Social Tourism in Rural Communities:
An instrument for promoting sustainable resource management

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Introduction:

Tourism: the industry without smokestacks. Many consider the industry to be a virtually costless generator of employment and well-being, offering seemingly limitless opportunities for “real” economic development to countless communities away from the centers of global industry and financial power. Even better, the industry is often heralded as a perfect instrument for achieving the goals of sustainable development, a vehicle by which a nation can exploit its resources while protecting them. A surprising feature of the tourism literature is its unquestioning acceptance of this vision, with many promoters fashioning an analysis designed to confirm the industry’s contribution to national development and most especially to foreign exchange earnings without critically examining its real impact on society and the environment.

Mexico is one of the world’s leading tourist destinations, boasting receipts of more than $8,000 million this year. Its importance is symbolized by the privileged position of the Secretary of Tourism as a separate government ministry. This inflow of resources has led Mexican governments, one after another, to focus almost exclusively on international tourism, assuming it to be a sort of cornucopia, a bottomless font of wealth. At this point it is probably unnecessary to berate the government and industry for their catering virtually exclusively to international visitors, designing and building infrastructure and hostelries for this group, which is flocking to Mexico in ever-growing numbers. Instead of examining this segment of the tourist market, by and away the most lucrative for the service providers, this paper focuses on another issue: How can a small but dynamic segment of the tourist trade be constructively organized to contribute to a sustainable pattern of regional resource management by rural communities?

By describing two different approaches to planning for tourism in protected natural areas, the analysis suggests important lessons for people critically examining these activities as an instrument for sustainable resource management and improvements in social well being. Complementing these examples, the paper then examines the potential of mass domestic tourism for stimulating economic activity and sound resource management practices in rural areas. These rural communities can become well equipped to receive small groups, and ensure respect for the ecosystems they visit. Various forms of tourism catering to niche markets of foreign visitors and low-income travelers from within are proving most attractive to communities searching for ways of promoting profitable avenues to generate income and employment opportunities while sacrificing as little of their traditions and inherited production systems.

If one lesson emerges from these experiences, it is that tourism should not be given the burden for single-handedly creating opportunities for community or regional well being. Only if it is part of a strategy for building a diversified productive base to assure everyone opportunities for individual and collective advance, can tourism become an instrument for sustainable regional resource management. This is the goal we seek to achieve by including tourism in our planning process.
The obstacles to sustainability:

Sustainable development has become a powerful and controversial theme, creating seemingly impossible goals for policy makers and development practitioners. Prevailing trickle-down approaches to economic development enrich a few and stimulate growth in "modern" economies and sectors within traditional societies, but they do not address most people's needs; moreover, they contribute to depleting the world's store of natural wealth and to a deterioration in the quality of our natural environment. A new discourse of sustainability is emerging, one that troubles thoughtful people, who are realizing the difficulty of implementing such an approach. When fully understood, people realize that present levels of per capita resource consumption in the richer countries cannot possibly be maintained much less generalized to people living in the rest of the world.

In the ultimate analysis, we rediscover that in present conditions, the very accumulation of wealth creates poverty. While the poor often survive in scandalous conditions and are forced to contribute to further degradation, they do so because they know no alternatives. Even in the poorest of countries, social chasms not only prevent resources from being used to ameliorate their situation, but actually compound the damage by forcing people from their communities and denying them the opportunities to devise their own solutions. For this reason, the search for sustainability involves a dual strategy: on the one hand, it must involve an unleashing of the bonds that restrain people from strengthening their own organizations, or creating new ones, to use their relatively meager resources to search for an alternative and autonomous resolution to their problems. On the other hand, a sustainable development strategy must contribute to the forging of a new social pact, cemented in the recognition that the eradication of poverty and the democratic incorporation of the disenfranchised into a more diverse productive structure are essential.

Sustainability, then, is about the struggle for diversity in all its dimensions. International campaigns to conserve germplasm, to protect endangered species, and to create reserves of the biosphere are multiplying in reaction to the mounting offensive, while communities and their hard pressed members struggle against powerful external forces to defend their individuality, their rights and ability to survive while trying to provide for their brethren. The concern for biodiversity, in its broadest sense, encompasses not only threatened flora and fauna, but also the survivability of these human communities, as stewards of the natural environment and as producers. Internationalization has stymied this movement towards diversity. The powerful economic groups that shape the world economy (transnational corporations and financial institutions, and influential local powers, among others) are striving to break down these individual or regional traits, molding us into more homogenous and tractable social groups. They would position us to support the existing structure of inequality and to engage in productive employment; and, for those lucky enough to enjoy high enough incomes, to become customers.
The study of tourism offers many opportunities to reflect on the importance of sustainability, and the possibilities of implementing approaches that move us in a new direction. But it also suggests that there are significant obstacles. Overcoming these obstacles requires more than well-intentioned policies; it requires a new correlation of social forces, a move towards broad-based democratic participation in all aspects of life, within each country and in the concert of nations. Strategies to face these challenges must respond to the dual challenges of insulating these communities from further encroachment and assuring their viability.

The obstacles are an integral part of the world system, a system of increasing duality, polarized between the rich and poor –nations, regions, communities, and individuals. A small number of nations dominate the global power structure, guiding production and determining welfare levels. The remaining nations compete among themselves to offer lucrative conditions that will entice the corporate and financial powers to locate within their boundaries. Similarly, regions and communities within nations engage in self-destructive forms of bargaining –compromising the welfare of their workers and the building of their own infrastructure– in an attempt to outbid each other for the fruits of global growth. The regions unable to attract investment suffer the ignoble fate of losers in a permanent economic olympics, condemned to oblivion on the world stage, their populations doomed to marginality and permanent poverty.

Sustainability is not possible as long as the expansion of capital enlarges the ranks of the poor and impedes their access to the resources needed for mere survival. Capitalism no longer needs growing armies of unemployed to ensure low wages, nor need it control vast areas to secure regular access to the raw materials and primary products for its productive machine; these inputs are now assured by new institutional arrangements that modified social and productive structures to fit the needs of capital. At present, however, great excesses are generated, excesses that impoverish people and ravage their regions. Profound changes are required to facilitate a strategy of sustainable development: in this paper we explore several approaches in which tourist activities might have a role, suggesting that ecotourism and even a new form of mass tourism may contribute to promoting a new form of autonomous regional resource management conducive to sustainability: a new political structure that would allow people to rebuild their rural societies, produce goods and services in a sustainable fashion while expanding the environmental stewardship services they have always provided.

Research shows that when given the chance and access to resources, the poor are more likely than other groups to engage in direct actions to protect and improve the environment. From this perspective, an alternative development model requires new ways to encourage the direct participation of peasant and indigenous communities in a program of job creation in rural areas to increase incomes and improve living standards. By proposing policies that encourage and safeguard rural producers in their efforts to become once again a vibrant and viable social and productive force, this essay proposes to contribute to an awareness of the deliberate steps needed to promote sustainability.

