

Winston Churchill Memorial Trust

2006 Fellowship



The Study:

Diversification and cooperation in the rural economy

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My own background

In 1990 I started diversifying out of farming and into farm tourism by creating a small self catering holiday complex. Over the years the business has won over a dozen awards including 'Best Self Catering Holiday of the Year' for the whole of England and featured in the travel sections of seven national newspapers as well as BBC regional television and national radio four.

I have become involved at a wider level within the industry assisting other rural tourism businesses on a consultancy basis and playing a role on other tourism bodies. This has included two years as Chairman of Cornish Farm Holidays and two years as Chairman of Cartwheel Farm and Rural Tourism, an organisation covering the South West of England and dedicated to marketing and promoting all sectors of farm tourism. I am still a director of Cartwheel and from time to time am a guest lecturer at colleges and university. I have also presented at rural conferences and host several educational visits to my own business each year.

The aims of my Fellowship.

The agricultural sector no longer dominates our rural economy in the way it once did and many farmers now struggle to make a living. However it is not all bad news with some farmers showing great business prowess by diversifying into new industries or specializing within their existing niche.

The aim of my study has been to explore real success stories in diversification and cooperation within the rural economy in other parts of the world, find out why they had succeeded, the impact they had and the lessons we in Britain could learn. My Fellowship took me to the following places:

September and October 2006.

Two weeks in **Slovenia and Croatia**, to see how the adoption of rural tourism heritage trails has helped farmers and other rural businesses to diversify into tourism. Creating a more secure and sustainable rural economy and enabling a resurgence in regional foods and crafts.

A week in **Northern Italy**, to see how the protection and promotion of traditional regional foods such as Parma Ham and Parmesan Cheese have created value added products with growing international markets.

January and February 2007.

Three weeks in **Costa Rica**, studying how small coffee farmers who were once at the mercy of world markets and unscrupulous middlemen have come together to form their own cooperatives in order to guarantee a fair price for their product, develop their industry and support their communities.

Also to discover why the country is regarded as a world leader in Eco-tourism, the fastest growing tourism sector in the world and how we can learn from its experiences.

Rural Heritage Trails.

Heritage trails in the Slovenian southern provinces of Dolenjska and Bela Krajina.



The concept of rural tourism heritages trails was first developed by a team of consultants from the UK in the early 1990's. During the same period the European Union created a funding package to assist the economies of the new emerging democracies of central and Eastern Europe. Part of the package was aimed specifically at rural development and the EU decided to give two countries financial support to develop their own heritage trails. Four countries applied and the province of Dolenjska in Slovenia along with a region within Bulgaria were selected.

Bulgaria initiated the first 18 month development phase, but due to a mixture of apathy and local politics the next phase involving the development of a partnership of business's never transpired.

The Slovenian project on the other hand has been a real success story. So much so that its Manager; Dr Marko Koščak is now involved in assisting rural areas throughout Europe to set up their own heritage trails, including one in the UK.

The initial development phase in Slovenia started in 1996. The Bulgarian experience had shown how local politics can play havoc with new initiatives involving collaboration between small local businesses not used to working together. However, by using outside consultants rather than local personalities to push the initiative through it was psychologically easier for local people to give their support to the project.

The aims and objectives of the heritage trail are to create a strong and sustainable rural economy through the development of its rural tourism industry and in turn help preserve its crafts, traditions and local foods. Trails by their very nature help link the economies of various communities rather than leave them struggling in isolation.

The Slovenian trail is a network of natural, cultural and heritage sites, activities and tourism facilities designed to give the visitor the opportunity to get the most out of the area whatever their interests.

A trail will have the following four main features:

1. The design of the trail is closely matched to visitor demands.
2. It is based around rural tourism, preferring to promote locally owned facilities and locally produced products. For example outdoor activity specialists, farm accommodation, restaurants using local produce, local crafts etc.
3. In order to gain and keep local support the trail is developed with the local community's involvement and aims to be economically and environmentally sustainable.

4. Marketing and maintenance of quality standards is administered on a self financing basis by existing local institutions, or new ones established as part of the heritage trail development process.

At present the number of facilities and activities mutually promoting each other under the Dolenjska and Bela Krajina Rural Heritage Trail banner are:

28 Natural and cultural sites.

70 Restaurants using primarily local foods.

21 Accommodation providers.

48 Local food producers.

55 Local events and festivals.



Although I didn't visit anywhere near all of the above, the ones I went to left me impressed by their level of enthusiasm and commitment to the future through the raising of standards and ongoing investment.

There are now six rural heritage trails within Slovenia and the long term plan is to create an umbrella organisation to pull them all together.

Heritage Trails in the Kolpa valley in Croatia and Slovenia.

