

Ecological tourism in Brazil

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The growth of interest at world level in conservation and intimacy with nature signals a promising future for ecological tourism in Brazil. In this paper we describe the ecological lodging, the characteristics of the tourist in the Amazon region and the principal 'ecological paradises' of the country. We also emphasize the necessity of monitoring the installation of ecological tourism infrastructure so as to provide adequate profitability and support socioeconomic development without harming the natural environment.

With an area of 8 511 965 km² (3 286 470 square miles) and 150 000 000 inhabitants, Brazil is seeking a route to socioeconomic viability and, more recently, for ways of conserving its natural environment. This is an arduous task and impossible to fulfil in the short term. However, the determination of government and people can overcome the problems if both really work together to lead the country towards a future of development and prosperity.

In this context, ecological tourism presents itself as one of the forces capable of contributing to economic development and at the same time to the preservation of Brazil's priceless natural heritage.

Ecological resources

Brazil, which covers both tropical and subtropical zones, houses the greatest number of species of certain groups of fauna and flora on this planet. For example, one-third of the world's species of vegetation are found in the Amazon region, Amazonia, including 2500 different types of orchid.

The intense international pressure for the preservation of tropical rainforests – philosophically considered a heritage of the human race because of their importance to the ecological and climatic balance of the planet – has reinforced equally strong internal pressures for conservation and balanced development.

Amazonia and the Pantanal (wet lowlands in the state of Mato Grosso) together occupy 50% of Brazilian territory and, in spite of the burning and devastation seen on the

world media, it has been suggested that 90% of Amazonian trees are still standing, although others¹ insist that 70% is the true figure. Some parts of the rainforest in the states of Amapá and Amazonas have remained virtually untouched, with less than 1% deforestation.²

Satellite photographs from NOAA 9 showed that the number of fires in Amazonia from July to September 1990 was 25% less than for the same period in 1989. The Landsat satellite presented evidence that Amazonian deforestation was cut by half in 1990.

Meanwhile, the 30 million hectares (equal the size of the state of Rio Grande do Sul) currently encompassing 120 parks, forests and ecological stations demonstrate that a conservation conscience has begun to take root and that in the future, abandoning the idea of progress at any cost, the country will be able to develop *and* conserve its natural heritage.

Ecological tourism

General aspects

Defining ecological tourism as 'that specialized sector of tourism characterized by a clear propensity of its practitioners for trips that take them into contact with nature, enjoying such by means of simple observation or by systematic study',³ public and private enterprises have been developing specific programmes directed towards stimulation of the flow of international tourism to the principal Brazilian 'ecological paradises':

- Amazonia;
- the waterfalls of the Iguaçú River (Brazil/Argentina);
- the wasteland (central plateau), including Ema National Park, (Parque Nacional das Emas, Goiás (GO)), Deerhunters' Plain (Chapada dos Veadeiros, GO), Cipo Range, (Serra do Cipo, Mato Grosso);
- the Pantanal, with wet lowlands covering 210 000 km²;
- prominent natural formations such as the Seven Cities (Sete Cidades, Piauí (PI)), Guimarães Plain (Chapada dos Guimarães), and Ancient Villa (Vila Velha, Paraná (PR));
- the caverns of Maquine and Lapinha (Minas Gerais (MG)), the Devil's Cavern (Caverna do Diabolo, São Paulo (SP)), and Mangabeira Grott (Gruta das Mangabeiras, Bahia (BA)); and

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- the 7 400 km long coastline with beaches, dunes, reefs and tropical islands.

These features, and many others of lesser international importance, are spread throughout the country and their logical utilization as tourist attractions constitutes an attempt to reverse the decline of foreign tourists noted in recent years. (In 1980 Brazil attracted 1.5% of the international tourist movement and in 1990 received only 0.5%.)

Specialists indicate various reasons for the diminished flow of foreign tourists to Brazil, the principal cause relating to the economic problems of neighbouring countries (Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay) which in the past have been responsible for about 50% of international tourist movement recorded in Brazil.