Ecotourism in particular is widely heralded as the perfect economic activity to promote both sustainability and social well-being. In contrast, many analysts consider mass tourism to be an anathema to sustainability and incompatible with the provision of quality employment for local people. As we shall see in this essay, the relationship between these two goals depends on the
nature of the process by which these services are provided rather than the product itself. Even successful ecotourism projects need not guarantee support for local communities or provide employment and income; such programs can even threaten the ecology of a region. The outcomes will depend not on any magical formula, but rather on the process of design and implementation, on the way in which the local communities and their resource base become participants in the project or objects of trade and exchange.

The Limitations of Ecotourism: The Monarch Butterfly:

The Monarch butterfly and its 5,000 mile trek between Canada and Mexico have come to symbolize the bridge that is bringing the three nations of North America closer together, forging a single trading bloc. The phenomenon of the overwintering of the Monarch Butterfly was "discovered" some 20 years ago (1974-1976) when researchers from the University of Florida finally traced the flight path from Canada. Of course, their presence was well known to local residents and to a broader segment of the population in west-central Mexico from time immemorial, but with the publication of the details of the journey in Scientific American and National Geographic magazines, its social and economic significance altered conditions in the region.

In spite of efforts to impose a "low-profile" on the phenomenon of the nesting butterflies, tourism grew rapidly. The visitors stream exploded during the following years, from about 25,000 a season to some 250,000 people who came from other parts of Mexico in the 1998-1999 season, to observe the spectacle during their four-month visit, a human tidal wave that virtually swamps the region. Foreign tourists still make up an insignificant proportion, certainly less than five percent of the total visitor population. International concern for the welfare of the Monarchs mounted, increasing tensions. Outside groups and interests irrupted in the area, staking a privileged claim on fast solutions to local problems. In 1997, ecologists went so far as to propose buying the local peasants’ lands and moving them out (Aridjis and Brower, 1996), as the only viable way to protect the butterfly’s habitat. They did not, however, give any consideration to what thousands of families might do instead or their impact on other regions if forced to migrate.

The lives of the people living in and around the Reserve changed dramatically. The communities trace their origins back hundreds of years. After the conquest, the indigenous population intermingled with settlers early in the Colonial period, transforming the region into a typical peasant society, organized into more than fifty communities dispersed throughout the highland plateau. At the turn of the century, they actively participated in the revolutionary struggles and were rewarded with communal titles to the dense forests, previously controlled by descendants of the colonial aristocracy. The villages evolved into prosperous rural economies, with a diversified production system that combined the cutting of timber with low-intensity farming. This combination assured the supplies that met their needs: the basic crops for their diet (maize and beans) as well as artisan pottery and furniture to complement sales of logs.

There are serious social and economic problems in the protected area. Many of these problems are simply local manifestations of the larger crisis of Mexican society, making it difficult for poor rural producers to survive by continuing their traditional activities. In this protected area, people have been particularly affected by specific conservation measures that intensified the
adjustment process. The declaration of certain important areas to be part of the nuclear and buffer zones of the reserve, led to a prohibition or severe restriction on traditional forestry activities, without offering the communities or their members compensation for the reclassification of their lands or alternative productive opportunities with which they might earn a livelihood elsewhere in the region.

The region’s problems and those of the communities did not begin in 1986 and cannot be attributed solely to the butterflies. Many are simply local manifestations of the larger crises of Mexican society, making it difficult for poor rural producers to survive by continuing their traditional activities. Orthodox models of local development proved inoperative, because the region is ill-equipped to compete with nearby areas to generate productive modern employment opportunities. Official policies discouraged peasant agriculture and local systems of control by economic élites and political bosses were an important part of the local scene long before the winged visitors acquired their new-found fame. Industrial demand for new sources of pulp, created a thriving illegal, but tacitly acknowledged, market for wood that many impoverished families supplied, creating pressures on the forests and dividing communities, pitting neighbors against another. The unbridled expansion of “ecotourism” and the appropriation of the spoils by a very small group of people further compounded the problems of social polarization and environmental decay.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, then, the communities find themselves at a complex crossroads. Shorn of their traditional sources of income, by the prohibition or severe restriction on traditional forestry activities with the creation of the Monarch Reserve, and with no recourse to agriculture and artisan production that have become unprofitable, traditional leaders and institutions are also being ignored or frankly undermined. Outside interests (paper companies, tourist agencies and regional power brokers) are exploiting the void created by the erosion of local community pillars. As a result, many people must leave to support their families, who remain in their communities to maintain the elements of the traditional society that are still so important. Migrating in search of jobs elsewhere, these people suffer the ignominy of poor pay and unhealthy working conditions in the nearby towns or in Mexico City, earning barely enough to allow their families to continue living in their communities; some venture further, assuming the risks of crossing the border with the US, with hopes for better pay.

With Mexico’s accession to NAFTA, and its proximity to Mexico City, this tourist area is one of the most heavily visited in the country. After years of experience with conflict and hordes of “experts” offering their frequently contradictory and almost invariably unrealistic solutions, it is little wonder that the communities listen with incredulity to the pious political promises of new commitments to “developing” the region. But without their own resources or an ability to negotiate their own terms with outside commercial interests, the peasant communities cannot construct their own alternative. Nor can they afford to take the risks and make the sacrifices required to initiate a long-term process of building new enterprises and reconstructing the diversified resource-based productive structure that would be required to successfully incorporate this short-term avalanche of tourists into the region. No group is seriously considering the possibility of diversification, so that people from Mexico City and Guadalajara might enjoy the region’s natural beauty and cultural variety visit during their traditional vacation periods. Although complementary, non-tourist related projects would be essential for any tourist
program to become a successful link in a regional development program, none of the outside agencies have shown any interest in a more ambitious program.

A local confederation of communities (*Alianza de Ejidos*) has begun to play an important role in creating new opportunities to replace the unraveling economic system. Bureaucratic imposition, outside control, poor planning and the lack of organization fueled a debilitating competitive struggle among the communities. The principal problem facing the region at this moment is the lack of understanding by outside agencies charged with managing the Reserve of the need for initiating a broad variety of complementary productive activities to create employment that will allow the 65,000 people in the region to improve the quality of their life while also exploiting the forest in a more sustainable way. As long as the corrective measures are focused exclusively on the miniscule area defined as sanctuaries, they will only deepen the social chasm and environmental decline generated by limited opportunities and self-interested tourist developed from outside.

A new strategy requires reexamining the resource base so that agroforestry and other forms of cultivation and gathering of wild products might provide a basis for a forging a new vision for the regional economy. At the heart of the problem is the limited conception of the region as a passive receiving area for the butterflies and their visitors during the winter months. Any alternative would redefine the region to include a larger area where new small-scale agroindustries would induce a demand for agricultural and agroforestry products. As we shall see below, there are alternatives that would enable the communities to offer their services to thirty million Mexicans who are anxiously searching for attractive, healthy, affordable recreation and vacation spots.