The Slovenian province of Bela Krajina borders Croatia along the river Kolpa and has more in common with its Croatian neighbour from a cultural perspective than the rest of Slovenia. Croatia is keen to develop its own heritage trails and in this case it would make sense for the two countries to link trails across their common border.

Fortunately relations between Slovenia and Croatia are very good. When the former Yugoslavia went through its very painful disintegration the two countries shared a desire to break away from the old federation and had no territorial issues with each other.

I visited the scenic river Kolpa and its surrounding area. It is full of possibilities for developing tourism and suits the heritage trails concept very well. Recently three regions, two in Croatia and one in Slovenia in and around the Kolpa valley have come together and secured half a million Euros in EU funding to develop their own heritage trail. There was a slight sticking point on what to call it as the words for Kolpa valley are not the same in both languages. They've resolved this by opting for the Latin description (Valis Colapis) keeping everyone happy. The advantage for Slovenia is that it makes this part of their county more appealing to tourists by extending the scope of what's on offer. For Croatia it offers up the opportunity to develop rural tourism in an area that is still an economic backwater and suffered greatly in the 1990's war of independence.

The protection and promotion of regional foods in northern Italy.

One area I felt needed exploring was the increasing interest in regional foods and the benefits to be gained from European regional protected status. The EU law known as the 'Protected Designation of Origin' seeks to protect the image and reputation of traditional regional foods from copycat products produced in other parts of Europe and sometimes the rest of the world.

No one can be stopped from producing a very similar product and that is not the purpose of the designation. It is there to allow the genuine article produced in its historical geographical area to flourish without the threat of copycat producers hijacking a name with an image and reputation that may have taken centuries to nurture.

The UK has many foods that could acquire this protected status. Some have, but none have the machinery behind that could propel them onto the international stage in the way that the following two Italian products have done.

Consorzio del Prosciutto di Parma (The Parma Ham Consortium).



The consortium was set up in 1963 by 23 Parma Ham producers (now 189) with the aim of safeguarding the genuine product and the image it represents. The consortium does not sell Parma Ham or recommend specific members. Instead it concentrates on protecting and promoting the brand and ensuring the quality and unique taste remains consistent.

Parma Ham, now a common sight in UK supermarkets is an air dried ham that is cured to very exacting standards. The process has to take place within a very definite geographical area around Parma and be from the haunches of specific breeds of pig considered most suitable for producing high quality cured ham. There are eleven regions within northern and central Italy where the pigs are allowed to be reared.

The ham is more expensive to produce because the breed of pig takes longer to mature than other more commercial breeds and the curing process is over a longer period of time with more demanding standards and quality control involved throughout the whole process.

Producers who belong to the consortium are able to sell a product that has a strong brand image with added value. The kudos of being a registered Parma Ham producer means that they are a trusted source for quality and it often assists them in securing sales of other meat products they may produce.

Although the domestic market still dominates sales it has been losing market share in recent years to cheaper non branded dry cured ham known as 'Prosciutto di Crudo' (raw ham), or 'Estero' (meaning foreign, because the pigs used are sourced more cheaply from abroad). The consortium has fought back with an aggressive marketing campaign reminding people of the higher quality and superior taste.

Exports account for 18% of the market and it is here that future growth potential lies. The overseas market for Parma Ham largely exists because of the consortium which has managed to protect and market the brand so successfully. France is the number one overseas market with the UK second. Pre-sliced ham is by far the fastest growing product especially in the UK and United States. The consortium has recently broken into Japan and has plans to target Korea and China in the near future.



A new batch of haunches.

Every haunch of Parma Ham carries a metal seal which is purchased by the processor from the consortium for one Euro. This is the levy it pays to the consortium to finance its activities, which amount to around €10 million a year. The main activity is the marketing and promotion of the brand. But it also has to finance expensive legal cases around the world to stop retailers using the Parma name when selling other dry cured hams. It also needs to pay independent assessors to check that the quality of finished hams is high enough to be sold under the brand.

The consortium has been successful in recent years in accessing additional funds available via the EU to assist regional protected foods promote their product outside the EU. The funds are not automatically forthcoming and have to be applied for. If regional foods join forces in a joint bid it is looked on more favourably and for this reason it has come together with the Parmesan cheese consortium and is about to embark on a second three year funded project to the USA and Japan.



Salting the haunches.



Sealing partially cured haunches with fat.

Consorzio del Formaggio Parmigiano-Reggiano **(Parmesan Cheese Consortium).**



Aging 'wheels' of parmesan cheese.

Parmesan cheese, like Parma ham is strictly bound by its place of origin. Both the production of the milk and the processing of the cheese can only take place within a few provinces in northern Italy. The milk is produced by cows fed according to strict regulations and must be taken to the cheese house within two hours of the cows being milked. It then goes through nearly four weeks of complex processing before being ready for aging.

