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Coral Reef Tourism and Conservation in Bocas del Toro: An Analysis of Ecotourism and its Tour Guide-Based Components

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Coral Reef Tourism and Conservation in Bocas del Toro



An Analysis of Ecotourism and its Tour Guide-Based Components

By Rebecca Kayes

*School for
International Training*

*Panamá:
Development and
Conservation*

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About the Author

Rebecca Kayes is a student at Wellesley College majoring in Spanish and minoring in Biology. Her second, unofficial minor is education.

The report is the result of her participation in the School For International Training’s semester-long program *Panamá: Development in Conservation* which requires an independent study project.

Rebecca’s previous experience in Central America was working as a tour guide in Costa Rica at the Monteverde Butterfly Garden

She chose to research this topic for her love of the Bocas del Toro reefs, her previous experience as an ecotourism tour guide and her passion for all forms of education.

This version printed December 12, 2005. All comments, questions, corrections and communication are appreciated and should be directed to rkayes@gmail.com.

Abstract

Tourism of the coral reefs in Bocas del Toro is an important economic activity but also potentially harmful to the environment, creating an ecologically and economically unsustainable situation and doubts that the region engages in “ecotourism.” Coral reef tourism was analyzed with a specific emphasis on tours, tour guides, tourist motivations, tourist education and conservation-related activities. Research methods included participant observation in the tourism world in Bocas, interviews with guides, tourists and community members, and a tourist survey. Though local popular opinion disagrees, data collected shows tourism in Bocas does not emphasize reefs or reef conservation, a potentially catastrophic situation for both the reefs and the local economy. The Bocas del Toro region is encouraged to shift tourism activities to be more in line with the methods and goals of “ecotourism.” Recommendations for increased tour guide and tourist education are given, potentially taking the form of a tour guide certification program.

Resumen Ejecutivo (Executive Summary)

Turismo de los arrecifes en Bocas del Toro

El archipiélago de Bocas del Toro tiene muchos arrecifes de corales que son unos de los mejores de Panamá y contienen muchas especies importantes. Su belleza atrae turistas y visitantes de todas partes del mundo. Bocas del Toro ha construido una industria de turismo alrededor de estos corales promoviendo así como “ecoturismo.” El propósito de esta investigación es saber si el turismo de Bocas del Toro apoya la conservación de los arrecifes, es sostenible y responsable, provee educación a los turistas para ser así “ecoturismo.”

Los turistas de Bocas del Toro

Conversaciones, entrevistas y encuestas de los turistas dieron mucha información sobre sus motivaciones y razones para visitar a Bocas. La mayoría de los turistas dijeron que no visitan Bocas por los corales, sino la cultura caribeña, su ubicación convenientemente cerca a Costa Rica. Ellos están buscando divertirse y relajarse.

Guías y tours

Los corales de Bocas del Toro solo se pueden ver a través de un tour. Los turistas pueden hacer snorkel o bucear, pero necesariamente tienen que hacerlo a través de un tour con un guía. Aunque Bocas del Toro tiene muchos sitios de corales increíbles, la mayoría de los tours siguen solo una ruta, motivo por el cual turistas normalmente solo visitan los corales una vez. Esto conlleva a que los turistas se quedan poco tiempo en Bocas del Toro.

Los guías en el área turística tienen mucha importancia, ya que ellos determinan los impactos en el medio ambiente de sus tours y pueden ofrecer educación a sus clientes. Los mensajes que ofrecen los guías en sus tours eran analizados y concluimos que los guías no dan mucha información a los turistas. Los turistas quieren aprender mucho más, pero por falta de experiencia y conocimiento o prisa para ir a todos los lugares en pocas horas los guías no dan la cantidad o calidad que los turistas quieren.

Conservación

Los *dive shops* hacen unas actividades de conservación en el área. Ellos han instalado boyas para no anclar en los arrecifes. También se preocupa por limpiar el mar y su costa a través de Project AWARE y PADI. El turismo que ellos ofrecen está bastante ligado al ecoturismo, considerado así el mejor de la región.

En lo referente a las actividades contra la conservación, los autores saben que no deben hacerlos. Muchos botes anclan sobre los corales. Aunque ellos intentan a anclar en áreas de arena, las cadenas de las anclas si tocan y dañan partes de los arrecifes. Unos restaurantes en el área de Cayo Coral tienen jaulas con animales del mar: tiburones y tortugas. Los turistas no le gusta este tratamiento de los animales y entonces los guías tienen que disculparlo. Si el propósito de las jaulas es mostrar los animales a los turistas, su existencia es ridícula porque cae mal a los turistas.

No hay ecoturismo

Generalmente, el turismo en Bocas del Toro le falta los elementos esenciales del ecoturismo. El turismo daña a su fuente, la naturaleza, por tanto no es sostenible y no educa a los participantes. El turismo aquí se parece al practicado en lugares como Cancún cuyo titulo es “sol, arena y olas.” Porque Bocas tiene los recursos como los arrecifes, debe promueve su unicidad y cambiar sus ofertas a algo que va a atraer turistas específicamente a Bocas. Además, si Bocas quiere continuar ofrecer turismo en el futuro necesita proteger su belleza y naturaleza; es decir, proteger su arrecifes.

Certificación de los guías

Un método potencial para obtener las metas de educación, ecoturismo y desarrollo sostenible es certificar los guías. Con una carrera de certificación, los guías pueden aprender los datos que los turistas quieren oír, saber como ofrecer tours de alta calidad y cuidar por el medio ambiente. Los turistas regresarán a usar los guías más de una vez porque están satisfechos. Los guías ganarán más dinero por más tours. El medio ambiente será protegido. Aunque hay mucho que hacer para cuidar los arrecifes y promover turismo sostenible, un programa de certificación puede ayudar a Bocas del Toro.

Introduction

The Bocas del Toro region was first seriously considered as a zone for tourism in 1992 when Panamá's tourism ministry, Instituto Panameño de Turismo (IPAT) included Isla Bastimentos and the associated marine park as part of a master plan for Panamá (IPAT 1992). The towns of Bocas del Toro and Bastimentos have since become the locations of major tourism operations. The real boom began in 1995 when the first few backpackers began to trek over from Costa Rica in 1995 in search of something new (Rodríguez 2005). Since then, numerous hotels, restaurants, bars and resorts, many foreign owned, have sprung up, and Bocas del Toro even has its own website, www.bocas.com (Rodríguez 2005). Most of this growth has been unplanned, and even though various groups with the support of international organizations have attempted to create overall tourism plans for Bocas del Toro, none has been seriously approved by the government or put into action (World Conservation Union 2002; Windevoxhel; PROMAR Bocas). The result is a collection of unplanned and unorganized tourism businesses with no real attempt for sustainability or cohesive tourist experience (Rodríguez 2005).

One of the Bocas del Toro draws, as proclaimed in guidebooks like the Lonely Planet, IPAT's tourism website and Bocas' own marketing, is the area's coral reefs, both in Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos and around the various islands (Louis and Dogget 2004; IPAT; Visual Adventures). These fragile reefs form part of a complex ecosystem, benefiting shorelines by breaking waves, providing a food source and making soft, white sand.

The purpose of this report is to examine in what way tourism in Bocas del Toro is affecting the surrounding coral reefs. If the tourism practices around Bocas del Toro truly are "ecotourism," as many constituents claim, than this tourism should use reefs in a way that is sustainable, not damaging, and promotes coral reef conservation and education.

Literature Review

Reef Basics

Coral reefs are remarkable organisms containing parts both plant and animal. The animal part, a polyp, traps even tinier animals, zooplankton, from the sea (Burke and Maidens 2004). The plant, zooxanthellae, lives embedded in the animal's tissue and nourishes its home with sugars it creates from photosynthesis (Burke and Maidens 2004). For a coral to be healthy, then, both food sources must be available. Seawater must be rich in zooplankton but clear enough for light to pass from the surface and illuminate zooxanthellae tissues. Water clouding due to sediment runoff or nutrient eutrophication can spell death for the fragile coral. Guzmán points to human population increases and development and the associated sedimentation, eutrophication and over-fishing as the current main causes of reef degradation (Guzmán 2003).