The decrease in arrivals of tourists from the Northern hemisphere is chiefly related to the negative image of the country abroad, caused by urban and rural violence, by the extreme poverty of certain sectors of the population, by the difficulties of the Indians and, further, by acts of devastation in the jungle and the killing of wild animals. Modifying this picture depends on innumerable factors. Manuel Figueirola, World Tourism Organization consultant, who has made a study of tourism perspectives for the country believes that 'if Brazil were to have a good strategy and the political will for investing in infrastructure, promotion and human resources, tourism could increase its current participation in the Gross National product from 2.2% to nearly 5%'.⁴ Numerically, this would mean increasing foreign tourists from the present 1.3 million to 4 million in 1994. Specifically in the Amazon region, specialists predict a growth of 12–20% a year, and estimate that in 1995, 318 000 tourists will visit Amazonia.

These numbers are modest compared with those of touristically more developed countries. However, if added to the 30 million nationals with the potential to travel within the country, there would be a sufficient number of travellers to make any tourist related enterprise in the area economically viable.

The Amazon Forest

Brazil's most important ecological attraction is the Amazonian forest. Three types of forest are found in the state of Amazonas:

- flooded forest with clear streams or tea coloured rivers, which tourists find most beautiful;
- *varzea* forest, located on the floodplains of muddy rivers where fertile silts are periodically deposited (the preferred land for planting); and
- terra firma forest sites, which are undergoing radical transformation by man.

Ecological lodging and programmes

At present, 38 projects for the development of ecological tourism in Amazonia are being studied by EMBRATUR (Brazilian Government Tourism Enterprise) and EMAMTUR (Amazonian Tourism Enterprise). Among these projects are several by multinational tourist companies

who intend to invest in Brazil because of its promise to provide a new motivation for tourist travel.

The options for foreign investment in the tourism sector include strategies whereby the Brazilian government can benefit directly: through the conversion of foreign debt, joint ventures and franchizing. Investment in environmental preservation continues to be studied by the authorities and specialists and its pragmatic goals mean that the strategy has every possibility of producing good results, both for the country and for investors. Ecological tourism allows tourists direct contact with nature and offers one way of utilizing natural resources without bringing about their destruction.

Meanwhile, construction, however carefully done, of tourism infrastructure in areas considered fragile necessarily involves environmental impacts that *must* be kept under control in order to preserve the authenticity and originality of the landscape which motivated their construction. Lodges (jungle hotels) are rigorously controlled by tourist and environmental authorities (and monitored by private conservation groups) who try to integrate the architecture with the landscape through specific regulations, thus earning a living from exoticism without harming the ecosystems. The lodges are constructed in areas of dense forest (several hours by boat from the principal Amazonian cities), near streams, lakes or rivers, and are equipped with radio telephones for contact with nearby cities. Accommodation varies depending on the lodge classification: 'open air' or 'ecological'. Some lodges, for example, do not offer rooms: clients sleep in hammocks with mosquito nets, just like the locals. Others may even include special suites which provide the comforts of civilization without sacrificing the tourist spirit of adventure. The comforts of civilization (fans, refrigerators, lighting, etc) are provided by generators, but as the noise of their motors interrupts the silence or drowns out the sounds of animals in the forest, some lodges use generators only when absolutely necessary or for just a few hours of the day or night.

When there is no electric light tourists use torches to guide them on nightwalks, and most visitors do not seem to miss a hot bath, radio or television. The show is provided by the jungle and its magic.

The programmes of these jungle hotels whose packages offer three days and two nights on average, include a series of day and night-time activities, eg photographic safaris, fishing, visits to Indian homes, swimming and crossing the marshy *igapós* in a canoe.