Second quality cheeses will normally be aged for fifteen to eighteen months with first quality 'wheels' taking up to four years! The cheese is periodically inspected throughout the aging process and the certification mark is only applied to wheels that pass inspection through to maturity.

The consortium was officially founded in 1934, but as early as the 1920's smaller regional groups were springing up in an effort to protect a traditional food that was being copied outside its place of origin. The Italian government formally recognised Parmesan cheese as a traditional regional product that needed protection as early as the 1954, with European regional protected status awarded in 1996.

80% of the dairies are farmer owned cooperatives, with farmers only being paid for their milk once the cheeses have been sold. This would of course be crippling for most new entrants to the industry, but there are EU regional funds available to assist new start up dairy farmers. The price of milk is set annually by a committee with representatives from the dairies, farmers and other interested parties. A fair amount of haggling takes place, but the price is largely based on the current average price of the cheese.

Farmers are keen to sell their milk for the production of Parmesan cheese because of the premium they receive. But it is not as good as it has been. Ten years ago the average price for a cheese wheel was €9 per kilo and farmers received around €50 for every 100kg of milk they produced. Today the prices have dropped to €7 and €35 respectively.

The reason for the drop in price is the launching of similar products that are made more cheaply and matured more quickly, but are marketed as if they are as good as the genuine article. Despite the name being legally protected throughout the EU and a further 54 countries it is difficult to control the onslaught. Last year the consortium sued three companies in the USA for choosing similar names that confused the consumer. It is also fighting the international food giant Kraft which is using the word 'Parmesan' on its own products outside Europe. As a result at the moment most of the consortium's budget is swallowed up in trying to protect the name, rather than promote it.

Despite its current problems the industry's size is impressive with around 4,750 farmers selling their milk to processors, who last year produced just over three million wheels of cheese. The processors have to buy the certification labels from the consortium at €6 a wheel, bringing in an annual income of over €18 million to the consortium.

The consortium's recent experiences show that it is not an easy task to protect a distinctive regional food. But if the consortium can gain the upper hand in its fight to protect its name it can once again divert more of its resources to promoting its unique product.

Costa Rica.

Fair Trade Coffee Cooperatives.

Coffee production was vital to the early economic development of Costa Rica and for over half of the nineteenth century was the country's largest industry and sole export. Since the 1890's it has steadily declined in importance and has been eclipsed by several other industries. However, it still involves nearly 5% of the nation's workforce and remains the main activity in large areas of the countryside.

To this day small farmers dominate the production of coffee, the vast majority having less than five hectares of land. Because coffee beans cannot be picked mechanically, tending and harvesting even a small plantation can be very labour intensive, often involving the whole family.

On their own these small farmers and their families are exposed to the vagaries of world commodity prices and at the mercy of unscrupulous buyers. To counter these threats they have formed cooperatives to process and sell the beans.

In 1988 six of these cooperatives came together to form an umbrella organisation known as Coocafé. Its purpose is to seek out the best international markets and assist the individual cooperatives in their economic, technical and social development. Technical assistance has allowed them to raise the quality of their product and therefore give them access to higher value markets. The commitment to social development of the local communities and improvement in environmental practices means that the cooperatives qualify to sell through the Fair Trade system, giving guaranteed minimum prices whatever the world price and also guaranteed premiums above the world price. Over 80% of coffee produced by the cooperatives is now sold as Fair Trade coffee.

Coocafé has also set up two foundations to help it achieve its aims. One (Foundation Hijos del Campo) is an educational foundation which awards grants to local primary schools and provides scholarships for children to assist in the costs involved in high school and university education. Funding comes from various sources including a proportion of the premium paid by the Fair Trade buyers and through the sale of additional services by the cooperatives such as eco and rural tourism initiatives.

The second foundation (Café Forestal) supports projects encouraging farmers to grow coffee using environmentally sustainable practices with minimum impact on adjoining rainforests. It is funded through the sale of branded Café Forestal coffee to consumers in Europe and the United States, who are happy to pay a premium in the knowledge that a proportion of the sale price is used to fund the projects.

Coocafé now represents over 3,500 small coffee producers within nine independent coffee cooperatives. I went to see two of these cooperatives to find out just how much the farmers have benefited by coming together in this way.

Coope Llano Bonito.

Located in the mountainous Tarrazu region this cooperative started in 1972 with 189 members and now has over 600. The high altitude creates the perfect growing conditions for high quality beans with a distinctive flavour. Because of this they are able to command a premium, but only since the cooperative built its own processing mill. Before, the local private mills would exploit the farmer's lack of choice in where they could sell their harvested beans and offered them very low prices.