It is important to note that not all corals build reefs. Only a few special corals extract calcium from ocean water and use it to build strong calcium-carbonate skeletons. As the coral grows, it moves up the pipe-shell it has built, gradually building a larger structure. In a reef, most of the structure is dead, with only the top few centimeters containing the sensitive living tissue that constructs the reef. Thus, reefs grow very, very slowly and any disturbance can destroy thousands of years of growth. (Maté 2005; Burke and Maidens 2004)

While reefs are extraordinarily sensitive to environmental disturbances, they also play a vital role in the coastal ecosystem, providing food and homes for countless organisms; coral reefs are some of the most intricate and diverse ecosystems in the entire world. In addition to any aesthetic and holistic values, coral reefs also provide direct, quantifiable human benefits (Guzmán 2003; Maté 2005). Reefs act as breakers to slow ocean waves and protect against shore erosion. As a home to fish, mollusks and lobsters reefs provide valuable human food production. Reefs are the latest source of new and potential pharmaceuticals, including Prialt, a new painkiller; AZT, a medication for HIV; and a host of potential cures for cancer (Burke and Maidens 2004). And reefs are also an important site for tourism.

Current State of the Reefs in Bocas del Toro

Panamá is home to a number of communities of coral reefs on its Pacific and Caribbean sides, the most extensive found in the Kunayala and Bocas del Toro areas of the country. These Caribbean reefs account for 6% of the Caribbean reef area and are also the site of the greatest biodiversity (Burke and Maidens 2004: 39; Guzmán 2003). These reefs, while many are still areas of beauty and diversity, are under attack. The *Reefs at Risk: Caribbean* project found that 85% of the reefs in Panamá are threatened at high to very high levels, with the greatest threat coming from sedimentation (Burke and Maidens 2004). The extent to which these threats are currently damaging corals is a difficult question to answer and depends completely on consistent and complete reef surveys and analysis.

The coral reefs in Bocas del Toro have been well studied and documented since 1997, thanks especially to the presence of a branch of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI). STRI scientists, especially Héctor Guzmán and Carlos Guevara, have done extensive work cataloging, describing and measuring the coral reefs over many years (Guzmán 2003; Guzmán and Guevara 1998; Guzmán and Guevara 1999). Their information provides us with a clear picture of where the reefs are, what organisms live in each cluster, and how the reefs have changed in recent years.

The Bocas del Toro reefs have a surface area of approximately 87 km² and began forming about 7,000 years ago (Guzmán 2003). The reefs have been shown to exhibit live coral cover of up to 50%, approaching 90% in some areas, including healthy populations of several endangered species (Guzmán and Guevara 1998; Guzmán and Guevara 1999). However, these numbers declined by as much as 10% from 1999 to 2003 (Guzmán 2003).

Researchers continue to offer information on how the reefs in Bocas can and should be protected, although many scientists express frustration at the fact that, in their opinion, bureaucracy combined with lucrative foreign investments have thwarted conservation progress and little has changed (Guzmán 2003). Guzmán asserts that a “lack of protection” is the biggest threat to the reef and that an effective management plan is “a pressing and unavoidable need” (Guzmán 2003: 242).

Part of the original conservation plans for the Bocas del Toro region included the establishment of a national marine park in 1988 (Guzmán 2003). The park includes 13,226 ha. with 11,596 ha. of that area containing marine environments (Guzmán 2003). However, the best corals and areas of highest diversity are located outside the park (Guzmán and Guevara 1998; Guzmán and Guevara 1999). Thus, unless park boundaries are extended the most important points of reef conservation are not directly affected by park management or laws but rather by reef use outside of the park.

Small indigenous communities still practice line-and-hook fishing over the reefs in leaky, dug-out cayucas. While their use of reef fishes may border over-fishing (Guzmán 2003), the main users of the reef are a rapidly growing group of transient visitors: tourists.

This study cannot hope to examine in detail each of the reef structures and their relative health and degradation; that study would require huge amounts of expertise and long-term observation. Nor is work in this area necessary: researchers, including Guzmán and Guevara, have examined and continue to monitor reef status. What this study can provide is a detailed examination of how tourism is using the reefs in Bocas del Toro, and how this use is contributing, or not, to reef conservation.

What is tourism?

The study of tourism has been growing steadily since the 1970s and has gradually attained the status of a respected field of anthropological research (Stronza 2001). There now exists a body of research analyzing the inputs and outputs of tourism, though the body of work is so young many gaps exist in the current understanding (Stronza 2001).

General tourism is pretty easy to recognize and define: groups of people from “somewhere else” visiting a “destination” for whatever reasons. It's also easy to take note of the direct benefits a healthy coral reef can have on coastal tourism. Reefs break waves, protect shorelines and create calm swimming areas. Reefs provide a home for a wide variety of exciting creatures that attract visitor admiration and attention. Reefs provide *the* place for snorkeling and diving. And reefs create the soft white beaches themselves by providing the source of the sand. (Burke and Maiden 2004)

Tourism can provide *huge* economic benefits for host countries, communities and the travel industry. Over the last 50 years tourism has earned a spot among the top global industries, creating incomes and jobs for millions of people (Sweeting *et al.* 1999). Ceballos-Lascurain describes tourism as “the most important civil industry in the world” (1993: 12). In the Caribbean alone, tourism provides an income of US\$350-870 million a year, accounting for more than 30% of the GDP in 10 Caribbean countries (Burke and Maiden 2004: 5, 54). In Panamá, the tourism economy was valued at \$1,527 million in 2002, or 15% of the GDP, though those figures have doubtlessly increased (Burke and Maiden 2004: 68).

Traditional tourism, where masses of people flock to ecologically and economically wasteful hotels, learn nothing about the place or the culture, contribute little to the local economy and finally may end up harming the local environment and people, is losing social popularity. The fastest area of growth in the tourism industry is forms of “alternative tourism,” or tourism that is somehow supposed to be better than traditional forms of pleasure vacations. These types of “alternative tourism” have evaded clear distinctions and definitions, and those that are now well defined suffer the ploys of marketing: tourism operators with a keen eye on current fashions and trends are quick to affix any label they think will earn them more business.

Ecotourism and Conservation

The most popular catch-phrase that has emerged is “ecotourism.” The goals of ecotourism inspire the new ecologically-aware ideals of the modern century. As defined by the recently-organized Ecotourism Society, ecotourism is “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people” (Western 1993:

8). Brandon describes it as a subset of “nature-based” tourism, explaining the “small scale” of ecotourism is what sets it apart and allows the effects of ecotourism to be consistent with aims of conservation (1996: i, 15). Cater explores the problems of definition, referencing conflicting uses to describe ecology- and nature-based tourism, where tourism “may be ecologically based but not ecologically sound,” and a mythic form of tourism that is sustainable on all fronts: economically, ecologically and culturally (1994b: 4). While Cater decides ecotourism is at heart a “variant of alternative tourism,” she explains in most cases the actual situation is one of “environmental opportunism,” not conservation-minded development (1994b: 3-4). Carrier and Macleod go further, stating, “like conventional tourism, ecotourism is a form of environmental exploitation,” though they admit such exploitation is at times better than previous forms of environmentally destructive use and, with the right controls and management, can align with the goals of environmental protection (2005: 319). Buckley neatly sums up the four types of tourism given the “ecotourism” label: “1) nature-based tourism, 2) conservation-supporting tourism, 3) environmentally aware tourism and 4) sustainably-run tourism” (1994).

In terms of definition, the result is a rather confusing mess. What *is* ecotourism? Does it exist? Is true ecotourism even possible? This report will not attempt to answer that theoretical question, although the conflicting values and messages between various “eco” definitions will at times be called into question.

Ecotourism is often described along with a set of lofty goals, including environmental protection, support of local communities, social responsibility and long-term sustainability (Carrier and Macleod 2005; Brandon 1996; Western 1993; Blangy and Wood 1993). It is important to reiterate that these stated aims may not have anything to do with the goals of a particular business, no matter what their self-label. The Ecotourism Society and others stress that a number of tourism providers have slapped on the label without changing or considering their practices or environmental effects (Brandon 1996; Lindberg and Hawkins 1993).

A number of the businesses in Bocas del Toro mention eco-tourism or eco-something in their marketing materials. The Bocas del Toro website www.bocas.com describes the entire destination as “Ecotourism in this Panamá Caribbean Region” (Visual Adventures). Is all tourism in Bocas ecotourism? Are the self-proclaimed “ecohotels,” “ecotours,” or “eco-operators” working to protect the Bocas del Toro environment?

Regardless of whether or not tourism in Bocas del Toro deserves the prefix “eco,” conservation of the very nature on which tourism depends should be an economic priority. The tourism product is “presumably conditional” on the existence of the environment that enabled the product's development (Boon *et al.* 2002: 94). Brandon asserts that “industry groups should be in favor” of protectionist laws and environmental use fees if this money is used to directly “maintain the tourism product” (1996: 9). Such conservation action can be considered a “maintenance cost” for tourism (Carrier and Macleod 2005: 328). Unless this cost is paid, like an ill-maintained building the environment is likely to deteriorate to a state unusable by the tourism industry, putting ecologically-based tourism in danger of becoming a “self-destructive process” (Cater 1994a: 77). The *Reefs at Risk* report expects tourism revenues in the Caribbean to decline by 2-5% over the next 10 years, resulting in a loss of US\$100-300 due to coral reef damage (Burke and Maidens 2004: 58). As Holder stated, “Tourism has often been described as an industry that destroys the resources on which it depends for its very existence” (1996: 146).