Tourism services themselves must be diversified, in both time and space to accommodate a broader base of visitors for longer stays that also extend the region’s attractiveness beyond the four-month period of the Monarchs’ visit (Chapela and Barkin 1995). To implement more comprehensive production strategies, including a range of new activities, additional information about opportunities and markets must be disseminated, as well as mechanisms to channel available resources more effectively. Local organizations must create structures to institutionalize cooperation, constructed on basis of broad-based effective participation. This is the route to creating a strategy of autonomous local development in which ecotourism, based on the wonderful spectacle of the Monarch Butterfly, would contribute to an overall strategy of sustainability.

**Community-Based Ecotourism in the Bahias de Huatulco:**

In 1984, a mega-resort, designed to attract beach tourism to international hotels, was initiated on the south Pacific coast of Mexico in the state of Oaxaca. Known as the Bahias de Huatulco, the spectacular setting, in a previously isolated region, is home to about 70,000 people from four different indigenous groups living in some 150 subsistence communities. The population is widely dispersed over 700,000 hectares in the surrounding highlands and a number of small fishing villages. The new mega-resort and the accompanying infrastructure integrated the region into the international market, sparking a self-reinforcing cycle of speculation and investment that accelerated the process of social and spatial polarization, impoverishing the native populations
and raising tensions throughout the region. The destruction wrought by Hurricane Paulina in October 1997 suddenly intensified the problems of poverty and environmental destruction. Even before the disaster, a local non-governmental organization (NGO), the Center for Ecological Support (CSE, for its Spanish initials), created in 1993 to promote a regional watershed rehabilitation scheme, had begun to implement a sustainable resource management program, by channeling domestic and international resources to attack these problems, with a series of productive programs designed to stem environmental degradation and strengthen the economy. With these activities, a renewed sense of responsibility towards nature is emerging in most of those communities that had been able to maintain communal organizations. This is the basis for the growing enthusiasm of the communities to participate in the regeneration activities.

In 1958, the landscape of the coast of Oaxaca, seen from the peaks of the Sierra Sur, was that of multiple greenish tones, contrasting with the multiple bluish tones of the Pacific Ocean. In the river basin feeding the coastal aquifer, minor breaks of less than 5% in the tropical dry forest included traditional fields of corn, beans and fruit trees. Canopies of shade trees covered the coffee areas. Forty years later, the forest coverage had been reduced by 50%; only 20% resembled its former condition, while the rest suffered from a partial extraction of its timber resources. During the past 15 years the rate of deforestation doubled that of the previous 25 years. Historically, the inherited culture of forest management within the coastal communities has been eroded by an antiquated and venal commercial structure. In spite of sustained demand for tropical hardwoods and attractive prices for such species as Rosewood and Lignum Vitae, a complex and costly system of intermediation discouraged communal planting and conservation and forced more intensive exploitation by drastically reducing local prices. Tourist development induced a heavy flow of migrants from the central highlands and other regions to the coast, overwhelming communal management practices that defined and restricted access to the forests. Devastation of the forests has been followed by the erosion of the soil and the final result is critical: the water supply to the Bahias de Huatulco tourist development area will be exhausted by the year 2020, unless some regeneration program is implemented. ¹

Most people in the region are still not even aware of the depths of the impending crisis. International integration assures regular supplies of lumber and food at prices that do not reflect their real costs: producers are poorly paid, water wasted and the environment despoiled. Consumers have become accustomed to these subsidies from the poor, from a clientelist political structure, and from nature; in the process, peasants have been forced to eke out an existence, dismembering their communities and devastating their environment. So absurd is the process, that the new hotels elected to import rolls of carpet grass from the center of the country rather than seed new lawns in Huatulco, as if the region’s abundant natural and human resources were not relevant. Even water appears as a gift from heaven: in Huatulco, urban consumers receive it free and, although they complain, the hotels are only charged a fraction of what they would pay in other international resorts. Underpriced resources for the privileged urban population are yet another signal discouraging peasant society from continuing its arduous task of environmental management, truncating its time honored commitment to assure water for their children and their

¹ Data collected from the battery of wells that supply water to the coastal areas showed a 26% decline in the levels of the aquifers between 1986 and 1992. Extrapolation of this trend leaves insufficient water for cost-effective pumping in less than a quarter century
grandchildren. In the end this combination of factors contributes to a self-devaluation within peasant society, a seemingly irreversible loss of self-esteem.²

Unlike many other groups in Mexico and Latin America, the communities in this part of Oaxaca have strong communal organizations. In spite of having origins in four different ethnic groups, each with its own language and cultural patterns, they share a tradition of strong collective roots based on the collective ownership and management of their land, their abiding support for local forms of communal organization and well-engrained cultural patterns that reinforce the traditional mechanisms of decision making, known as "uses and customs". These communities have struggled through the centuries to defend their homelands against outside invaders, be they other Mesoamerican groups, the Spanish conquerors, or the new powers from a modernizing nation. When the government decided to create the resort development, the Oaxacan natives were rudely shunted aside. Expelled from their coastal communities, even the meager compensations promised for expropriations were rarely paid. Uncomprehending and without alternatives, many of those who resisted were slaughtered in the unrelenting drive to push forward with the program. Developers moved in with impunity, backed by military might and a political commitment to forge a beachfront paradise. It is no wonder, then, that as the hotels were inaugurated and menial employment offered, many in the region chose to remain in their communities while a few migrated further afield in search of better opportunities. Traditional authorities and elders counseled against integration, moving to reinforce local options.

The CSE was created sometime after the first large hotels were inaugurated in the new resort. Cognizant of the underlying conflicts that permeated the region, the NGO carved out a niche for itself: working with the native communities to regenerate some of the smaller river basins in the region as part of a broader effort to promote community welfare, through the rehabilitation of the tropical dry forests, replanting denuded areas with native species of trees having cultural and commercial value. It started to work with the communities to implement a program of diversified production in which the forests would play a central role, but where complementary activities would offer an essential economic underpinning to assure its economic viability and guarantee sufficient opportunities to persuade people to remain and strengthen confidence in community governance and management capabilities.

The complementary activities envisioned in the CSE program included ecotourism, a renewed emphasis on production of basic foods for local consumption, and commercial production of goods and services for local and foreign markets. The new strategy was anchored in a carefully designed program to use reforestation to rebuild the deteriorated watershed that would be the foundation of a stronger productive system in the region, a prerequisite for supporting the local communities and their cultures. This approach was designed to create a favorable environment to attract visitors who might be interested in a variety of ecotourism offerings; these would be owned and managed by the indigenous communities participating in the program and sensitive to the natural heritage that they were rescuing and preserving. The bungalows were constructed as part of the program, creating an opportunity to offer some ecotourism services as part of an effort to demonstrate that the local cultures were also of interest to people from far afield; local people were pleasantly surprised about the outside interest in their practices for managing and

² The uprising by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in January 1994 is dramatic testimony to the depths of this process and the latent reserve of pride in this endangered heritage.
conserving the environment and enthusiastic about being paid for the privilege of people visiting them.