Coffee growing mountains of Tarrazu.



Ripening coffee beans.



Waste bean pulp to be composted for fertiliser.

As well as ensuring a fairer price for their product the cooperative also carries out the following measures and initiatives to assist its members:

A proportion of the coffee beans are now 'sun dried', which improves the beans aroma and therefore adds further value.

Farmers are paid in instalments throughout the year and are allowed several months credit when purchasing fertiliser through the cooperative, giving them a more even cash flow and reducing the incidence of debt.

The cooperative assists families with their children's high school and university education by offering scholarships to help cover the cost of transport, food and accommodation. The proportion of children from coffee growing families able to continue with their education has been greatly increased, with some of the scholars later finding technical, administrative and management jobs within the cooperative.

The cooperative fits the criteria for socially responsible investment companies and has been able to access loans to re-invest in more environmental practices such as a new ecological oven to dry the beans and invest in measures to reduce river pollution from the mill waste.

The cooperative is also entering rural tourism with its first holiday cabin due to open in 2008.

Coope Sarapiqui.

This cooperative is located an area around the small rural town of San Miguel two hours drive north of the capital San Jose. It was started in 1969 by 40 small coffee producers and now has nearly 400 members. It is very much at the heart of the local community, arranging regular social events and owns the town's only general store and agricultural merchant's. Although the coffee grown here is not of the same exceptional quality as that produced by Coope Llano Bonito farmers still achieve a far better price than if they were outside the organisation.



Coffee processing plant.

Many of its initiatives are very similar to Llano Bonito's, but in addition it is in a strong tourism region and is using its resources to assist in the development of rural tourism by opening up accommodation. It is also in the process of setting up coffee tours, walking trails, fishing lakes and a café for tourists.



Harvesting bananas amongst the coffee.



Dried beans of different quality.

Coope Sarapiqui also gives its farmer's advice on the correct use of fertilisers and encourages them to grow 'shade grown' coffee. This involves the planting of other crops such as trees for timber, bananas and avocados. The positive effects are a reduced need for herbicides, less soil erosion, less pressure to extract timber from the adjoining rainforest and the creation of additional cash crops. Farmers who adhere to these principles qualify to sell their coffee through the Café Forestal label adding further value to their product.

Another initiative has been to create huge composting 'wormeries' for the waste pulp from the coffee bean. Once the worms have done their work by breaking down the pulp they leave behind nutrient rich compost which the farmers take at no charge to use as organic fertiliser.

Coffee cooperatives have proved a real success story in Costa Rica and are an example to the rest of the world of what can be achieved through rural cooperation.

Eco-tourism.

Since the late 1970's Costa Rica has been at the forefront in the development of eco-tourism. Its geographical location at the crossroads of two continents makes it the most bio-diverse rich country per square km in the world. Add to this a stable democracy, wonderful climate and a reasonably close proximity to North America and it couldn't really go wrong.

To find out just how successful it has been I chose to spend my first week visiting a plethora of representative organisations and individual experts before feeling duty bound to visit some of the very best examples of eco-tourism throughout the country.

Representative organisations and associations:

Cooprena.

Formed in 1994, Cooprena is a membership organisation for farming and rural community cooperatives that have diversified into tourism. There are 13 member cooperatives throughout the country, all of whom offer accommodation to tourists and in some cases additional activities and attractions such as horse riding, boat trips, fishing, farm visits, nature trails, restaurants, local crafts and even a wildlife rescue centre.

Cooprena's aims and objectives are to assist their members in developing their tourism product and link them with the market place. The head office in San Jose has a total of seven staff involved in various tasks including training, promotion, research, fundraising and a commercial travel agency known as Simbiosis. Simbiosis doesn't just limit its offering to Cooprena members, but non members must be community based and have sustainability, eco and rural tourism credentials.

Funding.

Although Simbiosis does create some revenue for Cooprena it is only able to carry out the majority of its activities thanks to generous international funding. The Interamerica development bank based in the United States supports governments and NGO's throughout Latin America. In September 2006 it awarded Cooprena funding totalling nearly one million US dollars over the next four years. The purpose of the funding is to carry out research into the demand for rural tourism, prepare strategies, run workshops and seminars, develop an manual for 'Best Practice', create marketing material and give capital grants to cooperatives to improve their products.

Actuar.

Actuar was formed in 2001 by the coming together of seventeen rural tourism associations, now numbering twenty six. It is dedicated to promoting community based rural tourism throughout Costa Rica. By creating a jointly owned umbrella organisation it can achieve much more in terms of training, marketing and promotion.