On the flip side, tourism is also used by proponents as an economic justification for conservation, pointing to the economic benefits tourism can provide to local communities as well as directly to conservation efforts (Brandon 1996; Blangy and Wood 1993).

An analysis of the economic benefits and viability of tourism in Bocas del Toro is not within the scope of this report. What this report does attempt to cover is the current reef use of tourism ventures. Such use is directly related to reef conservation because without the reefs such tourism cannot and will not exist.

One of the major components of any ecologically-based tourism is education. Christie and Mason declare “education is at the heart of ecotourism” (2003: 4). On a small scale, this type of tourism will educate tourists about the environment they are in and perhaps the organisms and places they are visiting. On a grander scale, this tourism will convey positive conservation messages that tourists will take home with them, resulting in long-term behavior changes and perhaps even involvement in the active conservation community.

Current State of Tourism in Bocas del Toro

Bocas del Toro certainly offers a wide variety of nature-based tourism options. A brief look at the www.bocas.com website brings up information about surfing, kayaking, hiking, boating, snorkeling and diving. While many of the establishments declare themselves “ecofriendly,” or something comparable, the goals of many tourists may just be to have fun and enjoy the sun, sand and surf.

Rodríguez's investigation of tourism in Bocas del Toro found the situation to be rapidly increasing in a completely unorganized fashion. While Bocas claims to be working towards long-term sustainable development, in reality few projects have been completed, despite the extraordinary social, economic and environmental impacts tourism is causing in the area. While much tourism infrastructure exists and new businesses and buildings continue to open, the Instituto Panameño de Turismo (IPAT) has failed to put into place a strong, effective development plan. (Rodríguez 2005)

The focus of this project will be current status of reef-based tourism. How important are the reefs to tourism in Bocas? Is such tourism living up to the “eco” standards of conservation, sustainability and education?

Armstrong and Weiler: Analysis of Tour Guide Messages in Australia

In 2002 Armstrong and Weiler completed a year-long groundbreaking study on the messages delivered by tour guides in the national parks managed by Parks Victoria in Victoria, Australia. Armstrong and Weiler recognized that “one of the essential and defining characteristics of ecotourism is that it raises awareness of the environment and its natural and cultural values,” clarifying that, by definition, ecotourism “has an educational or learning component” (2002: 105). Many tourists seek out and rely on tour guides to provide this sort of information. This “face-to-face interpretation” can convey conservation goals and ecotourism ideals to tourists (Armstrong and Weiler 2002: 105).

This may be especially important in marine environments like Bocas del Toro where tourists can't just walk across the water to enjoy the majority of the exciting nature areas and are forced instead to charter a boat or attend a guided tour. While Armstrong and

Weiler's study focused on land-based resources, their insights into guided tours are generalized and therefore still applicable to the Bocas del Toro situation.

Armstrong and Weiler noted past tourism and education research focused on what tourists thought they learned as well attempted methods of measuring what they actually learned. No work focused on a source that was providing a potential source of learning: tour guides. Armstrong and Weiler analyzed the goals of the Parks Victoria protected areas, then proceeded to engage in participant observation and follow tours to see if tour guides were actually delivering the environmental conservation messages Parks Victoria wanted tourists to hear. Armstrong and Weiler also tested to see if these messages were received by distributing surveys to tourists at the end of tours which asked them to identify "key messages" given during the tour. Armstrong and Weiler found that the vast majority of messages delivered by the tour guides was "unrelated" to the goals of the park (2002: 111). Thus, tourism in Parks Victoria failed to exploit the full potential of conservation-related visitor education.

Bocas del Toro, besides being a marine environment, also differs from the Parks Victoria situation in that the majority of tourism happens *outside* of the protected area. (World Conservation Union 2002). However, the nature of the area restricts tourists to tour-based exploration, perhaps making tour guiding even more important to the region's tourism. Examining the messages given by guides on these tours can provide a good measure of the amount of environmental conservation information visitors receive, and thus how well tourism in Bocas is living up to the ecotourism standards of education.

Relating Tourism and Conservation in Bocas del Toro

Tourism in Bocas del Toro is centered around the area's natural beauty: clear, turquoise waters sheltering soft, sandy beaches hidden by thick jungle and underwater fish-gems darting amongst coral castles. Without clear water, clean beaches and protected islands tourism in Bocas del Toro would not exist. At this point in time, were the tourist industry to collapse, many residents would lose their jobs and Bocas would be filled with the empty shells of hotel and restaurants that used to serve the needs of tourists. Economically, Bocas needs to maintain its coral reefs for the survival and improvement of its tourism industry.

Many groups have worked together to examine the status of tourism in Bocas and many people have expressed the pressing need to create and execute a comprehensive development-conservation plan; this work does not need to be repeated (Guzmán 2003; PROMAR Bocas; Rodríguez 2005; Windevoxhel; World Conservation Union 2002). What would benefit Bocas right now is an examination of the current coral reef-related tourism practices.

What this study attempts to explore is reef-specific tourism. How much of the tourism in Bocas is even reef-related? Understanding this question will provide information on how much economic and tourist-imposed incentive there is to maintain reefs in good condition. What specific practices are damaging reefs? Such activities can be highlighted and potentially changed. What are tour guides saying about reefs? Are they promoting conservation? Are tourists listening? Do they even care?

This project aims to explore the answers to these questions in order to help provide information on how Bocas del Toro can work to conserve its fragile reef ecosystems.

Research Question

Is the relationship between tourism and coral reefs in Bocas del Toro one of exploitation or conservation?

Objectives

To analyze the relationship between tourism and coral reef conservation in Bocas del Toro.

- ❖ Determine to what extent tourism in Bocas del Toro is specifically coral-reef related.
- ❖ Identify potentially coral-damaging practices and activities associated with such tourism.
- ❖ Examine tour guiding practices in Bocas del Toro as a method of investigating a potential conservation education opportunity. Specifically,
 - Observe whether or not tour guides deliver conservation-related messages and
 - Note whether tourists listen to and remember these key points.
- ❖ Generate specific, practical suggestions for how tourism in Bocas del Toro can further promote coral reef conservation in the area.

Methods

I used a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods and research styles to achieve the research objectives and answer the research question. Walle has criticized past tourism research for its overbearing emphasis on quantitative methods and results, to the exclusion of researcher insight and flexibility (1997). He explains that while surveys and quantitative methods provide valid, reproducible data, sole use of such methods may make it impossible to “examine 'reality' in all its complexity,” and that tourism researchers should use methods like participant observation to ensure local voices are heard (1997: 535).

Bernard has defined a number of anthropological methods, and I utilized his style of participant observation (1995). He explains that participant observation is what allows a researcher to employ other data collection methods of research and obtain valid data. Other methods I engaged in included observation, natural conversations, various kinds of interviews and surveys.

I inserted myself into the tourism world, staying at a variety of hotels, talking with and joining tourists engaging in their normal activities. I chatted with tourists preparing meals in hostel kitchens, wandered with them while they decided what to do with their days and joined them for lunch at local cafés.

I also made a strong effort to communicate with the local population, asking questions as they worked at tourism counters, accompanying them as they rounded up tourists for tours, chatting on the beach while tourists bathed, helping to put away lifejackets after a boat tour, relaxing with them in the park after a long day’s work. Through the rapport I developed I was invited to tourism meetings and given permission to follow tours.

Throughout the experience, I was very careful to always explain from the outset my role as a researcher and the purpose of my time in Bocas, and I respected everyone’s rights not to have their name included in the data collected, though no one refused to talk with me or be

part of the study. In fact, most were intrigued by my study and immediately volunteered a wealth of information. Many tourism stakeholders were eager to share their opinions and offered to show me the elements of tourism in Bocas.

During my project I elected specific times to follow the research plan outlined by Armstrong and Weiler for my investigation of tour guides in Bocas (2002). I accompanied 7 tours in all. I selected a variety of tour operators: hotel-based, SCUBA, tour-operating businesses and freelance members of the local boating organization. The hotel-based tour guides were dependable freelance operators with an agreement with hotels to entertain their clients, but when numbers were low they would solicit tourists on the streets.

