Ecotourism in the National Parks of Latin America

By Ruth Norris

A couple of decades ago, if you were to win the lottery, or perhaps commit the perfect crime, you might think of escaping to a place like Manuel Antonio National Park. It's a fantasy tropical paradise: white-sand beach and blue-green waters, on the Pacific side of Costa Rica, shaded by lush tropical forest nearly reaching the water's edge. No traffic, no roads—for company, just the birds and the white-faced squirrel monkeys.

But today you don't have to be lucky or a conspirator. You can catch any one of the dozen or so daily international flights to San José, rent a car or hop on a bus and go to Manuel Antonio by highway. You'll still find the beach and the forest. The solitude—however, is long gone.

One of the most visited protected areas in Central America, 1,700-acre Manuel Antonio receives nearly a thousand visitors a day during the peak of the high season. It is surrounded by a hotel "strip." Some 300 monkeys are there, but their migration corridors have been disturbed, and like the bears of Yellowstone in years past, many have become garbage feeders.

Welcome to Costa Rica, whose parks are the crown jewels among developing-country protected areas. In the 1980s, this West Virginia-sized country won international acclaim for setting aside a fifth of its national territory as National Parks.

More than two-thirds of the international visitors to Costa Rica come to enjoy the country's national parks and other protected areas, such as Monteverde Biological Reserve (left), and to see wildlife, such as the blue-faced toucan (above).

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More than two-thirds of the international tourists in Costa Rica say they came to enjoy the country's national parks. The parks are popular recreational destinations for local residents as well, as confirmed by park agency visitation figures. In 1992, 398,003 visitors were registered, nearly triple the visitation level in 1982.

For the parks, this growing interest is a mixed blessing. To be sure, the dollars from aid agencies and conservation shows, advertisements, and offices in Miami, Los Angeles, and other cities to entice potential visitors with visions of romance and adventure. "Picture graceful, tall mountains, their tips wreathed in clouds," its brochure invites. "Imagine lush green meadows with rushing rivers and arching waterfalls; conjure up a vision of a population whose smiles reveal their inner happiness and pride in their land." In case your imagination fails you, there are 16 pages of color photographs.

It works—and then some. In August of 1993, tourism surpassed bananas as the country's number-one industry. For the past three years, the number of visitors to Costa Rica has increased at a rate approaching 13 percent per year and should reach three-quarters of a million annually by the next year or two, a million by decade's end. Tourism income has grown even faster, and now exceeds a million dollars a day.

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