From the very beginning, it was clear that tourism might play an important part of resource management program. The communities would be able to offer a variety of nature tourism and similar activities as part of a diversified regional development effort. The CSE initiated preparations by designing bungalows that could be built by the communities. Local promoters were already helping people to integrate this type of activity into community life, encouraging women to think about preparing traditional meals and helping men to improve their skills to ensure that the construction would offer a quality service. When the hurricane struck, several of the buildings were destroyed or collapsed, forcing design modifications that produced a more solid and attractive structure.

If this activity is to be successful, however, many more cottages will have to be built throughout the larger river basin. Careful thought is being given to the carrying capacity of each area within the region, and the ability of the people in the communities to provide the range of services that will be offered to the visitors, without threatening the structure of local life and production. Some of the local tourist promoters (including one of the hotels) have agreed to participate by channeling some their own clients into these facilities on attractive terms that will assure the communities a steady flow of income and gainful employment consistent with strengthening local institutions.

The CSE is proceeding cautiously. Once initiated, the temptation to attract large groups presents a permanent threat to the project, the ecosystem, and the communities themselves. The steady progress in incorporating the communities into the development of a variety of smaller enterprises is part of the long-term process of creating appropriate conditions for the communities to begin to control directly the activities. Today's efforts to rehabilitate the region and create the foundations of a basic infrastructure are being financed with development assistance funds from the national government and international sources. The move to a commercial stage will require different sources of capital: there is no lack of outside interests interested in financing this project. Here again, the CSE again views its role as more than that of a promoter; it is not simply attempting to create opportunities so that the communities can take advantage of a potential market. The local hotels have expressed their willingness to support the implementation of the overall resource management program through the ecotourism activities. Some of the more visionary hoteliers have begun to realize that this offering can complement rather than detract from their own markets and have accepted the position of the CSE that community ownership and control is an essential building block to assure the viability of the overall reconstruction program. The main challenge will be to control this development so that is a complementary part of the larger program, rather than one that dominates and subsumes the communities and their ecosystems to the short-term demands of a sometimes fickle market.
Domestic mass tourism:

The Mexican people do a great deal of travelling. More than 40% of the population travels away from home, with more than half of them staying away for at least one night; thus, more than 20 million people make at least one overnight trip a year, a number equal to the flows coming from abroad, including visiting Mexican nationals and border travelers. The overnight travelers are predominantly young (between 15 and 34 years of age); about half of the university educated people travel, as do those in the upper income groups. There are significant differences among occupational groups with high-level personnel, predominantly in public service, and educators travelling substantially more than others.

Domestic travel is predominantly family oriented. Almost half of the people who spend at least a night away from home visit family; however, the survey cannot distinguish between those going to visit family and those who take part in regional fairs or religious events, a common form of relaxation for Mexican families. This is in contrast to international travel by Mexicans, which is primarily for pleasure (40-45%) rather than family visits (30-35%). The second most important reason for domestic travel is for vacation or pleasure (25-30%). When traveling within the country, Mexicans overwhelmingly stay with family or friends (60%) rather than in hotels or motels (25%). Travel is widely dispersed, reflecting the significance of historical patterns of extended family relationships in determining destinations, rather than the distribution of urban settlements that developed during recent decades. Finally, in spite of the fact that most better off Mexicans travel a disproportionate amount, the majority of voyages are by interurban bus (55%), with private automobile representing a second option (35-40%); this is an indicator of the highly skewed distribution of income in Mexico, with more than three-quarters of the population earning less than what is officially considered to be the poverty level, thus making it necessary to use public transportation. In contrast, less than 10 percent of the population leaves the country. Of these about 40% of drive their own cars and a similar proportion use commercial airlines, reflecting the wealth of this small segment of international travelers or their proximity to the northern border with the United States. The family-oriented character of domestic travel reduces travel costs to about US$250 per trip, or less than $15 per person/night within the country; in contrast, foreigners are said to spend US$550 per person/trip in Mexico. Comparable figures for Mexicans going abroad are about $1,400 per trip and $50/person/night.

Thus, in strictly quantitative terms, we see a very different picture than the national tourist authorities would have us imagine. The Tourist Ministry defines a "tourist" as "a person who lives abroad, crosses the border and spends at least one night in the country" (Chi Chase, 1998). Although foreign tourism in Mexico is a major generator of foreign exchange in gross terms, census data indicate that most tourist employment and income is not generated in the regions where the mega-projects have been promoted in recent years. Spontaneous (small group and

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3 The data are taken from a quarterly survey administered irregularly by the Census Bureau (INEGI). The survey results are too incomplete to warrant including any systematization. Although the information are generally consistent over time, the presentation of the data available for this project do not lend themselves to easy tabular presentation; for further analysis, see Barkin in Ghimire (2000).

4 There is ample evidence to suggest that net earnings from foreign tourism to beach areas is substantially lower because of the heavy import component of expenditures there and the high fees and commissions charged by tour organizations and service providers for this segment of the market.
individual) foreign tourism and domestic travel account for considerably more employment and revenue than organized beach tourism, and probably has a far more widely distributed economic impact. This type of tourism generally has a higher multiplier effect in terms of both employment and income because it uses fewer imported products; requires less payments abroad for licenses, royalties, franchises, and profit; and employs less sophisticated technologies, that frequently require more intensive use of labor with lower skill levels.

The large volume of domestic mass tourism suggests a large potential that contrasts with the widespread neglect of this market by the Ministry. A careful review of official documents and interviews with key participants in the tourist industry and even in the academic centers preparing professionals reveals a disdain for domestic tourism. With a few notable exceptions, such as hoteliers in the less popular centers of cultural and historic significance, little attention is devoted to attracting or servicing any but the most affluent of Mexico’s tourists.

The neglect of mass tourism within the country is compounded by a systematic bias in public policy-making to provide for the needs of the wealthiest groups. As with most public policy formulation in Mexico during the past fifteen years, the emphasis on encouraging private investment with infrastructure investments and attractive credit facilities has been combined with a privatization of publicly held properties that created attractive opportunities for four and five star tourist developments in the beach resorts and adjoining regions; financing for these mega-projects is quite generous, in contrast to the absence of any special programs in other parts of the country. Domestic tourism is generally only considered to the extent that these clients are oriented to these properties. The bias against “popular” tourism is further reinforced by another characteristic of public policy formulation in Mexico with regard to tourism: the people appointed to Ministerial rank at both the national and state levels are frequently named for their political connections rather than for their knowledge of the sector; even in those instances where they have experience in the area, their programs usually are designed to further their personal investments and create new personal opportunities and are rarely oriented towards an overall plan for balanced development, that takes into account environmental considerations and the needs of the various social groups. The conflict between the individual gain of the titular head of tourist agencies and the design of facilities or the development of regional programs is obvious in an analysis of virtually every tourist development program in the country in which the government plays a role. At the state level, the personal interests dominate public decision-making.