A participant observer, I listened to the tours, engaged tourists in conversation, but attempted to remain unobtrusive and not to influence the tour or guide-provided information in any way. Any questions I had for guides I saved for interviews (formal and informal) so as not to affect the messages they elected to communicate to the tourists on their tour. At the end of the tour, I distributed a bilingual Spanish-English survey to tour participants, again following Armstrong and Weiler's outline (2002). This survey included some basic demographic information followed by a five-point Likert-type scale which measured the importance of 8 motivations. The survey concluded with the open ended question: "What two key messages do you feel you received from the tour?" Survey participants were given the option to receive study results via e-mail.

The study was limited by time constraints (only two weeks) and my ability to attend only one tour each day.

Results

Tourism in Bocas

Bocas del Toro is flooded by a constant flux of tourists. Some locals estimate that residents account for only 50% of the people on the island of Colón at any given time. This balance has a huge effect on the businesses and general layout of the town. The main "commercial district" is found along two streets, each lined with numerous hotels, restaurants, supermarkets, and internet cafés as well as infrastructure like the police station, firehouse, Instituto Panameño de Turismo (IPAT), Autoridad Nacional Medio Ambiente (ANAM), post office and bank. Most of the tourism and most of the tourists are concentrated in this area. The remaining streets are lined with residential houses and cheaper, more local-oriented *refresquerías* and small shops. Thus, tourists are housed close to all the amenities and services they may need during their stay.

Locals also stress the distinctions between two different kinds of tourism: domestic (*nacional*) and international (*extranjero*). In their minds, these two classes of people have very different wants and needs. Panamanians travel up from the capital city to spend holidays relaxing while foreigners breeze through on their Central American tours. Whether or not these two sets of tourists are actually that different, they at least look different to the locals. Many Bocatoreños acted pleasantly surprised to talk to anyone with even a basic grasp of Spanish; a few were shocked to find I could actually carry on a real conversation in Spanish. This may be an indication that most visitors to Bocas, at least of the international variety, don't speak Spanish.

Many Bocatoreños seemed to imply that they considered only international tourists to be “real” tourists when discussing tourism. I only twice encountered Panamanians visiting another part of their country for pleasure during my study though a number were in Bocas del Toro for business purposes. It was these international pleasure travelers who engaged in most of the “tourism” activities investigated in this study.

Tourist Attributes

The majority of tourists I talked with said they were passing through Bocas as part of a Costa Rican or Central American tour. One explained he was traveling around Costa Rica before flying out of Panama City; faced with two main options, inland in the west (David) and near the water in the east (Bocas), he said, “You don't want to go through David.” According to hotel owner Señor José “Tito” Thomas, Costa Rican travel agencies themselves are promoting Bocas by including the islands as part of their packaged tours. During my stay in Bocas, a group of Ticos from the Osa Peninsula as well as representatives from the Taca Airlines contingent in Costa Rica traveled to Bocas to talk with Bocatoreños about working together to promote each other's tourism products. Bocas' promotion may be even more international: a group of Spanish tourists explained that their travel agent from Madrid included Bocas as part of their Costa Rican package.

In general, most of the younger (19-29) tourists I talked with were not from the States, but instead Holland, Israel and Canada. In contrast, most of the older (30+) tourists were from the United States, with the frequency of other nationalities decreasing with age. Señor Jaime Jaramillo estimates that 80% of the visitors to his dive shop are from the United States or Europe. Tourists of all ages generally appeared to be in fit condition and at least moderately well-off for their age group. According to Señor Thomas, the budget backpackers that initiated the tourism boom in Bocas no longer exist. He says current tourists may wear backpacks, but they come with credit cards and have no qualms about spending \$50 a night on a hotel room – provided it includes air conditioning, hot water and a cushy bed.

Why Tourists Come to Bocas

As stated above, a number of tourists pass through Bocas because it makes a “convenient” stop between southern Costa Rica and Panama City. Many also expressed a desire for something “different” and “new.” Certainly IPAT is marketing Panama as an “undiscovered” tropical paradise – “Panama: the path less traveled” in English or “Panamá: la ruta para descubrir” (the route of discovery) in Spanish – perhaps these sentiments are the result of successful marketing strategy. Other tourists expressed a desire to explore a different “culture,” but not the indigenous one that is often marketed. Tourists come looking for a taste of Caribbean culture, especially in contrast to the places they visit in Costa Rica. One boat captain explained the elements of Bocatoreño culture she thinks tourists come to see: the guari guari language (a mixture of English, Spanish and French), old wooden houses, brightly-colored dresses, food like coconut rice and a slow-paced lifestyle. Another tourist described the concern she felt about traveling to a country she thought was more “dangerous” than Costa Rica, but was pleasantly surprised to find a laid-back and tranquil community.

A number of tourists in their twenties come to Bocas for one main reason: to surf. The second priority of some of these visitors is to drink and party. These tourists tend to spend their days surfing with the locals at a number of popular boat-accessible beaches and their

nights drinking at bars like La Iguana Surf Club or dancing at Barco Hundido (The Sunken Ship). One local recounted her grievances towards rowdy, drunken young tourists who break the tranquility of the night with their yelling and fighting.

Among the older crowd of tourists, many are on a scouting mission for potential retirement locations. Señor Ángel González described construction of retiree homes as type of the development with the most impact on Bocas right now. One Northamerican in his early 40s explained he came to Bocas *specifically* because he was interested in buying land for his future retirement.

None of the tourists said they traveled to Bocas especially for the coral reefs, although one enthusiast described diving as one of his “main goals,” while on the island.

Coral Reef-Based Tourism

While tourists may not be traveling to Bocas specifically to see the reefs, locals estimate that nearly all engage in some sort of reef-based tourism. There are two main types of reef tourism: snorkeling and SCUBA diving. Diving tourists are mostly from Europe and the United States – one boat captain explained that Panamanians prefer to snorkel.

A number of tourists, especially divers, expressed disappointment at the reefs they found in Bocas. Specifically, they noted the lack of brightly colored fish characteristic of other reef sites around the globe, like Australia. Though the dive shops are well aware of the difference between Bocas’ reefs and other reefs, if the tourists were informed beforehand they did not appear to understand what “more corals and less fish” really means. Diving in Bocas is very susceptible to water clouding due to heavy rains, markedly affecting the diving experience and restricting the use of a number of the best dive sites to periods of higher water clarity. Some divers said they would definitely not return to Bocas to dive again, although they mentioned they might come back for some of the other experiences Bocas offers.

Though a number of alternatives are promoted via signs and publications, most reefs tourism takes place on a well-worn route (\$5-17 plus lunch for snorkelers, \$60 plus lunch for divers). At 9:30 tourists set off from Bocas del Toro for Dolphin Bay. There, boats drive in circles to entice playful bottle-nosed dolphins to jump and flip in the wake. After about half an hour, the boats continue on to Coral Key. Tourists are given the opportunity to explore some of the local reefs and eat at one of the three seafood restaurants over the water (the guide selects which restaurant by driving the tourists to one location or another). An hour or two later tourists head off to Isla Bastimentos. A 7 minute walk on an impeccably maintained private path brings them to Red Frog Beach where they can play in the surf, receive a beach-side massage or relax in the sun with a post-meal nap. The final stop is Hospital Point where corals grow on an underwater wall of Isla Solarte. Divers engage in two one-tank dives in Coral Key and Hospital Point while snorkelers paddle around one or two surface locations at the Key and the shoreline at the Point. Both types of tours return between 4 and 5, giving tourists plenty of time to shower and head out to dinner. Though this tour passes through and around Parque Nacional Marino Isla Bastimentos, it does not utilize any sites located in the park. In fact, even though we crossed park borders, out of all of the tours I followed the park was mentioned only once.

Alternatives to this one tour are rarely actually offered and marine tours do not emphasize the park, though divers have more options to see more reefs. For about \$10 less they can forgo the grand tour and spend a few hours diving over 2 reefs in any of 15 different dive

sites. While divers are more likely to engage in multi-day reef tourism, most tourists see all the close, main sights in one day, and rarely return for another look.

Some guides and boat drivers try to encourage tours to some of the farther sights because a longer distance means they can charge a higher ticket price. However, the high price of gas makes the trips unfeasible if fewer than 5 people commit to the journey. Most established guides find they are ensured at least a few tourists every day if they stick to the standard route.

The lack of variety is very apparent to those who work in and study the tourism in Bocas del Toro (Rodríguez 2005; Thomas, personal interview; A. González, personal interview; Scanto 2005). Tourists quickly exhaust their options and leave after only a few days. One tourist, while waiting to see if he could go diving, told me he had planned to stay a week but was going to leave earlier if he couldn't find something to do.