The individual associations are located in rural areas close to National Parks or other protected areas within the 'Biological Corridor' and were formed in the 1990's to assist local people whose agricultural practices were being restricted by law due to their close proximity to protected areas. Most associations have initially developed at grass roots level usually by local farmers, while others started out as conservation organisations and moved into rural tourism to create more income. If the communities

were to remain viable they needed to find a new way to generate income and tourism was seen as the most viable option.

Since the mid 1990's the associations have been receiving financial assistance from the United Nations, originally for capital projects, with the emphasis changing to training and marketing. Much of the training is carried out through bespoke workshops within the small communities encouraging operators to build on their unique offerings by rescuing traditional cuisine, keeping other traditional activities alive and learning market skills.

Actuar's main activities involve marketing and promoting its member groups to the wider world, especially North America, France and Spain, operating a direct bookings service and administering the UN funded grants. It also has its own tour operator, designing trips for overseas visitors normally lasting for two to three weeks. Other tour operators can also sell packages on behalf of Actuar for a 5% commission and it allows other private reservation services in Europe and the United States to take bookings on its behalf.

The three permanent staff in the capital San Jose are very committed to the organisation and more community groups are queuing up to join, but it cannot afford to expand too quickly and many of the groups wishing to join are in areas not known for tourism and need to develop further before joining. However, Actuar is working in conjunction with Cooprena, the Costa Rican Tourist Board and Acepesa (a technical assistance NGO) to open up new rural areas for tourism.

Canaeco.

Canaeco is Costa Rica's eco-tourism chamber of commerce. Back in 2001 when it was first formed its founding members were a few independent consultants, small hotels and a travel agency. At the start of 2007 membership was up to 80 and still growing. All the major eco-tourism organisations such as the Rainforest Alliance, Actuar and Cooprena have joined. Other members include:

Turismo Banco National which is sympathetic to the eco-tourism industry and will give easy loans to small businesses for sustainable investment.

Nature Air, the country's domestic airline which claims to be the first in the world to be carbon neutral, charging a levy on all flights which is in turn invested into rainforest projects.

Mapache rent a car, who rent out hybrid cars to minimise carbon emissions.

Canaeco focuses its efforts on lobbying government and non government bodies, promoting its members and the eco-tourism sector in general.

Membership criteria includes involvement with the local community, a respect for cultural issues, a commitment to preserving the environment, the giving of a genuine eco-tourism experience, minimum levels of quality and membership of the National Tourist Board.

Sustainable Tourism Certification is optional for reasons explained later in this report. However after much pressure the National Tourist Board has finally agreed with Canaeco to pilot a new sustainable tourism grading scheme later in 2007 aimed solely at small eco-tourism businesses. This new pilot scheme is designed to be more accessible and user friendly than the present one.

Canaeco relies largely on its growing membership for financial support, although the Tourist Board and a few sponsors such as the National Bank will support costs involved in putting on forums and events.

Federico Gallegos, the organisation's current president has his own upmarket eco-tourism business. When he became president a few years ago Canaeco was still very small and without an office. Federico had a great belief in the importance of such an organisation. He offered up space in his own offices and took the risk of financing the salary of a full time member of staff under the proviso that Canaeco would only reimburse him if and when it could afford to. He has since been paid back and it is expected that within a couple of years the organisation will be funded well enough through its membership to have its own office.

The Alliance for Support of Rural Tourism.

The Alliance is a collaboration between Cooprena, Actuar, Acepesa and the farmers union known as Mesa National Campesina. It seeks to influence government policy and funding for the rural tourism sector and not without success. The day after my meeting with the General Manager of Cooprena Costa Rica's president publicly declared the government's support for rural tourism. In Costa Rican politics such an announcement normally precipitates favourable legislation and public funding. The alliance had been lobbying for two years for such a move to be made.

The Alliance also produces the 'Real Costa Rica' tourist guide, puts on an annual rural tourism fair aimed mostly at attracting inbound travel agencies and has also been successful in lobbying the national bank of Costa Rica to make it easier for its members to obtain loans.

The future.

In many ways there is much to feel positive about for the future of the rural/sustainable/eco-tourism sector within Costa Rica. It is well ahead of most of its competitors in terms of awareness and development of the product and for several years it has shown a healthy annual growth rate of between 8% and 15%.

However, there is no room for complacency with increasing competition from other parts of Central America. There is also a general concern that Costa Rica risks tarnishing its eco-tourism image through the rapid development of large unsustainable coastal resorts aimed almost exclusively at the North American package holiday market.

Sustainable tourism certification.



Phrases like environmental sustainability, carbon footprint etc. are now commonplace within our language and tourism operators throughout the world have woken up to the benefits of being seen to be 'Green'. As a result a whole plethora of certification schemes have sprung up in recent years.