In spite of official policies to discourage rural production and weaken rural communities, one-third of Mexico’s population continues to live there, reflecting a deep-seated commitment by the peasantry to defend themselves and their traditions at any cost. In fact, we estimate that there is an annual transfer from outside these communities of more than $10 thousand million, amounting to an injection of more than 40 percent of the value of rural production, from migrants who have gone abroad (primarily to the USA) either temporarily (by far the largest part) or permanently and from remittances from community members who are working in other parts of Mexico, generally in urban service employment, construction or as agricultural day laborers (Barkin, 2000b). As part of its staunch anti-rural posture, the Tourist Ministry considers

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5 This was always the case. The Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) devoted considerable resources to developing a number of important facilities for “social” or “popular” tourism, as it is called in Mexico.
the visits of Mexicans coming from the US as international tourism, rather than as family visits, characteristic of domestic tourism.

In this context, then, domestic travel and an important part of international visitors contribute to reinforcing the strong family ties and community traditions that persist, in spite of the virulent process of modernization. Many of these visits are timed to coincide with the local patron saint’s day or the traditional celebration of local or regional fairs; this "fiesta" complex, as it is sometimes called, is a fundamental part of social organization in rural and small-town Mexico and the occasion for a significant part of domestic travel. Of course, another grouping of family visits occurs during the Easter and Christmas seasons; summer time is less important an occasion for travel, because many breadwinners depend on agricultural work and rarely have vacations at that time. Thus, family and pleasure visits are highly correlated with other events that reinforce community cohesiveness and the local economy, even when the local productive activities might not appear to be sufficient to support the population. This particular character of travel in Mexico, must be an important element in thinking about a program to promote domestic tourism.

Interestingly enough, these community based activities are also magnets for promoting visits by other people. The most important of these occasions is the regional fair, some of which are assuming national (and even international) prominence, as local entrepreneurs join with governmental authorities to promote them. The San Marcos Fair in Aguascalientes dates back to the last century, the celebration of the Guelaguetza (a dance ceremony of indigenous origin) in Oaxaca has been popularized and widely promoted, the food fairs around the production of mole (a widely appreciated indigenous sauce based on a combination of several chiles, herbs, cacao and peanuts) in indigenous communities in the Mexico City area, the celebration of spring Equinox at the Mayan pyramids in Yucatan and Papanla on the Gulf coast, the Day of the Dead in early November in Michoacan, and the massive religious mobilizations honoring the Virgin of Guadalupe at the shrine in Mexico City, to which millions come, are but a few of the most important. Regional differences lend unique cultural significance to rodeos and feast days throughout the country. Most of the local fairs and community celebrations, however, take place without assistance or interest from the state or federal governments.

Local merchant groups and government organizations have joined to build on this pattern, creating new events of a cultural and commercial significance. The Cervantine Festival in Guanajuato is now 25 years old, bringing to this town rich in colonial architecture and university culture, a large variety of Mexican and international musical, choreographic and theatrical talent that attracts more visitors than the region is capable of accommodating. Agroindustrial interests in the central plateau created a commercial and cultural fair that attracts visitors from way beyond the region; similarly, cultural or historical events in other provincial centers are being used as an occasion to attract visitors by garnering sponsorship from local or national merchants who then promote these events more widely. In Mexico City, publishers are now organizing specialized book fairs, thus diversifying the offerings traditionally sponsored by the universities.

Unfortunately, as with most other aspects of Mexican society, in spite of involving significant proportions of the people, the financial benefits from these widely dispersed events are generally highly concentrated in a small coterie of wealthy groups on a regional and national level. Since Mexico's business community is even more highly polarized than its highly skewed income
distribution, most of the small-scale local merchants find themselves without sufficient resources to finance the scale of production and the inventories that would be needed to take advantage of the highly concentrated pattern of sales occurring during these special events. These ordinary market factors are compounded by the political influence that the wealthier merchants command, effectively consolidating their monopoly control in many local and regional markets, in addition to their high market shares in national markets.  

The possibilities and limits of social tourism in Mexico

Many rural communities and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are actively engaged developing their own alternatives to traditional tourist destinations and activities. While official policy seems to be oblivious to the importance of “eco” or “social” tourism as an instrument to promote decentralized development, new initiatives are being implemented throughout the country. In this section we examine some of these ventures, as part of a discussion of an alternative model that might be more conducive to the country’s needs and to those of its people.

There is a growing experience of grass-roots efforts to promote various forms of tourism. Local communities are trying to attract visitors sensitive to and interested in their cultural heritage, their natural beauty, and their contribution to protecting biodiversity. Spontaneous outside efforts to support these initiatives or to stimulate them, are increasingly common. Communities are becoming dissatisfied with the way in which the national park system is managed, or the arbitrary way in which biosphere reserves are created, without reference to local leaders; the scarcity of resources or the privileges accorded private capital at the expense of local communities. There is the particularly abusive case of the "ecology" theme park of X'caret on the new Mayan Riviera, carved out of rainforest lands owned by Mayan communities who have no participation in the project, except as menial laborers. Peasant efforts to defend their homeland and their right to autonomous management of a rich cultural and natural heritage in one of North America's largest remaining rain forest (Chimalapas) by developing a sustainable resource management program, including a "sustainable" eco-tourist component, has met with concerted opposition. Local landlords and politicians are fearful of the new model that will probably be effective enough to wrest control of the region from these traditional autocrats.

Economic polarization also contributes to environmental problems. Since the wealthy generally manage to avoid paying taxes, state and local governments don’t have the resources to install an adequate infrastructure, causing these very popular events to produce environmental disasters, not just generating massive volumes of wastes that local systems are incapable of handling, but sometimes, as in the case of the pilgrimage to the Guadalupe Shrine in Mexico City in mid-December, creating public health hazards as millions of people flock to a small area where no public sanitary facilities are available to permit the visitors to deal with their basic needs appropriately. Less evident, but no less worrisome, is the fact that virtually none of the resort facilities or hotels that receive domestic tourists are connected to sewage systems with water treatment plants, resorting instead to discharges into local rivers, underground aquifers or the nearby beach fronts. These structural obstacles to environmental responsibility are compounded by a lack of information and education to prepare the visitors to act responsibly.

Two excellent sources to learn more about these efforts are: 1) a comprehensive guidebook that mentions many of these efforts: Ron Mader, Mexico: Adventures in Nature (John Muir Publications, 1998), and 2) El Planeta Plática, an electronic newsletter that deals with ecotourism, sustainable development and related issues in the Americas -- http://www2.planeta.com/mader/planeta/planeta_index.html;

The recent (March 2000) decision to reject the application to build a huge salt mining operation on the edge of the country’s largest biosphere reserve (Vizcaino) in Baja California Sur in order to preserve its aesthetic and ecological values is a notable exception to the broader tendency to promote commercial developments at the expense of the
An important example of a successful local effort, that takes advantage of available infrastructure to divert existing tourists from traditional destinations, is the coalition of 16 villages that organized a project "Community Museums in the State of Oaxaca" to offer ecological and cultural tours to twelve different villages; the tours include visits to museums, to little-known natural and archaeological sites, to see healers at work and artisans making candles, fireworks, and breads, as well as more commonly visited trades such as weavers, stone carvers, and potters. Villagers explain the many products they obtain from their environment: collecting materials for natural dyes and for healing; planting of the majestic maguey plants to supply ingredients to make pulque (a pre-Colombian form of beer) or the much stronger mezcal; harvesting cinnamon bark, ginger root, coffee; raising animals to provide wool and milk for their highly regarded cheese. This experience is important, not only because it has been successful in attracting both local and foreign visitors to the beautiful city of Oaxaca, but also because it has strengthened the resolve of these communities to work together for their own welfare, rather than depend on state and federal institutions that have generally been unsuccessful when attempting such projects. Of particular note, is their outreach, now available on the World Wide Web (Morales, 1997; email: muscoax@antequera.com).