IPAT has launched a national campaign encouraging diversification of the services and options available to tourists (Scanto 2005). The IPAT team has examined the area around Bocas del Toro and criticized the fact only one route is currently in use. Their research concluded Bocas' draw was not its beaches but its reefs: the corals and coral-sand islands differentiate Bocas from comparable sites in Costa Rica. They asserted that, based on the number of businesses in operation, Bocas sells less “sun, sand and surf” and more “dive and snorkel” tourism. At an open presentation directed towards tourism business owners in Bocas, IPAT suggested a number of ideas for new, more specific tours that guides in Bocas could offer. They emphasized thematic tours using all nature sites that could be potentially interesting for tourists (Scanto 2005; Portugal 2005; Caballero 2005). Because of their “dive and snorkel” conclusion, the majority of these alternative routes include coral reef viewing.

Community leaders like Señor Thomas support the movement to diversify tourism offerings in Bocas del Toro, but he doesn't see the movement happening any time soon. In his opinion, no one wants to complicate things by trying something new.

One tour guide and self-described student of tourism Bocas explained he thought that tourism in Bocas needed diversify, but in a completely different direction. In his opinion, tourists were looking for the comforts of home. To attract more visitors, Bocas needs to build movie theaters, open familiar restaurants like McDonald's, and clean up the town so that everything looks like a 5 star resort. The standard attractions found at resorts in other places will encourage tourists to stay longer. His main concern for the town is that unemployment is contributing to increased poverty and decreased infrastructure, but if Bocas could attract more tourists the increase in jobs would benefit the quality of life for residents. His thoughts included no mention of coral reefs, nor are they in line with the ideals of ecotourism. By supporting generalization and mass-marketing options, his development plan for Bocas del Toro does not emphasize the unique aspects of the location that work to draw tourists in to one specific destination over another potential beach resort.

Reef Conservation Efforts

Carrier and Macleod describe SCUBA divers as the “quintessential marine ecotourists,” for their low-impact use of reefs and interest in pristine, high-quality ecosystems (2005: 321). No wonder, then that both dive shops engage in conspicuous conservation efforts, including posters explaining ecotourism and eco-operator values and information about how tourists can protect reefs.

The two dive shops in Bocas both engage in specific reef conservation efforts. Both are associated with the PADI SCUBA diving organization, and are thus affiliated with Project AWARE, a conservation effort focusing on public awareness and education. The Bocas dive shops fulfill their Project AWARE commitments with underwater and beach clean-ups, sending interested parties into the relatively shallow waters along the Bocas waterfront to remove trash.

One dive shop is helping to found Oceanpulse, a self-described “eco-tourism venture” focusing on low diver numbers and reef tourism that supports marine conservation (Oceanpulse). The shop also participates in Reefcheck, an online coral reef monitoring database sustained by volunteer data collection efforts.

The two dive shops have also created a system of buoys to limit anchoring on the reefs and make a conscious effort to drop the anchor over sand where there are no buoys.

No other coral reef conservation efforts were observed *within the tourism sector*, though a number of interested bodies work with coral reef investigation and conservation, namely the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute: Bocas del Toro (STRI Bocas).

Tour Guides and Boat Drivers

From my arrival in Bocas, I was warned by people outside the tour guiding business that proper tour guides don't exist. Boat drivers hire out their crafts to tourists and offer a ride on the standard tour route, but do not offer true “guiding” – a lone boat driver cannot and should not be guiding tourists while actually driving the boat. A true tour should include a captain who drives the boat and a guide who talks to tourists and offers information.

However, I think it is important to note that throughout my research, these people referred to themselves as tour guides and felt themselves to be fulfilling that role. All but one of the tours I followed included two staff on the boat, although I observed the frequency of one-man boats to be much higher.

In this respect, divers are usually at an advantage. Dive shops always send out a divemaster, who will lead tourists on their dives, and a captain who looks after the boat while the divers are underwater.

That said, most of the guides on the tours I followed offered minimal explanation of what was going on, much less interesting anecdotes or information about the nature surrounding the boat. Tourists were usually, but not always, told where the boat was taking them, and sometimes informed about how long they would stay and where they would be heading next. A general purpose was usually given – “to see the dolphins,” “to eat,” “to snorkel on the reefs over there,” - but more detailed information was almost never provided. Most guides would answer tourist questions, but would stop after a basic gloss and not delve any deeper. An example exchange might proceed like this:

Tourist: Are the dolphins always here?

Standard guide: Yes, they live here because there are lots of jellyfish.

Less common answer: Yes, the dolphins live here because there are a lot of jelly fish and sardines. Sometimes they leave to find other food sources, but they always return here to sleep, and they breed here, too.

Tourists often expressed the desire to learn more. As I always identified myself as a student “studying tourism of the coral reefs” at the beginning of all tours, sometimes tourists

would, unprompted, approach me with their opinions of the tour. Most tourists were happy, but almost all expressed a desire to receive more information.

The majority of tour guides and boat drivers in the Bocas area are unregistered with the IPAT, and this fact is known and worrisome to a number of tourism stakeholders (Rodríguez 2005; Scanto 2005). Panamanians who move to Bocas, buy a boat and offer tours may be unqualified to give them, resulting in lower-quality tours. Without guide training or a published manual for guides, these boat drivers don't know the information that tourists want to hear or how to lead dynamic, informative tours. Again, divers are likely to receive better tours: their guides are all certified divemasters, who at least have experience and training in underwater marine life.

Data: Tour Guide Messages

Tour guide messages in the categories delineated by Armstrong and Weiler (2002) were noted and recorded. However, so few messages in these categories were delivered that the data is not worth reporting. In fact, little information of any kind at all was delivered. Most messages were information about what we were going on, for example, "This is Coral Cay. We'll stop here for about 2 hours." A few messages explaining the purpose of the visit were delivered, "Now we're going to walk to Red Frog Beach. Along the way we'll look for the little red frogs." Whereas Armstrong and Weiler reported that in their study "the vast majority of content was unrelated to any of the seven environmental message categories," in Bocas del Toro there is a serious lack of any content at all.

Perhaps due to the lack of message communication, the "key messages" survey question received little response. Although fatigue or disinterest may have contributed to survey respondents not responding to the final question, many verbally told me they didn't respond because they didn't feel they received any key message. One survey respondent even wrote, "Not much of a message" and another "it wasn't really an educational tour." Some responses had nothing to do with tour guide-delivered messages and seemed aimed towards an attempt to give answers respondents thought a conservationist would want to hear: "Bocas has a long way to go towards eco-friendly diving and responsible reef management," and "pollution and trash disposal needs to be improved so that the ocean doesn't get destroyed." As in Armstrong and Weiler's study, I would conclude the dearth of response "suggests a lack of emphasis on take-home messages of any kind" (2002: 114).

Data: Visitor Motivations

The collected data demonstrated a number of clear trends (Figure 1).

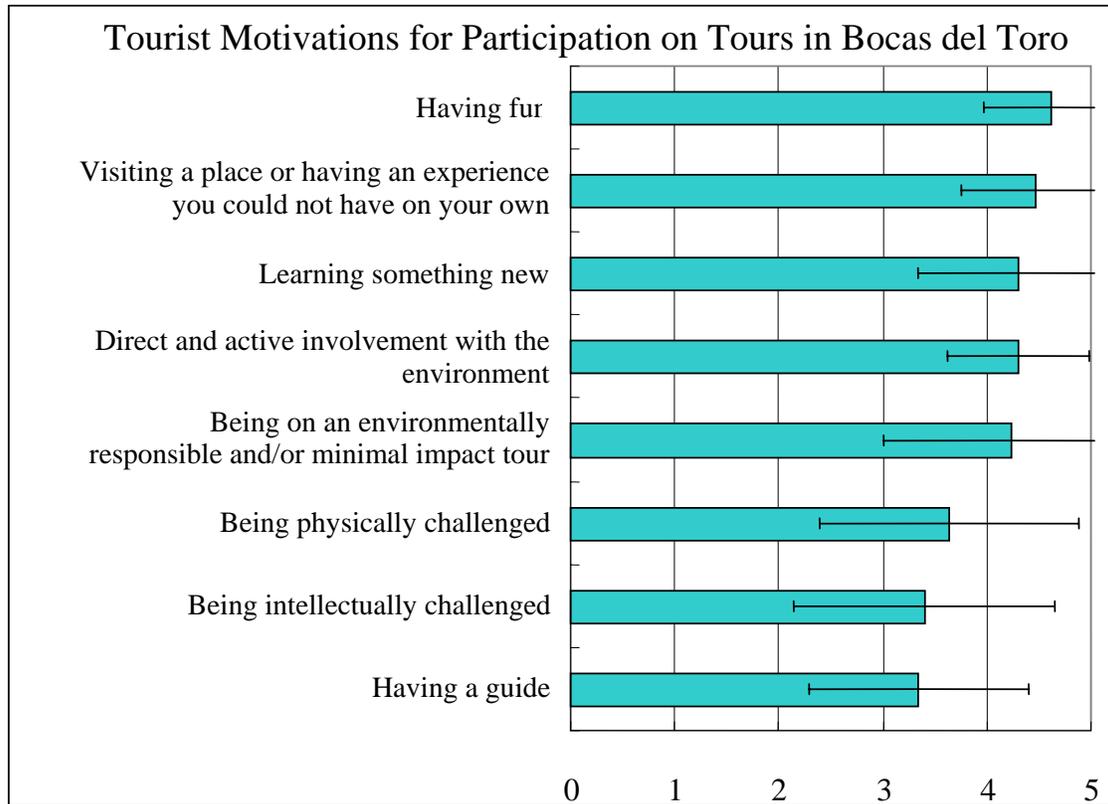


Figure 1: Relative importance of visitor motivations to participate on a tour. Data was collected via a Likert-type survey prompting visitor motivations from "not at all important" (a value of 1) to "very important" (a value of 5). The motivation of "neutral" was given the value of 3. Standard deviation is shown by the y-bars on the graph.