The tourist who does not wish to venture into the jungle may stay in total comfort at hotels located in the city of Manaus. From there, half or all day trips may be made which include fishing, photographic safaris, birdwatching and appreciation of the unique spectacle of the 'meeting of the waters' (the joining of two great rivers of different colour which form the mighty Amazon River).

Besides Manaus – the capital of Amazonas state – other urban centres offer the infrastructure for ecological tours, the best being Belém in Pará (tropical forest) and Cuiabá in Mato Grosso state (Pantanal). Besides direct contact

with nature the tourist can experience there some of the rich historical and cultural aspects of the country in the form of colonial buildings, splendid folklore and unequalled regional gastronomy.

Under the banner 'Know in order to preserve' EMBRATUR established its ecological tourism programme in 1988; this tries to control the tourist flow to areas of ecological interest, by using only specialized guides in previously selected areas.

It is a programme still in the initial stages, but its principal objective lies in using the natural and cultural heritage of the country as tourist attractions, while safeguarding it for scientific, educational, aesthetic and recreational purposes.

The demand for ecological tourism

In 1990 the Department of Regional Development and Environment of the Organization of American States (OAS) carried out a study at the request of those countries which had a part of their territory in the Amazon region (Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Guyana and Surinam). With the support of the official tourist and environmental protection agencies of these countries and of individuals involved with tourism infrastructure, the study produced the following information about the Brazilian Amazon.

Three kinds of international tourism were discerned. The most common was traditional tourism, principally motivated by the interest of tourists in relaxation and in seeing the most important regional attractions. The second kind was adventure tourism, resulting from a series of motivations to do with physical challenges, educational experiences, sport and contact with nature. The third type was ecotourism, defined by the World Wildlife Foundation as tourism to protect natural areas and a way of obtaining economic benefits by preserving these resources. Ecotourism is divided into hard and soft. Hard ecotourism is when tourists' interest in nature is intense or scientific, and it is generally practised by ornithologists, botanists, geologists or other specialized professionals. Soft ecotourism is more related to general interests such as photographic safaris, birdwatching, swimming, etc. The physical effort involved in a tourist excursion may also be categorized as hard or soft.

To sum up, the OAS research emphasizes that, in spite of technical differences, all three types of tourism interact, and interest in contact with nature is present in them all.

At present, the profile of the international tourist who visits Amazonia is as shown in Table 1.

Brazilian tourists show no particular interest in visiting Amazonia, and when they do, their main reason for going to Manaus is to shop in the duty free zone. The major objective in visiting Belém (Pará) is religious, to participate in the Nazareth Candle Festival which attracts thousands of people each year.

Most of the national tourists who have the economic potential to travel to Amazonia live in the south and south-east of the country (about four to six hours' flight from Manaus). However, the high cost of air travel creates

Table 1. Profile of tourists visiting Amazonia.

Origin	
Europe	65%
Germany	15%
Spain	14%
France	10%
Italy	10%
Others (Switzerland, Britain, Scandinavia)	16%
North America	19%
USA	14%
Canada	5%
Others (Japan, Australia and Latin America)	16%
Predominant motivation	
Contact with nature	
Type of tourism	
Traditional (mass tourism)	64%
Adventure	14%
Natural history	15%
Specialized tourism	7%
Type of trip	
Group (4–22 persons)	69%
Individual	31%
Age	
Under 30	35%
31–50	40%
Over 50	25%
Sex	
Male	55%
Female	45%
Length of stay	
3–5 nights	
Main season	
July–August/December–January	
Average daily expenditure	
US\$101.00	
Principal variables which limit growth of tourism in the area	
Difficulty of access	58%
Negative image of the country	42%
Lack of information about the country	40%
Lack of lodging	36%
High cost	34%
High operational costs	34%
Lack of interest of regional governments	29%
Lack of integration in the tourist field	20%
Unqualified human resources	18%
Miscellaneous	
Most tourists have previous experience with long trips.	
Group tours consist of packages which include two or more countries: Brazil/Peru; Bolivia/Brazil; Peru/Ecuador/Brazil; Brazil/Peru/Venezuela.	

a preference for travel to Disneyworld, Aruba and other Caribbean islands. The principal reason for this is that the price of such trips, compared to the cost of a stay in Amazonia or the beaches of the north-east of Brazil, is very low, due to airline and hotel promotion of these destinations.

