

# Mex appeal

Mexican communities that were once sanctuaries of culture and nature are fast becoming destinations for adventure tourists

BY SUSANA GUZMAN



**M**EXICO IS ONE OF THE 12 COUNTRIES WITH major biodiversity in the world. About 10 percent of the different types of the earth's plants and animals are located in the Mexican territory—with a variety of climates, ecosystems and habitats, ranking from deserts to rain forests. Nevertheless, ecotourism is not common for the majority of the Mexicans. Yet the image of Mexico's traditional tourists visiting the big hotels in the Pacific and Atlantic coastal areas prevails in many people's minds.

Ecotourism is a relatively new activity developed a decade ago mainly by environmentalists and entrepreneurs interested in conservation with practically no governmental support. Now, the Vicente Fox administration announced in April that ecotourism activities will be promoted in some of the 127 Mexican natural protected areas.

This new trend of tourism brings to Mexico new opportunities and fresh rev-

enue. (Recently all ecotourists pay a tax.) However, there are some alerting voices saying that this economical activity does not take into account the environmental degradation that could be accelerated by tourists. On the other hand, local people could be hurt by ecotourism in their areas, rather than benefit from it.

## A PUBLIC INITIATIVE IN MEXICO

Since a decade ago, alternative tourism—adventure and ecological—has been implemented by non governmental organizations and small entrepreneurs to conserve the natural resources. Also intended to be included in this alternative tourism vision are local communities. These NGOs and alternative travel agencies knew Americans' and Europeans' delight for international nature.

In the early 1990s, a Mexican environmental organization was started to promote organic tropical agriculture and ecotourism

in the Lacandon Rainforest. The group, called Dana, implemented the projects among four Mayan ejido communities in Chiapas (southeast Mexico). An ejido (pronounced eh-heedo) is a plot of land owned by many different households, sort of like co-op land-owning. These four Mayan communities' lands surround Lake Miramar, the largest of the Lacandon Rainforest's lakes.

Located in the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve, the region is the habitat of tapirs, monkeys, jaguars, crocodiles and migrant birds from Canada and the United States, as well as the Lacam Tun Island archaeological site. The activities there are many: watch birds, snorkel, camp, canoe, raft and swim in the Miramar Lake.

"We have six to eight tourists visiting every day during the summer. They are primarily 22- to 40-year-old American and European *mochileros* (backpackers). About 60 percent are women and 40 per- ▶



A biker stops to chat with a young Mexican girl wearing a traditional Mexican dress—with modern tennis shoes.

cent are men,” says Fernando Ochoa, a spokesperson for Dana. “Domestic tourists do not have the tradition of ecotourism. It is new for young Mexicans.”

Ochoa explained that 176 of 800 families living in the Emiliano Zapata ejido are participating in the project. There is a tourism commission among the members of the Emiliano Zapata ejido. They guide the tourists around the rainforest either on foot or horseback for \$10. Now they are working to include a tour to visit 76 families that own organic farms. The revenue from this activity goes to a health fund for women and children. Last year they raised \$1,400, which was up from the \$600 earned two years ago.

Recently, Dana received funds from the National Indigenous Institute of Mexico to build an 18-person *cabana* (motel) on the Emiliano Zapata ejido. Ochoa says the secretary of tourism of Chiapas has never supported them. “They only congratulated us because we were the first organization to advise them that we were going to build the cabana.” Apparently, organizations normally don’t tell the tourism department because of additional taxes they could incur.



Camping is becoming more and more popular in Mexico, along with star gazing.

## GARBAGE, A BIG PROBLEM

In 1995, a year after of the insurgency of the Ejercito Zapatista of the Liberacion Nacional (which was a group developed to overthrow the government) against the Carlos Salinas de Gortari administration, the Mexican military settled in the Lacandon Rainforest. The settlement of the military in the region brought negative impacts to the environment, denounces Ochoa, because they built roads through the rainforest.

“With the military presence came roads and commerce, but they did not bring at the same time education. Disposable plastic came in high scale, with no recycling program.” Moreover, there is no system of gathering garbage at all. The problem is that traditionally the inhabitants burn the garbage in their backyards, then they bury it. “People are not aware that it is a big problem. The education level average here is sixth grade.”

Ochoa explained that Ocosingo, the second largest Mexican *municipio* (municipal) where the four ejidos are a part, is about nine hours away from the military post.

## ENTREPRENEURS INTERESTED IN CONSERVATION

Ecotourism, promoted by entrepreneurs gives additional incomes to local communities. Ecocolors is a small family business owned by Kenneth and Miriam Johnson on the Yucatan Peninsula in southeast Mexico. “We have a collaboration agreement with different local communities, especially with the Chunyaxche (Choon-yan-shay) Mayan community, to offer tours to the Sianka’an (See-ahn-kahn) Natural Protected Area,” said Kenneth Johnson.

Every year, his ecotourism travel agency attracts about 2,000 tourists. The cost for an ecotourism adventure ranges from \$250–2,500. Four kinds of tourists visit the rainforest ecosystem:

- 40- to 70-year-olds who have a strong interest in conservation and generally only stay one day;
- 40- to 80-year-olds interested in bicycle racing, have extra money and time to travel;
- 30- to 70-year-olds interested in adventure and culture;
- and national and international students learning about environment and conservation.