Another promising local effort coalesced around a community's concern to protect a geothermal geyser in Michoacan. In this case, a local governing board (patronato) composed of local citizens, worked selflessly for years to provide a minimum of maintenance and to make minor investments to attract more visitors from within the region and improve the quality of their stay. Years of negotiation with different authorities to improve the site proved fruitless. When the state tourism agency intervened at last, with an inflated budget, it overcharged the patronato for minor improvements that effectively forestalled a more ambitious local development scheme being considered by the community. This project – in collaboration with a local university – would have transformed the area into a regional tourist and recreational facility for the large-scale mass domestic tourist market. This case offers stark testimony of a common pattern in Mexico of direct government intervention to thwart grassroots initiatives that might spark an autonomous process of local development.

In other cases, outside groups sometimes have been successful in assisting local groups in taking the first steps towards a form of promoting community tourism. Although these outsiders almost always focus on foreign tourists, as a more lucrative market, and one to which they often have privileged access, the projects often have an unexpected effect of attracting local tourists to a region that they might not otherwise visit. Various projects associated with the incorporation of local communities into efforts to protect several varieties of giant marine turtles, an endangered species with protected status, have included tourist promotion efforts; among the more notable of these is the conversion of a former slaughter house into a museum, and the construction of beachfront facilities operated by people from the local community to generate alternative livelihoods from protecting rather than hunting them. Unfortunately, the momentary success of these two projects does not weaken the broader criticism of the turtle program offered in the next section.

An exception: archaeological and cultural visits. Mexico has a great deal of experience with mass domestic tourism at archaeological sites that have been opened to visitors to examine the wonders of pre-Colombian societies (see Barkin 2000a for data on different types of environment. In this case, a lengthy international effort to protest the plans for the expansion of salt production was no doubt influential.
tourism). The National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) is responsible for managing them, although the millions of visitors they attract are not part of the stereotypes considered by tourism officials. The museums and "ruins" receive millions of visitors each year, many in large group tours assembled by commercial operators or by educational, workplace or social organizations; most are successful experiences and contribute to enriching popular understanding of their rich heritage. In most cases, however, these visits cannot offer any appreciation of the continuity of these cultures or the process of transformation into present-day vibrant communities because they do not have the capability to receive the visitors, to explain the ways in which they organize production today, the way in which the culture has contributed to a rich culinary tradition, to an eclectic understanding of the interplay between herbal remedies and modern medicine, or the way in which traditional authorities or organizations still play an important role in local society. Even more troublesome, the INAH has been unable to develop any constructive links to the surrounding communities. As a result, there are frequently important conflicts between the demands for protecting the historical and cultural heritage, on the one hand, and those of local merchants and residents, on the other, bent on encroaching on the protected areas for personal gain; the outright invasion of the areas surrounding the site at Mitla and the gradual spread of urban development at Monte Albán, both in Oaxaca, are particularly egregious cases in point (Robles García 1996). In an exceptional case, at the site in Tulum on the Caribbean coast, the nearby agrarian community (ejido) has gone to great lengths to develop a mutually advantageous program of activities, highly regarded by tourists and professionals alike, government officials do nothing to promote the effort.

There are, however, numerous examples of expert professionals transforming their traditional activities into innovative opportunities for tourists from home and abroad. The Museum of Popular Culture (in Mexico City) is a showplace operated by the INAH, exhibiting the fruits of its work with local communities to strengthen and diversify local artisan and environmental management practices, transforming them into income generating activities. In this area, when the government cut back this activity an NGO, AMACUP (email: amacup@mail.internet.mx), stepped into the breach, continuing and expanding the official program with international foundation support. There is great scope for expanding and enriching this portfolio of offerings, but public penury and an obsolete conceptual and administrative apparatus would require major innovations in public institutions and in entrepreneurial thinking before the foreign-oriented beach tourist model can be supplemented with new creative opportunities that would diversify and increase domestic tourist opportunities and spark local development. Unfortunately, the INAH does not have either the resources or the authority to impede developments on the edges of its sites and there are innumerable "horror stories" of commercial developments encroaching on the "ruins," destroying the majesty of the original settings, creating opportunities for the theft of parts of the pre-Colombian treasures, or actually threatening the physical integrity of the monuments; two such examples in the Mexico City area in recent years (at the royal city of Teotihuacan and the first ceremonial center in the valley, Cuicuilco), revealed the difficulties of impeding real estate developers from abusing of their wealth and power to appropriate the benefits of these sites.  

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9 Even as I write this paper in early 2000, a controversy has developed because of the permission to use the archeological site at Tajín (Veracruz) for a multimedia spectacle to celebrate the Spring Equinox that critics claim is wreaking havoc. A similar event at Teotihuacan scheduled in 1998 was cancelled.
The search for alternatives. Throughout the country, people committed to developing local communities are searching for ways to diversify local economies by introducing new productive alternatives, including tourist activities. It is interesting to observe that in many of these spontaneous examples of local initiatives, the innovators understand the importance of integrating tourism into a more balanced program of productive development. In a forest community in Oaxaca, Ixtlan de Juárez, a local NGO sparked local enthusiasm for sustainable forestry programs by supporting a local effort to build a small hotel for technicians and tourists visiting the project and offering classes in environmental education. A family in Delicias, Chihuahua, refurbished a XIX century hacienda shell as a hotel and restaurant-bar, taking advantage of a municipal initiative to open a paleontology museum to show off the local finds of pre-historic remains of various species of large mammals and reptiles (dinosaurs), and further enriched the local offering by rehabilitating an old river boat to accommodate groups for short cruises, all at accessible prices for Mexican visitors.