Data appeared to be separated into two separate chunks, as was the data for Armstrong and Weiler. One set of data is around the 4-5 level, showing a clear importance ascribed to these motivations. The other set of data is closer to 3, meaning more tourists chose "neutral" or lower; these three motivations are most likely neither important nor unimportant to tourists or the survey participants had no opinion in this area.

"Having fun" was the clear winner for visitor motivations. "Visiting a place or having an experience you could not have on your own" came in second, potentially because tourists cannot visit these places on their own; at the very least they would need to rent a boat and driver. "Having a guide" was least important motivation, perhaps because these tourists were not joining the tours because of the guide but, again, because they simply wouldn't be able to visit these locations on their own. Because surveys were given to tourists at the end of their tour, the low scores of these motivations may also mark a level of dissatisfaction with the amount of guiding and information provided, as tourists orally communicated to me.

It is interesting to note the relatively mediocre score of "learn something new," though I was repeatedly told by tourists they wished they were receiving more information. This might be an indication that, although tourists do not embark on these journeys for an "intellectual challenge" (in second-to-last place), they do expect to receive general information about where they are and what they are seeing. This is consistent with other research indicating

that, while tourists often do not actually improve their knowledge or learn anything on educational tour, providing tourists with information increases their enjoyment of a tour and makes them *believe* they learned something.

When the data is separated into SCUBA diver respondents and other respondents, a few shifts appear (Figure 2).

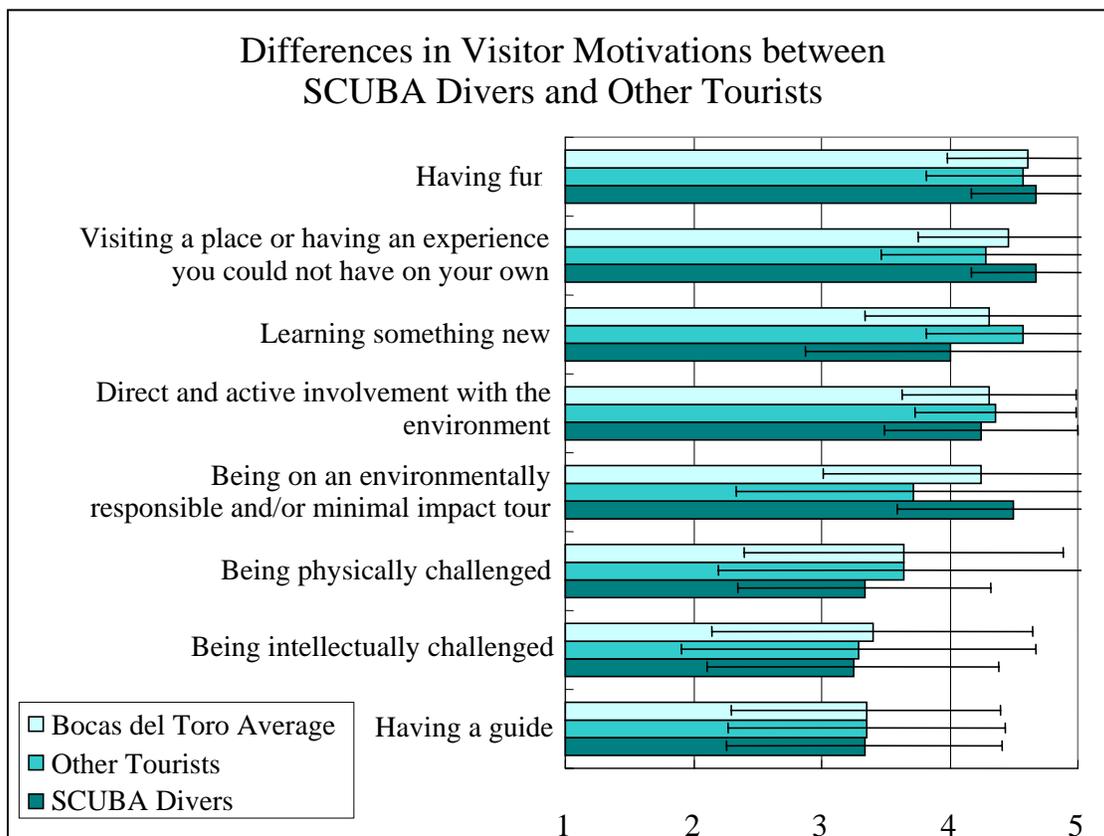


Figure 2: Differences in Motivations between SCUBA Divers and other tourists. Data was collected via a Likert-type survey prompting visitor motivations from "not at all important" (a value of 1) to "very important" (a value of 5). The motivation of "neutral" was given the value of 3. Standard deviation is shown by the y-bars on the graph.

Though high standard deviation ascribes little statistical value to these trends, SCUBA divers seem to show a greater interest in environmental responsibility, a finding in line with the conservation efforts of organizations like PADI and Project AWARE. They also show a slightly increased desire to have an experience they could not have on their own, most likely because dive shops provide the equipment and expertise necessary for diving; without guided tours these tourists would not be able to dive at all.

Reef-Damaging Behaviors

All potentially reef-damaging behaviors I observed were behaviors of which the tourism community is very conscious. For example, a number of boats dropped their anchors near reefs. The dive shops especially have initiated an effort to install buoys to prevent damage to reefs by anchors, but this work is not complete. In the non-dock anchoring sites, I only

observed buoy anchoring twice. Elsewhere anchors were dropped over sand, but I observed (via snorkeling) they still tended to drag a bit before catching onto the edge of a coral cluster. While this is less damaging than anchoring right on top the best reef heads, anchor chains still rub against a portion of the coral. With multiple visitors per day, every day, combined with the slow growth and recovery rates of the reefs, this damage can quickly add up. However, work is being done in this area.

Most tourists appeared to be intrinsically careful about disturbing the reef area, although most tourists were never given any instructions regarding touching corals or removing animals. (One guide said it may be illegal to remove animals, but he “wouldn't tell anyone,” if someone decided to take a souvenir.) This basic caution takes less than a minute to convey and should be explained to all tourists.

Two restaurants have large reef animals in wooden-stake cages: a sea turtle and a number of nurse sharks. The cages are topless, built by placing sticks closely together in a rectangle. From the level of the docks, tourists can look down and see the animals. I am not really sure why these animals are there. Tour guides immediately started apologizing for the animals' containment upon arrival at the restaurant locations, “Don't worry, they'll be released soon;” “They're only kept for a few days and then set free.” Tourists were dismayed upon sight of the creatures: “That's so sad!” “Oh! What are they going to do to them? Are they going to eat them?” Guides explained the animals were put there so that the tourists could see them, they were fed by the management, and would be released unharmed soon – they would *not* be eaten or hurt. If the true purpose is just to show these animals to the tourists, then their containment really makes no sense. While they did not get angry or protests, the tourists did *not* like seeing these large animals contained in small cages. Ironically, guides seem to understand this and are ready with forgiving explanations. Whether or not this practice is illegal, it is *not* beneficial to the tourists, the animals, or the establishments and should be discontinued.

Discussion

A Lack of Reef-Based Tourism

Admittedly, my research only covered a few tours over the course of about 2 weeks. However, overall tourism in Bocas del Toro does not currently appear to be coral-reef based, although community leaders, published marketing materials, the IPAT and others strongly believe reefs are key to Bocas' tourism. Most of the tourists encountered in my research did not travel to Bocas specifically to see the reefs, and most did not explore the reefs for more than one day – they only attended the standard-route tour. Perhaps tourism *appears* to be more coral-reef based because more businesses make more money off of such ventures. For example, IPAT's tourism analysis was based on the *number* of businesses offering an activity. Tourists looking for a place to surf or relax on the sand merely charter a boat to take them to the best beaches, forgoing the price of a tour or a guide. Because many of their boat drivers are unregistered, this type of tourism remains unregistered as well and therefore unaccounted for in studies like IPAT's.