As far back as the early 1990's Costa Rica was holding itself up as a world model for sustainable tourism development. With the creation of numerous well protected national parks and a large number of small low impact eco-tourism enterprises it could fully justify its claim and is to this day is regarded a world leader in eco-tourism and sustainable tourism practices. I was therefore keen to see what it had done about assessing and certifying the industry.

Unfortunately its 'Certification in Sustainable Tourism program' (CST) has been beset with problems and very slow to get off the ground. The general view amongst the small tourism operator and the eco-tourism organisations is that it has been ill thought out with many small operators finding the administrative procedures too demanding to justify the effort. Take up has been very patchy and despite this poor administration has created a backlog of applications waiting to be assessed.

My initial disappointment was tempered by a meeting with the Rainforest Alliance, which as you would expect has a strong presence within Latin America. Luckily for me its Central American headquarters are in Costa Rica.

The Rainforest Alliance is putting an enormous amount of effort into promoting sustainable tourism certification initiatives to tourism businesses across the region, particularly in Guatemala, Belize and Costa Rica.

Certification is based on the following three pillars; environmental, social/cultural and economic. It is doing its best to avoid the flaws within the CST scheme, while at the same time create something that crosses national borders.

With funding from the International Development Bank (IDB) the Rainforest Alliance was able to approach tourism businesses of all sizes offering them a guidebook, two day workshop and a one or two day visit from a technical advisor. Some of the more enthusiastic or most suitable businesses would then be selected as pilot projects at no cost to them.

At first it tried direct mailing to businesses, but had little response. Then it tried going via the local chambers of commerce, which wasn't much better. Finally out of desperation it approached the inbound tour operators. They immediately saw the commercial potential of promoting certified environmentally sustainable tourism business in countries that drew much of their tourism trade through their eco-tourism image. These operators went to the operators on the ground and told them they would be promoting sustainability accredited schemes more heavily within their brochures and online. Some went as far as to say it was their intention to eventually phase out working with businesses with no sustainable tourism accreditation. This was enough for tourism operators to contact the Rainforest Alliance in droves.

The Alliance's baseline criterion has around ninety different measures for businesses to consider. They only have to adopt a few to be initially certified and can then build on it to steadily improve their grading. The criteria is the same for each country as the

Alliance is planning a worldwide certification based very much on the same criteria in order to make the switch as easy as possible.

To date within Costa Rica over a thousand individuals have taken part in the workshop sessions and there are now over eighty pilot projects. It's mostly small hotels, but also includes eight tour operators.

Initially the Alliance concentrated on helping small businesses, which are still the backbone of Costa Rica's eco-tourism industry. However a few large international chains have approached the Alliance and have become involved. They felt they were missing out on something and two of Costa Rica's largest airport hotels are now participants in the scheme.

The International Picture.

The Rainforest Alliance has probably researched sustainable tourism certification more than any other organisation and is aware of over a hundred schemes throughout the world. Many are only local and regional within national boundaries. This plethora of schemes creates enormous problems when trying to build public trust, awareness and recognition. Too many schemes simply lead to low awareness, confusion and credibility issues.

The Alliance has been working very hard to try and initiate an international accreditation body via the Sustainable Tourism Stewardship Council. Its work has been funded primarily by the IDB and has come up with a huge 300 page feasibility study. From this, a business plan has been created, with the aim of launching the scheme at the end of 2007.

The aim is that approved companies will run the accreditation schemes with 50% of the funding coming from the IDB. The remaining 50% is expected to come from the individual participating businesses, although much of this is expected to be measured as 'In Kind' contributions whereby a value is put on the time businesses put into gaining their accreditation rather than any money being paid.

At first all efforts will be put into selling it to the industry and getting it right, with promotion and marketing to the consumer only starting when all the creases have been ironed out.

Technical assistance and training will be given to operators and although the scheme accepts it will be impossible for the majority of businesses to be completely sustainable the aim is that they must be steadily working towards this goal, with criteria being steadily tightened over time.

It is not expected that such a scheme would ever be completely self financing, but the aim is to move more in that direction and rely on international and national government bodies to make up the difference.

The airlines carbon footprint.

The Alliance is very aware that although it is very commendable to encourage tourism destinations to become more environmentally sustainable at the point of delivery, the benefits will be cancelled out very quickly if nothing is done to reduce carbon emissions in bringing tourists to the destination.

They are not dodging the issue and were involved in Costa Rica's domestic airline, Nature Air's carbon neutral initiative and are having preliminary discussions with

TACA, the Central American airline consortium. They are also working to find a sympathetic large international carrier who is initially willing to explore ways of making very small incremental steps, as they know this will be a difficult nut to crack.

Costa Rica's environmental hero.

Amos Bien, the saviour and founder of Rara Avis Reserve (mentioned later) commands enormous respect amongst the conservation movement not only within Costa Rica, but also throughout the world. Up until the end of 2006 he was the Director for International Programs within the International Eco-Tourism Society and is one of the key players in developing the international Carbon Offset Program.