On the Yucatan peninsula, there is a growing realization of the limitations of the dominant model of exclusive beach-oriented international tourism. Critics of the highly publicized and well-financed collaboration among the five Central American nations, known as Maya-World, are concerned about the environmental destruction and social dislocation that it is occasioning among native populations. Furthermore, with the changes in social organization, new problems are emerging or anticipated as the tropical forests and ecosystems are rapidly being destroyed or degraded. In response, creative programs like the Maya Echo project in the area just south of Cancun can serve as an example of how even small-scale efforts can have a dramatic impact in protecting a community and its area of influence, while accommodating increasing numbers of visitors. In this case a group of foreigners joined forces with community members to design a development programme that would be attractive for tourists. They raised enough funds from outside sources and from selling tours and local craft products to purchase sewing machines and then develop a steam bath to complement the "exhilarating" experience of swimming in the sinkholes that naturally emerge from the underground rivers on the Peninsula. Their evolving relationship, begun in the early 1990s, illustrates the perseverance and commitment required to forge a different development path. The project began when the organizers offered local women from the indigenous community the opportunity to make blouses and other cotton goods for visitors to a nearby Botanical Garden; the initial success sparked the interest of the men who suggested bringing tourists to swim in their cenote, as it is called, continually fed by underground water that maintains the water clear and chilly. The visitors learn about the chicle trade (a gum derived from a native tree), and other traditional productive activities while enjoying the local cuisine; the community's response has been to "reinvent" and expand their participation of "traditional" products (indigenous maize and chicle) and to reconsider disappearing models of home construction, as they realize how much they are appreciated by the outsiders, including people from other parts of Mexico (in sharp contrast to the scorn heaped on these activities by local ne'er-do-wells) (Locke, 1997).

A series of studies in the southern most state of Chiapas extend and deepen the lessons from other parts. On the one hand, we find that community tourist activities can be an important tool to spur development efforts and strengthen local efforts to improve environmental management practices (Nigh and Ochoa, 1997). But they also reveal the difficulty of implementing even the most well-intentioned and designed of projects: with contentious and paternalistic political
systems and development models instilling distrust and individualism throughout the society, the purposeful collective action required for a successful community project requires tenacious leaders and constant support to build an organizational capability and "social capital;" this bundle of attributes, the building block of grassroots development, consists of the political and social skills required for a community to implement a collective project of development (Kersten 1997). This community approach to development could be important in providing a decentralized panoply of recreational and cultural offerings well suited for the travel patterns of the Mexican population: individualistic and spontaneous family centered voyages in public transportation.

**The dilemma.** The commercial and social service organizations that presently offer large-scale tourism services in Mexico reinforce traditional models for the provision of such services. They share the vision that the best (most profitable) way to provide for these groups is through large-scale operators organized according to an international model based on large hotels, managed by transnational providers or their national counterparts. This vision excludes rural producers as potential providers of low-cost large scale facilities for a new type of tourist service designed specifically for a market oriented explicitly to "social" or working class and middle sector tourists, including public schools and senior citizens. A different approach would not focus on the fragile ecosystems so popular among rural development advocates today, but rather direct their attention to installations that could accommodate large groups in camping, dormitory, or cabin arrangements, with a combination of local service provision for recreational activities and meals, with economical self-service capabilities; one uniquely appropriate example of this, is the large dormitory and other facilities located in the Popocatepetl National Park, a favorite attraction for day travel and climbers in the Mexico City area. Destinations might be designed to facilitate visits to existing centers of attraction (including the INAH sites), as well as the development of new programs that combine tourism and recreation with social service, related to programs of reforestation and other tasks of environmental management. This alternative approach would have the added advantage of contributing to reversing some of the problems of environmental deterioration occasioned by these same rural communities for lack of income and employment opportunities (Barkin, 1998a).

**Solutions for regional resource planning**

A new approach to regional development is required, if the vicious circle of impoverishment and degradation is to be broken. While there is a general recognition that social tourism in rural communities can offer more opportunities for the people than other models, it is also clear that without other, complementary productive activities that create jobs and income, people will continue with environmentally destructive practices, to assure themselves their livelihood.

The implementation of an tourism program as part of a strategy for autonomous sustainable resource management requires a series of important advances on a number of different fronts:

1: The recognition of the local communities as the rightful claimants to speak for and benefit from any program that protects and exploits local resources. During the years of debate and conflict in the area of the Monarch butterfly, for example, it has become apparent that local communities are not only committed to but are also essential in protecting the butterfly habitat.
Their involvement in productive projects depends on their access to training, technical assistance, and resources. The “market” is incapable of supplying the local communities’ with capital nor do the “experts” realize the importance of strengthening traditional systems of production of food and other needs. These systems are essential if local structures of community organization and authority are to remain intact and effective.

2: The diversification of productive activities that allows local communities to generate income in a dynamic global market place. The pent-up demand of the Mexican people to know more about their own country creates a rich opportunity for a program of sustainable tourism, involving the management of natural, social, and cultural resources. By creating a tourist complex and supporting services for environmental management of the region’s resources, a wide range of opportunities would be created for significant numbers of people in the region. This would include the identification of non-extractive activities in forests (agro-silvicultural production) and other ecosystems that could complement proposed management programs needed to restore regional environments.

3: The reorganization of tourist services to overcome seasonality and the concentration of control by a few outside operators who bring their clients in without contributing to the maintenance and welfare of the region. The short cyclical features of some sorts of tourism (three months for the butterfly; two for the whales) impose a boom and bust character on the local economy. In the Monarch region, for example, the region must diversify its offerings, since most Mexicans vacation at periods when the butterflies are not present. The cultural, ethnic, and biological diversity as well as the geographical variety offer great opportunities to increase and diversify the range of tourist services, as suggested above, thus allowing for year-round tourism. Such opportunities, if properly implemented, could generate additional sources of financing to pay for the environmental services that are required if the overall program is to be successful.

4: Finally, some serious consideration should be given to the environmental services generated by this approach. Like the carbon-sequestration bonds, being used in the joint implementation schemes in Costa Rica and Bolivia, and more recently in Mexico,\textsuperscript{10} the management scheme offered here would improve the health of the ecosystem and the flow of water into the major watershed supplying Mexico City and Guadalajara.\textsuperscript{11} Similarly, by reversing the process of deforestation, the program would also be contributing to reducing greenhouse gases. The collateral benefits should be recognized and be remunerated as part of the program to protect the region that hosts the Monarch.

\textsuperscript{10} The growing concern for the problem of global warming, and the commitments made in the Kyoto Protocol to deal with the problem, has promoted a number of countries to oblige local companies to reduce their emissions of "greenhouse" gases. As an alternative to installing expensive equipment to eliminate these emissions in the first place, or reduce their release into the environment, many comply with the local regulations by purchasing "carbon sequestration offsets" from countries in the South that can guarantee certain parts of their forests will not be cut. This apparent "win-win" solution has been roundly criticized by many concerned with the long-term implications of poor countries "mortgaging the rights of present and future generations" (Agarwal and Narain, 1998).

\textsuperscript{11} Ghimire (1997) examines the potential for mass tourism to promote a sustainable pattern of growth in developing countries. His comprehensive review of recent experience in the Third World presents a sobering evaluation of the obstacles confronting planners seeking to reorient public policy in this direction. Barkin (2000a) offers an evaluation of community based tourist initiatives in Mexico.
It is unlikely that the Mexican government will recognize the potential and significance of the type of tourism discussed in this paper as a mechanism to promote sustainability and rural development. The model of locally controlled, resource-based tourism that caters to a middle-class domestic clientele, or a small group of foreign ecotourists, is not part of the image of the "smokestack free export industry" that tourism authorities cherish so dearly. The government is unprepared to consider this alternative a priority in its own right, much less as an instrument for environmental management and social well-being. There is no place on its neo-liberal agenda for the provision of services to meet the needs for recreation and relaxation of the large majority of urban denizens who cannot aspire to visiting the large scale upper-income tourist developments on which the government is focusing. Such neglect of a valuable, productive and low cost instrument is likely as long as public policy is driven by the service providers organized to respond to the demands of the tour operators who focus their efforts on the most profitable segments of the globalized market (Barkin and Pailles 1998).

