvantages of electricity in Loma Bonita?
6. Do you think that the installation of electricity will change the form of life of people living in Loma Bonita?
7. Are there new houses being built in your area?
8. Do you know of new people wanting to buy land in Loma Bonita?
9. What is the monthly income in this household?
10. What do you think Loma Bonita will be like in 50 years?
11. Did you live in Loma Bonita before the construction of the road?
  - a. If yes: What was Loma Bonita like before the introduction of the road?
  - b. How has Loma Bonita changed since the construction of the road?
12. How was Loma Bonita before the introduction of Peace Corps?
13. How did you feel about the first volunteers who stayed in the campo?
14. How has your relation been with the Peace Corps volunteers?
15. Do you like the incorporation of Peace Corps in Loma Bonita?
16. Do you utilize any Peace Corps programs?
  - a. Which programs/projects?
17. Do you have any ideas to improve the work of the Peace Corps in Loma Bonita?
18. What was the reaction of the community to the first group of students?
19. Have you learned anything from the students?
  - a. What type of things?
20. Do you think that the incorporation of students has changed the form of life of residents in Loma Bonita?
21. Do you have children in the city?
22. Are there benefits of having your children in the city?
  - a. If yes: What type of benefits?

Questions asked to non-community members:

1. Do you know how much the electricity costs?
  - a. If no: How much do you think it will cost?
2. Are you in favor of the electrification project in Loma Bonita?
  - a. Why or why not?
3. What do you think will be the results of electricity in Loma Bonita?

4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of electricity in Loma Bonita?
5. Do you think that the installation of electricity will change the form of life of people living in Loma Bonita?
6. Are there new houses being built in Loma Bonita that you know of?
7. Do you know of new people wanting to buy land in Loma Bonita?
8. What do you think Loma Bonita will be like in 50 years?
9. Have you heard stories of life before and after the construction of the road in Loma Bonita?
10. Do you know how did the community react to the first Peace Corps volunteers?
11. How does the relationship between the Peace Corps and the community appear to be?
12. Do you see many community members utilizing Peace Corps programs?
  - a. Which programs/projects?
13. Do you have any ideas to improve the work of the Peace Corps in Loma Bonita?
14. Do you know how the community reacted to the first group of students?
15. Do you think that the incorporation of students has changed the form of life of residents in Loma Bonita?

\*Other non-included inquiries were asked that did not pertain to the results or discussions in this paper

## **8. Interview index**

LBC3. Spoke with Piper Halpin. 17 November 2013.

LBC5. Spoke with Piper Halpin. 18 November 2013.

LBC9. Spoke with Piper Halpin. 19 November 2013.

LBC10. Spoke with Piper Halpin. 19 November 2013.

LBC13. Spoke with Piper Halpin. 19 November 2013.

LBC18. Spoke with Piper Halpin. 20 November 2013.

LBC22. Spoke with Piper Halpin. 20 November 2013.

LBC23. Spoke with Piper Halpin. 21 November 2013.

LBC25. Spoke with Piper Halpin. 21 November 2013.

LBC47. Spoke with Piper Halpin. 25 November 2013.

OTC1. Spoke with Piper Halpin. 25 November 2013.

OPC1. Spoke with Piper Halpin. 23 November 2013.

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