I was fortunate enough to meet up with him and below are some of his thoughts he shared with me about the future of eco-tourism within Costa Rica.

Although eco-tourism will always be a niche market there is a general consensus even amongst the large hotel chains that they need to be seen to be more sustainable in the future. Costa Rica is well ahead of its rivals on the ground and in terms of its international image. There are few countries in the world that could surpass Costa Rica in terms of opportunities within this sector, a small country the size of Wales, with less than four million people and more than 5% of the world's natural biodiversity is always going to be at an advantage.

Although beach tourism is growing rapidly a high proportion of tourist's primarily seeking the sun and sea also buy into eco-tourism experiences and the opportunity to mix both experiences often gives Costa Rica the edge over other destinations.

Threats.

However, threats do exist in terms of image and product. Low cost mass tourism is on the increase and if the market's perception of Costa Rica changes to one of just yet another mass tourism destination it may start losing out to other high end eco-tourism destinations. Economically this would not be good as many resort developments are owned by foreign companies and individuals with a large proportion of the income generated never finding its way into the country's economy. Conversely most small eco-tourism businesses are Costa Rican owned, use local labour, supplies and facilities and keep the income generated within the country.

However, even the large overseas chains see the benefits of eco-tourism positioning for the Costa Rican market and to a degree they are willing to play ball as far as sustainability issues are concerned.

The tourist carbon footprint.

Amos is acutely aware that most visitors to Costa Rica have travelled thousands of miles by air just to get there. The heavy reliance on long haul flights immediately questions the environmental sustainability of tourism destinations. However, it is the overall reduction of carbon emissions that is important and Amos is a firm believer that aircraft emissions can be offset. Interestingly 25% of global emissions are from tropical deforestation. Amos believes that removing the future threat of destruction from large tracts of tropical rainforest will in the long term reduce our emissions much more easily and economically than many of the proposals in the present Kyoto accord. He also sees no major long term problems with sourcing hardwood timber, as tropical plantations can produce a harvestable crop in as little as fifteen to twenty years.

A few of the best eco-tourism destinations I visited:

Rara Avis.



All primary rainforests are rich in biodiversity. But at Rara Avis a combination of geology, geography and altitude has made this little piece of rainforest more diverse than most.

Perched on the eastern flanks of Braulio Carrillo National Park, Rara Avis was saved in 1983 by American biologist Amos Bien, who first came to the country as a student in 1977

Amos became acutely aware of the area's biological significance at the same time that it was in danger of being clear felled by a logging company. To cut a long story short Amos found his way onto the logging company's board of directors, first he

convinced them the area was not economically viable to log and then persuaded them to sell him the land!

At that time Rara Avis didn't quite border Braulio Carrillo National Park. So the next thing he did was to persuade the government to move the park boundary to the edge of Rara Avis. Therefore in effect enlarging the national park and removing the risk that Rara Avis might one day become a small ecological island.

Amos has since set about creating a showcase eco-tourism reserve, demonstrating how preserving the rainforest can go hand in hand with sustainable wealth creation for the local community.

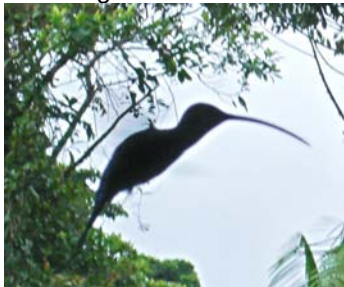


'Blue-jeans' frog.

If the area had been clear felled there would have been a short lived economic bonanza for the local population. But when the logging company moved on it would have left behind a wasteland with no economic value or potential. The thin topsoil once exposed would have soon been lost to erosion, so not even farming would have been a possibility.

Instead the reserve is a magnet for tourists and researchers alike and is able to support more than 15 local families through direct employment and the purchase of goods and services. The reserve also supports a number of endemic plants that have considerable economic potential.

Humming Bird.



Getting to the reserve is half the fun, which starts once you leave the nearest road. First you have to climb onto the back of a truck and endure over an hour of bouncing along an incredibly rough track. Once the truck can go no further you transfer to a tractor pulled trailer for a further two bruising hours. When I came to leave Rara Avis the tractor wasn't running. The only way out was a two hour walk followed by another two hours on the back of a horse! For someone who hasn't ridden for nearly twenty years this was most definitely the most demanding mode of transport.

Tortuguero.



This place is a gem. The village and adjacent National Park of Tortuguero sit on an isolated stretch of Costa Rica's northern Caribbean coast. Even to this day there is no road access and the only way to get there is to either fly or make your way by boat via an intricate network of rivers, lagoons and canals. The beach here is famed as the most important nesting site in the world for the Green Sea Turtle. It is also one of the wettest places in the world receiving over 200 inches of rain a year.