This existing model of tourist service provision is environmentally destructive and contributes to further social polarization. Ironically, it does not even seem to generate the volume of employment and the net earnings of foreign exchange that its promoters claim. There are too many leakages from the system and too much technology used to really deliver the promised local development benefits. We are not suggesting that the government abandon this pattern of development, but rather that there is a need for a critical reconsideration of the advisability of continuing with the substantial subsidies for credit and infrastructure that this strategy now requires. There is also an urgent need for an evaluation of the social and environmental impacts of this model of service provision.

The alternative model examined here offers an important counterweight with considerable benefits for rural communities and the Mexican working class. It would contribute substantially to breaking down some of the obstacles to building a more balanced national society. A program of socially oriented tourism would open a new model for decentralized development that would respond to the urgent needs of present-day society. Well organized, it could be financed much more readily than the international model and offers more employment and an inexpensive way to improve the quality of life for both consumers and providers.

It is clear that an initiative for developing this local capacity would be an imaginative and inexpensive way to promote rural sustainable development in some selected areas of Mexico. The knowledge, skills and capacity exist to implement such a program. Given the current character of government policies, it would be unreasonable to expect a public sector program, but with the capacities already in the hands of many communities and intermediate level organizations, such a program might be promoted by the social sector itself.

The analysis confirms a crucial lesson learned in Mexico and elsewhere: these small-scale rural sustainable initiatives must not be stand-alone projects, but rather fully integrated into a broader program of regional development. Thus, if mass tourism is to emerge in Mexico as part of a strategy for local development and environmental management, it will have to come from the organizations representing the “popular” sectors of the population and the receiving communities themselves. Therefore, if there were to be any public sector action in this area, the most
productive policy would be one to facilitate initiatives by NGOs and intermediate level community organizations already in place.

**In conclusion**

Significant groups of people in rural Mexico are attempting to find a way of creating a dignified way of life in a changing world that disdains and impovershies them, even though global economic forces have no real need for them or their regions. In the face of a multitude of crises, however, increasing numbers of outsiders are beginning to appreciate the qualities that these ecosystems offer to their residents and almost as generously to visitors.

Their communities suffer an ignoble fate in today's world economy, and yet they struggle to preserve a way of life, joined by others who offer to help improve conditions. This effort is not simply an altruistic outpouring of goodwill or charity. Many of these communities have been relegated to the more isolated and fragile ecosystems where, we are discovering, they make important contributions to improving environmental conditions to society: one particularly eloquent publication proclaims the montagne regions to be the "water towers for the XXI century." They go on to elaborate: "More than half of humanity relies on the fresh water that accumulates in mountains - for drinking, domestic use, irrigation, hydropower, industry and transportation" (Liniger, et. al. 1998). It would be tragic simply to reduce these communities and their ecosystems to their resource contributions to the globalized sectors of the world economy; this would miss an important facet of their significance to the world today. In the face of cumulating crises of production and social organization, the mountain regions and their people continue to offer alternatives for humanity. But well-meaning pundits may exacerbate the growing pressures threatening these regions, accelerating their integration into a model of production that will destroy their communities and impoverish rather than enrich their people. Fortunately, many rural communities are wiser than these erudite globalized do-gooders; they are strengthening their capacity to resist or modify these outside projects so that they might better serve the needs of their people and their regions. We would do well to begin to hone our own toolboxes and learn from these societies rather than simply assume that we must transform them.

At present, it is unlikely that government policy will recognize the potential of domestic mass tourism as a mechanism to promote sustainable rural resource management. Similarly, official policy demeans rural community contributions to regional environmental management. Nor is the government prepared to consider as a priority in its own right, or as an instrument for environmental management and social well-being, the provision of services to meet the needs for diversion and relaxation of the large majority of urban denizens who cannot aspire to visit the tourist developments on which the government is focusing. Such neglect of a valuable,  

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12 The Monarch Butterfly Reserve, for example, is in the principal watershed supplying water to two of the country's largest cities, Mexico City and Guadalajara, as well as to its largest natural lake, Chapala. With the unraveling of the peasant economies, as a result of policies to promote "rural modernization," impoverished communities throughout the watershed are no longer able to implement the conservation programs they traditionally undertook. Consequently, the volume of rain water captured for urban and industrial use is actually declining. An effective resource management plan for the region would also compensate the communities to enable them to once again carry out these conservation activities (Barkin 1999a).
productive and low cost instrument, and the people involved, is likely as long as public policy is driven by the service providers organized along the models of the large scale tour operators who focus their efforts in the most profitable and easiest segments of the market.

The dominant pattern is an environmentally destructive model that contributes to further social polarization. Ironically, it does not even seem to generate the volume of employment and the net earnings of foreign exchange that its promoters claim. There are too many leakages in the system and too much technology used to really deliver the local development benefits that are promised. While we are not suggesting that the government abandon this pattern of development, but rather that there is a need for a critical reconsideration of the advisability of continuing with the substantial subsidies for credit and infrastructure that this strategy now requires. There is also an urgent need for an evaluation of the social and environmental impacts of this model of service provision.

The several examples that illustrate the alternative model examined in this paper offer an important counterweight with considerable benefits for rural communities and the Mexican working class. In this way it would contribute substantially to braking down some of the obstacles to building a more balanced national society. A program of mass social tourism would open a new model for decentralized development that would respond to the urgent needs of present-day society. Well organized, it could be financed much more readily than the international model and offers more employment and an inexpensive way to improve the quality of life for both consumers and providers.

It is clear that an initiative for developing a capacity to service domestic mass tourism would been an imaginative and inexpensive way to promote sustainable rural resource management in many areas of Mexico. The knowledge, skills and capacity exist to implement such a program. Given the current character of government policies, it would be unreasonable to expect a public sector program, but with the capacities already in the hands of many communities and intermediate level organizations, such a program might be promoted by the social sector itself.

This overview of tourism in Mexico highlights the potential and the difficulties of generating a local capacity to promote a type of tourism that is at one and the same time environmentally and socially sensitive. This neglected sector offers great sectors of the population and the receiving communities themselves. Given the recent history of public policies stymieing rural welfare, any public sector action in this area would probably have to facilitate initiatives by NGOs and intermediate level community organizations already in place.13

Selected Bibliography


13 Mexico’s system of Natural Protected Areas is examining the possibility of involving local communities in the protection and management programs as a way of resolving or avoiding conflicts that have been very damaging in the past.


El Planeta Plática, an electronic periodical: [http://www2.planeta.com/mader/planeta/planeta_index.html](http://www2.planeta.com/mader/planeta/planeta_index.html)