Kenneth Johnson is also the Mayan Riviera president of AMTAVE, “the official organization that represents companies and projects that are dedicated to the promotion of alternative tourism in Mexico.” During a July 2001 conference, Johnson said ecotourism companies have increased from eight in 1994 to 400 in 2001. In his experience, the strong investment is in training and labor, more than infrastructure and equipment.

**“The industry needs to recognize that the introduction of ecotourism to peripheral economies, its development process, its role in conservation and its impacts have not been fully studied nor understood and therefore it needs regulation.”**

Domingo Medina,  
natural resource management scholar

Ron Mader is a journalist who has also promoted ecotourism in Mexico and other Latin American countries through his Web site *Planeta.com*. In 1999, the secretary of tourism awarded the site containing listservs, online forums, directories, books, articles and people interested in ecotourism gathered there. “*Planeta.com* is a clearing-house for practical ecotourism around the globe. As a travel resource center, we host a variety of online forums and conferences and have published more than 10,000 pages of features and scholarly reports,” reads the Web site.

#### **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT TOURISM: NEW POLICY**

In April, Leticia Navarro, the secretary of tourism (nicknamed *Sectur*) and Victor Lichtinger, the secretary of the environment and natural resources (nicknamed *Semarnat*) signed the agreement of the 2002 United Nation’s International Ecotourism Agreement.

Six governmental institutions contribute to the project with about \$28 million (254 million pesos) to promote ecotourism activities in natural protected areas managed by the *Semarnat*. Infrastructure, workshops, printed materials, information exchange events, environmental education and promotions are among the activities in which authorities request involvement. The *Semarnat* informed the public that *Sian Ka’an* (*See-en Keh-Ahn*), a reserve in Quintana Roo (*Keen-ta-na Row*) in southeast Mexico, will be the first integral ecotourism center.

For Angel Nieva, director of *Asesores en Desarrollo Turístico Sustentable* (Sustainable Development Tourism Advisors), the agreement “has no precedent because it is the first time the *Semarnat* and *Sectur* worked together in coordination to promote ecotourism.” However, he hopes some of this money would be used for training in and promotion for the rural areas.

In a *Planeta.com* document posted in March, Nieva pointed out among the strengths of Mexican ecotourism are the annual *Expo Aventura y Ecoturismo* (Ecotourism and Adventure Expo) in Mexico City, the 2000 National Policy and Strategy for Sustainable Development of Tourism (as a result of a national public consults from *Sectur*), and the Official Guide of Adventure Tourism, Ecotourism and Rural Tourism Destinations published by *Sectur*.

#### **ECOTOURISM RISKS**

Although a new stage for ecotourism is emerging in Mexico, the land property regulation, the inclusion of the indigenous people and the preservation of biodiversity are some challenges to be faced.

“Ecotourism is a myth,” asserts Fernando Ochoa of Dana. In his experience, this activity represents only additional incomes because the indigenous people are farmers or peasants. “Ecotourism is part of a diversification of their incomes of the communities, we do not intend to change their culture.” Corn, cocoa, beans and pork are the products they cultivate for themselves. Furthermore, he said, ecotourism is not an activity Mexicans commonly participate in.

On the other hand, he explained, 95 percent of the areas where ecotourism can be developed are the communities of indigenous people. The problem is that there is a big problem regarding the land property. Of the four *ejidos* they have been working on ecological projects, only Emiliano Zapata is legally constituted. The funds Dana got to do an environmental assessment impact could be applied only in Emiliano Zapata, thus constraining the ecotouristic efforts to limited inhabitants.

“The challenge many Latin American countries face is the forces pushing for the development of ecotourism are catalyzing and incorporating pristine peripheral rural, natural and cultural places (especially indigenous peoples) into the global economy without being prepared to manage for social, cultural and environmental change,” explains Domingo Medina, a scholar in natural resource management and a community development assistant for indigenous people in Latin America. “The industry needs to recognize that the introduction of ecotourism to peripheral economies, its development process, role in conservation and impacts have not been fully studied nor understood and therefore it needs regulation.”

In March, an International Forum of Indian Tourism was held in Oaxaca (pronounced *WĀ-hĀ-kĀ*), Mexico. The attendants alerted that tourism is expanding to remote areas where fragile ecosystems with biodiversity remain. Mountains, deserts, islands and rainforests are the new destinations for the tourism industry. They explained that problems can arise from tourists visiting these areas, such as people illegally collecting plants, animals and archeological objects. 🌍

#### **Who was Emiliano Zapata?**

A Mexican revolutionary, Zapata fought in guerrilla actions during and after the Mexican Revolution (1911–17). Specifically, Zapata fought to recover the *ejidos* (Indian communal system of land ownership) from the haciendas, which are private landowners. Zapata adopted the slogan “*Tierra y Libertad*,” meaning “Land and Liberty.”

He was the son of a peasant who trained and sold horses. Orphaned at 17 years old, he was forced to look after his brothers and sisters. In 1897 he was arrested after participating in a protest by the peasants of his village against the hacienda that had taken over their land.

For more information, go to [www.zapatistas.org](http://www.zapatistas.org).