Despite its isolation selective timber extraction started in the 1940's and for the next two decades the area experienced an economic boom until all the easily accessible timber was exhausted. The only large trees to survive this onslaught were the wild almond trees. Their timber is so dense it sinks in water and because the only way to get the timber out was to float it down the rivers and canals the trees were saved from the loggers' chainsaws.



'Jesus Christ' lizard.

During the same period over fishing and egg hunting saw numbers of the Green Sea Turtle begin to decline at an alarming rate. Within ten years the once numerous turtle became endangered. However thanks to international pressure from biologists the area was formally declared a National Park in 1975, taking in a 30km stretch of turtle nesting beach and extending to more than 200 square kilometres of surrounding forest, canals and waterways.

Although this was initially seen as a blow by the local population all their activities had been unsustainable. Now more than thirty years after the formation of the Park locals make a good and more importantly sustainable living from tourists who flock to see the turtles come ashore to lay their eggs and spot the abundant wildlife in and around the waterways.



Fresh water turtle.

Locals appreciate that tourism has been their saviour and that the only way to keep tourists coming is to preserve the environment and its wildlife. Guides for the turtle tours must be registered, the numbers of visitors are limited and everyone must be off the beach by midnight. The locals accept these rules because they know the alternative would be a return to an unsustainable boom and bust scenario.

Although I visited outside the turtle nesting season there was still plenty to see. In one three hour canoe trip with a guide I saw monkeys, toucans, parrots, humming birds, black river turtles, caiman, iguanas, otters and the incredible 'Jesus Christ' lizard. Enough to keep any wildlife watcher happy for a very long time!

Laguna del Lagarto Lodge.



Situated in a remote location close to the border with Nicaragua and surrounded by over 500 hectares of protected tropical forest, this place is a wildlife watcher's paradise, with over 380 species of bird and several types of reptile to be seen. It is a stronghold for the endangered Greater Green Macaw hosting approximately 10% of the world's remaining population.

The lodge can accommodate just over 40 people in either twin or triple rooms. Guests can sink into their deep comfy hammocks out on the verandas and watch toucans and parrots fly in to peck at the fresh bunches of bananas hauled up a nearby tree each morning.

Immediately below the lodge are two lagoons with fresh water turtles and caiman that can be spotted on guided visits an hour after dusk every evening. There are also over 10km's of rainforest trails that guests can choose to explore on their own or with a guide.

Another option is to take a four hour trip down the San Carlos River and I felt compelled to do this as part of my research! During the trip we spotted howler monkeys, crocodiles, an otter and too many colourful birds to mention.



Caiman at night just below the lodge.

As is so often the case the spin off to providing a true eco-tourism experience has not only been the protection of the natural environment, but also social and economic benefits for the local community. Here are just a few examples of the benefits the Lodge has created:

It has been instrumental in bringing electricity and telephone lines into the local village and contributes to the upkeep of the only road into the village and its water supply.

It directly employs eight local people in an area where unemployment is high.

It purchases nearly all its food from local farmers.

Guests visit the local village and spend money on food and souvenirs.

The boat for the lodge's river trips doubles up as a river taxi service for locals.

Plus here are a couple of personal stories:

Before he came to work for the lodge, Adolfo Gonzalez was an odd jobbing economic refugee from Nicaragua. He started out as a gardener, but his culinary skills soon came to light and before long he became the senior cook. A group of German guests were so impressed they arranged for him to tour Germany for three months to teach Costa Rican cuisine.



Red-eyed tree frog

Several years ago the lodge took on an enthusiastic local farm worker and trained him up to be a guide. Part of his training took him to the capital, San Jose to study English. Later a visiting tour operator offered him the opportunity to spend time in the United States as a canoe guide. On his return he felt emboldened enough to set up his own successful canoe expedition business.

Both these individuals started out as poor rural labourers with very limited education and horizons. The lodge has given them the opportunity to have experiences and achieve success beyond their dreams.

Conclusions.

What I have come away with from my Fellowship is a feeling of great optimism. Rural areas in other parts of the world have had to face up to far bigger threats and disadvantages than we do at home. Yet again and again throughout my travels I came across individuals and communities that have turned themselves around into real success stories.

However, very few of the examples I came across would have succeeded without the individuals involved being prepared to see the bigger picture, by cooperating with each other and working for the greater good.

This is where I feel the real challenge lies here in the UK. Rural communities and small rural businesses in Britain do not have the same cooperative culture as many of the places I visited. It is a skill we must learn and learn we must if we wish to reach our full potential.

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Costa Rica

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