Few fish and declining live coral coverage contribute to what looks to tourists like low-quality reefs, even though the reefs are actually home to incredible species diversity and large populations of important and endangered species (Guzmán 2003). However, tourists are just not informed of the types of organisms they are likely to see *before* they

don their mask and fins. If Bocas wants to continue to promote coral-reef tourism, an especially swift and effective effort is needed to conserve what they have right now. In terms of tourist expectations, any decrease in fish populations or moderate coral damage may completely destroy reef-based tourism. From a conservationist perspective, too much damage has already been done to the area's diversity and animal populations, but if locals are looking for economic incentive, the end of reef tourism should prove sufficient (Guzmán 2003).

“Sun, sand and surf” tourism, exactly what the IPAT research team explained is not the emphasis in Bocas, appears to be taking a stronger hold in the region. As Bocas becomes a more popular tourist destination, more and richer tourists are visiting the area. While they may be arriving for the “posh” international opinion of a “pristine” and “recently discovered” vacation destination, they bring with them a different set of standards and wants. Exactly what these tourists are looking for is hard to pinpoint, but it may not be reefs.

IPAT is sticking to the hands-off role local tourism stakeholders say it usually employs. While offering a number of suggestions for broadening the activities offered to tourists, IPAT is not working to directly support such ventures. Their recommendations that certain aspects should be done or changed lack the important “someone” to do them, monitor progress or make sure they get done. Even if IPAT's suggestions are insightful or potentially important, they are only being communicated to a very small group of people that attend their seminars. Insufficient interest or apathy on the part of residents in Bocas may be the root cause for low attendance at IPAT meetings or lack of follow-through, but IPAT is not utilizing the involved, managerial role that make may all the difference to a successful, coordinated tourism effort in Bocas.

Sun, Sand and Surf Tourism in Disguise

Low tourist emphasis on reefs could spell complete disaster for any attempt to tie conservation with tourism – that is, an attempt to promote “ecotourism.” Tourists seem to be attracted by the fashionable term, but if they are not actually arriving with ecotourist goals it will not happen in Bocas. The market responds to consumer desires, and current consumer desires are not conservation-minded activities. True, a number of divers express disappointment with the status of the coral reefs, but these visitors will simply leave, never return, and not have any net effect on tourism in Bocas – sun, sand and surf lovers will fill the vacancy.

Even the current forms of reef tourism have a remarkably sun-sand-and-surf-like character. For example, Coral Cay, the major destination of the standard reef tour. Tourists arrive at the full-service bar and café, spend a short amount of time fluttering over the reefs, then climb out of the water to lie on the wooden deck in bikinis and shorts, sip piña coladas and enjoy a rather pricey lunch. The activity has all the trappings of beach tourism, just without the actual beach. Most tourists take little interest in the fish, perhaps throwing crushed crackers or leftover rice to attract a school, and preferring instead to soak up the sun. Some never step foot in the water at all.

This is the major coral-based activity, perhaps the activity in which the greatest numbers of tourists participate, in what many describe as an ecotourism destination. Yet it does not fulfill any of the ecotourism requirements. It neither promotes conservation, provides

education about the environment, nor will it be sustainable if tourists trample reefs or overfeed select fish with processed Ritz crackers.

The majority of tourism in Bocas, then, appears to be “sand, sun and surf” tourism *disguised* as “ecotourism.” The “eco-friendly” label appeals to both tourists and operators, but only happens in very few instances. The actual situation is more in line with Cater's idea of “environmental opportunism,” and may even be considered Carrier and Mcleod's “environmental exploitation”(Cater 1994b: 3-4, Carrier and Mcleod 2005: 319).

It is important to note that ecotourism does not just signify “rustic,” though many such low-amenity hotels in the area seem to imply it does. Lack of electricity, use of rainwater and a remote location does not automatically create the environmentally-aware or sustainable business that ecotourism should embody.

If any sector of tourism in Bocas it to be considered ecotourism, the dive shops come closest. Through their public awareness initiative and physical effort to protect the reefs, the dive shops are approaching the ideals of ecotourism.

Ironically, the Bocas del Toro region should not be drifting towards sand, sun and surf tourism but instead be promoting the unique resources it has to offer, reefs among them. Tourists are drawn to Bocas over other potential destinations because of its distinctive aspects. If the focus of tourism in Bocas shifts to beaches and sun, Bocas will lose a significant competitive advantage.

Division between Conservation and Tourism

Throughout my research, I found an interesting assumption and disconnect in the minds of the local population. I was very careful to neutrally explain I was studying “tourism of the coral reefs,” but from that statement almost everyone *assumed* I was studying reef conservation. More than once I was initially told by a potential source that he or she couldn't offer me information because they weren't involved in research and conservation – I was better off talking to the scientists at STRI Bocas. I had to emphasize that my work was on tourism, that as a tourism worker such information as their activities and opinions of tourism were valuable to me. Even so, during a number of interviews informants continued to drift from my questions and lean towards offering what they thought I wanted to hear: conservation-positive messages.

These tourism stakeholders seemed to draw strict line between those involved in reef tourism and those involved in reef conservation. However, one of the main ecotourism theories and goals is that it reinforces or provides economic justification for conservation (Brandon 1996; Blangy and Wood 1993). As such, hotel owners, tour guides and boat drivers would all be contributors and stakeholders in the conservation and environmental protection effort. Perhaps this disconnect is one reason ecotourism does not appear to be successful or even in existence in Bocas del Toro.

The Answer: Education?

A solution, or at least a step, towards improving both tourism and conservation in Bocas may lie in education. Local tourism stakeholders could benefit from an increased understanding of what role they play in the ideals of ecotourism and conservation. Efforts to educate residents about specific conservation activities, dos and don'ts are already underway, but a coinciding effort to teach tourism workers that their decisions and actions

are actually tied to such ecotourism goals as long-term sustainability and cultural preservation may prove helpful.

Before turning tourism workers into conservationists, they need to be convinced that conservation is necessary. The ultimate quandary at the heart of the global conservation issue, this is a problem conservationists all over the world are working to correct, though they are being faced with constant, long-term failure as people favor small short-term gains over long-term value and sustainability (Roy 2005).

In line with the idea that “education is at the heart of ecotourism” convincing tourists of the importance of conservation may prove a better answer, especially in the short term (Christie and Mason 2003: 4). My research has shown that tourists really are interested in receiving more, more detailed information on their tours.

What needs to happen is a region-wide tour guide education program. Educated tour guides will be able to provide the higher-quality experience that tourists want. Tour guides need to learn about the Bocas area, its history, the local species and ecosystem interactions. By offering longer, more detailed explanations of observed wildlife, guides will be able to offer longer tours with more in-depth visits to fewer locations. Higher satisfaction with the guides and the tour means tourists will return to the same guide the next day to learn more about somewhere else. Guides will receive great economic benefits from repeat customers, and may be able to charge more for higher-quality tours. It’s a win-win situation: tourists are happy and learn, guides run successful enterprises.

Tour Guide Certification Program

This type of education objective could take the form of a certification program. Such a tour guide course would need to be short and resource un-intensive – a series of free evenings of seminar-like presentations at the IPAT may be enough. For such a program to be truly successful, it needs to be marketable. “Certified” guides, after completing the basic course, would need to be given flashy badges and boat placards. Such guides could then prove their worth to the tourists they approach on the streets of Bocas by demonstrating they offer more than just a boat ride.

Tourists would also need to be educated about the guide program. Banners and posters recommending tourists patronize only certified guides would create tourist incentive and bring more business to those tour companies, organizations and individuals that chose to offer high-quality, certified tours.

If the initial steps are successful, a tiered program might engender competition amongst guides in the Bocas area. While “Gold” guides may have proved during their certification course to know the names of all the local islands and wildlife, “Platinum” guides may be able to offer the species and life histories of organisms, historical anecdotes and specific suggestions to the tourists about how to minimize the environmental impact of their stay in Bocas. In fact, a special, separate “eco-friendly” certification could be created. After completing a course on how to run minimal-impact tours, guides would have no excuse to engage in common sense reef damaging behaviors. If tourists chose to patronize these self-proclaimed “eco-guides,” it might provide incentive for guides to actually follow through with more eco-friendly methods.