While looking for diversified data to make this study, we interviewed several tourist agents dealing with tourism based in the city of São Paulo. These professionals confirmed the conclusions of the OAS study. But, because these agents offered services to small international groups and individuals, they were able to point to other characteristics of their client groups.

Young people (22–26 years old) generally travelled in groups of two or three (male or female) and literally sank

themselves in the culture and countryside of places they visited. They tended to stay about three months, travel throughout the whole country (by bus or plane – Brazil Air Pass) and most of them brought addresses and tips from friends and relatives back home about places to visit off the traditional tourist path. They slept in youth hostels, campgrounds, bed and breakfasts or inexpensive hotels and ate meals from their backpacks, or at lunch counters or fast food restaurants in order to economize. There was no definitive time limit to their stay in the different places visited and they returned home when their money ran out, their return tickets having been bought and paid for in their home countries.

Another type of foreign tourist (generally European) who visits Brazil's ecological attractions is the couple in the 35–45 age group whose principal reason for the trip relates to business. The husband deals with commercial matters in São Paulo and then, before returning home, the couple make a tour of about one week through the principal urban centres from which ecological tours depart: Iguacu City (Iguacu waterfalls), Manaus (Amazonas), Belém (Pará) and cities in the Pantanal. These visitors are also interested in the beaches of Salvador and Recife and the city of Rio de Janeiro. They stay at four- or five-star hotels and eat in luxury restaurants, avoiding typical, local cuisine. Among their most common misgivings are fear of catching tropical diseases (yellow fever and malaria), of being assaulted in the streets, and the insecurity and dread of not finding anyone who speaks their language.

On the positive side, such tourists praise the friendliness of the Brazilians, the exuberance of the native flora and fauna, and the spectacular show offered by the waterfalls of the Iguacu River. They also emphasize the exotic beauty of the *mulatta*, the dark coloured Brazilian women resulting from the mixing of the black and white races.

Conclusion

The growth of interest at world level in conservation and intimacy with nature, coupled with the measures undertaken to conserve the tropical forests, signals a promising future for ecological tourism in Brazil.

Various obstacles must be overcome, specially those related to adequate training of human resources at all levels and a controlled preparation of the infrastructure to receive tourism.

It will be necessary to monitor installations in order to ensure adequate profitability, so that they support the country's socioeconomic development, without altering or denaturing the natural environment. Big projects for exploiting mineral resources (gold, petroleum, iron and manganese) in the area have also become the target of rigorous controls.

Amazonia, in addition to its influence in the planet's climatic balance, is the largest genetic storehouse in the world. In spite of serious degradation in certain areas it has been shown that recuperation is possible. Conservation and efforts to help it recover will succeed if we realize its importance and understand that this heritage does not belong only to Brazilians, but to all mankind.

Notes and references

¹William J. Vesentini and Vania Vlach, *Geografia do Terceiro Mundo*, Atica, São Paulo, 1991, p 83.

²'Luz verde no horizonte ecológico', *Revista Veja*, São Paulo, 16 April 1991, pp 52–61.

³Silvio M. Barros H., 'Ecoturismo: uma alternativa para o desenvolvimento da Amazônia', *Brasilturis Jornal*, 20 March 1991. This definition has been adopted by ULACIT, the Latin American University of Science and Technology, Costa Rica.

⁴'Importância econômica do turismo', *Jornal o Estado de São Paulo – Suplemento do Turismo*, 16 October 1990, p 2.

⁵OAS, Departamento de Desarrollo Regional y Medio Ambiente, *Estudio de la Demanda Turística para la Región Amazonica*, Washington DC, 1990.