The “covert” goal of such a plan, if it does not seem obvious, is a more ecologically-friendly, conservation-oriented program of reef tourism; something more resembling

ecotourism. Hopefully, tourists would choose these more informative and low-impact, certified guides. With high-quality, educational tours, tourists would leave happy and return again. Guides, following tourist demand, would offer better, lower-impact tours, and would benefit from repeat customers and the potential to charge higher prices.

In addition, locals might find pride in what tourists find exciting or interesting. A sense of pride would create a sense of worth and encourage subsequent protection. With an army of educated residents promoting nature to tourists every day, locals may be more inspired to protect nature and prove the worth of such resources.

Any tourist dissatisfaction with Bocas' reefs could easily be rectified by making what tourists *do* see exciting and interesting. Brittle stars, for example, are very common in most of Bocas' reefs. Tourists could be informed that brittle stars also have the ability to swim like fish, but if they lose a leg it will grow back – can fish do that? Endangered or ecologically important species can be identified, giving tourists more reason to value what they see and find their dive or snorkeling trip more important. Tourist interest can easily be directed away from the lack of big fish by emphasizing the details and importance of what they are seeing. Tour guide certification would fill any gaps in tour guide knowledge and ensure they have such information on hand to offer tourists.

Conclusions

Tourism in Bocas del Toro does not currently fulfill the requirements of “ecotourism.” Tourism in Bocas del Toro may be digging its own grave in terms of the sustainability of “nature-based tourism.” Thus, it must be concluded that the relationship between tourism and coral reefs in Bocas del Toro is one of exploitation.

But tourism in Bocas del Toro has great potential to reinforce coral-reef conservation and protection efforts, provide an amazing tourist experience, and support locals by providing high-quality jobs and encouraging the maintenance of local culture and pride. What Bocas needs, and this has been emphasized by many, is a concentrated, coordinated effort to improve tourism and coordinate development. A tour guide certification program may be able to provide one important piece of the puzzle, though it is certainly not the only option. IPAT would appear well situated to provide the guidance and creative thinking Bocas needs, but politics and ever-changing staff have left track record that is not promising.

Another facet of the Bocas situation, and one not covered in this paper, is other forms of development in the area. New housing projects directed toward US retirees may be affecting the environment more than tourism as mangroves and corals are cleared to make way for new houses and yacht paths. This development is also in need of a plan.

Reefs and other natural environments in Bocas del Toro need of protection and a support network that is not currently in existence. If the national government of Panamá is unwilling to provide this leadership, the Bocas del Toro community will have to rally together to support sustainable development and protect its own interests.

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Presentations, Interviews and Statements

Only formal and semi-formal interviews are included in this bibliography, where both I and the participant sat down face-to-face. Much of the data for this project was collected via participant observation, where statements and comments were recorded during the course of normal activities. For the protection and confidentiality of sources, these are not identified. For more information about the locations and subjects of this data collection please see the research calendar.

- Alvarez, John. Tourist. Bocas del Toro, Isla Colón. 25 Nov 2005.
- Ernesto. Tour guide. Cayo Coral. 2 Dec 2005.
- González, Ángel. Coordinador, Programa Alianzas. Bocas del Toro, Isla Colón. 24 Nov and 10 Dec 2005.
- González, Elba. Boat driver. Bocas del Toro, Isla Colón, 29 Nov 2005.
- Grant. Tourist. Bocas del Toro, Isla Colón. 29 Nov 2005.
- Harry. Tourist. Bocas del Toro, Isla Colón. 25 Nov 2005.
- Jaramillo, Jaime. Associate, Bocas Water Sports. Bocas del Toro, Isla Colón. 25 Nov 2005.
- Leonel. Tour guide. Cayo Coral, 5 Dec 2005.
- Luis. Owner, Cayo Coral restaurant and bar. Cayo Coral. 5 Dec 2005.
- Rose Marie. Tour guide. Isla Bastimentos. 30 Nov 2005.
- Sanders, Georgina. Owner, Starfleet SCUBA. Bocas del Toro, Isla Colón. 27 Nov 2005.
- Smith, Jeff. Tour guide. On his boat. 1 Dec 2005.
- Thomas, Señor José "Tito." Owner, Hotel Bahía. Bocas del Toro, Isla Colón. 27 Nov 2005.

Appendices

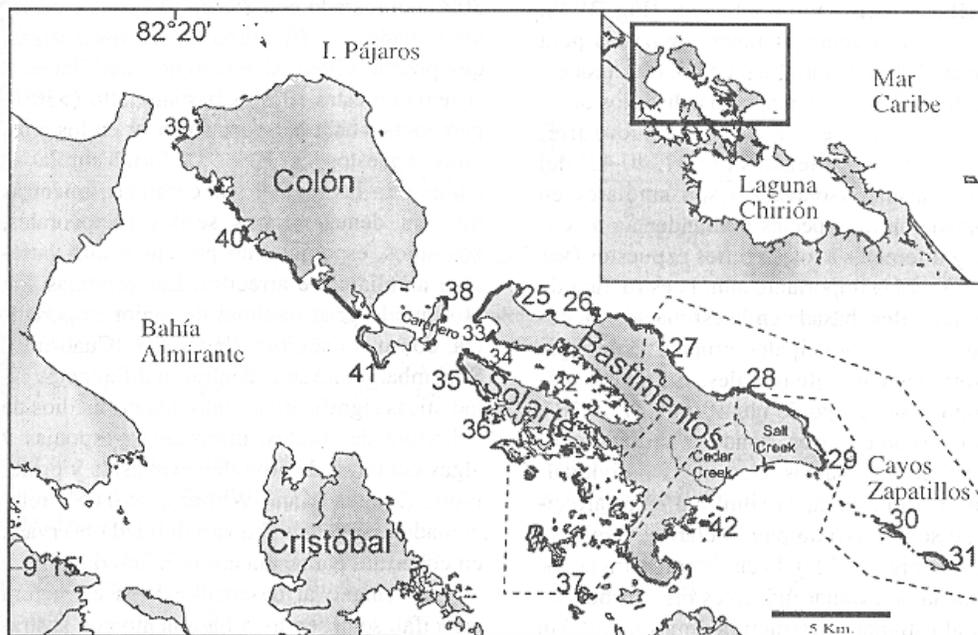
Turistic Map of Bocas del Toro

Dotted line shows the standard tour given to most circuits: visiting the dolphins in the bay of Isla Cristoból, snorkeling/diving at Coral Key, trekking across Isla Bastimentos to Red Frog Beach, snorkeling/diving at Hospital Point and returning back to Bocas del Toro.



Map of the Reefs of Bocas del Toro

Bocas del Toro and Islas Bastimentos, Solarte, Carenero and Colón. The location of the 18 reefs. The solid black line represents the approximate distribution of the reefs. The dotted line represents area allocated to Isla Bastimentos National Marine Park. From Gumán and Guevara 1998. All reefs visited by tourists during the study were located outside the park.



Research Calendar

Main research activities of each day during the study.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
		Nov 22	Nov 23	Nov 24	Nov 25	Nov 26
		-Arrival in Bocas -Talk with tourists, tourism workers and Bocas residents at Hospedaje Heike	-IPAT tourism seminar -OSA Peninsula/ Taca Airlines tourism conference	-Meeting with Angel Gonzalez	-conversations with tourists at Bocas Water Sports, Mondo Taitu -interview with Jaime Jaramillo of Bocas Water Sports	-conversations with tourism workers Mondo Taitu, Central Park
Nov 27	Nov 28	Nov 29	Nov 30	Dec 01	Dec 02	Dec 03
-interview with Georgina Sanders of Starfleet SCUBA -interview with Señor Jose "Tito" Thomas of Hotel Bahía	-organize data collected -write and print tourist survey	-tour follow (the Garden and the Playground): conversations with staff and tourists of Bocas Water Sports	-tour follow (standard circuit): conversations with staff and tourists of Bocas Water Sports	-tour follow (standard circuit): conversations with guide Jeff Smith, captain Tito Smith and tourists	-tour follow (standard circuit): conversations with staff and tourists of Transparente Tours	-(all tours full) -organized and analyzed collected data
Dec 04	Dec 05	Dec 06	Dec 07	Dec 08	Dec 09	Dec 10
-tour follow (the Garden and Shashe): conversations with staff and tourists of Starfleet SCUBA	-tour follow (standard circuit): conversations with staff and tourists of Transparente Tours -write ISP outline	-tour follow (standard circuit): conversations with staff and tourists of Bocas Water Sports -begin ISP write-up	-write ISP	-write ISP	-write ISP	-meeting with Ángel González -revise ISP -return to Panama City
Dec 11	Dec 12	Dec 13	Dec 14			
-revise ISP	-print ISP -turn in ISP -work on presentation	-work on presentation	-presentation at Tupper Center, Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, Panama City			